

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Creation *Ex Nihilo* A Mādhyamika Critique

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THE CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS of the concept of a creator contained in several Mādhyamika texts lack the characteristics we would expect of a Mādhyamika analysis. In the pages that follow I will elaborate on this point, with attention paid to three texts in particular, and then go on to suggest what I think could be adequately characterized as a Mādhyamika critique of creation *ex nihilo*. The texts to come under discussion are the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva, the *Twelve-Gate Treatise*, attributed to Nāgārjuna, and a short piece entitled "Refutation of the View of God being the Creator of the World and of Viṣṇu being the Sole Creator of the Whole World," also attributed to Nāgārjuna.¹

Since questions of interpretation of Mādhyamika texts have traditionally created such divergent opinion, and since I wish to suggest what is and is not of genuine Mādhyamika flavor, it is necessary to offer at least a brief account of what I take to be the central Mādhyamika position. The enterprise begins, then, with an analysis of select passages from Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamika-kārikās* and his *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (hereafter referred to as MMK and Vv respectively).²

¹ Relevant passages from the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva are to be found in a partial translation by Michael J. Sweet, "Śāntideva and the Mādhyamika: The Prajñāparamitā-Pariccheda of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*," unpublished dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1976, pp. 133-137. A complete translation is in Marion L. Matics, *Entering The Path of Enlightenment* (London: Collier, MacMillan Ltd., 1970).

The *Twelve-Gate Treatise* is translated in Cheng Hsueh-li, "An Expository and Critical Study of Mādhyamika Philosophy From Chinese Sources," unpublished dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1974. Chapter X is on pages 261-270.

"Īśvara-kartṛtva-nirākṛtiḥ-viṣṇoḥ-ekakartṛtva-nirakāraṇaṃ nama" was translated from the Sanskrit into Russian by Th. Stcherbatsky, and from the Russian into English by Harish C. Gupta in *Papers of Th. Stcherbatsky*, n.d., ed. by Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, pp. 3-15. This edition contains the Sanskrit original, a romanized transliteration of the original Sanskrit, and translations in both Tibetan and English.

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I

The most important of Nāgārjuna's concepts is "śūnyatā." That we may say this is evidenced by the central role played by the concept in his thought:

14. When emptiness "works," then everything in
existence "works."
If emptiness does not "work," then all
existence does not work. [MMK, XXIV]

70. All things prevail for him for whom
emptiness prevails;
Nothing whatever prevails for him for whom
emptiness [does not prevail]. [Vv]

From these two passages alone it is clear that "śūnyatā" is for Nāgārjuna perhaps the most important Buddhist concept or category. He also gives another indication of the role played by śūnyatā in the context of a discussion of the impossibility of holding views (dr̥ṣṭi):

29. Because of the emptiness of all existing things,
How will the views about "eternity," etc.,
come into existence, about what, of
whom, and of what kind? [MMK, XXVII]

It is the centrality of "śūnyatā," more than anything else, that gives Nāgārjuna's work its distinctive character. Most of the analyses conducted throughout MMK are attempts by Nāgārjuna to demonstrate the appropriateness of saying that all things are empty. To capture that which distinguishes the Mādhyamika position from most others it is necessary to understand what it means to say that all things are śūnya.

What, then, is the meaning of "śūnyatā"? What does it mean to say that all things are empty? Presumably, if all things are empty, they are empty of something. That is, an attempt is being made to say that a certain way of understanding the nature of things is not the case. What all things are empty of is own-being (svabhāva). The Indian concept of svabhāva is roughly equivalent to our own traditional notion of substance. Svabhāva is that which is distinguished from its own attributes, characteristics and relations in a very specific way. It is that which *has* attributes and characteristics, *that* which stands in relation.

² Passages cited from both the *Mūlamadhyamikakārikās* and *Vigrahavyāvartanī* are from the translation by Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), pp. 183–227.

Certain Buddhist sects which flourished before and during Nāgārjuna's time held that existing things were composed of dharmas (elements), but that these dharmas themselves must have unique svabhāva. The dharmas had characteristics, or marks (lakṣana), but these marks, as well as the relations in which the dharmas stood, were external to the dharma itself. Dharmas were basic particulars; they were the ontological simples which combined in various ways to construct the objects of the world. Buddhist ontology was, to a large extent, atomistic.

