ABSTRACT:

According to Professor Tao Jiang, the acclaimed Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna made a clear distinction between the conceptions of "primary" and "secondary" reality. Jiang contends that there is a fundamental incompatibility between these two conceptions and that most of the efforts to reconcile them have resulted in sacrificing the reality of the world. Jiang's novel solution is to reject the conception of primary reality and embrace secondary reality, the only reality for him. In so doing, he radicalizes the very conception of reality and challenges the way mainstream western and Indian philosophical traditions have dealt with the tension between these dual conceptions of reality.
JONATHAN GOLD

And one of the things I neglected to mention – this is our second meeting of the Columbia Society for Comparative Philosophy for the year. And one of the things I neglected to mention in the first meeting was that we sort of have a theme for the year. Last year, the theme was personal identity. And a few regular members of the group agreed that some of the theme – some of the issues that were coming out of that conversation on personal identity were leaking into the area of ethics, that we really felt like we needed to address more formally and explicitly. And so we decided that this was a good idea, to make that a theme for this year, as an extension of some of those conversations from last year.

At the same time, it's not a hard and fast rule, so not every talk for the year is on the topic of ethics. Today's conversation – I'm not entirely sure the degree to which we will touch on issues of ethics. It seems that we have a sub-theme or an alternative theme, which is the nature of reality from a perspective of the Madhyamaka tradition. If you'll see two weeks from now, Jan Westerhoff is going to be speaking on Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartani*. So this is also very – that will also, I think, be very closely related to this talk today.

So just to say a word, though, about that other theme, which is "Ethics across Traditions," the way that I have been sort of asking our speakers to think about this is to simply try to make connections to this topic of how ethics is formed when we think about it from the perspective of different traditions. So, "What is ethics?" is a question that comes up, I think, fairly often when we try to make claims about one or another tradition being – promoting an ethical position. So when we say that Buddhist ethics are saying one thing or Confucian ethics are saying something, very quickly people start asking this question, "Well, just what do you mean by ethics? What is ethics? What is a framework that would allow for all of these different traditions, or some of them, at
least, to be sharing a definition of ethics?" So that's a question that is going to be, I think, recurring throughout the year.

The format today is going to be very similar to our first talk, where we have a speaker and we have a respondent who has had the chance to look over the paper and ask a few questions, and then that will move into a wider conversation. And in case I forget to mention this, you are all invited to attend dinner afterward. I think we have a reservation. We can't actually afford to pay for everyone's dinner if everyone comes, but you're certainly welcome to join our speaker and respondent, and I know a few others will be coming. So please feel free to come along.

Today's speaker then, without further ado – our respondent today is going to be last month's speaker, Owen Flanagan. And today's speaker – we're very lucky to have, actually, two of our most regular members of the seminar here. So today's speaker is Tao Jiang, who is professor of religion at Rutgers University, and who will be speaking on the topic of "Incompatibility of Two Conceptions of Reality: Dependent Origination and Emptiness in Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā."

**TAO JIANG**

Thank you very much. Thank you, Jonathan and Chris, for putting this together, and also Owen for agreeing to respond to hopefully not too bad of a paper. And also, thank you for sharing a Friday of suffering with the group, suffering being the Buddhist mantra, I suppose.
I changed the title slightly, you know, to "Incommensurability," so that sounds better. That's the only reason.

So the topic is "The Incommensurability of Genic and Generative Conceptions of Reality, Emptiness, and Dependent Origination in Nāgārjuna's Milamadhyamakakārikā." And this is a topic I've been thinking about a lot, so I would really appreciate feedbacks from the respondent, also as from the audience.

So, there is a clear recognition of the conflict between various conceptions of primary reality, such as form, substance, universal principle, and God, et cetera, and conceptions of secondary reality, such as matter, attribute, particular things, creatures, et cetera, in the history of mainstream western philosophical discourse as well as in the Indian philosophical deliberations. So, in the Indian case, it will be the Ātman versus the others, or prakriti.

