

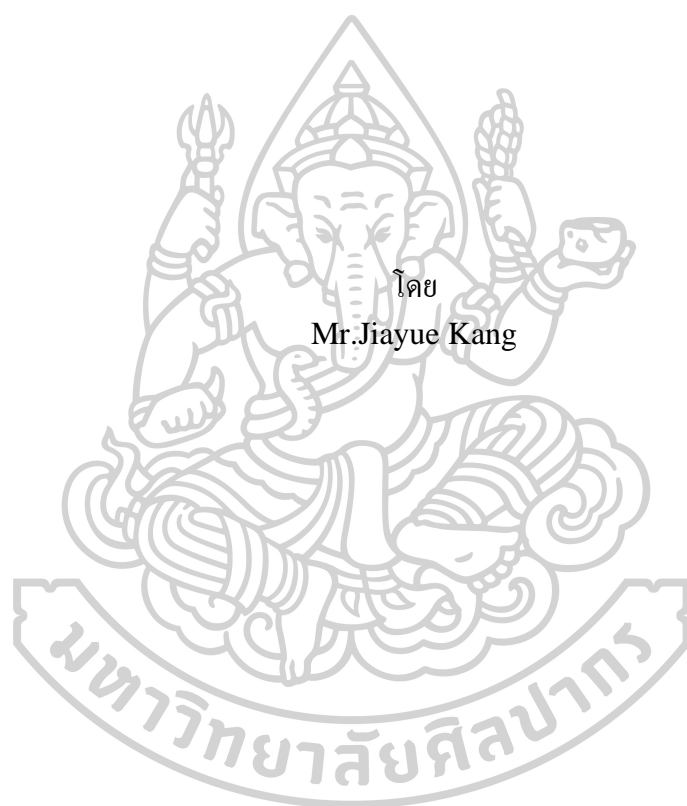


TIME, SPACE, AND IDENTITY IN NĀGĀRJUNA'S KĀLAPARĪKṢĀ: WHERE
'ME' PERCEIVES AND 'ME' IS CONCEIVED



By
Mr. Jiayue KANG

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Master of Arts Sanskrit
Department of Oriental Languages
Silpakorn University
Academic Year 2025
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วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต

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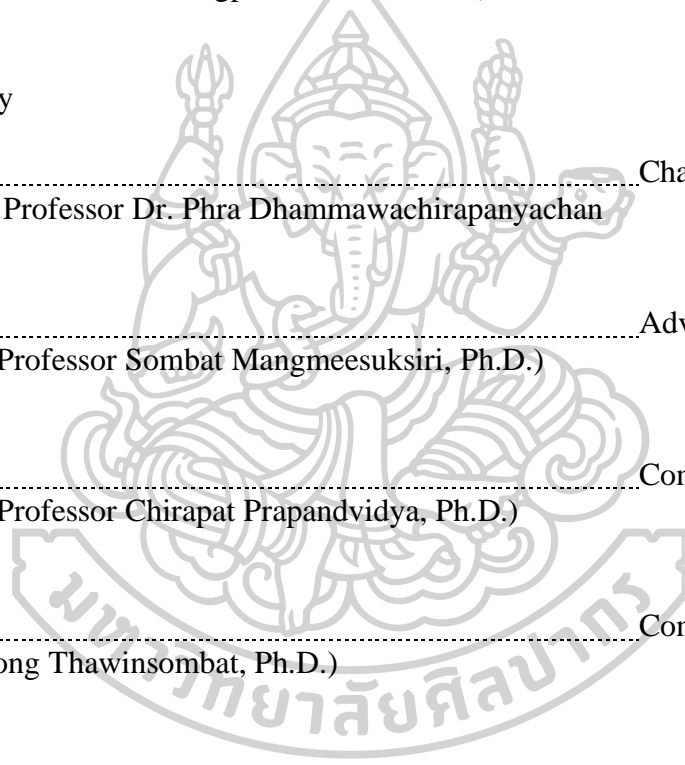
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Mr. Jiayue KANG : TIME, SPACE, AND IDENTITY IN NĀGĀRJUNA'S KĀLAPARĪKṢĀ: WHERE 'ME' PERCEIVES AND 'ME' IS CONCEIVED Thesis advisor : Assistant Professor Sombat Mangmeesuksiri, Ph.D.

This thesis provides a philosophical analysis and reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's Kālaparīkṣā (Chapter 19 of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā), with special attention to his treatment of Time, Space, and Identity. Two central interpretive difficulties in §19:4.2 are addressed: first, the apparent inapplicability of Nāgārjuna's temporal critique (§19:1-

3) to spatial categories (upper, middle, lower); second, the semantic ambiguity and grammatical anomaly associated with the term ekatvādi. The thesis proposes novel solutions to these difficulties by demonstrating that spatial relations differ fundamentally from temporal phases due to simultaneity, and by offering a rigorous grammatical and philosophical investigation of ekatvādi, clarifying its intended conceptual scope.

Furthermore, the analysis introduces an innovative distinction between two dimensions of subjectivity: the schematic agent ("Me"), which actively conceptualises and structures experience, and the constructed self ("me"), which mistakenly regards these conceptual constructs as independent realities. This distinction sheds new light on Nāgārjuna's method, revealing Time, Space, and Identity not as intrinsic ontological realities but as cognitive schemata generated through the mind's own conceptualising activity (prajñāpti). Thus, the thesis ultimately argues that Nāgārjuna's Kālaparīkṣā provides a sophisticated critique not merely of temporal phenomena but of the cognitive processes that underlie our very construction of reality.



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Jiayue KANG

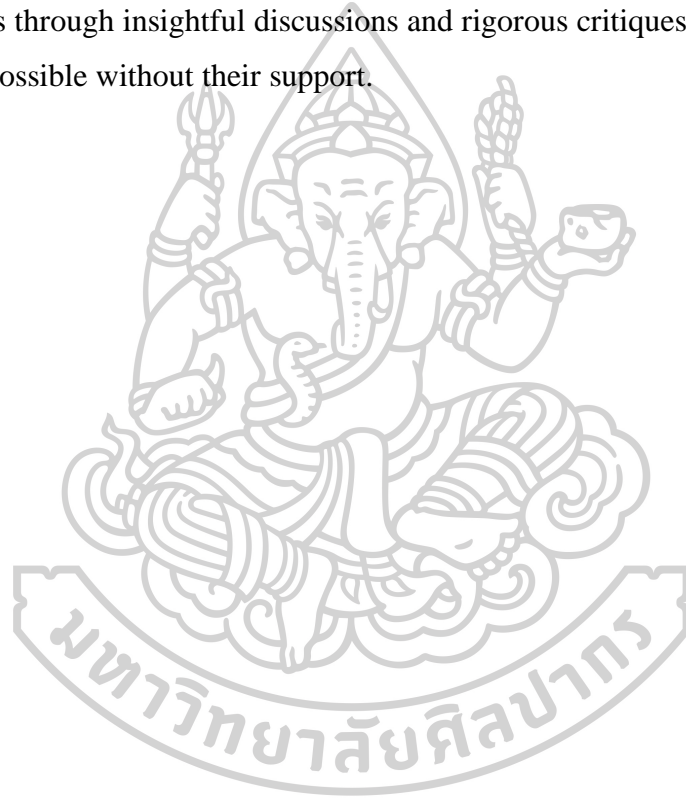


TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	D
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	E
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	F
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Statement and Significance of the Problems	1
Statement:	1
Significance:.....	1
1.2 Goal and Objective	3
1.3 Hypothesis to be Tested	4
1.4 Scope or Delimitation of the Study	5
1.5 Process of the Study.....	6
1.6 Method of the Study.....	7
1.7 Literature Review.....	8
1.7.1 Books	8
1.7.2 Research and Articles	9
1.7.3 Classical Works	10
Conclusion.....	11
Chapter 2 The Philosophical Problem of Time — Background, Commentarial Tradition, and Framework for Reconstruction.....	13
2.1 Introduction to <i>Kālaparīkṣā</i>	15
2.2 The Commentarial Tradition on Nāgārjuna’s <i>Kālaparīkṣā</i>	16
2.3 A Translation and Philosophical Reconstruction	19
§ 19.1 Mereological Collapse of Temporal Phases.....	19
§ 19.2 The Problem of Co-Existence	19

§ 19.3 Neither Dependent Nor Independent	20
§ 19.4 Extension to Other Constructs.....	20
§ 19.5 The Problem of Static vs. Dynamic Time.....	21
§ 19.6 No Dependence on What Does Not Exist	22
2.4 Summary	24
2.4.1 Temporal Phases are Mereologically Incoherent	24
2.4.2 Time as Flowing or Non-Flowing — Both are Problematic.....	25
2.4.3 Time cannot be Exogenously Caused.....	25
Chapter 3 Two Difficulties in §19.4.2	27
3.1 Difficulty I: Spatial Relation.....	28
3.1.1 Can Nāgārjuna’s Method Extend to Space?.....	28
3.1.2 The Limits of Relational Dependence	29
3.1.3 Broader Triadic Categories and Their Divergence.....	29
3.1.4 The Real Target: Conceptual Reification.....	30
3.2 Difficulty II: What Does <i>ekatva</i> Really Mean?.....	32
3.2.1 Dual Usage of <i>ādi</i> Suggests Distinct Conceptual Categories	32
3.2.2 Existing Interpretations of <i>ekavādi</i> : From Candrakīrti to Kumārajīva ...	32
3.2.3 Why Temporal Triads are Exhaustive — But <i>ekavādi</i> is Not.....	33
3.2.4 Grammatical Challenge: The Use of Masculine <i>-ādīn</i> with Neuter <i>ekatva</i>	35
3.2.5 Could This Be a Metrical Compromise?.....	36
3.3 A Putative Interpretation of <i>ekavādin</i>	37
3.3.1 Identity–Difference as a Superior Candidate	37
3.3.2 A Parallel to the Temporal Paradox?.....	38
3.4 In Response to Westerhoff’s Interpretation.....	39
3.4.1 Contiguity Cannot Explain <i>ekavādi</i>	39
3.5 Space Rejudged	41
3.5.1 Causal Dependence.....	41
3.5.2 Existential Dependence.....	41

3.5.3 Notional Dependence.....	42
3.5.4 Beyond Time: Nāgārjuna and the Architecture of Cognition	42
Chapter 4 Prajñāpti, Cognition, and the Me/me Distinction	44
4.1 Another Set of Relation: From Time to the Temporaliser	44
4.1.1 The Overlooked Relational Triad	44
4.1.2 <i>pratyutpanna</i> and the Presence of Non-being	45
4.1.3 The Simultaneity Field and the Temporaliser	47
4.2 Who Grasps It? — Voice, Agency, and <i>Prajñāpyate</i>	49
4.3 The Significance of <i>pra-√jñā</i>	54
4.4 Conceptualised versus Known	57
4.5 <i>upādāna</i> versus <i>upādāya</i>	60
4.6 The Only Option for the Unknown.....	63
4.7 Time, Space, and Identity as Cognitive Schemata devoid of Ontological Ground	67
Chapter 5 Conclusion, Findings and Discussion.....	69
REFERENCES.....	77
VITA.....	80



Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Statement and Significance of the Problems

Statement:

The thesis focuses on Nāgārjuna's critique of time in *Kālaparīkṣā* (Chapter 19 of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*), examining its ontological coherence and its conceptual interdependence with space and identity. It identifies interpretive challenges in understanding whether Nāgārjuna's critique targets only time's ontological status or extends to the cognitive and linguistic processes underlying temporal perception. Specific difficulties arise in §19:4, where Nāgārjuna introduces spatial triads (*upper, lower, middle*) and the ambiguous term *ekatvādīn* (previously interpreted as oneness, duality, plurality), which scholars often reduce to analogies of temporal relations, overlooking grammatical and conceptual complexities. The thesis proposes a novel distinction between a schematic "Me" (the conceptualising agent) and an empirical "me" (the constructed self) in §19:5, using this as a heuristic to explore how time, space, and identity are cognitively projected as substantial realities despite their emptiness (*śūnyatā*). This approach aims to resolve ambiguities and reveal Nāgārjuna's deeper critique of cognitive schemata and the illusion of a stable self.

Significance:

1. **Philosophical Contribution:** By addressing overlooked ambiguities in §19:4 and §19:5, the thesis advances Nāgārjuna scholarship by integrating ontological and cognitive dimensions, showing that his critique transcends mere refutation of time's inherent existence (*svabhāva*) to challenge the cognitive structures that shape perception.
2. **Interpretive Innovation:** The proposed distinction between "Me" and "me" offers a fresh lens to understand Nāgārjuna's analysis of *prajñāpti* (conceptual designation) and *upādāya* (mental appropriation), highlighting how cognitive processes create the illusion of substantiality.
3. **Bridging Traditions:** The study engages both classical (e.g., Bhāvaviveka, Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa) and modern (e.g., Kalupahana, Garfield, Siderits & Katsura) commentaries, fostering a dialogue that enriches the understanding of Madhyamaka philosophy.

4. **Relevance to Broader Philosophy:** By linking time, space, and identity as interdependent cognitive schemata, the thesis connects Nāgārjuna's insights to broader philosophical questions about perception, reality, and selfhood, potentially resonating with thinkers like Kant or Laozi.



1.2 Goal and Objective

The thesis has three primary objectives:

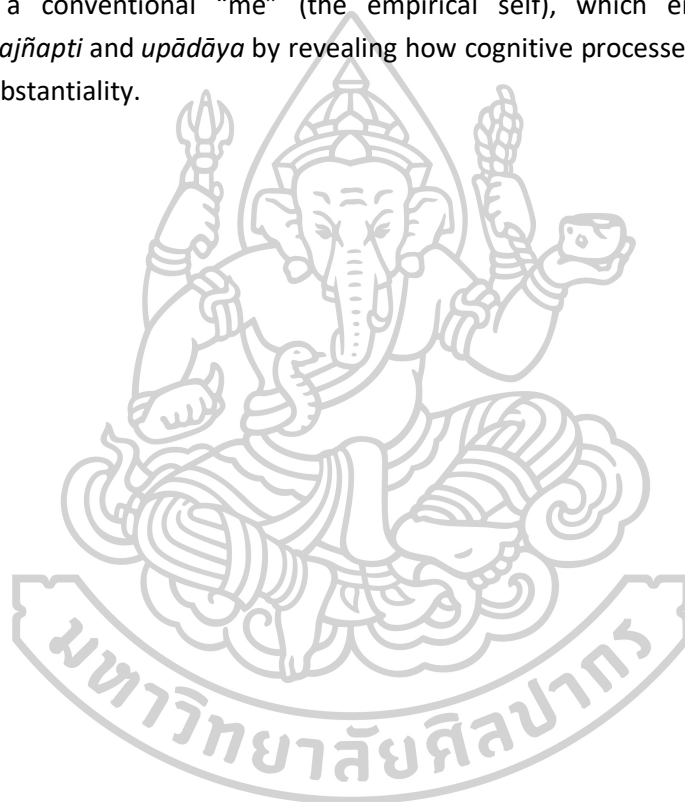
1. To examine Nāgārjuna’s critique of the ontological coherence of time in *Kālaparīkṣā*, and to explore how this critique inherently extends to the conceptual structures of space and identity, showing them as mutually interdependent and equally lacking inherent existence.
2. To investigate the grammatical and logical problems found in *MMK* §19:4 and §19:5—particularly the issues surrounding the spatial triads (*uttama–madhyama–adhama*) and the ambiguous term *ekatvādīn*—and to demonstrate how these sections challenge the application of temporal logic to spatial and conceptual identity schemas.
3. To reconstruct the cognitive architecture implicit in Nāgārjuna’s critique, beginning with the overlooked temporal relations (earlier, simultaneous, later), and showing how these depend on a schematic subject (Me). The chapter then explores the grammatical ambiguity of agency (*grhyate/prajñāpyate*), the roles of conceptualisation (*prajñapti*) and mental appropriation (*upādāya*), and concludes by proposing a dual-layered self (Me/me) that underlies the temporal construction.