In one way, then, "svabhāva" is meant to convey something like substance. It is a self-existent thing. It exists independently of its marks and relations. It is that in which marks inhere and that which is in relation. For Nāgārjuna, and the Mādhyamika in general, that which is śūnya is that which lacks svabhāva, it is something empty of own-being. To say that all things are empty is to deny a substance/attribute perspective as an adequate ontological conception.

Nāgārjuna discusses the concept of own-being in Chapter xv of MMK, which is entitled "Svabhāva parīkṣā," "An Analysis of Own-Being," or as Frederick Streng translates it, "An Analysis of a Self-Existent Thing." Nāgārjuna argues in this chapter that svabhāva is not possible. He remarks that:

1. The production of a self-existent thing by a conditioning cause is not possible,
[For] being produced through dependence on a cause, a self-existent thing would be "something which is produced."
2. How, indeed, will a self-existent thing *become* "something which is produced"?
Certainly, a self-existent thing [by definition] is "not-produced" and is independent of anything else. [MMK, xv]

His point is simply that svabhāva, as that which is self-existent, could not, by definition, be produced by causes. If it could not be produced by causes, it could not originate, it could not come into being. If it is by definition independent of causal interaction, not only could it not come into being, but it could not go out of being either. On the supposition of svabhāva, it would not be true of anything that it either came to be or ceased to be:

3. If there is an absence of a self-existent thing, how will an other-existent thing come into being?
Certainly the self-existence of an other-existent thing is called "other-existence."
5. If there is no proof of an existent thing, then a non-existent thing cannot be proved.

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Since people call the other-existence of an existent thing a “non-existent thing.” [MMK, xv]

If svabhāva were the case, then we would be faced with an eternalism. Any sort of change and movement would be ruled out. However, Nāgārjuna takes pains to point out that to deny svabhāva is not to argue for the non-being of things, since the notion of non-being, or what he calls “other-existence,” is itself a correlative of own-being, of self-existence. Thus he wants to deny the very terms in which the assertion of self-existence and other-existence, or being and non-being, is made. He wants to reject altogether an ontology that takes as its fundamental categories being and non-being:

6. Those who perceive self-existence and other-existence,
and an existent thing and a non-existent thing,
Do not perceive the true nature of the Buddha’s teaching.
7. In “The Instructions of Kātyāyana” both “it is” and
“it is not” are opposed.
By the Glorious One, who has ascertained the meaning
of “existent” and “non-existent.”
10. “It is” is a notion of eternity. “It is not” is
a nihilistic view.
Therefore, one who is wise does not have recourse
to “being” or “non-being.” [MMK, xv]

If Nāgārjuna rejects an ontology based on the categories of being and non-being, and on the related distinction between substance and attribute, what sort of ontological conception is operative in his work? We have seen the negative meaning of the claim that all things are empty, viz., that they lack own-being. But what are the positive implications of this claim? What is it that is true of all things if they are śūnya? Nāgārjuna indicates the positive meaning of śūnyatā in several passages:

22. The “being dependent nature” of existing things:
that is called “emptiness.”
That which has a nature of “being dependent”—
of that there is a non-self-existent nature. [Vv]
18. The “originating dependently” we call “emptiness”;
This apprehension, i.e., taking into account [all
other things], is the understanding of the middle way.
19. Since there is no dharma whatever originating
independently,

No dharma whatever exists which is not empty.

36. You deny all mundane and customary activities
When you deny emptiness [in the sense of]
dependent co-origination.

[MMK, XXIV]

If all things are empty, then all things lack svabhāva. If all things lack svabhāva, then all things prevail through dependent co-origination (pratitya-samutpāda). The meaning of "śūnyatā," then, is equivalent to the meaning of "pratitya-samutpāda." But the latter concept must mean something different for Nāgārjuna than it did for the abhidharmists. Pratitya-samutpāda was a principle of causation in the abhidharmic literature, but it was grounded in an atomistic dharma theory. Unlike that which dharmas served to constitute, they themselves did not lack svabhāva. But Nāgārjuna has denied the possibility of svabhāva, so he could not have followed completely the abhidharmists in their conception of pratitya-samutpāda.

