


The Confluence

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Anātman & Lack: Between Nāgārjuna and Lacan

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Introduction

The fear of nothingness is a primal fear. The fear of the emptiness of the void shakes our very being. Such seeming nihilism fills us with dread. But what if “nothingness” or “emptiness” was at the very core of our being? Most of our prominent belief systems are built around ideas meant to refute this shocking and startling claim. They are meant to obscure and even maintain an illusion that our being is very much a real thing. The brain, consciousness, the soul; these are all things that our being desperately latches onto in order to feel at ease. In Christianity, there is the eternal soul. In Hinduism, there is the *ātman*. In neuroscience, there is the consciousness-producing brain, even if it is not eternal.

Two intellectual traditions—that of Buddhism and psychoanalysis—seemingly stand in defiance of these comforting beliefs and philosophies. Both of these traditions hold the incredibly similar belief that there is something fundamentally missing from the core of our very being. For the Buddhists, there is the non-Self, or the idea that the eternal self is void and empty. For the psychoanalyst, there is our desire’s lack, which we can never fill. The notion of the Self lies at the heart of subjectivity, but simply put, there is a hole in our subjectivity.

The aims of this paper are to compare and analyze the intellectual legacies of Nāgārjuna with his Mādhyamaka philosophy as well as Jacques Lacan with his innovations on Freudian psychoanalysis. Each of their similar, yet different, subversive theories of subjectivity will be presented, analyzed, and compared. In addition to examining these theories of subjectivity, this paper will also analyze and compare the metaphysics that underlie both of these systems. In the end, it will be determined just how compatible *anātman* and lack truly are as philosophical concepts.

A Primer on Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka

The ancient Indian philosopher, Nāgārjuna, is considered by many traditions to be the pinnacle of Buddhist thought. This school of Buddhist philosophy is known as Mādhyamaka, and its tenets are laid out in Nāgārjuna's essential text, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (after this point referred to as the MMK). Central to the Mādhyamaka philosophy is the notion of emptiness—known in Sanskrit as *śūnyatā*. For Nāgārjuna, *everything*, when analyzed and broken down, is to be considered as fundamentally empty. Perhaps, most challengingly, is the notion that the person itself is empty: that there is, in contrast to Brahminical philosophies, no *ātman* or essential self. This doctrine of non-Self, or *anātman*, is crucial for understanding Nāgārjuna's conception of subjectivity.¹ This, therefore, warrants a further explanation of *anātman*.

Especially for those entrenched in the tradition of Western philosophy, the non-Self is a difficult idea to conceive of. How can there be no eternal self? How can there be nothing that is essentially me? Intuitively, we take our psychophysical experiences to be indicative of the existence of the Self. However, according to Buddhist thought, these psychophysical experiences are a bundle of five aggregates known as *skandhas*. “[I]n the standard Buddhist analysis, the person is not an entity that can exist independently of the five *skandhas*. Take away the complex, impermanent, changing *skandhas* and we are not left with a constant, substantial self: we are left with nothing.”² Our psychophysical experiences cannot prove the existence of the Self as the *skandhas* of our experiences are impermanent, and, in turn, empty.

Another important concept for the understanding of Nāgārjuna's philosophy is that of *svabhāva*. Often approximated as “inherent existence,” *svabhāva* is precisely what is rejected as empty by Mādhyamaka.³ “[S]*vabhāva* is something which is superimposed on ordinary objects in the process of conceptualization.”⁴ Take the example of the five aggregates from above. The

skandhas are seen as a unified, permanent, and independent Self, but this is merely because our superimposition of *svabhāva* onto the aggregates. In actuality, according to Nāgārjuna, because of the non-existence (or emptiness) of *svabhāva*, the Self cannot exist due to this faulty superimposition. Therefore, through the logical analyses of Mādhyamaka philosophy, *anātman* reigns supreme over *ātman*.

A Primer on Lacan's Psychoanalysis

A disciple of classical Freudian psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan expanded and extended upon Sigmund Freud's philosophical speculations and meta-psychological systems. Central to psychoanalysis as a whole is the concept of unconscious desire. As Lacan writes, "Desire is instituted within the Freudian world in which our experience unfolds, it constitutes it, and at no point in time, not even in the most insignificant of our manoeuvres in this experience of ours, can it be erased."⁵ For the psychoanalyst, it is our unconscious desire which wholly mediates our experiences. Lacan elaborates on the concept of unconscious desire by grounding it in what he calls lack. "Desire is a relation of being to lack...[the] lack of being whereby the being exists."⁶ For Lacan, lack is what causes desire to arise in one's sense of being; it is because of lack that the experience of our existence is mediated by unconscious desire.