Their strategies to deal with such a tension mostly follow one of the two lines, that is, either to argue that primary entities are ultimately real and secondary entities ultimately unreal or illusory, or to reconcile – try – by arguing that the primary entities are foundational and secondary entities are derivative. Now, in both cases, reality is bifurcated into two distinct domains, with the primary elevated to the higher realm and the secondary relegated to the lower. Both strategies consider secondary entities to be dependent in some fashion, the primary or other secondary entities, but do not view primary entities to be dependent either on the secondary or other primary entities. That is, between the secondary entities, their mutual dependency between primary and secondary entities, there is a one-way dependency with the secondary dependent on the primary, but not the other way around. Between primary entities, there is no relationship of dependency.
Now, clearly these traditions tend to privilege conceptions of primary reality over those of the secondary reality, often resulting in sacrificing the reality of the world and our experience, despite countless sophisticated and ingenious efforts to reconcile the tension between these two. And I have several people in mind. Anyway, so what I'm doing here is to challenge such a fundamental balance in navigating this tension prevalent in the mainstream philosophical discourse both in the west and in India. And I'll try to shed new light on the nature of the tension between the two conceptions of reality by bringing in the works of Nāgārjuna, primarily the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

I'll argue that Nāgārjuna's philosophical deliberation exhibits a clear recognition that the conceptions of primary and secondary realities are ultimately incommensurable, and most of the effort to reconcile the tension has resulted in sacrificing reality of the world and is as such unsatisfying. He is one of the few major philosophers in the history of philosophy, both in the east and in the west, who fully recognized the tension involved and vigorously argues for their incommensurability.

However, he flouts the mainstream philosophical approaches, which tend to sacrifice secondary reality. Instead, he completely rejects the conceptions of primary reality and embraces secondary reality, which is in fact not secondary, but the only reality for him. He regards any conceptions of primary realities as a distortion of the reality of the world. In so doing, he radicalizes the very conception of reality by cleansing it from any primary element, such as substance, essence, and et cetera. So this talk makes the case through a reexamination of Nāgārjuna's important but puzzling discussion of the relationship between the two central teachings of Buddhism, namely, emptiness and dependent origination.
Most Buddhist scholars generally agree that emptiness is one of the most important and certainly the most famous teaching in Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. Emptiness means that things, events in the world lack svabhāva, variously translated as intrinsic nature, inherent essence, inherent existence, self-existence, independent existence, and all-being, et cetera. Curiously, however, the way emptiness is explained seems to be inextricably tied to another earlier key Buddhist notion, namely, dependent origination.

Nāgārjuna puts their relationship this way in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. This is the famous verse 24:18, quote, "Whatever is dependently co-arising, that is explained to be emptiness," unquote. This is arguably the most quoted verse in the text, and it is important. This is obvious. Now, so scholars generally follow Nāgārjuna's lead in understanding emptiness and dependent origination synonymously. Therefore, an interesting issue arises. If dependent origination is exactly the same as emptiness, why is it even necessary to formulate another concept, namely, emptiness? That is, if the new concept of emptiness needs to be explained by appealing to the old concept of dependent origination, while they are regarded as synonymous, isn't "emptiness" redundant?

What is at stake is the following: do dependent origination and emptiness address exactly the same problem or different problems? If they address the same problem, how do they differ? If they address different problems, what are those problems? In this regard, it is well acknowledged that dependent origination and emptiness address the same issue of substantialization or reification in promoting a non-substantialist understanding of reality. However, to say that they address the same problem is different from claiming that the two are simply synonymous or identical. Therefore, the crucial question is how do they differ, if at all?
This question is usually addressed by invoking Nāgārjuna's distinction between the ultimate and the conventional truths in identifying emptiness as the ultimate truth and dependent origination as the conventional. Without disputing the validity of such an interpretation, it is worth noting that according to Nāgārjuna, any discussion of the ultimate truth makes sense only within the conventional domain, and no assertion can be meaningfully made from the perspective of the ultimate truth.

This means that both dependent origination and emptiness belong to discourse within the conventional domain, as Nāgārjuna insists that emptiness should be recognized as a dependent designation only. Furthermore, to claim that emptiness is the ultimate truth doesn't really say much about its value distinct from the conventional truths of dependent origination. Even though emptiness might be viewed as an effective way to address the tendency of reifying dependent origination, it's hard to say – it's hard to see why such tendency cannot be adequately addressed through an appeal to the dependent origination of dependent origination without resorting to yet another notion, since emptiness shared the same risk of being reified, hence prompting further clarification of emptiness of emptiness.

Given all of these considerations, the relationship between the two is at least worth revisiting. So, I propose a different way to describe their relationship, so as to shed new light on the two central teachings of Buddhism. It makes the case that dependent origination and emptiness resort to different modes of reasoning to address the same problem of reification or substantialization. To be more specific, I'll argue that dependent origination appeals to generative modes of reasoning, and emptiness to a genic mode of reasoning, and that the relationship between dependent origination and emptiness is not that they belong to different orders or reality, conventional
and ultimate, or secondary and primary, respectively, but rather that they are two different conceptions of the same and only reality when two distinct modes of reasonings are applied.

