

# Buddhist thought as a psychosemantics: the *nāmarūpa* concept and cognitive psychology

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**Abstract:** Within scholars that accept a psychological theory of Buddhism, there are who have longtime recognized the central role of language, or rather of semantic perception. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Siderits, Garfield, Hamilton and Tzohar, the awareness that the Buddhist thought system is based on an analysis of semantic cognition has increased over the past few years. Since a rigorous comparison between the refined descriptive lexicon of the cognitive system proposed by Buddhist thought and the ideas of Ferdinand De Saussure has never been proposed, the aim of this article is the demonstration that there is a perfect correspondence between some concepts of Buddhist thought and Saussurian structural linguistics. It will be shown correspondence between *nāmarūpa* as 'linguistic sign', and *sañña* as 'semantic cognition'.

**Keywords:** linguistics, cognition, semantics, buddhism, language, madhyamaka

## Introduction

Buddhist philosophy adopts two conceptual devices to describe how humans conceive reality. Among the philosophers who have been able to make good use of these devices there is undoubtedly Nāgārjuna. What he said was purely inherent in the perceptual and psychosemantic sphere. When he speaks of two truths (*dve satye*) or two realities, he is not referring to two different, distinct, and separate worlds, but to two ways of conceiving the only reality. We are most concerned with the sphere of conventions (*saṃvṛti*). Conventional reality would be what encompasses the infinite ways in which the conception of reality in a relative sense is elaborated, and everything that passes through a psychosemantic mediation is considered relative, that is, making use of a language to organize reality, and this it applies as much to languages linked to a certain spontaneous culture as to scientific languages, linked to a methodical conception of study and cataloging reality which is just as arbitrary and conventional as cultural languages. For this reason, "what is only a linguistic or conceptual truth, a universal, is simply held to be conceptual fiction, a superimposition without causal efficacy" (Duckworth 2018, 70).

Objectivity from this point of view is nothing more than inter-subjective consent. The problem of reality in Buddhism anticipates a question of primary importance in neuroscience, that is, understanding how the mind conceives and organizes the world around itself.

In 1960 Wilfrid Sellars gave two lectures at the University of Pittsburgh which were later published in the article entitled *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*

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(Sellars 1963). The article, which was intended to detect a major problem in science, highlighted a contradiction that has actually existed since the dawn of Western thought and which, from Plato to Husserl, has been repeated several times in various ways.

What is said in that article and in subsequent studies has been repeatedly compared to the famous distinction made by Buddhist philosophy present in Abhidhamma and subsequently proposed in a more radical way by Nāgārjuna and by philosophers who adopt him as patriarch. As far as conventional constructions can be infinite and there are many as there are visions of the world proposed by the different cultural or scientific traditions that try to reduce everything to a set of entities that can be named, classified and catalogued, each of this aspect is equally relative and impermanent.

Neuroscience needs to understand the synesthetic condition that Sellars' stereoscopy describes, and in the same way the vision of Buddhism can help to deepen Sellars' intuition which, in its time, appears flawed by a fundamental deficiency.

### 1. On the stereoscopic vision

In his work Sellars propose two distinct visions of the world appearance. The first is the 'manifest image' of the world and concerns how the things appear from the subjective human-centred perspective. The second is the 'scientific image' proposed by the objectifying gaze of science.

This distinction resembles the Nāgārjuna's philosophies of two truths (*dve satye*): one is the absolute truth (*paramārtha*) and one is the conventional truth (*saṃvṛti*). At any rate it is important to notice that for Nāgārjuna's perspective the only existent reality is the absolute one, which is also ineffable and inconceivable to language. The linguistic dimension is arbitrary, based on a reductive description of reality. For this reason, the conventional truth is not a second and distinct reality, but rather a different way to describe the only and absolute truth.

In fact, it would be more correct to say that although there is just one absolute reality, the ways we experience the world are as many as the conventional dimensions to describe it. There is no such thing as 'one conventional truth', but rather many conventional truths, which correspond to different languages, different cultural traditions, that give the impression of the existence of many different attemptable 'worlds'. Those are, however, the many relative ways to see the only ineffable truth. That is the correct purport of Nāgārjuna's 'conventional' truth(s).

The Buddhist view is not a relativism but includes relativity within its *monism*. Buddhism is not a nihilistic philosophy, nor a reified existentialism. It denies *the idea* of 'being' but not Being in itself, which however cannot be named without evoking the idea of 'being' that Buddhism recognizes as an ephemeral reduction of the absolute and ineffable truth. From this point of view, any attempt to describe the absolute through words creates a discourse of the ephemeral, and since the subjective and objective vision are equally proposed to describe the world, they are both true, but they are not the only Truth. Both the subjective and the objective are, for Nāgārjuna, part of the *conventional* truth.

So, the two images that Sellars describes are not the continuations of Nāgārjuna's two *satyas*. Both subjective and objective truths are conventional, but while the first derives from the direct, albeit reductive, experience of the world by the sentient being, the second is a reduction not made by the limitation of human cognitive means, but by limits imposed by a human convention itself. Science creates an objective truth, which is equally reductive, but which is based on limits and measurements imposed by the human being, who thus remains aware that inside those limits he will have certainties. These limits, however, by their very nature, cannot understand or explain the truths experienced by the subject, the infinite subjective worlds that are different from person to person and that are all valid and multifaceted visions of the same reality.

Nāgārjuna's model of two truths is taken from Abhidharma analogous distinction of *sammuti* (conventional) and *paramattha* (absolute) found also in Vasubandhus' commentary of *Abhidharmakośa*.

*In his mereologically reductionist Abhidharma model, the conventional truth comprises any object that is extended – spatially or temporally – while the ultimate truth eludes these features of phenomenal experience. While it seems that there really are things like tables, chairs, and persons in the world, upon a certain kind of analysis, these things can be reduced to their constituent parts (like the aggregates). Thus, something like a pink ice cube can be broken down into its constituents, so it is a conventional truth; it only nominally exists.*

(Duckworth 2018, 68)

Sellars therefore proposes a unifying vision of all conventional realities to get closer to absolute truth. He called this attempt a 'stereoscopic vision' which is the idea to keep both manifest and scientific images together.

*Sellars's key move here is to construe all the above basic human activities as essentially normative (as opposed to their being only descriptive of certain states of affairs in the world or human behaviour). He then asserts that this common fundamental feature in terms of which the 'essence' (or 'grammar') of our personhood is articulated within the manifest image — that is, its 'normativity'— does not come into view if it is described in terms of concepts that belong to the scientific image.*

(Christias 2014, 350)

There is no correlation between objectivity, scientific truth, and Buddhist *paramāthasatya*. Science and objectivity are part of the relative, and indeed are more relative than the subjectivity, which although it is a partial view of the world is limited by cognitive means and not self-limited by scientific reductionism.

Anyway, that's not the Sellars' idea of 'scientific image'. Actually, Sellars includes both subjective and objective visions in his idea of 'scientific image', since everything that underlies "a certain type of theoretical analysis, corresponds to a 'scientific image'"

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(Duckworth 2018, 69), whereas he defines a 'manifest image' as "the intuitive sense that there is a real whole above the parts" (*ibidem*).

The Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakakārikā* is essential to this work and reveals rich linguistic questions. Also, the Sasaki introduction to the study of ancient Buddhism by a linguistic approach is fundamental (Sasaki 1986). To understand Māhayāna Buddhism too, Tzohar's work on the metaphor in *Yogācāra* (Tzohar 2018) as well as Herat's on linguistic thought (Herat 2018) is essential. Among these, the contents of Johansson (1965, 1969 and 1979) are particularly appreciable. Ultimately, we mention Harvey's studies on the concept of *nimitta* as a 'sign' and *vipassanā* as a 'signless meditation' (Harvey 1986). Despite these facts, between the descriptive lexicon of the cognitive system of ancient Buddhism and nāgārjunian thought, and the ideas of the father of modern linguistics: Ferdinand De Saussure, has never been proposed a systematic comparison. This article will try to demonstrate that there can be a perfect correspondence between some concepts of ancient Buddhism and those of Saussurian structural linguistics, such as *nāmarūpa* and *sañña* which we can consider to indicate the 'linguistic sign' and the 'semantic cognition'.