1.3 Hypothesis to be Tested

The thesis proposes two hypotheses:

1. Nāgārjuna's Kālaparīkṣā critiques not only the ontology of time but also the cognitive schemata underlying temporal, spatial, and identity constructs, showing them as interdependent and empty.
2. §19:5 implies a distinction between a schematic "Me" (the conceptualising agent) and a conventional "me" (the empirical self), which enhances the critique of *prajñapti* and *upādāya* by revealing how cognitive processes generate the illusion of substantiality.



1.4 Scope or Delimitation of the Study

The study is limited to:

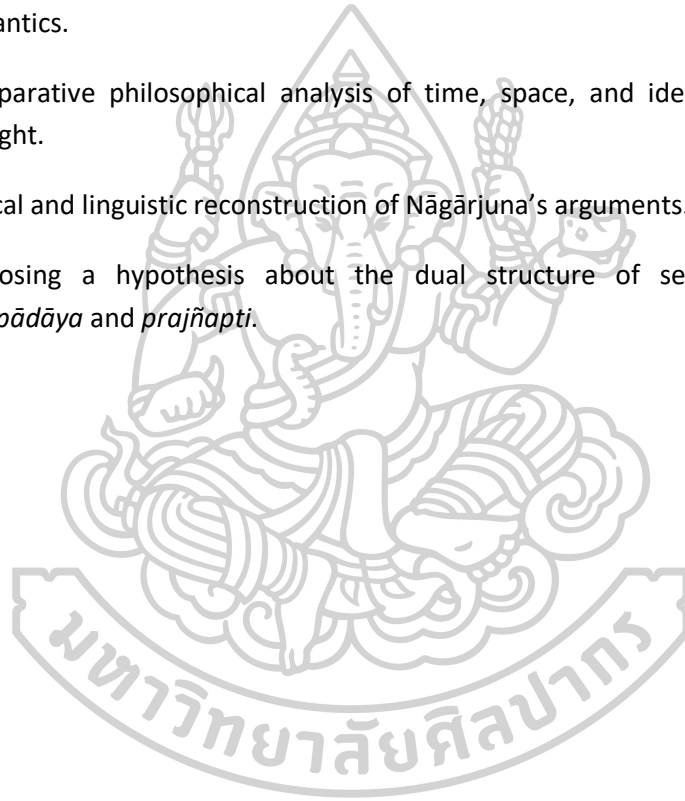
1. A philosophical analysis of *Kālaparīkṣā* (MMK Chapter 19), focusing on time, space, and identity.
2. Primary Sanskrit sources, key commentarial traditions (Candrakīrti, Bhāvaviveka, Tsongkhapa) and major modern commentaries (Kalupahana, Garfield, Siderits & Katsura, Westerhoff).



1.5 Process of the Study

The research process includes:

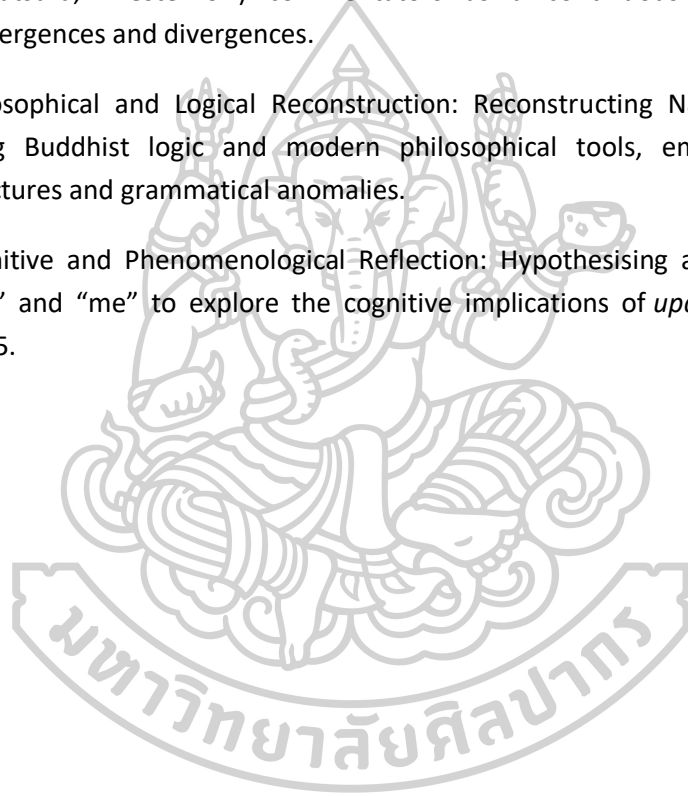
1. Close reading of *Kālaparīkṣā* in Sanskrit.
2. Examination of classical (Bhāvaviveka, Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa) and modern (Kalupahana, Garfield, Siderits & Katsura) commentaries.
3. Analysis of difficult verses (§19:4, §19:5), focusing on grammar, structure, and semantics.
4. Comparative philosophical analysis of time, space, and identity in Madhyamaka thought.
5. Logical and linguistic reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's arguments.
6. Proposing a hypothesis about the dual structure of self (*Me vs. me*) based on *upādāya* and *prajñapti*.



1.6 Method of the Study

The study employs a philosophical-critical method with four components:

1. Close Reading of Primary Text: Detailed analysis of *Kālaparīkṣā* in Sanskrit, focusing on logical structure, grammar, and argumentative method.
2. Unified Commentary Engagement: Simultaneous examination of classical (Candrakīrti, Bhāvaviveka, Tsongkhapa) and modern (Kalupahana, Garfield, Siderits & Katsura, Westerhoff) commentators as a continuous discourse, assessing convergences and divergences.
3. Philosophical and Logical Reconstruction: Reconstructing Nāgārjuna's arguments using Buddhist logic and modern philosophical tools, emphasising inferential structures and grammatical anomalies.
4. Cognitive and Phenomenological Reflection: Hypothesising a distinction between "Me" and "me" to explore the cognitive implications of *upādāya* and *prajñapti* in §19:5.



1.7 Literature Review

This literature review surveys scholarly and classical sources central to the thesis, which examines Nāgārjuna’s critique of time in *Kālaparīkṣā* (Chapter 19 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, MMK), focusing on its interplay with space and identity. The research question investigates how Nāgārjuna’s logical and cognitive strategies challenge time’s ontological coherence, extending this critique to spatial triads and conceptual designation (*prajñapti*). While Madhyamaka’s doctrine of emptiness is well-studied, few works explore the cognitive and logical nuances of *Kālaparīkṣā*, particularly its treatment of *ekatvādīn* as “Identity–Difference” and time as a constructed schema. This review addresses this gap by evaluating key texts, organised into Books, Research and Articles, and Classical Works in chronological order, to trace the evolution of interpretations and position the thesis within the broader Madhyamaka discourse on temporality, spatiality, and identity.

1.7.1 Books

Kenneth K. Inada, in his 1970 translation, *Nāgārjuna: A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, offers a clear and accessible rendering of Nāgārjuna’s text, translating *ekatvādīn* in MMK §19:4.2 as “identity” (footnote 33). This translation helps situate *Kālaparīkṣā* within the Madhyamaka framework, grounding the thesis’s exploration of time’s emptiness in Chapter 2 (section 2.2). However, Inada’s choice of “identity” is overly vague, missing the philosophical depth needed to capture Nāgārjuna’s critique of inherent existence. The thesis addresses this in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.2), proposing “Identity–Difference” to better reflect the ontological tension between unity and distinction. While Inada’s work provides a solid starting point, its minimal commentary requires supplementation with more detailed analyses, such as Siderits & Katsura (2013), to support the thesis’s nuanced interpretation.

David J. Kalupahana’s 1991 book, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, interprets Nāgārjuna’s rejection of absolute time as preserving a pragmatic role, drawing on William James’s concept of the “specious present” (footnotes 19, 34, 55, 73, 74). This empirical framing, discussed in Chapter 2 (sections 2.2, 2.4.3), contrasts sharply with Nāgārjuna’s focus on time’s logical and cognitive incoherence. The thesis argues that Kalupahana’s approach obscures the cognitive schemata central to *Kālaparīkṣā*, particularly in Chapter 3’s analysis of the “two difficulties” (spatial relations and *ekatvādīn*). While Kalupahana’s accessible style enriches the thesis’s context, its empirical bias needs correction through classical Madhyamaka sources like Candrakīrti to align with Nāgārjuna’s method.

Jay L. Garfield’s 1995 work, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s*

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, presents time as a relational construct devoid of inherent existence, aligning with the thesis's emphasis on interdependence in *Kālaparīkṣā* (footnotes 20, 22, 32, 56, 67). Cited in Chapter 2 (section 2.2), Garfield's commentary is valuable for its philosophical depth, but his translation of *ekatvādīn* as "unity, etc." and his application of temporal logic to spatial triads (section 3.1.1) are critiqued in Chapter 3 (sections 3.1.1, 3.2.2) for lacking precision. The thesis refines this by distinguishing the simultaneity of spatial relations (*uttama–madhyama–adhama*) from the sequential nature of temporal phases (*atīta–pratyutpanna–anāgata*) and proposing "Identity–Difference" for *ekatvādīn*. Garfield's insights are crucial, but the thesis's focused cognitive analysis sharpens his generalisations.

Bhikkhu K.L. Dhammajoti's 2007 *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* (4th edition) provides a detailed account of the Sarvāstivāda view of time as a real continuum with "dynamic identity" across past, present, and future (footnotes 13, 14, 39). This perspective, discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.1), grounds the thesis's critique of Sarvāstivāda's temporal ontology, highlighting its mereological incoherence due to the simultaneous existence of temporal phases. While Dhammajoti's doctrinal depth is essential for contextualising Nāgārjuna's arguments, its Sarvāstivāda focus requires integration with Madhyamaka texts, such as Siderits & Katsura (2013), to fully address the "two difficulties" in Chapter 3.

Jan Westerhoff's 2009 *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* critiques the misapplication of temporal logic to spatial constructs, supporting the thesis's argument in Chapter 3 (sections 3.1.1, 3.1.2, footnotes 23, 44, 51) that spatial triads differ due to their simultaneity. Westerhoff's logical clarity bolsters the thesis's challenge to generalisations by Garfield and Tsongkhapa, but his focus on formal logic underplays the cognitive role of *prajñapti*. The thesis builds on this by framing time as a cognitive schema, drawing on Kumārajīva's translations to refine Westerhoff's approach. His analytical rigour is invaluable, but the thesis's cognitive emphasis adds necessary depth.

Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura's 2013 *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* translates *ekatvādīn* as unity, duality, and plurality, providing detailed commentary on the collapse of temporal phases in *Kālaparīkṣā* (footnotes 35, 57). Cited in Chapter 2 (section 2.2), their focus on dependent co-arising aligns with the thesis's analysis of time's interdependence. However, their numerical reading of *ekatvādīn* is critiqued in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.2) for oversimplifying Nāgārjuna's ontological intent, with the thesis proposing "Identity–Difference" instead (section 3.2.3). Their scholarly depth is a strong foundation, but the thesis's cognitive lens refines their interpretive choices.

1.7.2 Research and Articles

David J. Kalupahana's 1974 article, *The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality*, anticipates and is later expanded in his 1991 book's argument, rejecting absolute time while

advocating for a pragmatic temporality grounded in William James’s “specious present” (footnote 55). Cited in Chapter 2 (section 2.2), this perspective frames *Kālaparīkṣā* within broader Buddhist thought, offering a contrast to Nāgārjuna’s logical and cognitive critique of time’s ontological incoherence. The thesis argues that Kalupahana’s empirical focus obscures the cognitive schemata central to Chapter 3’s analysis of the “two difficulties” (spatial relations and *ekatvādīn*). While the article’s concise analysis enriches the thesis’s contextual background, its empirical bias requires correction through classical Madhyamaka commentaries, such as Candrakīrti’s, to align with Nāgārjuna’s method.

M. Gauvain’s 2008 article, *Time and Temporality in Indian Buddhism*, surveys Indian Buddhist perspectives, including Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika views on time, providing valuable context for the thesis’s critique of temporal ontology in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.1). Although not directly cited in the thesis body, Gauvain’s broad scope situates *Kālaparīkṣā* within Indian philosophical discourse, supporting the analysis of Nāgārjuna’s engagement with rival schools like Sarvāstivāda. Its comprehensive overview strengthens the thesis’s historical grounding, but its lack of specificity on *Kālaparīkṣā* limits its direct relevance to Chapter 3’s “two difficulties,” serving primarily as a background resource supplemented by more focused texts like Dhammajoti (2007).

1.7.3 Classical Works

Kumārajīva’s 4th–5th century translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* renders *ekatvādīn* in MMK §19:4.2 as *yī yì* ([一異], identity and difference, footnotes 36, 59) and *prajñapti* as “fake/borrowed name” (footnote 68), providing a foundational text for the thesis’s reinterpretation of *Kālaparīkṣā*. Cited in Chapters 3 (section 3.2.2) and 4 (section 4.3), this early Chinese translation aligns closely with the thesis’s proposal of “Identity–Difference” for *ekatvādīn* and its cognitive reading of *prajñapti* as a constructed schema. Kumārajīva’s rendering highlights Nāgārjuna’s grammatical subtlety, strengthening the thesis’s arguments about time’s conceptual nature. However, its brevity necessitates supplementation with modern commentaries, such as Garfield (1995), to flesh out its philosophical implications.