So the two terms here, "generative" and "genic" – I put it down there – refer to two different modes of reasoning. To explain something by explaining – by examining what is existentially and conceptually prior to it as its conditions, causes, or constituents – its "generation," as it were – is a generative mode of reasoning. In other words, any appeal to form of relationality is generative reasoning. Or simply, "generative" is understood as a relational mode of analysis.

By contrast, to explain something by investigating what is irreducibly itself, its "gene," as it were, with no relationship with anything else whatsoever, either conceptually or existentially, is a genic mode of reasoning. So genic mode of reasoning is understood as non-relational modes of analysis.

Corresponding to these two modes of analysis, two kinds of entities can be conceived of, genic and generative. Genic entities, such as essence, substance, the basic building block of reality, like the classic atoms or God, et cetera, are independent and self-sufficient. They are not relational in the sense that their existence and/or analysis do not depend on anything else while they are regarded as the ground of other existences, and can be invoked to explain other forms of existence. Existentially, genic entities are grounds of existence. Conceptually, any analysis of the world or our experience of it that appeals to genic entities marks the end of such an analysis beyond which there is nowhere else to go. So when we explain something – if we hit the – that's the ultimate boom. That's it.
By contrast, generative entities, for example, a desk, are dependent on others, for example, wood, carpenter, et cetera, both existentially and conceptually. And thus, there is nothing that is irreducibly itself in a generative entity in the way a genic entity, like the classic atom, is. Generative entities are relational, and their existence and analysis necessarily depends on other entities, be they genic or generative.

Nāgārjuna, in his discussion of the relationship between emptiness and dependent origination, makes a powerful case for the mutual exclusivity between the genic and the generative conceptions of reality. He rejects the genic conception and embraces the generative one. Furthermore, he radicalizes the conception of reality by making it thoroughly generative, freeing from any genic element. He promotes the thoroughly generative conception of reality, which follows dependent origination, and repudiates the genic conception of that same reality, which turns out to be empty, employing emptiness to cleanse the generative domain of dependent origination from the taint of any genic element, so dependent origination.

The importance of the teaching of dependent origination in Buddhism cannot be overestimated. It is traditionally formulated as when this is – that is, when this, you know, comes into being, that comes into being; when this is not, that is not; when this disappears, that disappears. Now, it is an attempt to strike a middle ground between various extreme views held by the Brahmanic thinkers and some materialists in classical India. Put simply, instead of treating things as either substantively real – as either substantive or non-existent, dependent origination explains them by appealing to the conditions upon which they arise. This means that things in the world are neither substantively real nor simply non-existent, but instead have only dependent existence subject to various conditions.
In arguing that existence is contingent upon conditions, dependent origination espouses a world view that rejects the independence of beings and embraces their interdependence. Clearly, dependent origination embodies the generative modes of reasoning, as I defined previously. Due to its canonical status, the doctrine of dependent origination is at the center of intense Buddhist scholastic debates among early Buddhist thinkers, the Abhidhmikas, who hope to clarify some of the Buddha's teachings.

At the core of the debate is the issue regarding the scope of dependent origination, namely, how far can dependent origination go? In this connection, the Abhidhmikas distinguish two kinds of entities, primary and secondary. The primary entity is atomistic, known as dharma, defined as the possessor of an intrinsic nature, svabhāva. It is singular, unconstructed, and undissolvable upon analysis. In other words, a dharma does not depend on anything else either for its existence or for its analysis, but rather defines itself in terms of its intrinsic nature, and exists by virtue of such a nature. Therefore, a dharma is ultimately real. According to the Abhidhmikas, to deny the ultimate reality of dharma is tantamount to annihilationism, rejected by the Buddha.

So, as Noa Ronkin puts it succinctly, a dharma in possession of an intrinsic nature is self-defined as independent of other entities, both conceptually and physically. This makes dharma a generative entity. On the other hand, a secondary entity necessarily involves constructions, both physical and conceptual. It is an aggregate that comes into being by virtue of its dependence on primary dharma, into which it can be reduced and analyzed. This makes the secondary entity a generative one. As such, it is ultimately unreal since it does not and cannot stand on its own.
Curiously, however, according to the Abhidharmikas, the generative dharma is also causally connected with other dharmas. This means that for the Abhidharmikas a dharma is impermanent and changes from moment to moment. It is causally connected in the flow of momentary atomistic events, which is subject to dependent origination. This marks dharma also as a generative entity. Consequently, the Abhidharmikas regard dharma as both a genic and a generative entity. Through such a maneuver, the Abhidharmika hopes to steer clear of the annihilationist trap rejected by the Buddha by maintaining that dharma is the ultimate irreducible unit of reality in possession of an intrinsic nature while trying to stay committed to the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination by insisting that dharma is also subject to dependent origination.