Buddhism is often wrongly described as a nihilistic system of thought, especially due to the peremptory Nāgārjunian claims in the *Madhyamakakārikā* in which the emptiness of all things is announced.

*Nevertheless, the authors of classical Mādhyamika texts – especially Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti – were adamant in their censure of both nihilism (ucchedavāda) and its opposite, the so-called absolutism (śaśvatāvāda) of the Hindu philosophers, which is considered nothing more than an elaboration of the reified concept of being that underlies every form of epistemological and ontological monism.*

(Huntington 1989, 29)

These statements refer to the substantiality attributed to things cognitively perceived through language and naming (Kantor et al. 2019). We see a tree and we think it exists a 'tree' in an objective world, while the tree as such can be cognitively perceived only by virtue of the signified that defines the signifier, ie the mental (*ideal type*) form that is associated with 'something', that our perceptive system identifies as comparable to it. From this point of view, Buddhism is more properly a relativist philosophy and a phenomenology of the mind.

The momentary character of everything existing is further established by arguments from perception and inference. The first of them is an argument from direct perception. That sensation is a momentary flash is proved by introspection. But a momentary sensation is but the reflex of a momentary thing. It cannot seize neither what precedes nor what follows.

(Stcherbatsky 1962a, 87)

Buddhist philosophy is considered by many scholars as having its own psychological thinking. For some (Bugault 1994 and Gregory 1986, 56), Buddhist philosophical system is comparable to a psychotherapeutic process characterized with its specific conception of ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*), etiology (*samudaya*), prognosis (*nirodha*) and therapy (*magga*). Surely, it is difficult to sustain that there is a unitary Buddhist psychology, since every thinker belonging to Buddhism may have developed its own psychological thought. Referring to the old statements contained in the pāli canon we can identify in ancient Buddhist psychological thought a series of elements that centuries later would have been defined by joint studies in linguistics and cognitive psychology (Langacker 1987). We will demonstrate how Buddhism had anticipated the concept of semantic sign (*saññā*), of signifier (*nāma*) and signified (*rūpa*), in one of their possible connotations, and how it has been able to describe the cognitive and dynamic development in the human being, through these descriptors.

*svayaṃ kṛtaṃ paraḥkṛtaṃ dvābhyāṃ kṛtaṃ ahetukam |  
duḥkham ity eka icchanti tac ca kāryaṃ na yujyate ||1||*

*Some say that suffering is self-made, some that it is made by another, some that it is made by both, and some that it is without cause; but it is not correct to think of suffering as an effect.*

(Siderits et al. 2013b, 130)

If we consider just the psychological explanations in the ancient pāli cannon, and if we assume that Nāgārjuna based his psychological analysis exactly to the pāli cannon (as himself states), we find that Buddhist conception for psychological processes (and suffering insurgence as well) is clearly referable to a semantic process that happens in the functioning of the cognition. That means that symbolic and semantic dimensions are not distinguishable from the psychological and pathological ones.

## **2. Nominal existence and archetype: the concept of the ‘thing’ is not the Thing itself**

Both the Abhidhamma and Dharmakīrti’s philosophy offers a two truths models which is essentially a dichotomy between the appearance and the reality, (Duckworth 2018, 70) that is basically different from the Mādhyamika fake dualism between absolute and conventional truth whereas the only ‘real reality’ admitted is the one and only absolute truth, whilst the conventional truth does not depict a different reality at all. The distinction is pretty much the same we can find in the Neuro-Linguistic Programming, where the territory is the reality and the map, as a conventional description of the territory, even though referring to the same truth.

<i>paramārtha</i>	<i>saṃvṛti</i>
territory	map

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A map can refer to a photograph, a drawing, it can show only peculiar features such as physical or political geography, but in all cases, the map, whether it is a photo or a drawing, is a mere *representation* of reality made through a particular graphic language that *tries to reproduce* reality, but inevitably reduces it to conventional codes. In Nāgārjuna's philosophy the absolute is the territory, the relative is the map, and language is the means that draws the map.

Sellars immediately points out that the paradox of the human being or the human-in-the-world is that of being dependent on language to describe reality, and at the same time not being able to perceive reality as it is, since the language represents a reduction and cognitive distortion. This is "man's encounter with himself" (Sellars 1936, 6).

Relative perception of reality is an aspect of the absolute, but the absolute is the only existing reality. The relative visions outline conventional possibilities of understanding the absolute, creating various possible worlds, but they are all aspects of a single reality. But we cannot say that the absolute exists in the relative. Rather, in the relative there is the concept of the absolute, which however is not the absolute in itself but the eidetic image of the absolute, the concept reified, but in so far as nominal existence, like all things that are named, is conventional and therefore an aspect of relative reality, which is a conventional aspect of the absolute. In conclusion, therefore, only the absolute exists, and it does not depend on the relative.

The real problem with the Sellars definition is that the manifest image is somehow considered as the unreal, whereas the scientific one is the 'real'. Sellars does not place any supremacy of one over the other, proposing an integrative (stereoscopic) vision but the problem lies precisely in this which is not a true monism, for he not recognizing that the conventional underlies to the relative, and not vice versa.

*Under a Madhyamaka gaze, we can see that the two images do not correspond to the two truths but that both of Sellars' images fit into Tsongkhapa's account of conventional truth.*

*When outlining the relationship between the two truths, Tsongkhapa stated that the ultimate truths of emptiness conventionally exists. That is, since everything is empty (since nothing ultimately exists), the ultimate truth conventionally exists (and existing conventionally is the only way something exist).*

(Duckworth 2018, 74)

Both scientific image and manifest image are conceptual systems arbitrarily and abstractly formulated and under no circumstances claiming absolute truth (such as the *paramārtha* does). Rather, as any philosophical system does, their aim is "to understand how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Sellars, 1963: 1). The problem with the Sellars' system is that trying to explain the Truth through the relative is impossible as long as you don't admit that the arbitrariness of your system as a limit.

Also, there is for Sellars an ‘original image’ which is constituted by ‘pre-conceptual patterns of behavior’ and evolves into the conceptual thinking of humanity developing the manifest image (Duckworth, 2018: 69).

We can therefore say that the world of cognitions is considered ephemeral by Buddhism since the cognitive archetypes (or ideal types) on which the concepts with which we are confronted depend, are not endowed with intrinsic reality in themselves, but only with nominal existence, whose substance is attributed to him through the nomination. Many Buddhists have wondered if anything truly anarchist existed. Sometimes, like in Diñnāga’s philosophy, this has been referred to as a *svalakṣana* (‘owncharacteristic’). But in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy this has been called *anutpannāniruddhā*.

From an etymological point of view the term ‘anarchy’ literally means ‘without origin’. Something is anarchic if its condition of existence is totally independent from any cause. Of course, Anarchy also means the condition of independence from any rule, since a law is, sociologically, an archetype of behaviour.

The term derives from the same Greek word for archetype (*arkhē*) preceded by an alpha privative which generates terms like *ánarkhos* ‘without leader’ and *anarkhiā*, the condition of being without *arkhē*.

When the Christology faced with the nontrinitarian movement of Arianism the focus of the debate was precisely the anarchic nature of Christ being questioned. According to Arius, only God was truly ‘anarchic’, in the sense of being without principle. The son, although of the same substance as the father, was generated by the latter, and therefore, had God as archetype. This doctrine was judged heretical by the first Council of Nicaea, which affirmed the perfect equality between God and Christ. This is not just any problem, but it is the problem that all disciplines, from neuroscience to epistemology, must pay attention to.