Also essential for understanding the Lacanian conception of subjectivity is the idea of the Other. The so-called "big Other" can refer to two concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis. First, the Other refers to the idea of an anonymous and authoritative power; this can be exemplified by the idea of God.⁷ Secondly, the Other can refer to something unknowable—an unfathomable emptiness of a withdrawn (and yet ever-so-close) otherness.⁸

Related to all these concepts is the Lacanian theory of anxiety. The theory of anxiety relates to desire and lack because anxiety sustains desire when the object of desire is lacking—

which, as has previously been established, is perpetual and always the case.⁹ Anxiety relates to the concept of the Other, in so much that anxiety comes about when the subject becomes the object of desire for the Other. An example utilizing the last of this primer's Lacanian concepts will be helpful in illustrating this point.

The last of the crucial Lacanian concepts to cover is that of the Mirror Stage. According to Lacan, there is a transformation in psychological development when a young child first recognizes themselves in a mirror. This transformation is the birth of a fragmented subjectivity that occurs because of the child's identification with the ideal-I they see in the mirror's *imago*.¹⁰ In other words, the child sees themselves in the mirror and, as they become aware of themselves as an "I," they create a projected-Self—an ideal-Self—in the *imago* of the mirror image. This fragmentation of the subject is the beginning of the Self's sense of lack, and, therefore, also brings about desire and anxiety regarding the Other.

Comparative Psychologies

When examining the comparative psychologies of Nāgārjuna's Buddhism and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, one must begin with a discussion of subjectivity and the subject. These two intellectual traditions have similar concepts of subjectivity, yet they still depart from one another at crucial points. Compared to generalized conceptions of the subject in Western philosophy, both Nāgārjuna and Lacan offer subversive perspectives on subjectivity.

The current paradigm for understanding the subject and the Self in Western philosophy is based off of a Cartesian dualist worldview. "According to this (Cartesian) view, the [Self] is construed as a decontextualised object in order to be objectively studied and treated. The self is constituted as a nominative entity, having an objective, separate and 'real' existence...in every case it is presumed to be an entity that exists in itself separate and distinct from the world."¹¹ For

Nāgārjuna, the *anātman* nullifies the Self as “a nominative entity, having... ‘real’ existence.” There is no real existence of the Self because the Self is empty and does not exist as such. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, subjectivity is a source of alienation and doubt—quite the opposite of the inherent coherence that defines the Cartesian subject of Western philosophy. This is because psychoanalysis privileges subjectivity over the materialist-empirical assumptions made about the Self by Cartesian philosophy.¹² Both Nāgārjuna and Lacan’s theories of subjectivity outright reject this Cartesian dualism.

However, Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity goes further still. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject and the Self are not one in the same. The subject, through Lacan’s rigorous theoretical framework, is “[stripped]...of so many of the characteristics usually attributed to [the subject] in Western thought...”¹³ In the terms of psychoanalysis, rather than the subject as a whole being equated with the Self and sense of “I,” it is specifically the ego that is the seat of this sense of self. “The ego [or Self] is, in Lacan’s view, the seat of fixation and narcissistic attachment. Moreover, it inevitably contains ‘false images’...[F]or the ego is by its very nature a distortion, an error, a repository of misunderstanding.”¹⁴ This immediately ties into the Buddhist idea of *anātman* because Nāgārjuna’s teachings on the non-Self also attribute distortion, error, and misunderstanding to our faulty superimposition of *svabhāva* onto the *skandhas* of our psychophysical experiences. Both the ego and *ātman* are misguided illusions of selfhood.

Another striking similarity between these two psychologies lies in the comparison to be made between the Buddhist doctrine of attachment (and the *dukkha* this creates) and the psychoanalytic doctrine of unconscious desire. For Nāgārjuna, and, indeed for all Buddhists, attachment is the root cause of *dukkha*. The Pāli word itself, *dukkha*, is often simplified via

translation into the term “suffering.” Therefore, suffering is yet something else that must be overcome—just as the Buddhist must also overcome the illusions of Self and of permanence. How, though, does attachment and *dukkha* relate to unconscious desire? According to psychoanalytic theory, just as attachment is the root cause of all suffering for the Buddhist, so too is desire the root cause of all of our psychic maladies. In Buddhism, the spiritual goal is to overcome attachment and to be able to let go, so that one may attain Nirvāṇa. In psychoanalysis, the therapeutic goal of the cure rests on the ability of the analysand to recognize their unconscious desire. As Lacan taught, it is important “to teach the subject to name, to articulate, to bring this desire into existence, this desire which, quite literally, is on this side of existence, which is why it insists... That the subject should come to recognize and to name his desire, that is the efficacious action of analysis.”¹⁵ This is where the similarities between Buddhist attachment and psychoanalytic desire end because, as Lacan demonstrates, unconscious desire “is on this side of existence.” Mādhyamaka philosophy, in contrast to Lacanian psychoanalysis, would posit that attachment is decidedly *not* a part of existence because attachment is fundamentally empty and can be overcome in order to achieve enlightenment.¹⁶