To put it crudely, the Abhidharmikas want to eat their cake by postulating the generative dharma and have it too by making it also genic. However, by stipulating that dharma is both genic and generative, the Abhidharmikas make the notion of dharma unintelligible by attributing two conflicting and mutually exclusive qualities to it, namely dependence and independence. More specifically, a dharma cannot be both dependent in following dependent origination and independent in possessing a non-originated intrinsic nature, svabhāva. By introducing a non-originated element, svabhāva, into the realm of dependent origination, the Abhidharmikas inject genic elements into the generative domain, thus touching one of the central nerves in metaphysics – central nerves of metaphysics in the world's major speculative traditions, namely, the tension between the genic and the generative conceptions of reality.

While the Abhidharmikas might or might not have been aware of the tension between the genic and the generative conceptions of reality, Nāgārjuna's critique of Abhidharmika's conception of svabhāva, as well as its own philosophical project, is premised upon a clear recognition of the tension involved. Nāgārjuna maintains
the view that genic and generative conceptions of reality are incommensurable in the final analysis. There is an unbridgeable conceptual gap between the two. If reality is conceived of generatively, it cannot also be genic at the same time, and vice versa. Therefore, from Nāgārjuna's perspective, the Abhidharmika's conception of dharma, à la svabhāva, is a veiled attempt to insert a genic element into the generative domain of dependent origination. Since the origination of the genic self-nature cannot be accounted for, it can only exist outside the nexus of dependent origination.

For Nāgārjuna, that very premise of the Abhidharmika's interpretation of dependent origination is flawed since it leaves the basic units of reality, genic dharma and svabhāva unaccounted for by taking outside the generative realm of dependent origination, emptiness. Nāgārjuna defends the Buddha's view of dependent nature of existence by arguing that outside the nexus of constitutive relationality and dependency, existence is empty in and of itself. All beings in the world lack essential or intrinsic existence when examined from their own side without resorting to any relationality or generativity. The existence or analysis of anything can be understood only in relationship to others. There is nothing in an entity itself.

The modes of analysis embodied in emptiness is clearly genic. That is, emptiness employs genic reasoning to demonstrate that if any entity is analyzed genically, nothing would actually turn up. Therefore, every existence in the world must be genically empty. The curious aspect of emptiness is that its genic reasoning finds no corresponding genic entity. Indeed, emptiness employs genic analysis to demolish any genic entity since it turns out that there is nothing – there cannot be anything that is conceivably genic without compromising the generativity of the world. This means that emptiness is not another entity – it is not another entity. Rather, it is
the very antithesis of any genic conceptions of entity. It moves us away from seeing the world in terms of entities and points us right back into the generative world of dependent origination.

Furthermore, the generative realm of dependent origination is also transformed by the realization of its genic emptiness in that emptiness radicalizes dependent origination in making it thoroughly generative without any genic element, that is, independent of others.

However, one seemingly legitimate question remains for the generative conception of reality, namely, how does Nāgārjuna deal with the specter of infinite regress if no genic entity is allowed to terminate the apparently endless generative analysis. Nāgārjuna is clearly cognizant of the problem of infinite regress. In another – in a major work of his, the Vigrahavyāvartanī, he uses it as a weapon to discredit his opponents' efforts to establish any absolutely valid means of knowledge, pramanas. Quote, "If the pramanas are established through other pramanas, then there is an infinite series; neither the beginning, nor the middle, nor the end can then be established," unquote.

Nāgārjuna contends that since the valid of means of knowledge does not establish itself but depends on other means of knowledge, at no point can absolutely or independently valid pramanas be established. Whether Nāgārjuna's argument is a defensible one or not is of no concern here. What is relevant instead is that Nāgārjuna sees infinite regress as a weapon to challenge his foundationalist opponent rather than as a problem in itself. As is well known, Nāgārjuna's favorite forms of argument are tetra lemma and reductio ad absurdum. He does not seem to be bothered by the specter of infinite regress at all since he never addresses such a concern as a problem in itself.
Such apparent lack of vigilance against infinite regress as a problem on Nāgārjuna's part is rather curious and deserves some probing. As noted earlier, Nāgārjuna clearly recognizes the unbridgeable gap between the generative and the genic conceptions of reality. This means that the move from the generative to the genic to avoid the ghost of infinite regress requires an unwarranted philosophical leap with the sole purpose of terminating the ongoing analysis, however arbitrary and artificial that termination is.