If something has an archetype (an origin), is not an independent being, but it is a co-being that exists in a relative form within a system of interdependent elements. Buddhism had sensed that everything in relative reality (*saṃvṛti*) is an image, an appearance, a distorted view of Being. The true Being, if it is such, should be absolute (*paramārtha*) and therefore immutable. To be independent, something must be without an origin, never born (*na jāyate*) and can never be destroyed (*mriyate*).

The concept of anarchy is perfectly traceable within Buddhist philosophy in various forms, but one of these is certainly the *anutpannāniruddhā*. In MK 18.7 Nāgārjuna wrote:

*nivṛttam abhidhātavyaṃ nivṛttaś cittagocaraḥ |  
anutpannāniruddhā hi nirvāṇam iva dharmatā ||*

Once the cognitive activity (*cittagocaraḥ*) is extinguished (*nivṛttam*), also the object of cognition disappears [revealing that] the true nature of things (*dharmatā*) is such as the *nirvāṇa*: without origin and beginning (*anutpannāniruddhā*).

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Now the question to be resolved is the following: can we define a *svalakṣana* as an immutable absolute, in that case would it be a synonym of *paramārtha* and referable to a single eternal Being, or is this conception a retraction on objectivity and therefore assumes a *plurality* of objects, different from each other but all equipped with self-essence? It would seem ridiculous that Diñnāga began to deny the very basis of Buddhism, that is, the non-existence of an objective reality.

According to Diñnāga, when a cognitive experience occurs, what really manifests is an appearance (*ākāra*), aspect or image, also called *ābhāsa* that being a term linked to light or glare carries the meaning of an unsubstantial or ephemeral appearance, which means that, as Diñnāga said “in regard to cognitions whose phenomenological content is an external object, that the only ‘cognitive instrument’ (*pramāṇa*) in play is simply *the fact of the cognition’s having that phenomenological content*” (Arnold 2005, 87).

For Diñnāga *svalakṣana* is a peculiar kind of *pratyakṣa* which is the result of cognition and more likely is the immediate and unmediated kind of cognition.

### 3. A relation between cognition and suffering

Buddhist thought doesn’t dedicate its attention to describe the nature of pathological suffering, and probably doesn’t even feel the necessity of a clinical lexicon at all. The only general pathological dimension, the ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*) is studied in its dynamic constitution for the purpose of demolishing the very essence of suffering itself.

The only interest of Buddhism is to find the source of the sole suffering, by understanding the general process that originates it. The study of semantic cognition is now understood as the way to relativize all the different manifestations of suffering. Since the relativity of perception and the substantial emptiness of everything are described in many Buddhist *suttas*, it is clear that Buddhist thought understands the different diseases as conceivable *meaningful* manifestation, by the mechanism of *semantic priming*, of the sole *dukkha*.

So, for this reason no word is spent in order to study the infinite possibilities of semantic manifestation, but the comprehension of the impermanent ‘structure’ of them all is the only interest of Buddhist thought. It will be clear after an analysis of this mechanisms.

To understand how suffering works in Buddhist idea of disease, we must therefore understand how *semantic priming* is described in Buddhist psychological view.

Cognitive studies have long been dealing with the problem of ‘consciousness’. Defining ‘what is conscience’ is complicated from different points of view. Before cognitive sciences, Buddhism defined consciousness (*viññāṇa*) as a flow of perceptual processes connected to the six traditional sense organs of Indian physiopsychology: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind.

The conscience accesses the mother’s womb in the process of reunion (*paṭisandhi*) between the psychic and the physical component, thus activating the re-composition of the *khandhas* (Rossi et al. 2018, 42, 43). In the *Madhupiṇḍikasutta* (MN 18) the process of constructing the cognitive chain is explained in another way.



*manañcāvuso, paṭicca dhamme ca uppajjati manoviññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāsaṅkhā samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu manoviññeyyesu dhammesu.*

*Mental consciousness arises because of the mind and thoughts. The meeting between the three is the feeling. It is the condition that leads to the notion. You feel what you perceive. You perceive what you think. What you think proliferates in you. What proliferates is the source of identity concepts, emerged from the proliferation of perceptions, which assail the person. This happens by virtue of the thoughts produced by the mind in the past, in the future and in the present.*

The mechanism proceeds through the following pattern: from the vision (*cakkhu*) directed towards a ‘referent’ object, the form (*rūpa*) of the same is derived. According to the principle of cognitive association, the vision of a given form is followed by the association with the ‘ideal form’, ie the prototypical form (Rosch 1975), which belongs to a *nāma*, that is the *signifier*.

signified	<i>nāma</i>
signifier	<i>rūpa</i>
semantic sign	<i>sañña</i>

The form (*rūpa*) that the eye sees, in fact, is not the ‘true form’ of the object, but, as cognitive psychology teaches us, a ‘mental copy’ elaborated by the brain through vision. The true form is thus traced back to ideal concepts of forms associated with entities referable to already known signs. There is obviously also a process of simplification: it is not possible to see the ‘true form’ of an object in its entirety, since it would be necessary to observe it at the atomic level, and this would make us realize that there are no two equal objects in the entire universe.

The linguistic-cognitive reduction to the binomial *nāmarūpa* is all idealized, and it is what allows us to look at two chairs and define them both as /chair/, although there cannot be two exactly identical chairs in each single detail.

*When the existence of a patch of blue is perceived, its non-existence, or absence, is eo ipso excluded and hence its existence in the former and in the following moments is also excluded. The present moment alone is seized by sensation. Since all external objects are reducible to sense-data, and the corresponding sensations are always confined to a single moment, it becomes clear that all objects, as far as they affect us, are momentary existences.*

(Stcherbatsky 1962a, 87)

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The visual conscience (*cakkhuvīññāṇa*) described in *Madhupiṇḍikasutta* is a cognitive process, and triggers a series of concatenated chains of productions and reactions that maintain the self-referentiality of language.

From the vision, thus reified in visual consciousness, comes the feeling (*phassa*), and from this comes the perception (*vedanā*), since all future perceptions refer to past visual experiences. And thus comes the notion (*sañjānāti*) of the linguistic sign that is previously 'established' by the previous visions, and subsequently fortified and reconfirmed at each subsequent vision: "so *vatāvuso, cakkhusmiṃ sati rūpe sati cakkhuvīññāṇe sati phassapaññattiṃ paññāpessatīti thānametaṃ vijjati*".

Taking a cue from Johansson's (1979, 81) scheme of cognitive development in the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, we can evaluate the implications that the cognitive chain has in Buddhist thought.

Discursive thought (*vitakketi*) is all referable to the notion of language and would not exist without the preceding phases. And finally, this system leads to the proliferation (*papañceti*) of further concepts that will originate and keep in the same circle: "*vitakkapaññattiyā sati papañcasaññāsaṅkhāsamudācaraṇa-paññattiṃ paññāpessatīti thānametaṃ vijjati*".

This is obviously valid for all the other sense organs, and follows the same dynamic: "so *vatāvuso, sotasmim asati sadde asati pe ghānasmim asati gandhe asati pe jivhāya asati rase asati pe kāyasmim asati phoṭṭhabbe asati pe manasmim asati dhamme asati manovīññāṇe asati phassapaññattiṃ paññāpessatīti netam thānam vijjati*".

What we have said before is clarified also by Vasubandhu in his treatise on the proof in twenty stanzas that everything is nothing but a mental representation (*viṃśatikāvijñaptimātratāsiddhiḥ*).

This text is a full part of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition defined as 'yoga practice', or yogācāra. It is also known as 'mere cognition' (*cittamātra*) or 'doctrine of conscience' (*vijñānavāda*).