The *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, attributed to Nāgārjuna and translated by Kumārajīva in the 4th–5th century, likens metaphysical questions about time to “milking a cow’s horn” (footnote 87), reinforcing the thesis’s argument in Chapter 5 that *Kālaparīkṣā* avoids ontological assertions in favour of cognitive schemata. This vivid metaphor supports the thesis’s view that Nāgārjuna critiques time as a conceptual construct rather than a propositional reality. While its doctrinal authority bolsters the thesis’s analysis, the text’s debated attribution to Nāgārjuna requires cautious use, with the thesis relying on confirmed texts like the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* for core arguments.

Huiyuan’s 4th–5th century *Book of the Meaning of Mahāyāna* defines *prajñapti* as “name obtained by means of others” (footnote 69), supporting the thesis’s interpretation in

Chapter 4 (section 4.3) of *prajñapti* as a relational, cognitive designation. This definition aligns with Nāgārjuna’s view of time as a constructed schema, reinforcing the thesis’s emphasis on cognitive processes over inherent existence. Huiyuan’s clarity strengthens the thesis’s argument, but its focus on Mahāyāna doctrine requires integration with broader Madhyamaka texts, such as Kumārajīva’s translations, to fully contextualise Nāgārjuna’s approach in *Kālaparīkṣā*.

Bhāvaviveka’s 6th century *Prajñāpradīpa* interprets *ekatvādīn* numerically and affirms time’s emptiness (footnote 30), providing a precise dialectical framework for the thesis’s logical reconstruction in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.2). However, the thesis critiques Bhāvaviveka’s generalisation of temporal logic to spatial relations, arguing it overlooks the distinct simultaneity of spatial triads (*uttama–madhyama–adhama*) addressed in Chapter 3 (section 3.1.1). His early commentary lends classical authority to the thesis’s engagement with Madhyamaka, but the thesis refines his spatial overreach by emphasising Nāgārjuna’s focus on temporal incoherence, drawing on primary texts for accuracy.

Candrakīrti’s 7th century *Prasannapadā* (edited by Vaidya, 1960) interprets *ekatvādīn* as oneness, twoness, and multiplicity (footnotes 28, 29) and elaborates on triadic categories in MMK §19:4 (section 3.1.4). Cited in Chapter 3, the thesis critiques this numerical reading for oversimplifying Nāgārjuna’s ontological intent, instead using Candrakīrti’s triadic framework to argue for conceptual over numerical identity in its “Identity–Difference” proposal (section 3.2.3). Following Bhāvaviveka, Candrakīrti’s dialectical rigour strengthens the thesis’s logical analysis, but his numerical focus requires refinement to align with Nāgārjuna’s critique of inherent existence, supported by the thesis’s cognitive approach.

Tsongkhapa’s 14th century *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (translated by Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield) uses dialectical methods to affirm time’s emptiness, offering a robust framework for the thesis’s logical reconstruction of *Kālaparīkṣā* (footnotes 9, 24, 31). Referenced in Chapter 2 (section 2.2), Tsongkhapa’s systematic approach strengthens the thesis’s arguments, but his extension of temporal logic to spatial triads is critiqued in Chapter 3 (section 3.1.2) for conflating sequential and simultaneous relations. The thesis corrects this by emphasising the distinct nature of spatial simultaneity, drawing on primary texts to stay true to Nāgārjuna’s intent. Tsongkhapa’s rigour is a key asset, but his spatial misstep requires the thesis’s refinement.

Conclusion

This literature review synthesises a range of classical and modern sources, revealing a complex engagement with Nāgārjuna’s *Kālaparīkṣā*. Early classical works, such as Kumārajīva’s translation and Huiyuan’s commentary, provide foundational support for the thesis’s reinterpretation of *ekatvādīn* as “Identity–Difference” and *prajñapti* as a cognitive

construct, though their brevity necessitates modern elaboration. Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti, in historical sequence, offer dialectical rigour but simplify *ekatvādīn* into numerical categories, which the thesis refines to emphasise ontological depth. Modern works like Garfield (1995) and Siderits & Katsura (2013) provide accessible translations but lack focus on Nāgārjuna’s cognitive strategies, prompting the thesis’s novel approach. Sources like Dhammajoti (2007) and Gauvain (2008) contextualise Nāgārjuna’s critique within Buddhist debates, while Augustine (2017) connects it to universal philosophical questions. The thesis addresses these gaps by highlighting Nāgārjuna’s grammatical and cognitive subtlety, arguing that time, space, and identity are interdependent constructs devoid of inherent existence, thus contributing to both Madhyamaka scholarship and broader philosophical discourse.



Chapter 2

The Philosophical Problem of Time — Background, Commentarial Tradition, and Framework for Reconstruction

“What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it, I know not,” confesses Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* (Augustine, 2017, Book XI).

Saint Augustine’s question — “What, then, is time?” — captures the paradox at the heart of this study which explores time’s mystery through Nāgārjuna’s *Kālaparīkṣā* in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK hereafter; Nāgārjuna, trans. Garfield, 1995, chap. 19), arguing that time, space, and identity are mental and linguistic constructs shaped by the mind’s naming process, or *prajñāpyate*.

By distinguishing the schematic agent (*Me*) from the constructed subject (*me*), this analysis reveals how Nāgārjuna dismantles the illusion of a perceiving Self — revealing that time is not perceived, but produced; not given, but named.

Time appears indispensable to the structure of experience. Every event, thought, or object — whether a tree growing or an idea forming — requires a “when” to be real. Yet, when we examine time itself, it slips away. The past exists only in memory, the future in anticipation, and the present is fleeting, like a single frame in a film that vanishes as we try to grasp it. Consider watching ink dissolve in water: we see changing shapes, but what links these moments into a flow? Time’s role in connecting events feels intuitive, yet its nature remains unclear. This study suggests that time’s elusiveness arises not from its absence, but from the way it is structured by *Me* — through the act of naming and organising experience — a process Nāgārjuna unravels in *MMK* 19.

In Buddhism, time underpins causality, as seen in *pratīyasamutpāda/dependent arising*, where causes precede effects in a temporal sequence. However, declaring time nonexistent misses its deeper emptiness. Unlike a table, whose lack of *inherent nature/svabhāva* can be realised within time, time itself is the framework for all phenomena. To see time as empty requires recognising it as a construct of *Me*, not a fixed reality. Nāgārjuna’s *Kālaparīkṣā* challenges us to question time’s ultimate existence while preserving its conventional role in causality, a paradox this study explores through the lens of *prajñāpyate* — the mind’s act of naming.

Time’s mystery extends to space and identity, which also shape how we experience reality.

Space orders objects by “where,” like arranging books on a shelf, but is it merely a mental framework? Identity defines “who,” distinguishing *me* as a self, yet is it fixed or constructed? Nāgārjuna’s critique in *MMK* 19 suggests that time, space, and identity are interdependent, arising from *Me*’s naming process. This study offers an accessible interpretation of *Kālaparīkṣā*, rephrasing Nāgārjuna’s logic in everyday language to show how *Me* constructs these concepts, fostering both understanding and reflection on their emptiness.

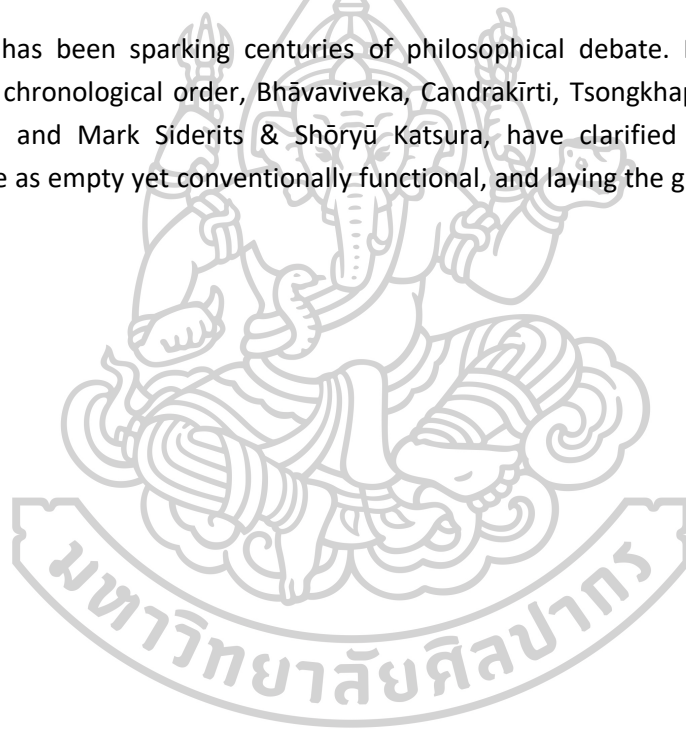


2.1 Introduction to *Kālaparīkṣā*

Nāgārjuna's *Kālaparīkṣā* offers a radical critique of the *inherent existence/svabhāva* of *time/kāla*, presenting a metaphysical investigation into its ontological status. He argues that the present and future rely on the past for their intelligibility, yet if the past cannot be found or established independently, then neither the present nor future can stand on their own. In this interdependence, none of the temporal phases possess intrinsic reality.

He further shows that time is not directly perceived but *posited* through conceptual appropriation, revealing it as a cognitive construct rather than an independently existing entity. Ultimately, since time arises only in dependence on *conditioned phenomena/bhāva*, which are themselves empty of *svabhāva*, time too collapses under ultimate analysis.

His critique has been sparking centuries of philosophical debate. Major commentators, including, in chronological order, Bhāvaviveka, Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa, David Kalupahana, Jay Garfield, and Mark Siderits & Shōryū Katsura, have clarified Nāgārjuna's position, showing time as empty yet conventionally functional, and laying the groundwork for further inquiry.



2.2 The Commentarial Tradition on Nāgārjuna's Kālaparīkṣā

Bhāvaviveka: Logical Refutation of Time's Inherent Existence

Bhāvaviveka interprets Nāgārjuna's Kālaparīkṣā as a logical refutation of time's inherent existence. He argues that past, present, and future are mutually dependent and cannot exist independently. If the past lacks self-existence, the present and future collapse. Time, for him, is not a real substance or causal factor but a *mental imputation/prajñapti* based on observed change. Drawing on sūtras, he affirms that time is empty of *svabhāva* and merely a conventional designation. His commentary emphasises that treating time as an objective entity is a conceptual error rooted in mistaken inference and realist assumptions.

Candrakīrti: Emptiness and the Collapse of Temporal Reference

Candrakīrti asserts that past, present, and future do not exist independently or inherently. He argues that the present and future cannot rely on the past, since the past is non-existent — like trying to hang a chain from an empty hook. If the present cannot be grounded, all of time collapses. Even the idea of time possessing measurable units (like moments or days) fails, since time has no fixed essence to be grasped or measured. Time arises only through conceptual designation based on dependently arisen phenomena, which themselves lack intrinsic nature. Thus, time is empty and ultimately non-existent.

Tsongkhapa: Emptiness through Structured Dialectics

Tsongkhapa systematises Nāgārjuna's critique by rigorously dividing the analysis of temporal periods — past, present and future — into mutually dependent categories. He argues that if any time relies on another, it collapses into incoherence; and if it does not, it lacks foundation. He extends the analysis to triadic structures, e.g., superior, inferior and average, and refutes both non-Buddhist and internal Buddhist realist claims. While affirming conventional designations of time based on arising and cessation, he concludes that time lacks inherent existence and is a conceptual imputation. His commentary integrates Madhyamaka logic with scholastic clarity, confirming his view through authoritative sūtra citations.

David Kalupahana: Pragmatic Rejection of Absolute Time

Kalupahana reads Nāgārjuna's critique of time as a rejection of metaphysical absolutism rather than of experiential temporality. He highlights how time, when treated as an independent substance, either as static or flowing, is logically incoherent. Drawing from

early Buddhist karma theory, Kalupahana shows how time became entangled with causation and identity. Nāgārjuna dismantles notions like the past containing the future, or time existing apart from phenomena. Instead, Kalupahana affirms that time arises only dependently, not as an entity. Time is pragmatically useful but conceptually void — an imputed, non-substantial convention grounded in change, not in essence.

Jay Garfield: Time as Relational Construct

Jay Garfield interprets Nāgārjuna's Kālaparīkṣā as a philosophical dismantling of time as an inherently existing entity. He emphasises that time cannot exist independently of the events that occur within it. Instead, time arises as a relational construct — a conceptual framework derived from the ordering of phenomena. Garfield shows that if the present and future depend on the past, they must already exist within it, leading to a logical contradiction. Conversely, if they are independent, no coherent temporal sequence is possible. He further argues that time cannot be either static or dynamic, as both views demand an incoherent Super-Time. Finally, Garfield highlights Nāgārjuna's positive view: time is not a substance but a set of relations among impermanent, dependently originated phenomena. Since these phenomena lack inherent existence, time too is empty — devoid of any intrinsic nature. This aligns with Garfield's broader reading of Madhyamaka as a critique of reification and reinforces the thesis that time is a mental imputation (prajñapti), not a metaphysical substrate.

Siderits and Katsura: Dependent Collapse of Temporal Constructs

Siderits and Katsura read Kālaparīkṣā as a methodical refutation of time's reality. They explain that past, present, and future are mutually dependent: if the present depends on the past, but the past no longer exists, the present cannot stand. This logical entanglement undermines any triadic system, including temporal and evaluative categories, *e.g.*, one two many, and, best middling worst).

They also reject the idea that time exists because it is measurable — measurement requires stability, which time lacks. Even conceptual designation fails: if time depends on *phenomena/bhāva*, and *bhāvas* lack intrinsic reality, then time too is unreal. Thus, all theories — realist or nominalist — collapse, affirming Nāgārjuna's thesis of emptiness.

Synthesis: The Commentarial Consensus on Time

The major commentators on Kālaparīkṣā converge on a key insight: time has no intrinsic or independent existence.

Bhāvaviveka and Siderits & Katsura highlight the mutual dependence of temporal phases — if one collapses, the rest follow.

Candrakīrti intensifies this view, arguing that even conventionally, time fails to stand as a

measurable or coherent entity.

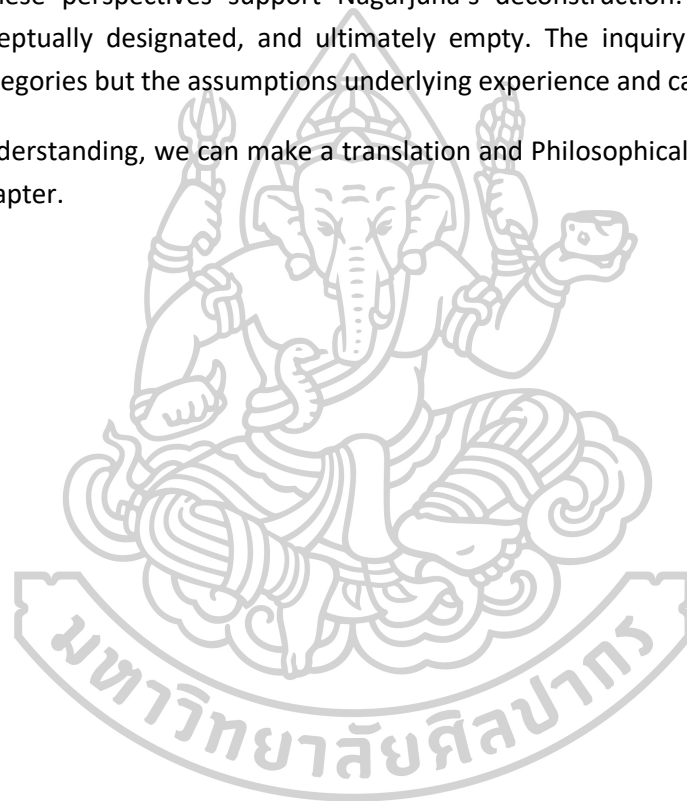
Tsongkhapa maintains a middle path, acknowledging time's emptiness while affirming its practical designation within conventional truth.