It is much more fruitful to view infinite regress as a practical problem instead of a metaphysical problem. As a practical problem, it can be dealt with through a pragmatic analysis of what one hopes to accomplish and what is achievable in a given situation. The purpose of analysis is accounted for by the dominant condition in Nāgārjuna's scheme. For example, when we analyze the disaster that happened in New Orleans in August 2005, depending on what we hope to achieve and what is achievable, our analysis can vary a great deal. The efficient condition was obviously Hurricane Katrina, and the immediate condition was the collapse of the levies. However, many other factors were involved, such as the abhorrent level of poverty in the city, the lingering legacy of racism, the responses or lack thereof from various levels of the federal and local governments, the impact of global warming, the location and design of the city, the maintenance of the levies or lack thereof, the draining of critical domestic resources due to various costly, ongoing international involvements, and such a list goes on. And each factor on the list also has its own conditions and history as well.

Depending on the purpose of analysis and the ability to accomplish what is possible in short and/or long term, the direction of analysis can vary drastically from one another, from local to global, or even the cosmic, from the physical to the political, historical, or even the cosmological. This means that the purpose of the analysis is
constitutive of that analysis. The endpoint, a genic entity, should not be decided \textit{a priori} in any particular analysis. Nor should it be understood that any endpoint is historically speaking more than a temporary pause conditioned by the goals, needs, and ability in a given situation, which is infinitely complex.

Furthermore, for Nāgārjuna, the \textit{a priori} postulation of some genic entity as something ultimate in order to put an end to the generative analysis would result in a closed analytic system. It is far more fruitful to engage the world when it is taken to be thoroughly generative and infinitely open. And as such, there is no room for any genic entity. If certain genic entities are postulated for analytic purposes, those entities should be recognized as postulates at best representing some temporary, albeit useful, pauses in analyzing and engaging the world. Hence, emptiness sweeps away any genic residue within the generative domain, and in so doing radicalizes dependent origination by making its realm thoroughly generative and infinitely open.

Now, one question is often raised in this connection. Why should anybody follow the Buddha's teaching instead of other teachings, since they are all ultimately empty anyway, according to Nāgārjuna? Behind such a question lies the charge that Nāgārjuna has rendered the Buddhist's enlightenment unintelligible and has denied the possibility of any path towards it. However, on this question Nāgārjuna is decidedly unambiguous. Only the Buddha's teaching as Nāgārjuna sees it is thoroughly generative and hence genically empty. By contrast, other teaching either confuses generative and genic entities, leading to the postulating of certain entities as absolutes for explanatory purposes, but subsequently reifying them into something genic in order to justify their postulation, or sacrifice generative entities in order to save the absolute validity of genic entities, leading to the compromise or even rejection of the world and our experience.
Nāgārjuna takes upon himself to restore the true spirit of the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination upon which the Four Noble Truths are premised. Such a teaching is generative through and through. It is in this light the following verse should be interpreted, quote, "The Buddha's teaching of dharma is based upon two truths, a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth. Without a foundation in the conventional truths, the significance of the ultimate truths cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation cannot be achieved," unquote. In other words, in order for the conventional to be truly conventional, it has to be thoroughly generative, which is eo ipso genically empty.

Nāgārjuna is radicalizing the understanding of the conventional truths, dependent origination, by making it subject to generative analysis alone. As such, conventional truth is genically empty. Paradigmatically, there is an inverse correspondence between the generative and the genic conceptions of reality. Namely, what is conceived of as genic generatively real corresponds to what is conceived of as genically empty, and what is conceived of as genically real corresponds to what is conceived of as generatively empty.

Now, that's the – paradigmatically. Now, normatively, Nāgārjuna only accepts the generative conceptions of reality, namely, dependent origination, and its inverse correspondence to the genic emptiness while rejecting the opposite pair, since a non-generated, immutable, eternal genic entity – a genic reality is contrary to the most basic fabric of human experiences. His teaching of emptiness is a way to free the generative realm of dependent origination from any distorted presence of genic residue. In light of such an interpretation, conventional truths can no longer be seen as lesser truths than the ultimate truth. Rather, there is a perfect alignment between generative reality and genic emptiness, with neither of the two getting in the way of each other, as it were.
To put it simply, what is generatively real in the thorough sense is also by default genically empty. This implies that what is meant by generative or conventional is usually more than what is really conventional since it almost always involves some genically substantive entities in that it postulates some genic entities to explain the conventional or generative, but are not themselves conventional or subject to generative analysis, for example, substance, essence, and other genic entities. Consequently, the ultimate truths of genic emptiness is not at all truer than the conventional truths of generative relatedness, nor is the conventional truth less true than the ultimate truth. Instead, there is a perfect alignment between generative reality of the conventional and genic emptiness of the ultimate.