The yogācāra doctrine is a 'phenomenology of the mind' (Robinson and Johnson 1996) developed by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu starting from the analysis of innovative sūtras such as the *Avataṃsakasūtra*, the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*. According to this school, only one real and non-apparent thing exists, and this is consciousness (*vijñāna*, pāli: *viññāṇa*). The obfuscation, here defined as 'contamination' of consciousness, produces the ignorance that generates the impermanent phenomena of the world.

In many aspects, the *vijñānavāda* can be considered a further elaboration of what has already been put in place by the Mādhyamaka on the level of psychological analysis. However, it must be emphasized that, according to authors such as Murti, the *vijñānavāda* school would have misunderstood part of the Mādhyamika message. Candrakīrti criticizes the *svasaṃvitti* because he denies that there can be a *vijñāna* without the object, since without it the *vijñāna* would also be nothing (Murti 1983, 86, 87).

According to Candrakīrti, the *vijñānavāda* is not the middle position, which is the non-acceptance both of the 'is' and of the 'isn't' (*astiva* and *nāstiva*). The *vijñānavāda* indeed accepts them both, the non-existence of the *parikalpita* and the existence of

the *paratantra*. For Candrakīrti, the *vijñānavāda* is not the final teaching (*nītārtha*), but only a step towards it (*neyārtha*).

The substantial difference between the meaning of *vijñāna* in the Buddhism of the Abhidharma (*viññāṇa*) is that of the school of the ‘sole cognition’ is the difference between a consciousness of a psychophysical nature and an awareness of an immanent nature.

The first is linked to the psychological sphere and formed in the methods described by the process of cognitive appropriation, the second more like an immutable ultimate reality but still ‘contaminable’ by *avidyā*.

In the *vijñānavāda* vision, Consciousness is situated at the deepest level of the psychic dimension, repressed, and submerged by the contaminations of *avidyā*.

It is the only ‘permanent’ factor, which, purified by contamination, returns to the nature of the awakened (*buddhadhātu*).

The ‘therapy’ of the ‘contaminated’ conscience takes place through detoxification from ignorance.

Consciousness (*vijñāna*) can change and purify itself by getting rid of the duality that is superimposed on it (*ivi*, 92).

#### 4. The role of linguistic cognition in Nāgārjuna

The position of Nāgārjuna has been defined as an absolute nihilism, not realizing that, in reality, the psychology of Nāgārjuna was centered on the meditation of cognitive processes, and therefore he did not deny the existence of something material beyond the gaze, but rather the conviction that this ‘something’ had its own peculiarity, its absolute identity in the world, forming part of a system not attributed by human thought given by linguistic discernment.

Padmasiri De Silva points out that in Buddhism cognition is perceived dynamically: “the Buddha discerned the mind as a dynamic process: a stream of consciousness rather than a static entity. The term *saṃvattanika-viññāṇa*, translated as ‘re-linking consciousness’, is used to refer to the survival factor that links one life and another” (De Silva 2014, 36).

What we can call as ‘psychic apparatus’, which is only a linguistic designation to understand a set of processes, is described by Buddhism as arising from the interaction of five aggregate factors (*khandha*). These five elements are factors of interaction that are continuously experienced by the body and that are part of the ‘external world’. They are embodied constantly and contribute to forming the psychic dimension. These five main elements are interdependent, which means that they exist depending on each other, and so is the psyche. Their coexistence ensures that the psyche is maintained, like how a house of cards is maintained for the balance of all the cards that push against each other without falling. The five aggregates are: *rūpa* (form), *vedanā* (sensation), *saññā* (cognition), *saṅkhāra* (formations), *viññāṇa* (conscience). We can say that Buddhist psychology considers the existence of a lexeme (*samaññā*), a semantic cognition (*sañña*), as well as a signification (*sankhā*), and the binomial signifier (*nāma*) and signified (*rūpa*).

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Language which shape the world (*loka*) is nothing but a convention (*vohāro*) which is part of a common conception (*paññatti*), which would not exist without such a conventional agreement.

This complex system of cognitive reiteration is called 'semiotic-significant proliferation' (*papañcasaññāsankhā*). Since this discourse is also valid for the subjects (*puggala*), it can be deduced that there are no beings (*satta*) who are nothing but agglomerates of cognitive factors (*suddhasaṅkhārapuñja*).

Any living being, therefore, is nothing but the aggregation of several cognitive-perceptive factors (*suddhasaṅkhārapuñja*) which would generate the illusion of an identity (*ātman*). The identity, by self-preservation, would adopt the mechanism of appropriation of further mental images (identification). Both the nominal signifier (*nāma*) and the formal signified (*rūpa*) are dependent on cognition.

The language assumes central importance in Buddhist psychology, which is in effect of a psychosemantics. All constructive cognitive processes (*saṅkhāra*) are nothing but artificial and conditioned products, including the *rūpa*, the 'form' or 'body' of things which, as explained in the doctrine of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, is generated, in fact, on the basis of individual conscience (Rossi et al. 2018, 49).

*The impression that the central meaning of sankhāra is dynamic is confirmed by its use as signifying magical power. In such cases, the strengthened form abhisankhāra, 'super-sankhāra', and the corresponding verb abhisankharoti are usually preferred. 'Thereupon the venerable Mahaka made a magical (iddhi) creation (abhisankhāra) such that a cool wind blew and there was a thunderstorm and the sky(-god) rained down drop by drop' (Atha kho āyasmā Mahako tathārūpam iddhābhisankhāram abhisankhari, yathā sītako ca vāto vāyi abbhasamvilāpo ca assa devo ca ekam ekam phussi, S IV 289 f).*

(Johansson 1979, 45)

The question of cognition in Buddhism is directly related to the question of language. Summing up the problem, Buddhism points out that the world in which the human being lives is a world managed by a series of linguistic norms that define perception. Since each name (*nāma*) associated with a given form (*rūpa*) confers on the latter an identity based on convention, it is evident that there is no absolute reality. The very worldliness of the world is made up of entities that are simply such, constantly changing shape due to wear, aging or growth, and the perceived boundary between one object and another is only arbitrarily set by the observer's cognition, directed by language.

*When the Mādhyamika philosophers consistently refuse to use words and concepts as though they drew their meaning from association with an intrinsically existent 'private object', they not only provide a de facto solution to any intellectual problems of ontology or epistemology that focus on such abstract, hypothetical entities, but more important, a philosophical bulkhead is established from which they can mount an all-out attack on the essentially emotive or volitional problem of clinging. (Huntington 1989, 39)*

The identity of things is not ‘naturally’ real. There is no natural identity in anything. This identity is given to parts of the world, arbitrarily dissected by language, to allow human society to become an organization. The illusion to which the human must face is that of attributing to the relative reality, which is that described by language and therefore constantly perceived, the status of absolute truth. Each scientific language has set itself the aim of describing ‘reality’ in the most impartial style, but in the very instant in which a name is given to a thing, it falls into the same trap as always.

Dissecting increasingly smaller parts will not help to reach the truth. The suchness that Buddhism wants to investigate is the *ipseity* of the world, its being *as it is*. Language is a deception if one is unaware of its trap. But if wisely used then it becomes a skillful means (*upāya*) to then overcome the relativity of language itself. Anything we consider real is nothing but a prototypical idea, an idealized cognitive model of a, prototypical form, to which a linguistic sign is associated (Lakoff 1987).

In the Discourse on the network of Brahma (*Brahmajālasutta*, DN 1) the Buddha criticizes the position of those who believe there is an absolute and immutable identity (*ātman*) and a world (*loka*), stable as the peak of a mountain and still as a pillar.

He calls them eternalists (*sassatavāda*) and proceeds with a long examination of sixty-two points for which the eternalist vision is wrong, because when eternal ascetics or brāhmaṇa proclaim on the basis of four arguments that the self and the world are eternal, this is only the feeling of those who do not know and do not see. It is only the agitation and uncertainty of those who are immersed in craving.