Kalupahana interprets time as a construct imposed by habit and memory, not a feature of external reality.

Garfield adds a cognitive dimension, suggesting time is a projected illusion rather than a direct perception.

Together, these perspectives support Nāgārjuna's deconstruction: time is dependently arisen, conceptually designated, and ultimately empty. The inquiry destabilises not only temporal categories but the assumptions underlying experience and causality.

With this understanding, we can make a translation and Philosophical Reconstruction in the following chapter.



2.3 A Translation and Philosophical Reconstruction

§ 19.1 Mereological Collapse of Temporal Phases

The opening verse of MMK 19 states the mereological relation between the Temporal Phases, namely, Past, Present, and Future.

pratyutpanno 'nāgataśca yadyatītamapekṣya hi | 19:1.1 |¹

pratyutpanno 'nāgataśca kāle 'tīte bhaviṣyataḥ | | 19:1.2 | |²

If³ Present and Future (be) dependent on Past,

Present and Future *will be*⁴ in Past.

Nāgārjuna begins by exposing a contradiction: if the present and future depend on the past, they must, in a temporal sense, lie within the past. But the past, by definition, excludes both present and future times. Thus, present and future cannot simultaneously be both past and non-past — a mereologically incoherent result.

§ 19.2 The Problem of Co-Existence

pratyutpanno 'nāgataśca na stastatra punaryadi | 19:2.1 |

pratyutpanno 'nāgataśca syātām kathamapekṣya tam | | 19:2.2 | |

However, if Present and Future *are*⁵ not there,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in this thesis follow Vaidya's (1960) critical edition of the *Madhyamakāsāstra* with Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*.

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations from primary sources are by the present author.

³ All translations in this thesis have been rendered as literally as possible, in order to provide a clear basis for the conceptual analysis undertaken in the following chapters.

⁴ Given the centrality of the concept of Time to this study, verbal tenses in the translations have been preserved as faithfully as possible to the original Sanskrit in order to retain subtle temporal distinctions.

how could Present and Future be dependent on it?

Nāgārjuna points out that for the present and future to depend on the past, they would have to exist within the time of the past. But if the past has already ceased — if it no longer exists — how could anything depend on it? To depend on it would require the present and future to co-exist with the past, which is clearly untenable.

§ 19.3 Neither Dependent Nor Independent

anapekṣya punaḥ siddhirnātītaṃ vidyate tayoḥ |19:3.1|

pratyutpanno 'nāgataśca tasmātkālo na vidyate ||19:3.2||

However, (being) non-dependent on Past, these two's establishment is not found.

Therefore, Time is not found.

On the other hand, if present and future are not dependent on the past, they lose their definitional grounding; for, without a past, what meaning could “present” and “future” retain? Thus, Nāgārjuna's argument unfolds as follows:

1. If the present and future are dependent on the past, they must in some sense be located in the past — which is temporally incoherent;
2. If they are not dependent on the past, they cannot be defined as “present” or “future” at all;
3. Therefore, whether they are dependent or not, both options collapse: the present and future cannot coherently be said to exist.

Accordingly, Time — as constituted by these three phases — fails to achieve coherent existence, since its mereological parts are asynchronous by definition.

§ 19.4 Extension to Other Constructs

etenaivāvaśiṣṭau dvau krameṇa parivartakau |19:4.1|

uttamādhama madhyādīnekatvādīṃśca lakṣayet ||19:4.2||

⁵ It is noteworthy that Nāgārjuna employs present and future tenses—rather than the past tense—to articulate the notion of being in the past in §19:1.2 and §19:2.1. This observation will be examined in greater detail in a subsequent chapter.

By this very method should the remaining two re-arrangements, and upper, lower, middle, *etc.*, and *ekatva...⁶etc.*, be regarded.

Nāgārjuna extends the same critique to relations grounded in the present and future, demonstrating that these, too, mirror the logical inconsistencies found in the case of the past. Since all three temporal phases are structurally identical in their dependence and mutual exclusion, the argument applies interchangeably across them.

This line of reasoning is then extended to other conceptual relations, such as spatial distinctions — specifically, Upper, Lower, and Middle. According to Tsongkhapa (2006, p. 397), these distinctions are purely relational: no object can be intrinsically “Middle,” since such a designation depends entirely on its position relative to others. At the very least, the concept of “Middle” becomes untenable in the absence of “Upper” and/or “Lower.”

In this context, Nāgārjuna introduces another conceptual triad, beginning with *ekatva* — a term whose interpretation will be examined in greater detail, with due methodological care, in a subsequent chapter.

§ 19.5 The Problem of Static vs. Dynamic Time

Now, Nāgārjuna moves from analysing the mereological parts to investigating Time as a whole:

nāsthito gr̥hyate kālaḥ sthitaḥ kālo na vidyate | 19:5.1 |

yo gr̥hyetāgr̥hītaśca kālaḥ prajñāpyate katham || 19:5.2 ||

Non-static Time is not grasped. Static time is not found.

How can that ungrasped time be grasped and *prajñāpyate*?⁷

To understand time as non-static, one must stand outside of it — like observing a river’s flow from its bank. If we drift with the current, we can’t perceive movement unless we compare it to something still, like the riverbank. Likewise, change within time only becomes intelligible in relation to something that does not change. Yet in the case of time, this would require a Super-Time, either unmoving or flows differently, which lies entirely beyond our

⁶ The term *ekatva* may provisionally be rendered as “Oneness.” A more thorough analysis of its conceptual role, along with its connection to spatial relations, will be undertaken in subsequent chapters.

⁷ The verb *prajñāpyate* is commonly rendered as “to be made known” or “to be known.” Its usage and philosophical significance will be examined in later chapters.

experience and conception. Such a perspective, by definition, exceeds the bounds of possible thought.

Secondly, if time were static, it could not account for change — neither within itself nor in the events it supposedly contains. Its phases — past, present, and future — would coexist without distinction, collapsing both historicality and futurity into a frozen singularity: the present. Moreover, as with the flowing model of time, recognising staticity would require a reference point. Yet to assert something as truly motionless, one must posit an absolute stillness⁸ — an idea even more fraught than the already problematic appeal to a Super-Time. Without an absolute frame of reference, static time cannot be verified. Such a notion lies beyond the ontological scope Nāgārjuna would accept. Therefore, this concept of time also fails to withstand scrutiny.

Hence, whether conceived as static or non-static, time remains burdened by the problem of reference. If time cannot itself be grasped, how could we possibly comprehend a Super-Time or an overarching Absolute? Worse still, to know whether that Super-Time flows, or that Absolute is truly absolute, we would need a Super-Super-Time or Absolute-Absolute, and so on, *ad infinitum*. The regress is unavoidable. It is therefore reasonable to ask: how can Time (be) *prajñāpyate*? The answer is simple: it cannot.

§ 19.6 No Dependence on What Does Not Exist

Nāgārjuna concludes by exposing the external dependence of Time:

bhāvaṃ pratītya kālaścetkālo bhāvādṛte kutaḥ | 19:6.1 |

na ca kaścana bhāvo 'sti kutaḥ kālo bhaviṣyati | | 19:6.2 | |

If Time (be) dependent on (an) existent, from where (could) Time (be) without (this) existent?

(There is) not any existent. From where *will* Time be?

He challenges the idea that Time arises dependently as a function of *phenomena/bhāva*. He asks: if Time depends on existents, what happens when such phenomena disappear? Does Time vanish along with them? If so, how could Time serve as a consistent framework for the

⁸ Certain physical systems, such as Newtonian mechanics, presuppose the existence of absolute space and time. In contrast, Einstein's theory of relativity maintains that the speed of light in a vacuum is constant for all inertial observers, despite the fact that both time and space are relative to each observer's frame of reference. Whether this tension between invariant velocity and relativized temporality entails a deeper metaphysical regress lies beyond the scope of this study.

ordering of events?

More critically, Nāgārjuna reminds us that phenomena themselves — the very *bhāvas* on which Time is said to depend — have already been shown to lack *intrinsic existence/svabhāva*. If no phenomenon truly exists in itself, then Time has no ground to stand on. It cannot arise dependently, for there is nothing real upon which it could depend. Thus, Nāgārjuna dismantles not only the metaphysical foundation of Time, but even the conventional rationale for positing it at all.



2.4 Summary

Kālaparīkṣā offers three distinct arguments against the ontological coherence of Time:

2.4.1 Temporal Phases are Mereologically Incoherent

This section challenges the common view that Time consists of three distinct phases, and that causality requires a cause to precede its effect. According to Sarvāstivāda, these Temporal Phases are both *intrinsically existent/svābhāvika* and mutually dependent: Present and Future are said to depend on the Past while still retaining their own intrinsic being.

Nāgārjuna argues that this view results in contradiction. If the Past gives rise to the Present and Future, these two must, in some sense, already exist within the Past, which contradicts their essential temporal characteristics: Present must be only present, and Future only future. On the other hand, if Present and Future are separate from the Past, they become uncaused, independent, and disconnected, which also conflicts with their temporal meaning, since Present and Future are only intelligible in relation to what has come before.

Thus, whether the Present and Future are identified with or distinguished from the Past, Present and Future lack coherent ontological grounding, despite Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika's assertion that a dharma's *essence/svabhāva* persists across *the three times/trikāla* by means of what they term "dynamic identity" (Dhammajoti, 2007, p. 137).

Sārvāstivādins maintain that *adhvaṇ/Time* is not a real entity but a conceptual superimposition upon the activities of various kinds of dharmas, and this superimposed temporal sequence is explained through four kinds of changes:

1. change in existence — *bhāva-anyathātva*,
2. change in characteristics — *lakṣaṇa-anyathātva*,
3. change in state — *avasthā-anyathātva*,
4. change in relation — *anyathā-anyathātva* (Dhammajoti, 2007, pp. 119–120).

However, so long as these dharmas are assumed to be intrinsically existent, their interdependence implies that each moment, for instance, the Present, must already be implicitly contained within the Past in order to arise. This, once again, reproduces the aforementioned contradiction: Present ends up being both present and past. Consequently, the most basic condition for a coherent temporal structure — that Past must be only past, Present only present, and Future only future — cannot be upheld.

It is important to note that the logical failure lies not in intrinsic existence alone, but also in its combination with causal dependence, as expressed in the Sārvāstivādic concept of *saṃskṛta-dharma* ("conditioned phenomena"; Dhammajoti, 2007, pp. 38, 122). This hybrid

notion is what ultimately causes the logical impasse articulated in *MMK* 19.1–2 — a veritable temporal labyrinth.

2.4.2 Time as Flowing or Non-Flowing — Both are Problematic

If Time is conceived as flowing, there must be some superordinate reference point against which that flow could be measured. In this case, the *Ābhidhārmika* concept of *kṣaṇa/instant* becomes untenable, for, if there exists a static moment, it could not coherently form part of a flow. The presence of fixed instants contradicts the very idea of fluidity.

On the other hand, if Time is non-flowing, then all of its temporal parts — Past, Present, and Future — or an infinite series of static moments — would have to coexist simultaneously. In this scenario, time collapses into a singularity, comparable to a black hole devouring all differentiation. It is likely in this sense of undifferentiated simultaneity that Nāgārjuna declares non-flowing time “is not found”.

Moreover, by denying Time could be at all graspable, Nāgārjuna effectively asserts that Time *per se* lies outside of the empirical sphere, that is, beyond what can be directly experienced or conceptualised.

Incidentally, non-fluidity of Time, in concept, superficially resembles the presentism held by Sautrāntika, Vibhāvavāda, and Theravada schools. According to these, only Present exists, and neither Present nor Future can depend on Past since Past no longer exists (Wikipedia contributors, 2025, "Presentism"). However, the claim that ‘only Present exists’ would necessarily entail that Time as a whole be static, which would return us to the same black hole-like scenario of collapsed temporal differentiation.

Nota Bene: Since Time can be neither static nor non-static, all logical possibilities for its existence as a coherent whole are exhausted.

2.4.3 Time cannot be Exogenously Caused

If Time were the effect of external phenomena locally, then with different phenomena arising and ceasing, there would be multiple, fragmented, or even absent Times, which is conceptually incoherent.⁹

Moreover, since *svābhāvika/intrinsically existent* objects have already been confuted in

⁹ This should not be confused with time dilation in Einstein’s special theory of relativity, wherein time is frame-dependent and varies across different inertial reference frames.

former chapters and the confutation is global¹⁰, Time cannot arise as their effect — neither locally nor globally.

In comparison, while the Sārvāstivādin conception of *adhvan* which treats time as “just a superimposition on the activity of these different types of dharma-s and does not exist independently” (Wikipedia contributors, 2025, “Abhidharma”), Nāgārjuna goes further: Time can be neither locally nor globally exogenously dependent.

Thus, Nāgārjuna rules out every ontological mode of Time:

- i. not endogenously dependent
- ii. not non-dependent (at least conceptually)
- iii. not flowing
- iv. not static
- v. not exogenously dependent, neither locally nor globally

The only remaining, and seemingly nonsensical, logical possibility is that Time is exogenously non-dependent, a notion alien to Mādhyamika thought. Yet, paradoxically, this very absurdity might point to something unnoticed and worth deeper investigation.

Lastly, it seems to me — *pace* Kalupahana and Garfield — that Nāgārjuna neither positively acknowledges “temporal phenomena” (Kalupahana, 1991, p. 279), nor affirms Time as “merely a dependent set of relations among empirical phenomena” (Garfield, 1995, p. 257). Kālaparīkṣā offers no explicit textual basis for such claims; rather, it reveals deeper interpretive tensions and unresolved complications in the existing commentaries.

¹⁰ This stands in contrast to the phrasing in §19:6.1, which is amenable to interpretation as either globally or locally scoped.