In this state of perfect alignment, there is no distortion or reification in the cognition of the generative reality. For Nāgārjuna, what makes the Buddha's teaching more effective than other teachings is precisely because the Buddha's teaching exhibits the perfect alignment between the conventional and the ultimate, while others confuses the two, with the consequence of distortive and reifying cognitions at multiple levels due to the fact that the genic constantly gets into the way of the generative in understanding the world.

Therefore, quote, "There is not the slightest difference between samsara and nirvana. There is not the slightest difference between the two. Whatever is the limit of nirvana, that is also the limit of samsara," unquote. These two verses can be better interpreted as arguing for the alignment of samsara and nirvana, not their identity. In other words, as Nāgārjuna interprets it, the Buddha's teaching can be best understood as promoting a perfect alignment between the generative reality of the world and its genic emptiness. Only when the world is genically empty can it be generatively real. So genically, there is nothing; generatively, there is the world.
So we can think about the Buddha's statues. When we see from the front, there is the Buddha; when we see from the back, it is empty. There is nothing.

To preserve the generativity of the world, any genic elements have to be rejected due to the mutual exclusivity between the genic and the generative. If there could be anything genic, they would not be fundable generatively since they would not be possible objects of experience, to use the Kantian terminology. It is important to be reminded here that emptiness is not a genic entity. As I said, emptiness doesn't have any corresponding object. As seen repeatedly here, emptiness is precisely meant to rid any genic entities of its generative realm of dependent origination so that there could be no genic elements to distort the cognition of the thoroughly generative world at any level every day or meditative.

In other words, if emptiness were a genically real entity, Nāgārjuna's emptiness would indeed be nihilistic, as his many detractors accuse him of. Therefore, quote, "The pacification of all object objectifications and the pacification of illusion no dharma was taught by the Buddha at any time in any place to any person," unquote. Genically and ultimately, dharma, Buddha, time, place, person are all empty because no meaningful assertion can be made genically. Generatively and conventionally, however, there was dharma that was taught by the Buddha at some point in time and place to some people.

Reification at various levels is a subtle form of distortion the Buddhist tradition has been battling with. Emptiness is precisely the culmination of such an effort and can hence be best interpreted as non-distortion all the way up to nirvana and down to samsara. In other words, emptiness does not negate reality; rather, it is the
non-distortion of the generative reality of the world, thus advancing a radically different way to engage the world that is distortion-free.

To conclude, this presentation has tried to make the case that Nāgārjuna and the Buddhist tradition he represents is a major challenge to the strategies that have been developed within the mainstream philosophical projects both in the west and in India to deal with the tension between two conceptions of reality, genic and generative. Indeed, Nāgārjuna is one of the few proponents – few prominent world philosophers who have fully realized what is at stake and have attempted to solve the core tension in metaphysical reasoning between the genic and the generative conceptions of reality.

The uniqueness of Nāgārjuna's effort can be seen in at least two aspects. First, he adamantly rejects bifurcation – bifurcating reality into two distinct realms, and instead argues for one reality whose nature is thoroughly generative and genically empty, hence infinitely open. Second, he makes a rigorous case for the incommensurability between two conceptions of reality, and in the end rejects the genic conception while embracing the generative as a way to both validate the world and our experience on the one hand, and to transform the way it is understood and experienced on the other. His appeal to emptiness is meant to free the cognition of the generative reality of the world, whether on the everyday gross level or on the meditative subtle level, from any distortion by the genic reification.

So I hope this, you know, helps to view the relationship more fruitfully. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

OWEN FLANAGAN

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[Off-mic] of our discussions. I'll try to speak in an entirely different idiom, the idiom of a western philosopher interested in this case in metaphysics. So I've written some things on the board, and I'll just point to them. It's pretty simple.

So the – as Jonathan said at the very beginning, one of the topics this year is the topic of ethics. And so one way to read Tao's paper is that getting emptiness and dependent origination right is really important for the practical task of Buddhist philosophy. Now, the way I read and have always read emptiness and dependent origination, because of my orientation, is as metaphysical claims, okay, in the western sense. That is, they are claims about the way things ultimately are or are not and about – now, so I'll talk about them that way for a few minutes.

So, Tao starts his paper out talking about whether – one interpretation. And I'm going to leave Nāgārjuna interpretation to all the rest of you. I'm not going to get into that one bit. And in fact, Tao says in his paper he's not interested actually in exactly doing textual interpretation, but a reconstruction. So I'm interested in whether what he says is true, either one of these guys, okay, as we'd say in the west.

Okay. So let's talk about this table. When I took philosophy classes at first, "I thought this is all very good." The guy said on the first day, "Plato posits the good." I thought, "Oh, this is good. I'm going to study this. Whatever that means, I like it." But then they started talking about tables, whether the tables in the room were really there or not, like that.