The fact that the connection between a *nāma* and an idealized *rūpa* can also occur with elements that only partially refer to a perceivable totality, demonstrates, beyond the complexity of the cognitive system, also the functioning of the linguistic mechanism that manages to relate the numerous elements who has learned to distinguish cognitively. Only the name, through language, gives identity, and therefore perceived substantiality, to things. Without the name, things are not perceivable as having a self-existent (*svabhāva*) identity of itself.

In fact, Nāgārjuna writes in MK 15, 1-3: “*na saṃbhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ | hetupratyayasam̐bhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ kṛtako bhavet || svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham | akṛtimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca || kutaḥ svabhāvasyābhāve parabhāvo bhaviṣyati | svabhāvaḥ parabhāvasya parabhāvo hi kathyate ||*”. He said that the fact that a natural identity comes into existence from causes and conditions is contradictory.

He also asks how an identity of nature will be produced. In fact, an identity of nature is not produced and does not depend on anything other than itself. In the absence of an identity of nature how will there be an alterity of nature? In fact, what is called the alterity of nature is nothing but the identity of nature of another being (Magno 2012, 293). This therefore denies in the Buddhist view, as Nāgārjuna repeats, there is no objective reality which can be the one understood today by science. Since objectivity is only perceived by the nominal assignment that scientific language makes. The only ‘reality’ is rather subjective relativity, which however is not absolute. If we dismantle all

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the interdependent constructions (*pratītyasamutpāda*) there is nothing left but emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Whenever, therefore, the concept of a nature or an essence of nature (*prakṛti*) makes its way into our perception, making us believe that there is a law of nature that regulates certain events, that is yet another illusion (Siderits et al. 2013a, 161).

Language is a fundamental element of both Buddhist thought and psychological study. Buddhist psychology has dedicated its best treatments to the nature of language, to the linguistic study that this ‘tool’ has, and to how it acts on a cognitive and social level. We cannot therefore avoid also analyzing the sphere of language, and try to see how this, so important and indispensable in Buddhist philosophy and preparatory to meditation, has instead been transmitted to today’s meditative practices.

As anticipated at the beginning of this work, the psychological system referable to ancient Buddhism, and taken up by Nāgārjuna as a basis for furthering the study of the relativity of psychological precautions, was a system that could fully fit into the linguistic discourse described from Saussure, and in fact we note precise correspondences between the concept of linguistic sign, as well as the dichotomies between signifier and signified. We will now justify the reason for this comparison.

### 4. Saussurian linguistics compared to Buddhist psychosemantic theory: the principle of ‘discernment’ as the starting point of language cognition

Ferdinand De Saussure defines the signified as a *concept*, and the signifier as an *acoustic image*, to indicate the common ‘psychic’ nature of both these elements. To be more accurate, the acoustic image is the psychic trace referable to the abstract concept, for this reason the two elements are intimately united and recall one another.

The *sign*, therefore, is nothing more than the union between a signifier and its signified, which more precisely subsumes the relationship of these two interdependent aspects. As for the semantics of the Buddha, we can safely prove that, just as in De Saussure, both the form (*rūpa*) and the name (*nāma*) do not refer to ‘concrete’ entities, but to the already idealized cognitive representations of such entity the observer produced.

The ‘objective’ form is considered unattainable by Buddhism, since matter is constantly changing, while observation uses a simplification. The distinction between one form to another is completely arbitrary and based on a preconceived judgment. Nothing prevents us from seeing all the matter observed as a single matter, a single continuum. What to one’s cognition makes say that an object is distinct from another in the visual field, is a mere *formal* preconception, in the sense that a pre-incorporated ‘form’ (*rūpa*), or concept. The form stands between the observer and the observed, and applies to that portion of ‘matter’ which can be reduced to the ideal form which, in turn, is semantically associated with a signifier-name (*nāma*). Every *prameya* (the known/cognized object) is, in a certain way, created by cognition itself and is not independent of the cognitive models that idealize it. Sellars himself admits that “the very notion of the manifest image is scientific; that is, the manifest image is part of the

scientific image when categorized as one of two images of the world” (Duckworth 2018, 69).

The name, as it is understood in the Buddhist texts, is not the evocative act of *calling* or *naming* something with the voice, it is not the actual pronunciation. The ‘sound’ (*vāc*) plays a role in its own right that was already quite distinct in the previous Indian tradition (Kazanas 2009). What the *nāma* is in the Buddhist semantic theory, is the ‘value’ of the name, and not the act of naming itself.

A more popular interpretation has always brought the *nāmarūpa* binomial back to the mind/body binomial. In my opinion, however, this interpretation presents a series of problems: first of all, it does not take into account the fact that this binomial is typical of Western culture, and it is not said to be such also in Buddhism. In the *Sammādiṭṭhisutta* (MN 9) for example, the nature of the sign (*nāmarūpa*) is described, and the description of the *rūpa* is far from referring to that of a ‘physical body’ as a biological body. More properly it refers to the ‘body of objects’, whatever they are, and it is therefore logical to assert that the ‘body’ of a seen object, is the *form*, mentally elaborated, of the object itself. The idea that *nāma* is the mind is equally questionable and is rather used to refer to the mental identity that the objects perceived have.

The term ‘sign’ derives from the Greek *sēmeîon*, derivative of *sēmā* which indicates a sign or a marking (from the Indo-European \**dh̥jeh₂* ‘to notice’, cf. the sanskrit *dhyāyati*), while in Latin the term *signum* is used, which derives from the Indo-European root \**sek-* with the meaning of ‘to cut’. This last meaning let us understand a metaphor elaborated by Saussure about the nature of language: “thought is like a nebula in which nothing is necessarily delimited. There are no established ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of the language” (De Saussure 1916), so the *sign* is something which is ‘cut’ away from this nebula. A semantic border within sign and sign is arbitrarily cut in this nebula to separate semantic potentials.

Things have not their meaning by their own. Nothing has an objective, permanent and absolute meaning. Even science, which pretends to study the real world, has based its knowledge on an arbitrary taxonomy and nomenclature. The human being gives, through language, identity to the things of the world, and establishes the semantic boundaries within things which have a meaning and are opposed to the sense of things ‘different’ from them.

*Indeed, Sellars suggests that some of the most important philosophical errors of both traditional rationalism and empiricism stem from their common underlying and unquestioned assumption to the effect that the logical form of philosophical propositions refer to some kind of independent reality that is non-contingent in nature is a natural outcome of the above assumption – that is, that philosophical propositions are descriptive/factual in form – combined with the assumption that philosophical propositions, unlike factual ones, do not seem to be contingent.*

(Christias 2014, 353)

This boundary is only arbitrarily learned and is manifested by language alone. For this reason, a real empirical science has to be, as Brentano said, a science of pure

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phenomena (*ausschliesslich phänomenale Wissenschaft*), that is “a science whose objects are not substances but phenomena” (Kriegel 2017, 35).

The pāli *saññā* is in all respects referable to the sanskrit *saṃjñā*, a term which, unlike the corresponding pāli, has kept the morphological boundary between its components. So, we can analyze it as *saṃ* + *jñā* where the first part (*saṃ-*) is a very common prefix with the meaning of ‘uniting’ or ‘putting together’. We also find it in words like *saṃskṛtam* (‘sanskrit language’, literally ‘what is composed’, ‘what is made’, ‘put together’, ‘packaged’, ‘perfected’, cf. latin *cōnfectum*).

Then, the second part *jñā* is presented as the feminine form of *jñā* with the meaning of ‘knowledge’. We can therefore understand *saṃjñā* also as a knowledge composed of elements put together. What these elements are, it is easy to understand. The components to be understood are two: a concept (*rūpa*) and an acoustic image (*nāma*) of that bifacial psychic entity which is the sign.