What, then, does "pratitya-samutpāda" mean for Nāgārjuna? We have already seen that "śūnyatā" is equivalent to "pratitya-samutpāda," and that "śūnyatā" is the central category of Nāgārjuna's thought. "Pratitya-samutpāda" must then hold an equally central position. If dependent co-origination does not mean a causal relation between self-existent things, then it must mean that what is is itself a function of the conditions of which it consists. Dependent co-origination means that what is consists of conditions in certain relations to one another, and the conditions themselves are dependently co-originated. Streng suggests a similar interpretation:

Considered in the context of emptiness, co-originating dependently loses its meaning as the link between two "things"; rather it becomes the form for expressing the phenomenal "becoming" as the lack of any self-sufficient, independent reality.³

To say that what is is dependently co-originated is to deny self-existence to anything, but it is not to deny the world. There are objects, events, people, etc., but they are not self-existent things. They are complexes that arise and prevail in a set of conditions. The conditions are themselves complexes, which is to say that they are dependently co-originated. Śūnyatā, then, is a conception that does not admit of ontological simples, and the conditions which comprise complexes are the conditions that they are, which is to say they have the nature that they have, at least in part by virtue of the complexes they give use to.

Chapters II through XXI of MMK, with the exception of Chapter XV, are applications of Nāgārjuna's conception of śūnyatā and pratitya-samutpāda to a series

³ Ibid., p. 63.

of prominent Buddhist concepts and terms. Chapters I and XV are not included under this rubric since together they provide the foundations on which the other analyses rest. The features of Buddhist thought considered in these nineteen chapters are shown to be incomprehensible if *svabhāva* is postulated. The conclusion should presumably be that philosophic analysis in the Buddhist spirit is impossible if one supposes a self-existent thing or its correlative notion of an ontological simple. The world, including the fact of suffering and the possibility of release from it, is intelligible only in terms of emptiness and dependent co-origination. We will briefly examine Chapter II, "An Analysis of 'Going to'" (*gatagata parikṣa*), since it is in many ways a paradigm for the others of this section of the text. The analysis of Chapter II will show the ways in which the interpretation of *śūnyatā* just offered accords with Nāgārjuna's own remarks.

In the analysis of "going to," Nāgārjuna tries to show that when considered as self-existent entities, there can be no "goer," no "act of going" and no "destination gone to." These three factors of motion are so intricately bound up with and determined by one another that the distinctions between them can only make sense if they are seen in their complex interrelations. Nāgārjuna makes this point in the following passages:

7. If there is no going without a "goer,"
How will the "goer" come into being when there is
no "going"?
8. The "goer" does not go; consequently a "non-goer"
certainly does not go.
What third [possibility] goes other than the "goer"
and "non-goer"?
10. Those who hold the view that the "goer" goes must
[falsely] conclude
That there is a "goer" without the "act of going"
since the "act of going" is obtained by a "goer." [MMK, II]

There can be no "goer" as distinct from the "act of going," since the one is conditioned by the other. A "goer," then, as a self-existent entity, is not possible. Verses 12-14 make a similar point with respect to the "state of going to" and "that which is gone to." All three distinctions are determined by a web of interrelations and conditioning factors.

But Nāgārjuna is careful not to overstate his case. On the one hand he wants to say that if we conceive of a "goer," etc., as a self-existent thing, we run into serious conceptual difficulties. On the other hand, he does not want to say that a "goer," the "act of going" and the "destination gone to" are indistinguishable:

18. Thus it does not obtain that the "goer" is simply "what is going."

Likewise it does not obtain that: "Then the 'goer' is something other than what is in the 'process of going'."

19. And if the 'act of going' and the 'goer' are identical, The fallacy logically follows that the "person acting" and the action are identical.

20. Alternatively, if the "goer" is different from the "process of going," The "act of going" would exist without the "goer" and the "goer" would exist without the "act of going."

21. Neither the identity nor the essential difference is established regarding the two [conceptions "goer" and "act of going"].

If these two [alternatives] are not established, in what way is [this problem] to be understood?

[MMK, II]

Nāgārjuna does not suggest that we cannot distinguish between a "goer," the "act of going" and the "destination gone to." He in fact says that "Indeed someone goes somewhere" (MMK, II, 22). Clearly, then, the point is not to say that there are no such things as "goers," etc., or that the distinction is in some way an artificial one. The point appears to be that there is a certain way of understanding what a "goer," etc., is, and if anything the artificial notion is the distinction between the "goer," etc., as self-existent things. They are not entirely separate things, since they arise through mutual conditioning and determination. At the same time, though, Nāgārjuna insists that they are not identical either.