(Laughter)

**OWEN FLANAGAN**
I was – then I was – I didn't quite know. But I'm – so now it's 30 years later; I'm going to talk about tables.

Okay. So at one point in the paper, we get this idea about – a nice example and a nice quote from Jay Garfield too. So a table is, as Garfield says and Tao agrees with – it is viewed from a certain perspective. It's an arbitrary coming together of a thingamajig in space-time. That's the way Garfield puts it and you assent to it. And the idea there is that the reification of tables – Whitehead is a nice example here because Whitehead would worry about fallacy of misplaced concreteness, reifying things, right? So the table we can imagine. This is a way of, at least in the west, thinking about dependent origination. It would just be to say whatever the table is made up of – let's not say it's atoms yet or anything like that. But whatever it is made up of, its parts possibly were there at the Big Bang 14 billion years ago, and then 14 billion years down the road, they will be doing something else. They will be dispersed again maybe. But they just came together now. And so there is this tendency to think of this object has having permanency, but it is, at least on one view, its parts, okay. They will just reconstitute themselves later on, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and all that.

So that's dependent origination. Now, that's a very, very popular idea in the west, of course. And most western philosophers, I think metaphysicians, would say, yeah, what we're talking about there is causal relations primarily, causal relations in time. So I suggest that one way to think about dependent origination in western metaphysics is that it's really primarily whatever partakes of the causal relation, or possibly if you're a skeptic about causation like David Hume, say, maybe was – and he says, really, all we see is constant conjunction – then you might say, well, it's the after-then relation. This occurs, then the next thing occurs is that, okay?
So you could be agnostic about there being causation, but say at least dependent origination tells me about the historical sequence of events. I could be agnostic on causation, okay?

Now, another, of course, deep interest – and so that's, I think, what Tao calls the generative, right? And he specifically says he is going to talk about in terms of a causal relation. That is what I just mean – call diachronic. So dependent origination is looking at things diachronically over time. And if you look at anything over time, you'll see the world looks much more Heraclitean than Platonic. Everything is in flux, okay? And the table is that arbitrary time slice. So that seems to be very much part of the sort of basic western metaphysical view.

Now, emptiness, however – this is trickier. So think of a question – now here is where we get into the metaphysics of time. So we might say, okay, so what is – what about the nature of this table at this time, not – we're not thinking about the Big Bang giving rise to it or where it is going to be in 14 billion years. We're just saying, look, right now, is there anything here which is the whatever of the table, the essence of the table. So we know that there are answers. People will say things like, yes, there are the primary qualities of the table like its shape, its mass, its weight, whatever the kinds of primary qualities. And then there are things that are secondary, like its color, which if you're a bird of prey would look brown, okay? That's relational. So there are contingent properties and essential ones, all the language that you exactly are right about.

Now, the interesting question seems to me though whether – so this is what I think of as synchronic, if there is such a thing, capturing the nature of the thing at a particular time – could you do that? Now, you might think in the west that when we do things at a time, synchronically, that that's what people do who say water is H₂O or
salt is NaCl or gold is the substance with atomic number 79. But of course, this particular piece of gold is not
the substance with atomic number 79. This particular piece of gold is the particular piece of gold. Now, that's
nice for the view that you're promoting because what is is the way it is, okay? These things that we pick out
that are the so-called essential properties, those are just things that happen to unify conceptually perhaps all the
things that we call gold. So there is nothing – there is no token instances of things with atomic number 79.
Well, there are – sorry. There are token instances, and they add up to the thing we call conceptually "gold."

Now – but I guess the thing that I would just wonder about – it seems to be an open question that – I'm a student
of Quine. So Quine says the best philosophy is continuous with science. So it seems to me if we take
something or another, whatever it is, a table, and we ask does it decompose – now this is one way I always read
this question about emptiness, and in the – so is there a decompositional analysis of the thing that gets me to the
rock-bottom constituents of that thing. So, for example, in Theravadan Buddhism, right, the five components of
mind, say – whatever the number is; it doesn't matter, as long as there as a bottom level number. And then –
and I take it that Mahayana will specifically say, oh, but if you get there, you could divide it further, okay? And
this is where the infinite regress issues that don't bother him come in, and I think that's fine.

So one thing – sometimes in your paper, Tao, you use the – you say something like – you use words like
"dividing things up" or "analyzing things conceptually" or "empirically," I think.

**TAO JIANG**

Existentially or conceptually.
OWEN FLANAGAN

Existentially or conceptually.

TAO JIANG

Right.