Saññā is defined in MI 293: ‘He perceives, he perceives: it is therefore called saññā. And what does he perceive? He perceives what is green, yellow, red, white’ (Sañjānāti sañjānāti kho ..., tasmā saññā ti vuccati, kiñ ca sañjānāti: nīlakampi sañjānāti, pītakampi sañjānāti, lohita-kampi sañjānāti, odātampi sañjānāti). The verb sañjānāti is here translated by ‘perceive’, and saññā would correspondingly by ‘perception’, which is also the most common translation. [...] To be conscious of a colour may mean at least two things: you may see, for instance, a blue object or you may, with closed eyes, imagine a blue colour (or, thirdly, you may think about ‘blueness’ without actually being concretely aware of the colour itself. Saññā covers both the two first experiences; the English word ‘perception’ covers only the first one, and ‘idea’ would cover the second and third ones.

(Johansson 1979, 92, 93)

If we think now, after what we have said about the relationship between signifier and signified in the cognitive act, and about the eidetic nature of each entity perceived due to the pre-imposition by the cognitive pre-judgment imposed by the semantic habit, it is evident that the *saññā* is nothing but the linguistic and cognition of the *nāmarūpa* sign.

When we look at any object, it is already idealized, mentalized by the cognitive act. The object itself does not exist, there is no objective object, since at the moment of vision the cognitive process is already trying to bring the perceived (thus already idealized) form back to a form already known and part of its own significant ‘vocabulary’. The form is already signified in itself. Furthermore, even if it is not perfectly associable with an already known signifier, it will be reduced to the closest signified and ‘signifiable’ form (*rūpa*).

The consequence of this fact is that we must re-define the concept of buddhist ‘mind’. For so many years the concept of ‘mind’ has been used to translate several pāli terms, such as *citta* and *viññāṇa*. What we have seen instead, is that Buddhism see psychological acts as *dynamic* and not as produced by permanent entities, such as



mind can be. Nowadays, the term ‘cognition’ is slowly replacing the ‘mind’, conveying with it a conception of a more impermanent nature of cognition *process*. So the buddhist term *citta*, is more likely to be translated as ‘cognition’ as it is a *product*.

Citta reacts as an emotional center according to S I 53: ‘Niccam utrastam idaṃ cittaṃ’. ‘This citta is always terrified’, – and S II 226 ‘na ca na uppanno lābhasakkarasiloko cittaṃ pariyādāya ṭhassatīti’, ‘and when gains, favours, and flattery come to us, they shall not take lasting hold of our citta’.  
(Idem 1965, 167)

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*), on the other hand, is for Buddhism a discriminating knowledge that arises from the cognitive *division* of entities. The pāli term is equivalent to the Sanskrit *vijñāna*, which is composed of the prefix *vi-* ‘different’ (from the proto-Indo-European \**ui* ‘separate’) and *gyān* ‘knowledge’ (cf. Sanskrit *jñāna* ‘knowledge’, from the root *jñā-* ‘to know’, from the proto-Indo-European \**ǵneh<sub>3</sub>-* ‘to know’, cf. greek *gignōskō*, *gnōsis* and old English *cnāwan* from which the modern *to know*).

Based on this etymology we can deduce that *vijñāna* is something that derives from *discernment*. Discernment is a knowledge that has to do with *separation*. In fact, the same root of the Latin *discernō*, discerning is composed of *dis-* ‘apart’ (from the proto-Indo-European root \**duis-*, cf. Greek *dís*, Sanskrit *dvís* and Latin *bis*, *duis*) and *-cernere*, *cernō* ‘to separate’ (from the proto-Indo-European \**krej-* ‘to divide’, cf. Greek *krínō*). Therefore, discerning means ‘to separate (*cernere*) into parts (*dis*)’, just as *vijñāna* is a knowledge (*gyān*) that derives from the separation of different entities (*vi-*). Now we can understand the pāli *viññāṇa* as ‘discernment’, ‘discriminating consciousness’, a type of decisive intuition, in the sense of cognitive foundation of entities. All this can only remind us of what De Saussure said about the cognitive functioning of language: “thought is like a nebula in which nothing is necessarily delimited. There are no established ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of the language”.

The conviction that there’s a real objective reality beside the reality that we experience of is no more a dogma, and it is clear that as the cognition process is not based on objective entities, but on cultural, semantic and many other inter-related and relative factors, also the ‘scientific’ study of the things the scientist ‘see’ with their own means are as well relative and concerning a particular semantic area (the scientific one) that is no different from any other semantic field such as cultural and subjective ones.

The problem of subject and object, as well as the observer/observed problem is widely explained by Nāgārjuna. The distinction between the observer subject and the observed object is merely arbitrary. It is the subjective act that defines the role in the action: if I watch another person, I make him or her the object of my observation, but they are as well subjects of their lives and, as well as they see me, I am the object of their attention.

It is impossible to determine an absolute objectivity since, according to Nāgārjuna, there’s no independent subject as well. My subjectivity depends on the inter-relation with other subjective people. As well as in the semantic world, where any sign exists by the constant opposition with all the other different signs, the subjectivity exists only

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thanks to the inter-relation and inter-dependence with all the other subjects in the world. Therefore, since there is no subject whom existence is independent from the other semantic recognition, as in the language, there's nothing but conventional (semantic) identities. As Nāgārjuna says in MK 28, 10: "Everything that arises in dependently on another one is, in fact, neither identical nor different from itself. It is therefore neither annihilated nor eternal".

### 5. Form, Name, things, and existence

We tried to demonstrate how Buddhist philosophy, already in its earliest form, was based on a psychosemantic conception of human anthropology, at the center of which there is a cognitive theory of the linguistic sign, directly based on the perception of what we commonly call 'world' (*loka*).

From the suttas of the pāli canon, it is evident that the cognitive act for Buddhist philosophy can be traced back to an essential associative factor: that between a particular cognitive form reified (*rūpa*), thus constituting the function of the saussurian signified, and a nominal identity (*nāma*), that is, the saussurian signifier.

The two-sided entity that in a single idea associates nominal identity with the cognitive form is the *nāmarūpa*, the linguistic sign. Buddhism conceives liberation as independence from the linguistic sign. In the correct vision (MN 9) we read:

*yato kho, āvuso, ariyasāvako nāmarūpañca pajānāti, nāmarūpasamudayañca pajānāti, nāmarūpanirodhañca pajānāti, nāmarūpanirodhagāminiṃ paṭipadañca pajānāti—*

*katamaṃ panāvuso, nāmarūpaṃ, katamo nāmarūpasamudayo, katamo nāmarūpanirodho, katamā nāmarūpanirodhagāminī paṭipadā?*

*vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phasso, manasikāro—*

*idaṃ vuccatāvuso, nāmaṃ;*

*cattāri ca mahābhūtāni, catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāyarūpaṃ—*

*idaṃ vuccatāvuso, rūpaṃ.*

*iti idañca nāmaṃ idañca rūpaṃ—*

*idaṃ vuccatāvuso, nāmarūpaṃ.*

*viññāṇasamudayā nāmarūpasamudayo, viññāṇanirodhā nāmarūpanirodho, ayameva ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo nāmarūpanirodhagāminī paṭipadā, seyyathidaṃ—*

*A noble disciple understands what names (nominal signifiers) and forms (formal meanings) are, what their origin is, their cessation, and what practices lead to their cessation.*

*But what are the name and the shape? What is their origin, their cessation and the practice that leads to their cessation?*

*Sensation, cognition, intention, contact and attention;*

*This is the 'name';*

*The four primary elements, and the form derived from the four primary elements;*

*This is the 'form'.*

*Such is the name and such is the form.*

*This (together) is called name-and-form.*

*Name and form originate from consciousness. Name and form cease when discernment ceases. The practice that leads to the cessation of name and form is simply the noble eightfold path.*

From this passage of the Sammādiṭṭhisutta we therefore learn that the form is something that is taken from the primary elements, what we commonly believe is part of the external world. It is in fact common opinion that the Buddhist idea of 'form' is not simply a geometric fact: everything that is conceivable as a cognitive form (external appearance, color, sound, tactile perception) is part of the data of the cognitive form. The name, on the other hand, is the nominal identity that is associated with the form: nothing less than the Saussurian signifier. The existence of the name-form binomial is finally attributed to cognitive discernment: *viññāṇa* which we know is a knowledge derived from the separation and organization of entities into distinct units.