We can see in the analysis of "going to" one of the characteristic features of Nāgārjuna's method. He argues that the "act of going" and the "goer" cannot be identical, but they cannot be different either. These two claims represent half of the fourfold negation, which Nāgārjuna uses at a number of points. The four "corners" of the dialectic, if we were to apply them to the analysis of "going to," would be as follows: 1) It is not the case that "the act of going" and the "goer" are identical; 2) It is not the case that they are different; 3) It is not the case that they are both identical and different; and 4) It is not the case that they are neither identical nor different. It appears that the dialectic disallows any claim at all concerning the subject under consideration, thus leading some scholars to interpret its impact as leading us towards an intuitive insight that transcends the conceptual limits of logic and language. On the interpretation of Nāgārjuna that we are offering, though, the dialectic does not point to a non-

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cognitive intuition, but rather it compels us to revise the general categories in terms of which we are inclined to think about things. The "act of going" and the "goer" are not identical, since our ordinary experience gives us every reason to distinguish them. As Nāgārjuna says, "Indeed someone goes somewhere." At the same time, though, they are not different, since each is at least part of what constitutes the other. They are not both, that is, in the same respect, because that is contradictory, and they are not neither, since we appear to have good reason to accept, at least to some extent, what is implied by both difference and identity.

Language tends to develop in a manner such that the uses of certain terms tend to force us into a specific perspective. Words take on collectively recognized meanings and connotations. To say that the "goer" and the "act of going" are identical would incline us to say that the terms are simply two different ways of speaking about the same thing. To say that they are different implies that whatever relations that obtain between them are in some way extrinsic to their essential natures. Neither of these implications or connotations are acceptable, yet both terms seem to contain a glimmer of what we do want to say about the "goer" and the "act of going." They are neither entirely acceptable nor objectionable, and this is so because of the ordinary connotations we take them to have. Nāgārjuna, in his use of the dialectic, is attempting to drive home the point that a revision in our general way of understanding things is required. It is required because both possibilities, i.e., difference and identity, are rooted, as far as our understanding of them goes, in a tendency to understand the objects and events of the world as self-existent, as having own-being. The terms "difference" and "identity" do not allow us to characterize sufficiently well the "goer" and the "act of going" in the way that we need to.

We need to be careful, though. The point is not that we are to *transcend* difference and identity, whatever that would amount to. Rather we need to realign our thinking so that what seems intuitively correct about the distinction between difference and identity is maintained while the undesirable implications of the terms are avoided. We must reject the ontology, and it is one which the terms seem to force on us, that is based on the *svabhāva* of individuals and the correlative distinction between internal and external relations. We must indeed maintain a distinction between the "goer" and the "act of going," but we can only do so by understanding each as constitutive of the other. The "goer" is a "goer" insofar as it participates in the "act of going." Participation in the "act of going" is what makes this particular complex a "goer" and not something else.

The analysis of "going to" in Chapter II of MMK nicely illustrates the general points Nāgārjuna wants to make. If we understand the "goer," etc., as having *svabhāva*, then they are not even possible. But since "someone goes somewhere," that is, since we are not justified in rejecting the distinctions altogether, we must revise our conceptual categories in order to adequately account for them. It is to

this revision that the dialectic and the fundamental categories of śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda point.

II

This sketchy overview of Nāgārjuna's ontology will allow us to take a closer look at the notion of creation *ex nihilo* from a Mādhyamika perspective. We will attempt, in the end, a development of Nāgārjuna's central ontological conceptions insofar as they have a bearing on the question of God, especially God as creator. There is always a danger in taking a concept like God out of its natural home, which consists essentially of religions that had their origins in the Near East, and transporting them into very different traditions. The Indian religious milieu did not have a notion of God in the same sense as did Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They did, however, have a very clear notion of a creator, so while the Indian traditions did not concern themselves with God in the Western sense of the term, they were concerned with the idea of creation. Several Indian religious and philosophical traditions, the Sāṃkhya and Nyāya for example, explicitly held to the view that there is a creator. While it may not be entirely proper, then, to speak of God in connection with Indian religious traditions, it is nevertheless acceptable to address the issue of a creator.

Since the concept of a creator was very much in the religious and philosophic air of classical India, there is a fair amount of literature on the subject. There are texts in which the concept of a creator is defended, and there are others in which it is criticized. Among the latter group are a small number of Mādhyamika texts in which attempts are made to refute the concept of a creator. Before developing our own Mādhyamika critique of the concept of a creator, we will briefly examine the refutations contained in these other Mādhyamika texts. We will find that arguments presented in these other texts for the most part lack a distinctively Mādhyamika flavor. This remains to be shown, of course, but we can anticipate a bit by saying that it is because these arguments are in general not properly Mādhyamika in character that there is still a need to develop such arguments from Nāgārjuna's own general ontological remarks.