Though one may glean nihilistic attitudes in these philosophical outlooks, that is simply not the case. Nāgārjuna’s thought walks a fine line between essentialism and nihilism, but in the end, it takes the Middle Way between these two.¹⁷ Lacan is also often accused of having a nihilistic bent, but this is due to psychoanalysis’s anti-humanist outlooks and foundations because while the Self might not have agency, the unconscious certainly does. As this comparison continues, the actual implied metaphysics of both Mādhyamaka and Lacanian ontologies will be examined.

Comparative Ontologies

Delving deeper than the psychologies of subjectivity offered by Nāgārjuna and Lacan, one can begin to appreciate the metaphysical implications of both Mādhyamaka doctrine and Lacanian theory. If one is to look for the ontological foundations of both of these traditions, they will find two seemingly analogous concepts: those being śūnyatā and lack respectively.

Śūnyatā is the fundamental emptiness of all things, or, more precisely, the emptiness of *svabhāva* or “inherent existence.” This emptiness is not only essential to the idea of the non-Self, but foundational to Mādhyamaka metaphysics as a whole. With emptiness being essential to Nāgārjuna’s metaphysical system, the concept of dependent co-arising is needed to make coherent sense of śūnyatā. As explained by scholar Jay L. Garfield in his commentaries on the MMK, “[W]e can make no sense of how [entities and their properties] fit together temporally, logically, or ontologically. It is important that objects and their characteristics, persons and their states, be unified. But if we introduce essence and entity into our ontology, this will be impossible...”¹⁸ Things must be empty of inherent existence because once essence is introduced, there is no ontological coherence to the unity of an object and their characteristics.

Lack is the starting point for a Lacanian ontology. The Lacanian subject is born out of lack. “Being attains a sense of self in relation to being as a function of this lack, in the experience of desire. In the pursuit of this beyond, which is nothing, it harks back to the feeling of a being with self-consciousness, which is nothing but its own reflection in the world of things.”¹⁹ Lack is that which is nothing, and it lies at the very core of our being. This lack can never be filled by our desire because the subject desires precisely what it lacks.

In Chapter IX of the MMK, entitled “Examination of the Prior Entity,” there is written a verse ripe for both Buddhist and Lacanian exegesis on these matters. Take, for example, the following lines of Nāgārjuna’s text:

Someone is disclosed by something.

Something is disclosed by someone.

Without something how can someone exist?

Without someone how can something exist?²⁰

The narrative opponent of Nāgārjuna argues in MMK IX:5a-b that “the emptiness of all phenomena still requires that there be a subject for whom they are the phenomena.”²¹ Nāgārjuna responds in MMK IX:5c-d, arguing that subjectivity is the awareness that grounds perception, but that this awareness is also inherently empty.

Similarly, from a Lacanian viewpoint, MMK IX:5 could be read that *the subject* (“someone”) is revealed to be who they are by their *desire’s lack* (“something”). Subjects are not complete and are without coherent identity; instead, they are open subjects. For both Nāgārjuna and Lacan, there is a hole at the center of subjectivity—that hole corresponding to emptiness and lack respectively.

Why is it, though, that all things are empty and lacking? This can be explained by examining Chapter XV of the MMK. This chapter, entitled, “Examination of Essence,” discusses the necessity for emptiness in relation to essence and dependent co-arising.

According to Nāgārjuna, not only are all things empty, but all things are dependent on one another. Because essence itself is eternal and independent, it cannot arise dependently and

would not be empty.²² “[W]hen Nāgārjuna argues that all phenomena originate in dependence upon conditions, that all phenomena are interdependent, and that all phenomena are fabricated..., he is thereby arguing quite directly for their emptiness.”²³ Therefore, essence cannot exist in a coherent metaphysical system. Without essence, one is only left with emptiness.