Chapter 3

Two Difficulties in §19.4.2

In §19:4, Nāgārjuna states:

etenaivāvaśiṣṭau dvau krameṇa parivartakau | 19:4.1 |

uttamādhamamadhyādīnekatvādīṃśca lakṣayet | | 19:4.2 | |

By this very method, should the remaining two re-arrangements, and upper, lower, middle, etc., and *ekatva...etc.*, be regarded.

§19.4.2 presents two significant interpretive difficulties:

1. The spatial relations “upper, lower, middle” do not align clearly with the method of analysis applied to temporal phases in §19:1–3,
2. The phrase “*ekatva-ādīn*”¹¹ exhibits semantic ambiguity: what does it precisely denote in this context — numerical unity, metaphysical oneness, or a conceptual abstraction?



¹¹ “*one-ness etc.*” — masculine accusative plural.

3.1 Difficulty I: Spatial Relation

3.1.1 Can Nāgārjuna's Method Extend to Space?

In §19.4, Nāgārjuna says categorically:

By this very method should '..... etc.' be regarded.

Garfield interprets this to mean:

"Moreover, Nāgārjuna notes, this argument applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to spatial relations" (Garfield, 1995, p. 176).

However, Jan Westerhoff rightly observes:

"The above argument cannot be generalised to cover spatial relations as well. The higher, middle, and lower part of a building can perfectly well be described as depending on one another" (Westerhoff, 2009, p. 125).

Before adopting Westerhoff's view that spatial designations (upper, middle, lower) are mutually interdependent and coexistent, it is crucial to recall that Nāgārjuna's critique in §19 targets the *svabhāva*—the intrinsic reality—of such designations. He does not merely ask whether they depend on one another, but whether they can be grasped as real in themselves, possessing an independent essence. The absence of *svabhāva*, even in simultaneous relations, renders such constructs insubstantial and ultimately empty (*śūnya*).

The spatial parts of an object — upper, lower, middle — are interdependent both conceptually and existentially. For instance, the lower part of a building is so designated precisely because it stands in a relation to the middle; it is the presence of the lower part that enables the designation of a middle. Their identity is mutually defined, and, most crucially, these parts not only exist but must exist simultaneously. This simultaneity stands in sharp contrast to temporal phases, wherein the past ceases to exist when the present arises.

Yet, Nāgārjuna's method questions the "real reference" of these spatial concepts — does the "upper" have a self-existent basis beyond its relational designation? If the middle need not be located within the lower to be dependent on it, as the present is said to be "in" the past in §19:1–3, the dependency in spatial relations diverges significantly from temporal logic. However, since neither spatial nor temporal constructs possess *svabhāva*, the critique may still apply, though it operates differently: spatial simultaneity does not confer inherent existence, making upper, middle, and lower as empty as past, present, and future. Consequently, the concepts of upper, middle, and lower cannot be invalidated by the reasoning of §19:1–3 in the same way, but they remain subject to Nāgārjuna's broader refutation of *svabhāva*.

3.1.2 The Limits of Relational Dependence

Tsongkhapa, in his interpretation of §19:4.1, suggests:

“In brief, if the superior and inferior existed through their own characteristics depending on the average, [.....], then they would have to exist at all temporal periods and places where that on which they depend exists. And if they did not exist in that manner, they would not depend on them in that way.”

Since it is not tenable for them to exist without being mutually dependent, they do not exist inherently; but it is not the case that they do not exist through the force of mundane convention. All of the others should be understood in this way (Tsongkhapa, 2006, p. 397).

It appears that Tsongkhapa treats these triadic concepts — such as superior, average, and inferior — merely as *saṃskṛta dharmas/conditioned phenomena* in the Sārvāstivādin sense, which are held to exist across all three times. Yet this assumption finds no clear support in the logic of Kālaparīkṣā. A superior phenomenon in the present could depend on an average phenomenon within the same moment, and both may cease without contradiction. The notion that they must exist across all temporal periods is therefore unwarranted.

Nāgārjuna’s argument in §19:1–3 depends not on the general issue of causality which he already rejects in the *Pratyayaparīkṣā*, but on asynchrony: temporally distinct phases cannot causally or existentially depend on each other because they do not coexist. This asynchrony is the key to the contradiction he exposes. Tsongkhapa’s relational reading of spatial triads thus, as Westerhoff notes, “*at odds with Nāgārjuna’s earlier attempt to find fault with the very idea of establishing the three times as dependent entities*” (Westerhoff, 2009, p. 126).

3.1.3 Broader Triadic Categories and Their Divergence

Kalupahana offers a different angle:

“In all these cases, the metaphysical issues emerge as a result of the absolute distinctions that are being made. Such absolute distinctions are being often made in logical analyses, and are not supported by empirical evidence. Time, as experienced, cannot be analysed into three water-tight compartments as past, present, and future. (See Introduction, for an explanation of the experienced time by a modern psychologist)” (Kalupahana, 1991, pp. 277-278).

He invokes William James' "specious present" to argue that the lived experience of time is not cleanly divisible into past, present, and future. However, this notion seems more relevant to Nāgārjuna's treatment in §19:5 than to §19:4. In contrast, spatial relations (upper, middle, lower) are clearly identifiable, simultaneous, and do not give rise to the phenomenological puzzles posed by temporal categories.

More importantly, the spatial triads do not suffer from asynchronism, which is the crux of Nāgārjuna's refutation of temporal dependence. Upper, lower, and middle are simultaneous and co-existent, not temporally separated. Therefore, the logical structure Nāgārjuna employs in §19:1–3 — specifically, the impossibility of causal or existential dependence among non-coexisting temporal parts — cannot be directly mapped onto spatial categories.

Additionally, Nāgārjuna's method here is that of rigorous logical analysis rather than empirical psychology. His aim is to expose the contradictions in ordinary assumptions, even those grounded in everyday experience. Hence, Kalupahana's appeal to empirical evidence may miss the mark: the validity of Nāgārjuna's argument does not rest on phenomenological support, but on demonstrating internal incoherence in conceptual structures.

3.1.4 The Real Target: Conceptual Reification

In light of this, interpreting *uttama–adhama–madhya* in §19:4.2 as mere spatial loci undermines the force of Nāgārjuna's earlier refutation. The method from §19:1–3, when extended to these spatial distinctions, fails to generate the same contradiction. Thus, what Nāgārjuna means by *etenaiva... krameṇa... lakṣayet* — "by this very method, one should regard upper, lower, middle, etc." — becomes questionable.

Bhāvaviveka comments:

「且有上者非上，自體有相待故，譬如中自體。如是中亦非中，自體有相待故，譬如下自體。下亦非下自體，有相待故，譬如上自體。復次以有相待為因，欲令汝解上中下等無自體故。」 (Bhāvaviveka, ca. 6th century, p. 132)

Moreover, that which is considered superior is not inherently so, because its nature is defined in relation to the middle. Likewise, the middle is not inherently middle, for it depends on the lower. The lower is also not inherently lower, as it depends on the upper. Because of this relativity, you should understand that upper, middle, and lower lack intrinsic existence.

While this aligns with the Madhyamaka critique of *svabhāva* via relational dependence, Bhāvaviveka's application here misrepresents the specific inferential strategy of *MMK* 19. Nāgārjuna's original argument exploits the temporal non-coexistence of phases; applying

the same logic to simultaneous conceptual triads yields no contradiction. Thus, although Bhāvaviveka's reading coheres with general Madhyamaka doctrine, it fails to preserve the unique force of Nāgārjuna's temporal critique.

Candrakīrti extends *uttamādhmama* in §19:4.2 even further:

uttamādhmama²madhyamāniti ādiśabdena kuśalākuśalāvyākṛtāni
utpādashthitibhaṅgāḥ pūrvāntāparāntamadhyāntāḥ
kāmarūpārūpyadhātavaḥ śaikṣāśaikṣanaivaśaikṣanaivāśaikṣādayo
yāvantaḥ padārthāḥ tripadārthasaṃbandhavyavasthitāḥ te sarve
gṛhyante | (Vaidya, 1960, p. 164, [B 385])

The word 'etc.' in 'upper, lower, and middle' includes such triads as: wholesome, unwholesome, and indeterminate (*kuśala-akuśala-avyākṛta*); arising, persisting, and ceasing (*utpāda-sthiti-bhaṅga*); beginning, middle, and end (*pūrvānta-madhyānta-parānta*); the realms of desire, form, and formlessness (*kāmarūpa-arūpya dhātu*); and the stages of trainee, post-trainee, neither trainee nor post-trainee (*śaikṣa-aśaikṣa-naivaśaikṣa naivāśaikṣa*), and all such triply structured categories.

This broadens the discussion to encompass all triadic conceptual relation. Yet only some — such as *utpāda-sthiti-bhaṅga* and *pūrvānta-madhyānta-parānta* — involve temporal succession and thus align with Nāgārjuna's inferential structure. Others — like *kuśala-akuśala-avyākṛta* — can coexist and do not yield contradictions under mutual dependence. Saying that unwholesome depends on wholesome, for example, does not imply temporal incoherence.

That said, Candrakīrti's generalisation is not without philosophical merit. While Nāgārjuna begins with the problem of time, his deeper critique targets the architecture of conceptual division itself — the tendency to posit inherently distinct, mutually conditioning categories. Even when time is not at issue, such triadic frameworks remain susceptible to the same analytical dismantling, — not on account of temporal asynchrony, but because of their lack of intrinsic identity.

Thus, while the logical contradiction exposed in §19:1–3 hinges specifically on temporal asynchrony, the broader trajectory of Nāgārjuna's critique reaches beyond time. What is ultimately undermined is not merely the ontology of temporal phases, but the very act of reifying categorical distinctions — a process that obscures the emptiness at the heart of all conceptual constructs.

3.2 Difficulty II: What Does *ekatva* Really Mean?

3.2.1 Dual Usage of *ādi* Suggests Distinct Conceptual Categories

Let us now turn to Nāgārjuna's further extension in §19:4.2:

etenaiva...krameṇa...ekatvādīṃśca lakṣayet, a phrase that introduces an even more perplexing dimension.

Notably, the repeated use of the *ādi* — first in *uttamādhama-madhyādīn*, then again in *ekatvādīn* — strongly suggests that Nāgārjuna is designating two distinct classes of conceptual categories. The first, beginning with *uttama-adhama-madhyā*, clearly refers to spatial or similar triads; the second, beginning with *ekatva/one-ness*, belongs to a different logical register altogether.

If these two *ādi*-marked groups were simply meant to be lumped together and dismissed as just more examples of conceptual triads, that would sit uneasily with Nāgārjuna's usual style of precise and carefully structured argumentation. Such a flattening of distinctions risks undermining the precision and stratified architecture of his critique. At the very least, we should not treat these two sets as if they were the same. To understand how Nāgārjuna refutes them, we must recognise that they likely involve different kinds of reasoning.

3.2.2 Existing Interpretations of *ekatvādi*: From Candrakīrti to Kumārajīva

Candrakīrti writes hereof:

*ekatvādīṃśca ityanena ādiśabdena dvitvabahutvayorgrahaṇātte
eva uttamādayaḥ ekatvādayaśca kālatrayavyākhyānena
vyākhyātā veditavyāḥ || 4 ||* (Vaidya, 1960, p. 164 [B 385])

By the term *ekatvādi*, through the word *ādi* ('and so forth'), the notions of twoness and multiplicity are included. Thus, these very notions of superior (*uttama*), etc., and oneness (*ekatva*), etc., are to be understood as explained through the exposition of the three times.

He interprets *ekatvādi* ("oneness, etc.") as referring to the triad of oneness (*ekatva*), twoness (*dvitva*), and multiplicity (*bahutva*), which, according to him, should be understood in the same manner as the previously discussed categories of temporal phases and spatial triads (e.g., upper–middle–lower).

This interpretation of *ekatvādi* follows that of Bhāvaviveka, who earlier offers an extensive refutation of oneness, twoness, and multiplicity in terms of their mutual dependence and lack of intrinsic identity. He writes:

「謂一者無二及無異故名為一，無一及無異故名為二，無二及無異故名為三，自三已後總名為多，亦如前遮而令開解。」(Bhāvaviveka [清辨], Prajñāpradīpa [《般若燈論釋》], p. 132)

“What is called ‘one’ is so named because there is neither a second nor any distinction; what is called ‘two’ is so named because there is neither one nor sameness; what is called ‘three’ is so named because there is neither two nor sameness. From three onwards, all are called ‘many.’ These too are to be negated just as explained before.”

Tsongkhapa likewise treats *ekatvādi* as referring to *Unity Duality and Multiplicity* (Tsongkhapa, 2006, p. 397).

Garfield, by contrast, translates *ekatvādi* merely as “unity, etc.” without specifying what the other members of the series are supposed to be (Garfield, 1995, p. 256). Kenneth K. Inada similarly renders it as “Identity”, but again without identifying the remaining elements (Inada, 1970, p. 118). Kalupahana follows the same pattern (Kalupahana, 1991, p. 278). Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, however, interpret the series as *singularity, duality, and plurality* (Siderits & Katsura, 2013, p. 112).

Interestingly, Kumārajīva, the earliest known translator of the text, renders the term as 一異 (*yīyì*), meaning “identity and difference” (Kumārajīva, ca. 5th century, Chapter 19).

3.2.3 Why Temporal Triads are Exhaustive — But *ekatvādi* is Not

What Past, Present, and Future collectively designate is the full spectrum of Time. They divide exhaustively and proportionately into its three distinct phases, regardless of whether we conceive of them as inherently existing, dependent, both, or neither. In this way, they constitute the logical and mereological completion of the concept of Time itself.¹²

¹² Without yet assessing its applicability to the present refutation, Candrakīrti’s earlier enumeration of triads—intended to illustrate generalisation across the levels of Lower, Middle, and Higher—does appear to fulfil the structural requirement. These include: *kuśala-akuśala-avyākṛta* (wholesome, unwholesome, indeterminate); *utpāda-sthiti-bhaṅga* (arising, abiding, ceasing); *pūrvānta-aparānta-madhyānta* (prior limit, later

By contrast, if we take *ekatvādi* as Oneness, Twoness, and Muchness or Infinity, the set clearly fails to encompass the entire range of the numerical concepts. If interpreted as Unity, Duality, and Multiplicity — or Singularity, Duality, and Plurality — in a mereological sense, the category of Duality becomes problematic. Unlike Present in temporal triads, Duality lacks a distinct defining function that sets it apart within its set. This interpretive model thus also fails to reflect a complete or coherent range.

Alternatively, if we understand Unity as idealism and Duality as a co-existence of mind and matter, then it does not seem promising to find a role for Muchness or Multiplicity. Even if such a structure could be defended, it is still obscure why Duality would be accorded the central role comparable to Present in temporal analysis.

Moreover, the *ekatvādi* series clearly cannot correspond to the doctrinal triad of Eternalism, Nihilism, and the Middle Path — another framework of triplicity that enjoys philosophical importance in Madhyamaka reasoning.