We will look at three Mādhyamika texts. The first is the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva, Chapter IX of which contains several refutations of a creator. The second text we will examine is the *Twelve-Gate Treatise*, the Chinese Mādhyamika text which is attributed to Nāgārjuna but for which we have not yet found a Sanskrit original. In Chapter X of that Treatise there are no less than fourteen separate arguments designed to show that there cannot be a creator. The third text we will consider is a very short piece which is rarely ever mentioned in the secondary literature. It is a text concerned solely with the issue of creation, and

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is attributed to Nāgārjuna. The title of the text has been translated into English as "Refutation of the View of God being the Creator of the World and of the View of Viṣṇu being the Sole Creator of the Whole World," and there are versions extant in both Sanskrit and Tibetan.

One would expect that a Mādhyamika critique of a creator would make significant use of the concept of śūnyatā. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, though, Śāntideva offers several different refutations of a creator, none of which mention either śūnyatā or pratītya-samutpāda. The arguments are offered in Chapter IX, verses 119–126, and they are directed against the Nyāya school of Hinduism. There are actually three main arguments. The first, from verses 119–121, asks precisely what it is that the Nyāya is referring to when it suggests that there is a Lord that has created the universe? Śāntideva says that the Lord cannot be the elements out of which the world is composed, since these do not have any of the qualities that the Nyāya also attributes to the creator, qualities such as eternality, purity, etc. He goes on to warn the Naiyāyika that they cannot retreat from the question by saying that the nature of the creator is incomprehensible, since to do that would be to remove whatever grounds there might be on which to base the claim that there is a creator in the first place. These remarks do not constitute an argument against the creator, but they do suggest to the Nyāya that it may well in the end not have a coherent concept of what it means to say that the Lord has created the universe.

Śāntideva (verses 122–123) then asks what this Lord could possibly create? On the Nyāya's own view, the self is eternal, as is the world, since it holds that the constituent elements of the world are eternal. But of course if the self and the world are both eternal, then neither could have been created. Śāntideva further points out that the Lord could not have created knowledge, joy or pain either. Knowledge, he says, is a function of the knower's relation to the known, while joy and pain are consequences of our own activities. In neither case is there any room, and certainly not a need, for a creator.

Śāntideva's third argument (verses 124–126) comes closest of the three to incorporating characteristically Mādhyamika points, but even here he falls short of a comprehensive, explicit analysis. The question he asks is why, if there is a creator of all things, creation does not take place all at once? In other words, why does the Lord not create everything all at once? If creation occurs little by little, then what is created is contingent. But if the entire creation is the Lord's product, on what could the created be contingent? Śāntideva points out that if an effect depends on the totality of its causes, then God could not be the sole creator, since in the presence of the totality of causes God could not fail to create. On the other hand, in the absence of the totality of causes, God would not have the power to create. We might claim that the Lord creates as a function of his own desire, but this, Śāntideva suggests, would be equally absurd. If the

Lord creates without desire, then he is under the control of something else. If he creates with desire, then he is dependent on the desire itself. In neither case could we say that the Lord is the creator of all there is.

This last argument resembles a genuine Mādhyamika critique since it hints at the interrelations among an actor, any action, and that which is acted upon. These relations are constitutive of all three, as we have seen in the analysis of Chapter II of MMK. Śāntideva, though, fails to make any of these points explicit and therefore fails to offer as powerful a critique of a creator as the Mādhyamika is capable of.

The second text to consider is the *Twelve-Gate Treatise*. Although the work is attributed to Nāgārjuna, there is some question over its actual authorship.⁴ But regardless of who actually wrote the text, it is clearly a Mādhyamika work, and consequently its critiques of a creator are of interest to us. Chapter X of the *Treatise* contains fourteen different arguments against the possibility of a creator. Like the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, none of the arguments work out in any detail a specifically Mādhyamika critique. Some of them do come a bit closer than Śāntideva's, though, since four of the arguments are actually designed to show that a creator could not be self-existent. Only one of them actually states that creation would only be possible if the creator were self-existent. The other three leave this crucial point unstated. The third argument presented, for example, asks the question "If God were a creator, who created him?" (p. 265). He could not create himself, since that is impossible, and he could not be created, because if he were then he would not be self-existent. The argument does not go on to show, as one might expect, that a creator must be self-existent, and that such a thing is not possible. It is precisely the latter that a sufficiently well developed Mādhyamika critique of a creator must show. The remainder of the arguments in the *Twelve-Gate Treatise* are even less interesting from a Mādhyamika point of view, and we need not go into them here.