In the Lacanian theoretical framework, lack arises from the discovery of the Other during the Mirror Stage. The instinctual and intuitive Self—that would be, a self-thought to be with essence—is fundamentally lacking. This Self is lacking because the projected-Self (the *imago* of the mirror-imaged Self) is simultaneously the source of alienating anxiety as well as the mechanism that is assumed by the subject to compensate for this anxiety. The recognized disparity between the intuitive Self and the projected Self is the beginning of the subject’s sense of lack.²⁴ The unknowable Other that the subject finds in their mirror-image fills them with anxiety.

This is where the comparison between these two ontologies breaks. For the Mādhyamaka ontology, dependent co-arising is necessary for a system of emptiness to be coherent. However, in the example of Lacan’s Mirror Stage, one can see through the demonstration of anxiety that lack is a simultaneous process. Lack is simultaneously the source of the alienating anxiety and the coping mechanism for dealing with it. In this instance, lack cannot dependently co-arise as simultaneity precludes this.²⁵ Two verses from the discourse “Examination of Fire and Fuel” in Chapter X of the MMK illustrate this point:

If fire depends on fuel,

And fuel depends on fire,

On what are fire and fuel established as dependent?

Which one is established first?²⁶

...

Fire does not come from something else,

Nor is fire in fuel itself.

Moreover, fire and the rest are just like

The moved, the not-moved, and the goer.²⁷

Nāgārjuna’s point in his argumentation found in Chapter X of the MMK is that “Strict identity and difference as determined by reference to phenomena themselves are only conceivable from the incoherent standpoint of inherent existence.”²⁸ While using the metaphor of fire and fuel, Nāgārjuna demonstrates how apparently distinct entities, such as events and their causes, or, in our example, lack and the resulting anxiety, are absurd when viewed through a lens of *svabhāva* (“inherent existence”). For the exponent of Mādhyamaka philosophy, only when this superimposition of *svabhāva* is stopped and lack, with its accompanying anxiety, is seen as dependently co-arising can there be a coherent metaphysical argument. With Lacanian psychoanalysis being more grounded in the Western tradition, its metaphysics do not see the need for strict adherence to dependent co-arising, and therefore, the ontology of lack works on its own internal logic.

Conclusion

Anātman and lack—are they the same or does the truth lie somewhere in between Nāgārjuna and Lacan?

Through our examinations of both the comparative psychologies and comparative ontologies of Mādhyamaka Buddhism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the ideas and concepts of

the Self, non-Self, śūnyatā, and lack have been explored. Though Nāgārjuna's non-Self and śūnyatā have striking similarities with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic lack, they depart at too many crucial points for it to be considered a one-to-one comparison. However, it is important to note that both of these thinkers offer strong and subversive challenges to dominant Western narratives about the Self and subjectivity.

Though the hole at the center of our subjectivity may be a challenging as well as frightening concept, it is important to meditate and reflect on these ideas. After all, for Nāgārjuna, such reflection could lead to enlightenment, and for Lacan, these realizations could lead to the psychoanalytic cure of the neurotic psyche. In other words, challenging the Cartesian notions of subjectivity could lead to liberation and a curious sense of freedom in the face of what, at first glance, seems like a form of nihilism.

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- ¹ Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 157.
- ² Matthew Mackenzie, "Enacting the Self: Buddhist and Enactivist Approaches to the Emergence of the Self," in *Self, No Self?: Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*, ed. Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 243.
- ³ Westeroff, 19 & 53.
- ⁴ Westeroff, 48-49.
- ⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 222.
- ⁶ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, 223.
- ⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Translation in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 13
- ⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII: Transference*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 268.
- ⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*, 363.
- ¹⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, 76.
- ¹¹ Ken Bradford, "The Subject Matter of Psychology: Psyche, Dasein, non-self," *Existential Analysis* 31, no. 2 (2020), 338.
- ¹² Bradford, 338.
- ¹³ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 35.
- ¹⁴ Fink, 37.
- ¹⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, 228-229.
- ¹⁶ Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 180.
- ¹⁷ John Spackman, "Between Nihilism and Anti-Essentialism: A Conceptualist Interpretation of Nāgārjuna," *Philosophy East & West* 64, no. 1 (2014), 151-152.
- ¹⁸ Jay L. Garfield, "Commentaries" in *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 158.
- ¹⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, 223-224.
- ²⁰ Nāgārjuna, MMK IX:5, trans. Jay L. Garfield.
- ²¹ Garfield, 183.
- ²² Garfield, 220.
- ²³ Garfield, 221.
- ²⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*, 374.
- ²⁵ Garfield, 194.
- ²⁶ Nāgārjuna, MMK X:8, trans. Jay L. Garfield.
- ²⁷ Nāgārjuna, MMK X:13, trans. Jay L. Garfield.
- ²⁸ Garfield, 195.