The philosopher who seems to have understood this teaching in the most drastic way is obviously Nāgārjuna, who draws radical and necessary consequences from the awareness of this devastating cognitive mechanism.

The theory of language in the Nyāya school can be considered the antithesis of the Nāgārjunian one. The naiyāyikas believed that every word had a referent, be it ideal or concrete, and that obviously a more specialized language developed towards an absolute concreteness, which therefore for them was an objective fact. In this case, therefore, it is asserted that every name has a concrete reference, and that there is an external material reality.

*The Naiyāyika is not obliged to believe in yetis just because our language contains the term 'yeti.' The point is, rather, that when we continue to unpack such a term along the lines of 'large apelike creature supposedly inhabiting the Himalayas,' we eventually end up with a description using only terms that have a referent. The Naiyāyika realism does not demand that each term has a referent, but merely that all of the simplest terms connect directly with the categories out there in the world.*

(Westerhoff 2017, 5)

The origin of the misunderstanding is merely cognitive. Words invoke the thing when it appears, but everything is merely an aspect of being, therefore everything actually says being as it is and as it denies nothing. This appearing as an aspect of being, however, reveals the limitation of cognition, which sees being as multiple and not as the unity that it is. The unity of being is unnameable, but its appearing multiplicity can be infinitely named, as many times as there are possible names to evoke being, but every evocation is of being an aspect that appears. However, it happens that cognition organizes aspects of being as independent entities that oppose each other, one which is determined by negating the other. As the truth of being, everything that appears is

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the being that denies nothing, but as a psychosemantic organization of the world, everything is reified as something that can also be non-being. The same 'nothing', as a nameable word is a concept, is a reified ideal, and although as such itself, the idea of 'nothing', is and is not a non-being, therefore it denies the meaning it would pretend to say, it is not through its evident self-denial that the nothing is perceived, but rather, as a reified and empowered ideal, it acts as a permanent anthropological threat, as what actually prefigures the disturbing and distressing possibility that what is can become what is not. è, that is to annihilate. Being would cease to be and would become something else or nothing. For Parmenides, what 'is not' cannot possibly be (*hè mèn hópōs éstin te kai hōs oyk ésti mē eīnai*).

It is therefore obvious that Parmenides wants to underline how the multiplicity of being that shows itself at appearing is determined by the totality of names (*pan'tónoma*), but this does not mean that their nominal existence is a non-existence, or an existence inferior type. Existence is just. What cognitive perception does is mediate the conception of existence, perceiving it as multiple manifestations then organized into entities that can be named and recalled upon appearance, also generating a cycle of interdependence between the observer and the observed, where one depends on the other and modifies the other constantly, without one being wholly generated by the other. The two aspects (observant and observed) are, to use Nāgārjuna's terms, relative manifestations of a single reality.

The differences are only apparent, but they arise in the multiple configurations of the relative world and allow interaction and experience. The reduction of evidence to appearance is what allows the being to manifest itself, but at the same time deceives the conscience about the true nature of being itself.

Nāgārjuna recognizes that something, in order to be real (*sadbhūtam*) should be permanent, not subject to change or change of any kind, and therefore it should give itself as an eternal and independent being. In his analysis, the Indian philosopher clearly demonstrates that in our world view, there is the possibility that a being (*bhāva*) becomes a non-being (*abhāva*), the laws (*dharma*) are changeable and not eternal, and this has done so that many Western commentators saw in Nāgārjuna a nihilistic ontology.

The fact is that Nāgārjuna limits himself to pointing out that this idea that the being of things becomes nothing is in principle our belief in the world, as well as what apparently appears to us. Furthermore, Nāgārjuna points out the inconsistency of the human sciences, which are based on the axiom that things have their own identity (*svabhāva*) where everything testifies to an interdependence of entities, therefore in favor of an intrinsic non-identity.

That said, however, it does not mean that this condition of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of entities coincides with their being nothingness. Nāgārjuna is very clear to warn the reader of any nihilistic interpretation of his philosophy, and therefore it is to be attributed to a total misunderstanding or inattention the reading in this sense that many commentators give.

We must pay close attention to what Nāgārjuna says: the things that we perceive as separate and which, by virtue of this distinction we identify as different, that is, with

their own independent identities from each other, actually reveal themselves as non-independent: their identity depends on, and is defined by, mutual opposition, therefore it is not an independent identity, therefore they do not have an intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*) and therefore it cannot be said that things are really as we perceive them. This is the fundamental point of Nāgārjuna. In no case would this reasoning lead to nihilistic consequences. The ‘what-is’ (*tattva*) of things is in no case identified with a nothing (*abhāva*), but it is equally true that the very perception of things is mediated by an unconscious projection (*prapañca*) which enormously distorts their cognition. Nāgārjuna opposes the position of those he calls nihilists (*ucchedavāda*) for whom if something no longer appears, it literally doesn’t exist (*nāsti*) then it means that it is destroyed (*uccheda*).

The condition of emptiness coincides rather with that of ephemerality of judgment: things are not as they appear to us, but this does not mean that nothing exists. Our level of judgment is recognized as conventional (*vyavahāram*), and very different from the reality of Being, which cannot be said from the conviction (since naming ‘to be’ as well as naming ‘non-being’ evokes the appearance of the respective idea to be or not to be, a ‘thing’, a reified idea that still belongs to the sphere of conventions, and therefore impermanent, ephemeral, vacuous), which Nāgārjuna calls ultimate or absolute Truth (*paramārthasatya*).

It implies that affirming the ultimate emptiness of all dharmas inevitably leads to the affirmation that Truth cannot be told by dharmas, that is, by conventions. It is not clear what the nihilists’ interpretation is according to which, affirming the emptiness of conventions is equivalent to saying that the world is nothing, that is, that being is non-being.

Emptiness is certainly not a ‘nothingness’. Otherwise, it is not clear why Nāgārjuna speaks of *śūnyatā* and not of *abhāvatā*. Nāgārjuna’s problem is certainly not proving the impossible, that is, that things are nothing, which would be so self-contradicting that it is not even in the philosopher’s concern to discuss the absurdity. Rather, Nāgārjuna wants to point out a certain dogmatism scientifically adopted by human beings that precisely absurdly believes that many things are self-existent, where however this contradicts the equally widespread belief that things change and destroy themselves. If a thing is self-existent it cannot change (MK 15.8).

Far from being a nihilist therefore, Nāgārjuna is the greatest advocate of the truth of Being as an absolute and, above all, non-divisive (*advaita*) truth of entities. His philosophy, rather, “characterizes what is without self-existence as being empty (*śunya*). This does not mean being empty of matter—it is a metaphysical emptiness of anything that gives something the power to be, not a space empty of all material things. Nothing is self-created or self-contained. In effect, it is an expansion of the Buddhist idea of no self (*anātman*) to all things” (Jones 2020, 9).

Being appears as determinations but it must appear, or it would be nothing. We see that it appears, so the fact that being ‘is’ is evident. And being appears to us as variants. These are the possibilities of appearance of being.