The last work that demands treatment is the very short piece mentioned earlier. According to Stcherbatsky the work has been attributed to Nāgārjuna, and it is devoted entirely to a refutation of a creator.⁵ The most striking thing about this work is that it contains almost nothing one would expect Nāgārjuna to say on the subject of a creator. This may itself be evidence that Nāgārjuna had little if anything to do with the text.

There are three basic arguments. The first says that a creator creates either that which is existent or that which is not existent. He cannot create that which is existent since it has no need of a creator; it already exists. On the other hand,

⁴ Cf. Richard A. Gard, "On the Authenticity of the Pai-Lun and Shih-Erb-Men-Lun," *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, Vol. II, No. 2 (March, 1954), pp. 742-751.

⁵ Cf. Chattopadhyaya, p. 3-4.

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a creator could not create the non-existent either. We are given the examples of oil crushed from sand, or wool on a tortoise as instances of that which is non-existent, and the author suggests that these could not be created since we know them to be non-existent.

The author goes on to suggest that perhaps the creator makes that which is non-existent existent. But this is impossible, it is claimed, since the two are mutually exclusive concepts. That which exists cannot become non-existent, and that which is non-existent cannot come to exist.

These two arguments should give us reason to pause. In the first place they are rooted firmly in two of the concepts Nāgārjuna explicitly rejects in MMK, existence and non-existence. Nāgārjuna has made it clear that these concepts are not appropriate for the sort of philosophic analysis in which he was interested. A second point we should note is that these arguments, and especially the second, presuppose two other concepts Nāgārjuna explicitly rejected, eternalism and nihilism. It is assumed that what exists can never not exist, and vice versa. These are conceptions directly antithetical to the Mādhyamika viewpoint as developed in MMK. We can say that whatever the independent merits of these arguments, and they appear to be minimal, they do not have the characteristics of a Mādhyamika critique.

The third argument in the text is similar in some respects to the one we mentioned from the *Twelve-Gate Treatise*. The question is asked whether the creator is himself born or unborn. He cannot create if he is unborn, since the unborn, for example, "the son of a barren woman," are not capable of action. If the creator is born, we must ask whether he is born from himself, from something else or both. He could not have created himself, since "one's own actions cannot relate to one's own self." On the other hand, he could not have originated from something else, since then he would not be the creator of all that is. Finally, he could not be born from both, since that would involve both fallacies. Therefore the creator can be neither born nor unborn.

This last argument contains, like its counterpart in the *Twelve-Gate Treatise*, a glimmer of a Mādhyamika critique. It is suggested that the creator could not have originated from something other than itself because it could then not be said to create that from which it originates. In other words, a creator is only possible if it is self-existent. Since self-existence is presumably not possible, then neither is a creator.

It is clear that none of the three texts contain what could justifiably be called an explicit and sufficiently developed critique of a creator along Mādhyamika lines. There are certain features a Mādhyamika critique should have. Since the principles of śūnyatā and pratitya-samutpāda are at the heart of the Mādhyamika ontology, a critique of a creator along Mādhyamika lines should incorporate those principles. Many of the chapters of MMK provide adequate models for an

analysis of the possibility of a creator. Just as Nāgārjuna speaks of a goer, the act of going and that which is gone to, we can just as easily analyze the concepts of a creator, the act of creation and that which is created. The following section is an attempt to develop the implications of Nāgārjuna's general ontology for the concept of a creator.

III

The argument is a fairly simple one. If there is a creator *ex nihilo*, then that creator is either śūnya or aśūnya. A creator *ex nihilo* cannot be śūnya, nor can it be aśūnya. Therefore, a creator *ex nihilo* is not possible. What needs to be shown is that a creator could be neither śūnya nor aśūnya.

As we have already seen, many of the chapters of MMK are designed to show that such concepts as a "goer" or "destination" cannot designate anything self-existent. That which is not self-existent is dependently co-originated, which is to say it is śūnya. We can substitute the concept of a creator for any of those Nāgārjuna chose to discuss in MMK itself.