Needless to say, it is implausible to treat the series as a classification of divine populations or theological statistics, especially in this highly abstract and logical context.

If we take that Nāgārjuna implicitly supplies a masculine head noun such as *bhāva* or *svabhāva*, frequently mentioned in MMK, then, in this view, *-tva* forms are neuter nouns in ordinary usage but function as adjectives qualifying *bhāva* for Nāgārjuna, who treats all things as *bhāva*. Thus, *ekatva* becomes “one-being,” aligning the masculine *-ādīn* with the elided noun.

This *bhāva*-elision hypothesis is philologically elegant and consistent with Nāgārjuna’s rejection of independent abstractions. However, it conflicts with MMK 19:4:

etenaivāvaśiṣṭau dvau krameṇa parivartakau |
uttamādhama madhyādīnekatvādīṃś ca lakṣayet ||

(“By this very method, the remaining two—upper, lower, middle, etc., and *ekatvādīn*—should be regarded.”)

The phrase *etena eva* (“by this very method”) requires the temporal reasoning from §§19:1–3 (interdependence and asynchrony of past, present, future) to apply equally to space and *ekatvādīn*. These temporal phases are not adjectival to *bhāva*; their mutual dependence negates time’s *svabhāva*, as parts cannot coexist or sequence causally.

If *ekatvādīn* modified *bhāva*, it would form qualitative states rather than a parallel relational

limit, middle); *kāma-rūpa-arūpya* (desire realm, form realm, formless realm); and *śaikṣa-aśaikṣa-anupaśaikṣa* (trainee, non-trainee, neither).

triad, rendering the method inapplicable due to lost reciprocal dependence. Thus, *bhāva* cannot be the implied noun, as it disrupts methodological parity. Instead, the masculine inflection aligns *ekatvādīn* with time and space as relational modalities of conceptual cognition. The irregularity serves as a philosophical device, suspending gender concord to emphasise cognitive parity. The “missing *bhāva*” is a deliberate absence, enacting Nāgārjuna’s insight that neither being nor its predicates stand independently.¹³

3.2.4 Grammatical Challenge: The Use of Masculine *-ādīn* with Neuter *ekatva*

Grammatically, *ekatva*, being a neuter noun, should not ordinarily be followed by *-ādīn* (from *-ādīṃś ca*) which is a masculine plural accusative form. The use of *-ādīn* is appropriate in the case of *uttamādhamaṃmadhyādīn*, since *madhya* can take masculine gender depending on context. Nouns ending in *-tva* (such as *ekatva*, “one-ness”) are strictly neuter, and the expected accusative plural form should therefore be *-ādīni*, rather than *-ādīn*. Therefore, Nāgārjuna’s use of the same masculine inflection with *ekatva* is striking and unusual. It is likely to suggest that *ekatva* is the first item in a series whose final member is masculine in gender.

For the existing interpretation of *ekatvādi* as “Multiplicity” or “Plurality” enumerated in 2.2.2, a survey of Sanskrit equivalents, hopefully exhaustive¹⁴, yields the following terms:

1. *bahulatā, bahutā, bahulatva, bahulya;*
2. *vaiśvarūpya, vairūpya;*
3. *anaikya, anekatā, anekatva;*
4. *prakṛtibhūman.*

All of these are either feminine or neuter in gender. None correspond to masculine nouns that would justify the use of the accusative masculine plural *-ādīn* (from *-ādīṃśca*) in *ekatvādīn*.

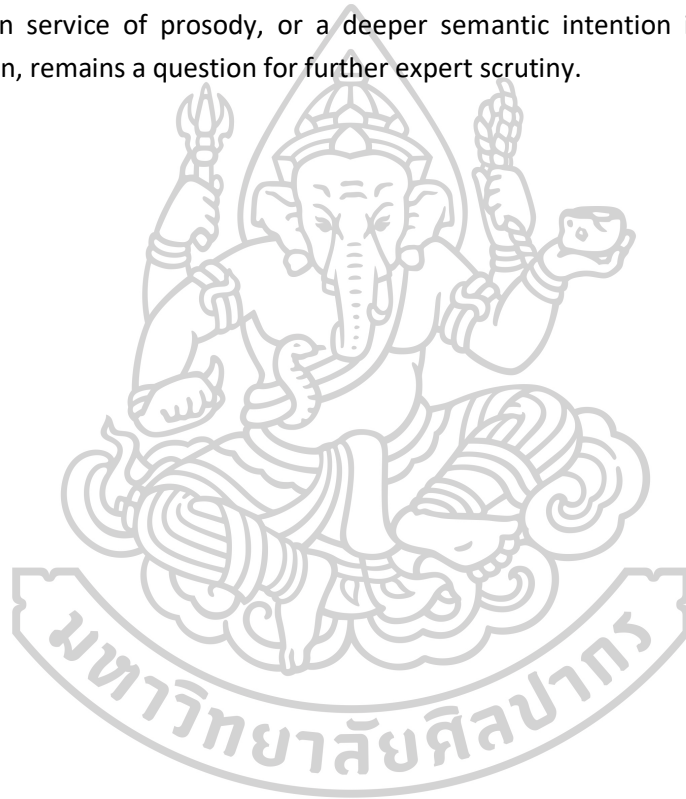
It thus implies a clear grammatical incongruity in Nāgārjuna’s otherwise meticulous usage — a verified error, if taken at face value.

¹³ The referential scope of *ekatvādīn* is addressed in 3.3.

¹⁴ Results for the terms “Multiplicity” and “Plurality” were consulted in the following English–Sanskrit dictionaries: *Monier-Williams’ English–Sanskrit Dictionary* (1851); *Borooah’s A Practical English–Sanskrit Dictionary*; *Apte’s Student’s English–Sanskrit Dictionary*; and *Glashoff’s Sanskrit Dictionary for Spoken Sanskrit*.

3.2.5 Could This Be a Metrical Compromise?

Nonetheless, it must be noted that *MMK* is composed in Anuṣṭubh meter, with each line containing eight syllables. The phrase *ekatvādīṃś ca lakṣayet* satisfies this requirement exactly. However, substituting the grammatically proper neuter plural *-ādīni* (i.e., *ekatvādīni ca lakṣayet*) would result in nine syllables — violating the meter. One might suggest omitting *ca*, but even that would not fully resolve the issue. It is, however, difficult to believe that Nāgārjuna, a master of linguistic precision, would not have devised a more elegant solution if meter alone were the issue. Whether the use of *ādīn* reflects a deliberate grammatical irregularity in service of prosody, or a deeper semantic intention involving a masculine terminal noun, remains a question for further expert scrutiny.



3.3 A Putative Interpretation of *ekatvādīn*

3.3.1 Identity–Difference as a Superior Candidate

It appears to me that Kumārajīva’s interpretation as 一異 (Identity Difference) is all the more plausible, and Identity-Difference is indeed a very hopeful candidate in such a way:

Identity — Identity-in-Difference — Difference

ekatva — bhedābheda — bheda

For the concern of gender, *bheda* is uncontroversially masculine which would agree with -*ādīṃśca*. And *bhedābheda* is exactly the expression used by Sarvāstivāda for *Identity-in-Difference* (Dhammajoti, 2007, p. 137).

There surely is more reason: this interpretation would suffice the requirement of perfectly and correspondently covering an entire range of *something* in which, different from a series with *Twoness* or *Duality*, every part has an exclusionary status. Prominently, *bhedābheda*¹⁵ takes a very special status as Present does, for, if Present can be parsed as *neither-past-nor-future* and has to be sandwiched between the other two, *bhedābheda* even need not be parsed — since the composition of the word already makes this clearest and puts it in between the other two extremes by its innate compositional connotation as *neither-identical-nor-different*.

They fit in Nāgārjuna’s reasoning in §19:1-3:

If *bhedābheda* and *Difference* (be) dependent on *Identity*, then *bhedābheda* and *Difference* will be in *Identity*.

However, if *bhedābheda* and *Difference* are not there, how could *bhedābheda* and *Difference* be dependent on it?

However, not (being) dependent on *Identity*, these two’s establishment is not found.

Therefore, *bhedābheda* or *Difference* is not found.

In order to know *bhedābheda*, we would have to know that very *Identity*; in other words, the cognition of *bhedābheda* depends on the cognition of *Identity*. It is by the knowing of the *identical* that we can obtain the knowing of the *non-identical*; thus, the *non-identical* is

¹⁵ For clarity and precision, the term *bhedābheda*—widely recognised among Sanskritists as signifying “difference and non-difference”—is used throughout the following discussion.

distinguished from within the *Identity*. So we can say that *bhedābheda* will be in *Identity* should it be dependent on *Identity*.

For §19:2, it becomes clearer by the lucider composition of the word than the case of Time: *bhedābheda* could only be dependent on *Identity*, and *Difference* as well; that is, the dependence would have to be mereological and endogenous¹⁶. If *bhedābheda* does not contain the part from the identical, it cannot be related with that *Identity*, and thus cannot be *bhedābheda*. Therefore, *bhedābheda*, if not being in *Identity*, could not be dependent on *Identity*.

However, *bhedābheda* is not *Identity*. It is revoked exactly by its compositional part *bheda-*, being *non-identical* partially. Therefore, to say that *bhedābheda* is in *Identity* is illogical: being both identical and non-identical is perfectly self-contradictory.

However, without the notion and cognition of *Identity*, and *Difference* as well, how could there be *bhedābheda*?

3.3.2 A Parallel to the Temporal Paradox?

In brief, the situation is that:

1. if being dependent on *Identity*, cognitively *bhedābheda* would have to be in *Identity*, and thus to be both identical and non-identical — Dependence is impossible;
2. yet *bhedābheda* has to be dependent on *Identity* — Dependence is the prerequisite;
3. *bhedābhedas tasmāt na vidyate*.

This can be easily applied to the case of *Difference* and the other two combinations exactly like Temporal Phases. The difference is that, for *bhedābheda*, the paradox lies in discriminative cognition, whilst, for Temporal Phases, the paradox emerges from Temporality's asynchronism. But, if this is the case, would asynchronism, or even synchronism, share something in common with discriminative cognition in a mental stratum?

¹⁶ *i.e.*, within the whole relation.

3.4 In Response to Westerhoff's Interpretation

Jan Westerhoff put forth an interpretation that

“[a]lternatively we could understand the argument as claiming that if any present or future entity depended on a past entity, this entity would have to have existed in the past’. And, ‘[w]hat the argument¹⁷ rejects...is that each object has a “hard core” persisting through the three times’. Then, for Space, instead of ‘one piece of matter that runs through the entire house and is characterised by the attributes upper, middle, and lower’, ‘[i]t is rather that different parts of the house are designated in this way in relation to one another, and that they are regarded as parts of the same house by their spatial contiguity, not because of some sort of material backbone running through all of them” (Westerhoff, 2009, p. 126).

It would seem plausible if only Time and Space are concerned. But, in this way, *ekatvādi* cannot be explained. And, Westerhoff, indeed, does not discuss *ekatvādi* in his “Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction”.

3.4.1 Contiguity Cannot Explain *ekatvādi*

To begin with, *Unity*, *Duality*, and *Multiplicity*, or *Singularity*, *Duality*, and *Plurality* are not *parts of the same thing by their contiguity*. It might be fine to see Time and Space as continua, but in which sense can we take *Unity*, *Duality*, and *Multiplicity* as a continuum, and in which way can *Unity* be contiguous to *Duality*? To take it mathematically, *1* and *2* as *integers* are far from being contiguous but rather separated by an infinite amount of fractions between them.

Furthermore, they are contrariwise based conceptually on some sort of backbone running through all of them, this backbone of which is exactly that *Unity* in concept¹⁸. Unlike *Past* and *Lower*, *Unity* is the essential part of *Duality*, as *1* is the very essence of *2* mathematically, and *duo-* can mean nothing else but *2* in the first place. Then, if *ekatvādi* as *Unity*, *Duality*, and *Multiplicity*, or alike, cannot be taken as a continuum, how can we suppose that Nāgārjuna's refutational target could be a persisting core?

Should we take the putative interpretation of *bhedābheda* series into consideration, it is

¹⁷ Referring to §§19:1-3.

¹⁸ This use of *backbone* should not be conflated with an assertion of *svabhāva* (inherent existence).

even farther from parts of the same thing by their contiguity. *Identity* is neither temporal nor spatial; rather, it is strictly conceptual. We could hardly conceive a contiguity from *Identity* to *bhedābheda*. In a separatist reading of the relation, it is evident that *bhedābheda* is perfectly insulated from *Identity* by *bheda-*, although partially in meaning yet always valid. For this reason, *bhedābheda* series cannot be a continuum. The only plausible description of this set seems to be discriminative cognition, which is different from *Time* and *Space* but the ability of distinguishing and identifying. And being discriminative itself suggests that it is rather being departed or united than being contiguous.

When Nāgārjuna categorically claims that the same *krama* [step] should be taken in order to understand these series, obviously he means the *step* to be method, rather than fact or conclusion. But, as analysed above, the method would not work when taking the sets as spatial relation or *the persisting “hard core”*.

In fact, the issue of Time also lies in this contiguity. Present would not be able to be contiguous with Past in our conceptualised understanding due to the ensuing problematic bivalence infected on the conjunction of the two Phases. This is already refuted in §19:1 where we see that Present cannot be in Past yet it would have to, which shows that the contiguity cannot fit in. If Nāgārjuna means only to point this out, why should he bother to write §19:2-3.1?

Therefore, instead of a “core” persisting through the whole, attempt will be made to demonstrate that Nāgārjuna’s target is the cognitive schema.¹⁹



¹⁹ The concepts of *svabhāva* and a presumed “core” emerge only as conceptual residues within a framework that is itself dependently designated.

3.5 Space Rejudged

Rather than viewing 'Upper', 'Middle', and 'Lower' as simultaneous dependent loci within an intuitively accepted spatial field, we may instead regard them as components of a fundamental cognitive schema — that of spatial linearity. This reframing allows us to apply Nāgārjuna's method more appropriately, bypassing the apparent contradiction that arises when spatial relations are treated analogously to temporal phases.

3.5.1 Causal Dependence

Upper can only be distinguished cognitively through awareness of Middle, mediated by the faculty of Discriminative Cognition. If Upper is regarded as an intrinsically existent entity yet still dependent on Middle, then the discriminative function is excluded from the genesis of Upper. In that case, Upper becomes merely a dharma causally related to Middle, and no other factor could be said to contribute to its arising.

The dependence of Upper would thereby fall under the category of self-causation, wherein the effect is already contained within the cause as a part. This would imply that Upper exists in Middle, which entails the contradiction that Upper is both middle and upper simultaneously. Such bivalence undermines spatial distinction: the Line collapses into a singularity, just as temporal phases coexisting simultaneously would nullify temporal succession.

→ Causal Dependence is thus untenable.