OWEN FLANAGAN

So one might say something like, well, one can conceptually say that whatever you give me – so that – let's take a view like Greek atomism, where the Greek atomists commit themselves to, yes, there is something this table is made of. It's atoms all crunched together, and the atoms are the lowest divisible particle. Then someone can come along and say, well, conceptually, I can imagine dividing them further. Now, one answer would be to say, yeah, you can do that conceptually. It's just that the world bottoms out there. So the knowledge or language doesn't track the way reality is. Reality, for the best we can tell if you're a Greek atomist bottoms out there. This is some of the things that Zeno's paradoxes gives us, actually, this – that I can do it conceptually but not in reality.

So I take it as an open question, nothing that anyone can solve about – so, for example, you know, I had a colleague who worked with Ed Witten for a year, and he came back to Duke, and he said he had been working on the structure of the most elementary string that Ed Witten works on, and the president of Duke – I was at a dinner. She said, "Could you test for this?" And he said, "Well, I know the structure of these things if they exist, but they're very small." And he said, "For example, one of these elementary strings is the same size in relation to a single proton as a single proton is in relation to the entire known universe." So it's very small. But,
you see, you still might be committed on some version of super string theory to there being elementary something or others.

So I just throw these things out. So there might be a difference in method here. So contemporary, I think, philosophers who follow science would just say it's an empirical question. It's not a conceptual question, whether reality bottoms out in some things. And it will be told to us by our best science.

So I put up – so that's just to throw a question out for the people in the audience. I did write up the possibilities here because I totally agree with Tao that whoever reads these theses as identical, it just seems wrong, partly for reasons that I've given on my own over here. So Nāgārjuna, of course, believes both dependent origination and emptiness. I'm not talking, by the way, about the last part of the paper. I'm sure the audience is going to have a lot to talk about about that, which reality is most real and the incommensurability thing. I'm puzzled about the use of incommensurability, but in any case – so one view you could have is that dependent origination is true and emptiness is true. That's available to you in contemporary people, I think.

Another view, though, would be dependent origination is true and emptiness is not true, and I gave the example of Greek atomists. I think Greek atomists could easily hold that everything is in flux. It's just that the primary vehicles of the flux, of the unfolding, are atoms, okay? You could also hold a no dependent origination – well, how would no dependent origination be? It would be in the west what we have seen sometimes with people like David Hume saying, well, at least if it is the causal relation you're talking about, that's – we don't see any evidence of cause. We just see one thing after another. And I wrote down "block universe people." So some
people have said that the Witten equations which are now the best explanation of the universe don't even have a variable for T in them, for time, okay, so that time on that view would be an illusion.

Now, that's nothing that comes up in this paper, but it's important because it does look to me as if time is assumed. It is not just phenomenally experienced, that is, that we experience time, but that time is a real thing, and that the best equations to predict a cosmological – you know, this is not from my – I just hear this on the street. But I hear it from physicists, okay, and philosophers of physics, so that – in any case, that would be a view that there is no dependent origination; it just seems like there is. Could you have that with emptiness? I guess you could. And then the last view – and I can't think – I couldn't think off the top of my head – no dependent origination and no emptiness. I get – anyway, these are all logically possible, and they help with the idea that they are not the same thesis because, I mean, just the possibility proof in the west would be number two, where they come apart, so they can't be the same thesis, or number three. They come apart, okay?

And I have some things to say about – I'm not sure incommensurability is your word, but I align that with Thomas Kuhn's work and the incomparability of scientific theories and things like that. And I have left open the last part. So that's all I wanted to – just speak in the voice of a western metaphysician for a minute and see how these things wind up. Thank you.

(Applause)

JONATHAN GOLD

So how would you like to respond first to Owen's reply? And then we can open it up to questions.

TAO JIANG
Yeah, I – you know, yeah, this is the – you know, sort of enumerate these possibilities. I guess it would be another way to think about the relationships. I guess I was approaching it in terms of sort of the inverse correspondence between using genic and generative, or diachronic and synchronic in your vocabulary, which I talked, you know, about – I actually first – when I was first writing this paper, I was using precisely synchronic and diachronic. So – and then I decided to change that.

But anyway, I was thinking in slightly different – I guess I wasn't thinking of all the possibilities of their relationship. I was thinking of, you know, the – in what ways the – in what ways within the text the – when he was talking about the relationship between the conventional and the ultimate truths, and then if we juxtapose that with the emptiness and dependent origination – I was trying to work out, you know, sort of that – the problem I guess internal to the text itself. So, yeah, I appreciate that. So this would actually be a good way to hook up to the western, you know, sort of conversations on this topic.

**JONATHAN GOLD**

Okay. Questions?