We should perhaps supply a brief review of Nāgārjuna's remarks concerning a "goer," the process of "going" and "that which is gone to." Nāgārjuna's approach to these concepts is to show that if we conceive of them as self-existent, then they would not be possible. However, since there is no reason to deny and every reason to affirm a "goer," etc., it must be the case that none of them are self-existent. If they are not self-existent they must then be understood in terms of pratītya-samutpāda and śūnyatā. Nāgārjuna is careful to warn us, though, that while we cannot take a "goer," "going" and "that which is gone to" as essentially distinct from one another, we cannot treat them as identical either. It is the concept of śūnyatā that allows us to tread a middle path between identity and difference.

How do we apply this kind of analysis to the concept of a creator *ex nihilo*? If we attempt to understand a creator as self-existent, we would have to say that the character or the nature of the creator is not a function of the creator's relation to its creation, but rather is self-determined. What the creator is is determined by svabhāva, or self-nature. The creator is what it is by virtue of its own intrinsic essence. But Nāgārjuna asks with respect to a "goer" how, "if there is no going without a 'goer,'" it would be possible for a "goer" to "come into being when there is no 'going'?" (MMK, II, 7). We can make the same point with respect to a creator. If there is no act of creation without a creator, it is equally true that there is no creator without an act of creation. If this is the case, then part of what it is to be a creator *ex nihilo* is determined by an act of creation, and by that which is created as well. If this is the case, then we cannot say of the creator that what it is, its nature, is fully determined solely by its own svabhāva.

CREATION EX NIHILO

If a creator is what it is at least in part by virtue of its relation to both the act of creation and that which is created, then the creator's nature is determined, or conditioned, by something other than itself. But this contradicts the conception of the creator as self-existent, and it in addition articulates what it would mean to say that a creator is śūnya.

A creator, then, cannot be understood apart from an act of creation and whatever is created by that act. This is equivalent to saying that a creator, an act of creation and that which is created cannot be distinguished from one another on the basis of an individual essence of each. If we turn again to Nāgārjuna's remarks concerning a "goer," we find that while a "goer," etc., cannot be essentially distinguished from one another, they should not be understood as identical either:

18. Thus it does not obtain that the "goer" is
simply "what is going."

Likewise it does not obtain that: "Then the
'goer' is something other than what is in the
'process of going'."

[MMK, II]

By the same token, we would have to say that while a creator would not be essentially distinct from a creation and what is created, it would not be proper to take them as identical either.

In the case of the "goer," "going" and "that which is gone to," the partial difference of and the constitutive relations among the three are what determine their natures as śūnya. In the same way we would want to distinguish a creator, the act of creation and that created from one another, but it is only possible to understand each by conceiving of them as constituted at least in part by the others. In other words, if we were to seriously entertain the concept of a creator *ex nihilo*, we would have to understand it as being śūnya. It is not possible, on Mādhyamika grounds, for a creator *ex nihilo* to be aśūnya.

But we have claimed that it is equally impossible for a creator *ex nihilo* to be śūnya. The very concept of a creator *ex nihilo* requires that it be intelligible in terms of itself alone. If a creator is to create *out of nothing*, then it must be possible to characterize the creator without reference either to the act of creation or to whatever is created. If the nature of a creator is determined by the act of creation and what is created, then a creator requires both the act of creation and that created to even be what it is. But if a creator is what it is only by virtue of its act of creation and what is created, then the concept of a creator creating out of nothing becomes incoherent. Without the act of creation and whatever is created, the creator could not even be, let alone be a creator *ex nihilo*. It is impossible, then, to conceive of a creator *ex nihilo* as śūnya.

From a Mādhyamika point of view, a creator can be neither śūnya nor aśūnya.

RYDER

Since these two are the only possible alternatives, we can conclude that a creator *ex nihilo* is not possible. Precisely the same analysis can be applied to the conception of a preserver of what is and a destroyer of what is, if we wish to extend the analysis to other characteristic features of God. A preserver can no more preserve the world than the world preserves it, since the act of preservation and that which is preserved constitute the preserver itself. In a similar way, a destroyer cannot destroy the world, since to do so would be to destroy itself.

To conclude, Nāgārjuna's general ontology generates a powerful critique of the creator *ex nihilo*, a critique which classical Mādhyamika texts failed to draw to its fullest extent.