3.5.2 Existential Dependence

The spatial schema appears to be grounded in mutual simultaneity, as illustrated in §19:5.1, where the upper, middle, and lower parts of a building are said to coexist and define one another relationally. This might initially suggest that spatial dependence is existential — that is, based on simultaneous being.

However, closer scrutiny reveals that coexistence in space is never directly cognised as such. When we cognise *Upper*, we do not simultaneously apprehend *Middle* or *Lower* in full spatial distinction. Our awareness operates by selecting and distinguishing, not by co-apprehending multiple positions in a single unified act.

What appears as spatial simultaneity is, therefore, an illusion produced by a sequence of notional acts. The mind accumulates discrete perspectives over time and reprojects them into an image of a continuous spatial field. In truth, what we experience is not the Line *per se*, but rather the incremental effectuated possibilities of the linearity, by means of which we conceptualise the acquired yet still accruing experience as the Line. Spatial coexistence is not phenomenally given, but conceptually constructed.

Just as Present is the only temporal phase directly accessible to experience — with Past and Future posited through recollection and anticipation — so too are spatial positions distinguished not through simultaneity of experience, but through Discriminative Cognition and Notion.

→ Existential Dependence, therefore, is not ontological but notional.

3.5.3 Notional Dependence

Without a prior or concurrent notion of Middle, the category of Upper cannot meaningfully be posited. The spatial triad depends on a referential structure that presupposes contrast, hierarchy, and relational delimitation. This dependence is neither causal (in the metaphysical sense) nor existential (in the empirical mode of simultaneity), but conceptual — rooted in the mind's discriminative power to generate spatial categories through relational reference.

In this framework, Space is not a self-evident container of simultaneous parts, but a projection structured by the cognitive faculty of differentiation. It is through this discriminative scaffolding that concepts such as Upper, Middle, and Lower gain intelligibility.

3.5.4 Beyond Time: Nāgārjuna and the Architecture of Cognition

In this tentative narrative, the superimposition of *svabhāva* onto Upper sends it into Middle, for the absence of a mediating cognitive process renders Upper merely dependent on Middle. The paradox here mirrors the demonstrated monopolised dependence of Present on Past: an untenable asymmetry arises. It is as if two *ṛṣi*s — two seers — operate within the depths of our ordinary logic: one embedded in the dependent, the other in the depended-upon. This implies a splitting of the subject in the act of cognition, as though one consciousness posits an object while another apprehends it. Such duality cannot be sustained within a coherent epistemology and inevitably generates the bivalence that undermines *svabhāva* itself.

By contrast, in actual cognition — as discussed under Existential Dependence — there can be only one *ṛṣi*. Thus, the presumed coexistential dependence of spatial and temporal parts exists only within our notional frameworks. We do not, and cannot, experience such continua as real entities. Rather, equipped with memory and expectation, we concoct them — assembling elusive fragments into a coherent mental whole. This is likely why paradox arises in what otherwise seems a natural understanding — that Present depends on Past, or Upper on Middle.

This suggests that the three examined sets — Time, Space, and Discrimination — are best

understood as fundamental cognitive schemata, originating from a deep, perhaps the deepest, preconceptual stratum. It is only upon these cognitive scaffolds that more explicit judgments (such as those Candrakīrti enumerates) can be built.

Nāgārjuna's treatment of Time thus reveals a deeper engagement: he is already addressing the conditions of cognition themselves — spatial differentiation, conceptual identity, and discriminative partition — all of which precede ethical, logical, or even metaphysical analysis. In this light, *Kālaparīkṣā* is not merely a critique of the ontology of Time, but a critical inquiry into the machinery of conceptualisation.

Moreover, even setting aside the problems of Time, the schema of Discrimination appears to function prior to that of Linearity. Without discrimination, there would be no distinction between Upper, Middle, or Lower. This indicates that our recognition of both Time and Space rests upon a still more basic cognitive act — one of differentiation by reference. Indeed, what we call reference may be nothing but a manifestation of the discriminative faculty itself.

Interestingly, the deeper the schema lies in cognition, the fewer words Nāgārjuna expends on it. Discrimination, for instance, is represented by a single opening word: *ekatva*. Could it be that this topic — conceptual discrimination — was already so familiar in Nāgārjuna's milieu that it required no elaboration?

This hypothesis may seem far-reaching. Yet such depth is precisely what Nāgārjuna's method seems to presuppose — a strategy that avoids merely enumerating conventional dependencies, and instead reveals how these very dependencies are fabricated through cognitive operations. Notably, the verses §19:1–4 omit a set of relations that would indicate such dependence, while §19:5 introduces a verb that may mark a shift — not merely syntactically, but cognitively. This shift signals a deeper structural move: from the illusion of stable *relata* to the dynamic act of relational constitution itself. Through these, reference may indeed find its counterpart — or its origin.

In sum, Nāgārjuna's method in *Kālaparīkṣā* can be understood as targeting not merely the metaphysics of time, but the scaffolding of human cognition itself: spatial differentiation, conceptual identity, and categorical partition. These are not merely topics of analysis — they are the very conditions that make such analysis possible, and which, for that very reason, are susceptible to deconstruction.

Chapter 4

Prajñapti, Cognition, and the Me/me Distinction

4.1 Another Set of Relation: From Time to the Temporaliser

4.1.1 The Overlooked Relational Triad

Temporal relations such as *being earlier*, *simultaneous*, and *later* form a set overlooked in Nāgārjuna's Kālaparīkṣā. While the treatise explicitly examines the triad of Past, Present, and Future, it omits reference to this second-order relational set. Perhaps because it does not feature prominently in the Ābhidharmic framework he critiques. Yet, without them, the very distinction among temporal phases — such as “Past is earlier than Present,” or “Future comes later” — loses definitional ground.

An intriguing issue arises when we consider the Present: with what, precisely, is it simultaneous? The relatum, it seems, cannot itself be a temporal category. Present can only be simultaneous with *that which it is*²⁰ — a tautology that reveals simultaneity here is not a relation among temporal objects, but between a temporal term and its phenomenological content. Even though Present is notionally placed between Past and Future, this sandwiching is meaningful only when we deliberately posit those two absent terms. From a presentist standpoint, it seems unproblematic to claim — in the subjunctive mood — that even if Past and Future were entirely non-existent, there would still be no grounds to deny the presence of *that which it is*.

But if *that which it is* is purely spatial (or better, phenomenally immediate), how can it be said to belong to temporal order at all? To say “it is now” is simply to affirm that it is simultaneous with itself. The only distinction lies in this: *that which it is* is a neutral phenomenological description, whereas “now” enacts what Heidegger calls *Gegenwärtigen* — the enpresenting act that temporalises immediacy into a conceptual phase. In doing so, we transform a cognitive occurrence into an abstract temporal category. But this operation

²⁰ *All* might be parsed as that which spans the temporal modes—was, is, and will be—and thus satisfies the minimal condition for inclusion among the conceptual triads currently being analysed.

adds no new ontological content. At most, it shows that the relata in the so-called temporal relation are not primitively temporal. They are phenomenal first, only later reified as temporal.

If this is the case, then the very structure of simultaneity reveals something deeper: that temporality — like spatiality — is not primary, but constructed. And if Time is constructed, what becomes of Space in Time's absence?

4.1.2 *pratyutpanna* and the Presence of Non-being

Nāgārjuna uses the word *pratyutpanna* [*prati - ut - vpad*] (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 677) which is morphologically and semantically proximate to the Latin-derived *Present* [*præ-* “before”, from PIE **preh₂-*, cognate with Sanskrit *pra-*; and *esse* “to be”, from PIE **h₁és-*, cognate with Sanskrit *vas*] (Harper, n.d., Online Etymology Dictionary). Both terms, in their etymological cores, function as spatial descriptions — gesturing toward *that which presents itself*²¹. But toward what?

A similar logic underlies *atīta* (*vi + -kta*, “gone”) and *anāgata* (*na-ā-vgam*, “not-yet-come”). Their temporal roles in Abhidharma are well-known, yet their literal meanings still encode directional spatiality: *from*, *toward*, and *to*. This opens the way for a thought experiment: if we render Nāgārjuna's temporal vocabulary literally within the frame of a car's being, the result reads:

if car's {*Emerged*²²-*Towards*} and {*Not-Yet-Come*} (be) dependent on car's {*Gone*}, then both {*Emerged-Towards*} and {*Not-Yet-Come*} will be in {*Gone*}.

However, if {*Emerged-Towards*} and {*Not-Yet-Come*} are not in the {*Gone*}, how could they depend on it?

And yet, if they are not dependent on the {*Gone*}, then their establishment is unfounded.

This obviously makes no sense. The absurdity arises because our grammar of temporal

²¹ It is perhaps no coincidence that most words denoting temporal phases across languages originate as spatial descriptions. In modern Chinese, for example, 「現在」 (*xiànzài*) is morphologically composed of “appear” (*xiàn*) and “be/exist” (*zài*). Similarly, 「過去」 (*guòqù*) and 「未來」 (*wèilái*) correspond almost precisely to the Sanskrit terms *atīta* (“gone”) and *anāgata* (“not yet come”), respectively.

²² Given that *pratyutpanna* is a past participle, its usage implies an action that has already arisen or been accomplished, despite its role in present-oriented constructions.

experience is so deeply ingrained that, once stripped of the orienting triad — earlier, simultaneous, later — the original textual logic becomes unintelligible. When we reverse the direction of conceptual dependency (trying to read *pratyutpanna* not as “present” but as “emerged-toward”), the entire structure collapses into semantic nonsense. It is as though we were listening to Jabberwocky — grammatically structured, but cognitively incoherent.

Yet intuitively, this description is subliminally processed as if the car possesses a threefold being. The terms {Not-Yet-Come} and {Gone}, though seemingly negations, ascribe to the car a mode of existence — albeit negative — that nonetheless occurs within the Present. After all, to be is, in a certain sense, to present. That there is a car means that the car presents itself there; and to say that the car is red is to say that redness is what presents the car as such.

Thus, *that which it is*²³ — what appears as characterised (*lakṣya*) through its defining marks (*lakṣaṇa*) — the very givenness of presence — is always already mediated by cognisance (*sam-vjñā*), the apprehension of what presents itself. In this sense, presence is never a bare immediacy but a signified appearing: even absence, when conceived, presents itself through a mark (*lakṣaṇa*) that renders the non-being present as such.²⁴ By extension, *non-being*, if it can be conceived at all, must be understood as *the being of non-being*, a presence of absence. In other words, what is present — what stands in the Present — is *the being of non-being*: that which is *Gone* or *Not-Yet-Come*.

This is not a mere play of words or formal paradox. Rather, it probes deeply into the cognitive architecture by which we relate to negation itself. In each of the expressions — (*Gone*) from, (*Emerged*) towards, and (*Not-Yet-Come*) to — we can discern a latent structure: the presence of a standing foot, a subject-position, namely: Me. It is through this *Me* that the negated must still appear in a positive form: as *being* the negated. The negated is not simply absent; it is presented as absence.

We are capable of grasping *what it is to be*; but *what it is not to be* is not only “the question,” but precisely what “puzzles the will,” as Hamlet’s soliloquy puts it:

²³ As Achan Sombat notes, *lakṣya* and *lakṣaṇa* in Sanskrit: the characterised and the characters.

²⁴ The pairing of *lakṣya* (the characterized, the target) and *lakṣaṇa* (the mark, the defining feature) reflects the epistemic structure by which every object of cognition is presented. In classical Sanskrit thought, notably in epistemology and poetics, *lakṣaṇa* functions as the mode of signification through which *lakṣya* becomes knowable. Hence, what is “present” (*pratyutpanna*) is never unmediated but always already “marked” — the being of non-being is apprehended through its *lakṣaṇa*, its sign of absence.

“The undiscover’d country from whose bourn / No traveller returns... / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of.”²⁵

Non-being, then, is that from which no cognition returns. We can know *being*; and we can only *know of* non-being as a conception — a projected hypothesis, a logical presumption, an imagined inversion of what we already take for granted.

In this light, Past and Future, by virtue of their non-being, must remain unknowable. Because they are always interpreted through the triadic lens of earlier–simultaneous–later, and yet one relatum of any such relation is categorically absent, the relation itself becomes epistemically hollow. What we do know of them depends entirely on what we know of simultaneity — that raw experiential givenness in which data come into being together.

But this then leads us to a derivative and more troubling question: upon what is simultaneity itself based?

4.1.3 The Simultaneity Field and the Temporaliser

Temporal relations such as earlier, simultaneous, and later are typically regarded as fixed. Since Newton died before Einstein, that relation is assumed to be forever determined. However, let us consider a different case. Suppose *Event A* and *Me* are both in the Present at time T_1 . *Event A* concludes at T_2 . From T_2 onward, *Event A* falls into the Past, while *Me* — if still alive — remains in the Present. Thus, what was once a simultaneous relation at T_1 becomes a non-simultaneous relation from T_2 to T_∞ : *Me* is now later than *Event A*.

This indicates that the relation — thought immutable — has changed. It also raises a more subtle point: is the change a change in the events themselves, or in the awareness that frames them?

This is not meant for going instead to analyse *dharmasantāna* or *bhedābheda*, but to suggest that:

Since the history of *Event A* is changed from T_2 on, and *Me* has thus two kinds of recognition on local events, this, from a cognitive perspective, conflicts with Time as “a fundamentally relational phenomenon with an intrinsic ordering” (Westerhoff, 2009, p. 125) of whose temporality must be all-overarching, and individual-specific. On the other hand, *Me* exists as a temporally-global event, and entitles constantly the simultaneity with itself. Since *Me* could have two distinctive experiences as from T_1 till T_2 and from T_2 till T_∞ , *Me* is suspicious

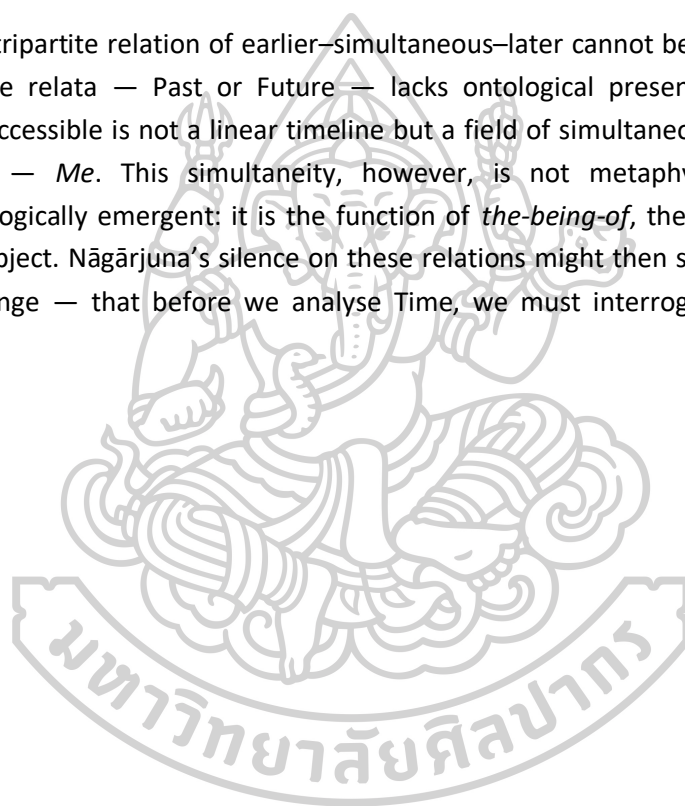
²⁵ From Hamlet’s soliloquy in Act 3 of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by William Shakespeare.

to be *the trouble maker*.