In the conception of Nāgārjuna we can certainly find the same distinction between being and what appears to us as the multiplicity of the world, the ‘things’ endowed with

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identities from our conventions, believed to be independent but instead ephemeral and impermanent. Undoubtedly, Nāgārjuna's idea of *tattva* is analogous to that of being in Severino, as *tattva* can be defined in Nāgārjuna as “free of any discrete parts that we normally cut the world up into by our thoughts (*vikalpas*) that necessarily make distinctions — it does not have the artificial borders within it that our conceptual differentiations suggest” (*ivi*, 11).

The core of the problem concerns everything that, from a semantic point of view, is a dependent designation (*upādāya-prajñapti*). From this point of view, *tattva* is, beyond the term *tattva* itself, “is simply the phenomenal realm free of our conceptual division of it into self-contained objects (*bhāvas* and *dharmas*) and is open to direct experience” (*ibidem*).

Conventional structures (*prapañca*) are responsible for the creation of the ‘world’ and, to use a metaphor to which we will often resort, the convention is like the lens of a pair of glasses that stands between Truth and vision. By mediating the vision through conventions, that categorizing grid is imposed that divides the being into the many nameable ‘things’. Conventionality “is projecting onto what is truly real (*tattva*) the conceptual differentiations we ourselves devise, and thereby seeing reality as a collection of discrete objects” (*ivi*, 12).

Ultimately, however, in order to avoid making the mistake of confusing truth with the idea of truth (just as confusing being with the idea of being would mean bringing a conventional, impermanent and intrinsically empty fact back to the center of the discussion. and not the true eternal Being) Nāgārjuna is keen to clarify that *tattva* is *śanta*, that is, totally devoid of distinctions: it is totally unity, and not a set of beings (*bhāva*) or laws (*dharma*) nor can one identify *tattva* itself with the idea of *bhāva* or *dharma*: “*tattva* is free of conceptualizations—the distinct objects that our concepts produce are merely our creations. The stilling of all conceptual support and the stilling of the projection of concepts onto reality is peace (*śivaḥ*) (MK 25.24). No concepts developed for the discussion of *bhāvas* or *dharmas* could apply because *tattva* is not divided up into parts for our concepts about entities to correspond to. Since *tattva* is not an entity or collection of entities, there is nothing within it to be an alleged referent and thus it cannot be expressed in terms of the attributes of entities but only more abstractly (as in MK 18.9-10)” (*ivi*, 13).

Being it just *is*. Already if you think of being as ‘that thing that is’ you think of it in its reified image, as a sign that refers to being. Whereas Nietzschean nihilism limits itself to thinking of the devaluation of values, the lack of purpose and the lack of answer to why, the brilliant Severinian thesis notes that instead the danger is more ancient, and stands out in the belief that being (and in this also the human being) is nothing, and is destined, as he came from nothing, to return to nothing. Rather, Nietzsche's nihilism can be summed up in a single problem that includes all the successive declinations: meaning is no longer detected.

While physics deals with facts contingent on the material dimension that can be measured with the tools of a specific science, metaphysics should transcend the same material limits, investigating the very foundations of the experienceable reality to which also, but not only, the tangible underlies. . Metaphysics is, in the radical sense in which

Severino understands it, the study of being and its manifestation as such, which explains his harsh criticism of Western philosophy, recognized as a failed metaphysics, which leads to normal physics. More precisely, “after Parmenides all Western metaphysics is a physics: because the idea of being on which it is built thinks of being as the positive that is opposed to nothing, but thinks it, together, as something that exercises this opposition only when it is, and therefore he thinks of it as that which is allowed (to it, to the being!) not to be (that is, to be nothingness), according to what happens to the differences that manifest themselves as becoming” (Severino 1982, 26).

Furthermore, if we understand that the problem of being is primarily a psychosemantic problem, we do not worry about observing the principle of non-contradiction or, as Severino does, having to point out that admitting nothingness would mean accepting that the positive is the negative. From an anthropological point of view, the principle of non-contradiction is a self-contradictory human dogma that applies as a general principle of linguistic, social and psychological systems. The idea, that is, that a thing is itself and nothing else, reflects the linguistic principle of semantic opposition, which is the center of radiation for every subsequent structure that is based on this anthropological principle: from social organization to the cognitive system.

However, Severino demonstrates, even using this principle, that being cannot non-be. However, we must understand that this principle is only a will that has value relative to the human thought system. The haecceity of being which should be far beyond the limits of human cognition is quite another. Furthermore, the principle of non-contradiction brings with it a rather unpleasant problem: that of identity.

Identity is simply the principle of semantic opposition, and the claim of non-contradiction is the axiom that underpins the semantic-cognitive system on which this rule is based. An entity can be thought of as itself and no other only by virtue of the fact that the sign that identifies it is within a system in which it opposes all the other elements (signs) that are part of the system itself. Each otherness is therefore in itself an identity that looks at other identities as otherness with respect to itself. Once the semantic discernment grid is removed, the cloud of meaning remains, where dualisms and oppositions do not exist, and therefore any claim to identity collapses. It can be said that each entity is quite identical to being itself, because it is to the being that the entity refers to, as it is to the nebula (which we call ‘original meaning’ to distinguish it from the meaning associated with the signifier at the origin semantic bifaciality) that the sign refers to.

## 6. Conclusion

The first aspect that we must note in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is *linguistic* expressiveness. Nāgārjuna uses the language in a masterly way to bend the barriers of ignorance, while recognizing it as nothing but an imperfect instrument. Thus, the means is useful for describing its own uselessness: “Everything is real and is not real,

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both real and not real, neither real nor not real, this is Lord Buddha's teaching" (MK 28, 8).

So, linguistically speaking it is in fact impossible to describe an absolute reality that does not provide for language. We should 'auto-negate' the language but doing it through language. This is an almost impossible operation. Language cannot exceed its limits, but it can shake the awareness of Buddhahood in us, so an imperfect sentence, but close to the truth, can be revelatory.

*One who does not grasp onto 'I' and 'mine',  
That one does not exist.*

*One who does not grasp onto 'I' and mine',  
He does not perceive.*

(MK 28, 3)

However, Nāgārjuna states that all the dharmas are empty. This means that only a language that has concealed the archetypes is also free from their constraints.

The neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññā*) concept inevitably leads to the renunciation of an identity, since it is no longer necessary as a defense mechanism to protect us from the fears of death and the unknown that the misguided emptiness provokes.

*When views of 'I' and 'mine' are extinguished,  
Whether with respect to internal or external,  
The appropriator ceases. This having ceased, birth ceases.*

(MK 28, 4)

Everything is suffering for the wise one. If you do not know, you suffer. If you are wise you suffer because you know (this is a popular formula reported also in the yogasūtra 2, 15: "*duḥkham eva sarvaṃ vivekinaḥ*"), but after you have known, you do not suffer anymore.

*Everything is real and is not real, both real and not real.  
Neither real nor not real.  
This is Lord Buddha's teaching.*

(MK 28, 4)

Reality does not exist in two forms (*real* and *relative*), since duality only characterizes the 'relative reality'. What is relative is changeable and mutable, so it must be dual. This does not mean that it is *false*, but only that its permanency is illusory. Only 'real reality' is permanent, but it is constituted by emptiness. Only what does not change and remains identical to itself forever is real.

*How could there be destruction without becoming?  
How could there be death without birth?*



*There is no destruction without becoming.*  
(MK 21, 3)

Deception is in language: human beings confuse semantics with substance, giving to the words a psychic eternity that project onto matter. The construction of symbols serves to erect the cathedral of the archetypes, and the veneration of them is only a defense mechanism to hide the fact that they are all empty.

The Nāgārjuna's philosophy is presented as unsettling but he has found a simple way to reject any kind of assessment by including in his own exposition the problems and the contradictions, deconstructing piece by piece the nature of perception.

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*Abbreviations: DN Dīgha Nikāya, Pāli canon; MK Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā); MN Majjhima Nikāya, Pāli canon*

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