At least it can be seen that the simultaneity lies ultimately in *Me*. *Me*, the standing foot, is *the-being-of*, which is always *simultaneous* with *that which presents itself*, that is, the *cogniser* and the *cognised* are always being *present*, and temporally covalent.

Notwithstanding that this incurs the problem of *ekatvabhedābhedābheda*, it does not matter so much since *ekatvabhedābhedābheda* is only valid in the notional existence, whereas we can only analyse Time at this moment.²⁶

In sum, the tripartite relation of earlier–simultaneous–later cannot be coherently described if one of the relata — Past or Future — lacks ontological presence. What remains as cognitively accessible is not a linear timeline but a field of simultaneous being, anchored in the subject — *Me*. This simultaneity, however, is not metaphysically primitive but phenomenologically emergent: it is the function of *the-being-of*, the structural role of the cognising subject. Nāgārjuna’s silence on these relations might then signal not an omission, but a challenge — that before we analyse Time, we must interrogate the temporaliser.



²⁶ (cf. Chapters 2.5, 2. and 3.)

4.2 Who Grasps It? — Voice, Agency, and *Prajñapyate*

Nāgārjuna seems to confront the question of simultaneity and temporal presence directly in §19:5:

nāsthito gr̥hyate kālaḥ sthitaḥ kālo na vidyate | 19:5.1 |

yo gr̥hyetāgr̥hītaśca kālaḥ prajñapyate katham | | 19:5.2 | |

Non-static Time is not grasped. Static time is not found.

How can that ungrasped time to be grasped and *prajñapyate*?²⁷

If Time is ever grasped, it must be through Present — for nothing unrepresenting can be grasped. But apart from *Me* and that which presents itself, what else appears in the Present?

This is not a rhetorical question but a philosophical provocation. Grasping presupposes presence, and presence implies simultaneity. Yet if Time itself is ungraspable — neither static nor flowing — then it fails not only ontologically but even linguistically: the condition for its designation collapses.

The following section examines how this collapse is structurally encoded in Nāgārjuna’s use of verbs — particularly the passive and causative-passive constructions, which reveal the underlying grammatical architecture of cognition.

By Nāgārjuna’s using the verbs [sanskrit originals] *grasped*, *found*, (*made*) *known*, it is implied that *Me* is *in the field*, but obviously *it* is placed outside Time²⁸. This could be regarded as for the sake of convenience *tout simple* since Nāgārjuna is treating Time as being *svābhāvika* in argument.

But the available translations of *grhyate* and *prajñapyate* are sort of confusing. Kalupahana renders them as *observed* and *made known* (Kalupahana, 1991, p. 278). Garfield *grasped* and *known* (Garfield, 1995, p. 256), Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura *apprehended* and *conceived* (Siderits & Katsura, 2013, Chapter 19), and Kenneth K. Inada *manipulated* and

²⁷ *Prajñapyate* is frequently translated as “be made known” or “be known.” Its grammatical structure and philosophical significance will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

²⁸ In passive voice, *Time* in the nominative case serves merely as a grammatical subject, not as the agent. The role of agency belongs exclusively to *Me*.

conceptualised (Inada, 1970, p. 118). Kumārajīva translates them as [得] and [說時相]²⁹.

However, without knowing the object, how can one observe or grasp or do anything alike to the object? After all, it is the knowing itself that makes the object into consciousness in the first place, is it not? *Known* or *made known* does not look very tenable here.

The verbs in §19:5 can be put into two classes, passive and passive causative:

gr̥hyate: √*grah*, sg. 3rd. present. passive.

vidyate: √*vid*, sg. 3rd. present. passive.

gr̥hyeta: √*grah*, sg. 3rd. optative. passive.

prajñāpyate: *pra-*√*jñā*, sg. 3rd. present. passive-causative.

If it were simply √*jñā* and in passive voice only, we could unhesitatingly render *Time is known by Me*. But things turn out to be a bit different.

The verb conjugated in passive mode will bring about a patient and an instrument which is the actual agent of the verb, whereas, when conjugated in causative passive mode, there, along with a patient, will spring up two instruments including the actual agent of the action and the actual agent of the causation of the action. We can take {*to learn*} and {*to teach*} [*to make learn*] as the causative verb, with an anchor verb {*to obtain*}, to demonstrate the situation:

#0 The book is obtained by me. — Anchor

#1 The book is learned by the pupil. — Passive

#2 The pupil is taught by me with the book. — Passive Causative

Following this example, let Nāgārjuna's expression be examined. In §19:5.2, one verb is

²⁹ (Kumārajīva, 《中論》 [*Madhyamakakārikā*], Chapter 19). 「時去亦叵得」；「云何說時相？」 — That which has passed in time cannot be obtained; how, then, can one speak of the appearance or marks (*lakṣaṇa*) of time?

The verb 得 (*dé*) here connotes “to obtain” or “to grasp,” while 說時相 literally means “to speak of the characteristics (appearance) of time.” This mirrors the Sanskrit phrasing often associated with *gr̥hyate* (“is grasped”) and *prajñāpyate* (“is designated”), highlighting the epistemic tension between what has elapsed and what can be conceptually known.

causative and the other is not, but the nominative is the selfsame Time. To make two sentences with the same nominative, we can transform #2 with reference to #0 the Anchor into:

#3 The book **is learned by the pupil, the fact of which is made by me.** — The part in **Bold** equals to the Passive Causative {**is taught**} in #2

So arrives the question as who would be the two instruments in *yat kālāḥ prajñāpyate katham.*

With *nāsthito grhyate kālāḥ* in §19:5.1 and *yat grhyetāgrhītaḥ kālāḥ* in §19:5.2, it can be assumed fairly safely that all the instruments of *vgrah* would be a same *me*. We can thus formulate the former part of §19:5.2 as per #0:

#0 How could that Time be grasped [by me].

As per the example of the above #3, we can transform the passive causative *prajñāpyate* into the merely passive *prajñāyate* and render the latter part as:

#3 How could that Time **prajñāyate by [?], the fact of which kriyate by [me].**³⁰

³⁰ All verbal formations of *pra-vjñā* (except the one currently under analysis) in MMK appear to be employed in a consistent semantic field—namely, “to be made known” or “to be known”—which equals the core meaning of *prajñāpyate*. The following examples, drawn from Kalupahana’s (1991) translation, demonstrate this consistency:

Pūrvāparakoṭīparīkṣā, passive:

pūrvā prajñāyate koṭīr nety uvāca mahāmuniḥ |

saṃsāro ’navarāgro hi nāsyādir nāpi paścimam || (MMK 11:1)

“The Great Sage has stated that the prior end is not known. The life-process is without beginning and end. There is neither a beginning nor an end.”

Pūrvāparakoṭīparīkṣā, passive causative:

darśanaśravaṇādibhyo vedanādibhya eva ca |

yaḥ prāg vyavasthito bhāvaḥ kena prajñāpyate ’tha saḥ || (MMK 11:3)

In full form, for the sake of clarity, we put §19:5.2 in two sentences:

#0 How could that ungrasped Time be grasped [by Me].

“Whatever existent is determined as existing prior to seeing, hearing, etc., and also feeling, etc.—by what means is he [it] made known?”

Tathāgataparīkṣā, passive causative:

tattvānyatvena yo nāsti mṛgyamāṇas ca pañcadhā |

upādānena sa katham prajñapyate tathāgataḥ || (MMK 22:8)

“He who, sought for in five ways, does not exist as a different identity—how can that tathāgata be made known through grasping?”

evam śūnyam upādānam upādātā ca sarvaśaḥ |

prajñapyate ca śūnyena katham śūnyaḥ tathāgataḥ || (MMK 22:10)

“Thus, grasping and the grasper are empty in every way. How can an empty tathāgata be made known by something that is empty?”

Viparyāsaparīkṣā, optative causative:

anapekṣya śubham nāsty aśubham prajñapayemahi |

yat pratītya śubham tasmāc chubham naivopapadyate || (MMK 23:10)

“We make known that the unpleasant does not exist without being contingent upon the pleasant, and that the pleasant, in turn, is dependent upon that. Therefore, the pleasant [in itself] is not appropriate.”

anapekṣyāśubham nāsti śubham prajñapayemahi |

yat pratītyāśubham tasmād aśubham naiva vidyate || (MMK 23:11)

“We make known that the pleasant does not exist without being contingent upon the unpleasant, and that the unpleasant, in turn, is dependent upon that. Therefore, the unpleasant [in itself] is not evident.”

#3 how could that ungrasped Time *prajñāyate* by [?], the fact of which *kriyate* by [me].

If the actual agent of the causation of *prajñāyate* is taken as the same one of the agent of *vgrah*, the actual agent of *prajñāyate* seems obscure. To say

*Something *prajñāyate* by [me], the fact of which *kriyate* by [me]

appears to be either semantically redundant, or that the same agent does two actions. In the latter case, there in fact could be not one *me* but two. But, to Nāgārjuna who points out the issue of two goers in *Gatāgataparīkṣā*, this seems very suspicious³¹.



³¹ To be clear, this hypothetical ‘Me’—or any notion of an agent—is not upheld by Nāgārjuna, who would rigorously deconstruct such identities within the Mādhyamika framework. The current formulation merely serves to locate the target under critique.

4.3 The Significance of *pra-vjñā*

Prajñā is a Buddhist term whose role is of paramount importance in *Pāramitā*. Its prefix *pra* [before] is said to be ‘an intensifier which can be translated as “higher”, “greater”, “supreme” or “premium”, or “being born or springing up”, and *√jñā* is said to be as “consciousness”, “knowledge”, or “understanding”. As a Buddhist concept, *Prajñā* is often translated as “wisdom” (Wikipedia contributors, 2025, "Prajñā").

According to Damien Keown, ‘it [*prajñā*] is closer in meaning to “insight”, “non-discriminating knowledge”, or “intuitive apprehension”’ (Keown, 2004, p. 218).

But, according to Manfred Mayrhofer (1986, pp. 599–601), *vjñā* is “*kennen, erkennen, wissen*” [have information of, recognise, be aware of], and *pra-vjñā* is “*Unterscheidung, Urteilskraft*” [distinction, power of judgement]. With this hint, *pra-vjñā*, disregarding specific Buddhist context for the time being, seems rather to *distinguish, to be able to discern*, than to *interpretatively understand, or to be wise*.

According to Franklin Edgerton (1953, p. 358), the causal form of *pra-vjñā*, *prajñāpaya*, contains the meanings of ❶ *makes known, declares, teaches*, ❷ *arranges, provides (a seats)*, and ❸ *arranges, spreads out (cloths, garments, to sit on)*. The objects of ❶, evidently, are ideas of some sorts.

To arrange or provide a seat is to make it available for use; in fuller terms, to make it presentable in a form recognisable as a seat.”

This suggests that ❶ could engage with an action of {*to make an idea to present in a form as being able to be possibly known*}. To encapsulate, *prajñāpaya* should be arguably {*to be conceptualised*}. This interpretation reverts *pra-vjñā* back to Manfred Mayrhofer’s “*Unterscheidung, Urteilskraft*” [distinction, power of judgement]. A concept is (a thing) conceived, and to make a concept is to take the abstract out of something into mind, which involves with discrimination.

Nāgārjuna’s usage of *prajñāpti*, the noun formed by the causal stem of *pra-vjñā*, is supportive to this interpretation. In the most celebrated verse in *MMK*, §24:18, he proclaims:

yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tām pracakṣmahe |

sā prajñāptirupādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā ||24:18||

That which arises in dependence, we declare to be emptiness.

This, a *prajñapti upādāya*³², is itself the middle path.

Prajñapti is translated, by Garfield, as *designation* (Garfield, 1995, p. 304), which is etymologically the action of {*mark out by sign*}. To Kumārajīva, it is [假名], a “borrowed” or “provisional” name used for dependent conceptual designation (Kumārajīva, ca. 5th century, Chapter 19), further interpreted as [假他得名], meaning “a name obtained by means of something else” or “designation through dependence on other” (Huiyuan, Dàchéng Yìzhāng, entry: “假名”). The two translations both imply that *prajñapti* is seen as a *signifier* rather than the *signified*, i.e., it is a sign as the result of the action of conceptualisation. To put it into the case of Time, it is clear that it is not Time *per se* but the concept of Time, a sign, an *insignia*.

By *prajñapti*'s second meaning on dictionary, *Zauberkunst* [Magic], its affinity with *saṃvṛti* [*saṃ-vṛ*, to cover up] in §24:8 is in a way further strengthened (Böhtlingk & Roth, 1868, p. 1616):

dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā |

lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ ||24:8||

Relying on two truths, the Buddhas teach the Dharma:

The *lokasaṃvṛti* truth, and the ultimate truth.

Here, *lokasaṃvṛti*, denoting *world-concealing*, highlights the veiling role of conceptualisation upon cognition — not just how we see, but what gets to be seen.

At first glance, *Prajñapti* [*concept taken into mind*] and *saṃvṛti* [*concealing*] might seem to operate in opposite directions: *saṃvṛti* is what we look at — the world as covered over, while *prajñapti* is what we receive — the internalised concept shaped by that act of concealment. Yet the two are co-dependent: *saṃvṛti* hides, *prajñapti* reveals — but reveals only what concealment has already shaped.

What we perceive is never the raw object, but its conceptualised form. The act of conceptualisation turns the merely looked-at into something seemingly known. The “seen” is not the raw data itself, nor the process of knowing — it is the outcome: a constructed mental object, a sign (*prajñapti*).

For example, when we see or touch a table, we receive raw sensory signals. But these signals do not by themselves distinguish the table from its surroundings. It is our cognitive faculties — discrimination and modelling — that synthesise them into the concept “table.” That

³² A detailed investigation of the gerund *upādāya* and its conceptual implications within the phrase *prajñaptir upādāya* will be undertaken in a subsequent chapter.

concept, *prajñapti*, is what the mind grasp.

Since these faculties function beneath conscious awareness, we cannot fully uncover what was originally concealed. In this sense, when we conceive of Time, what we grasp is not Time itself, but an already interpreted and stylised representation — not Time bare, but Time clothed in conceptual artifice. Or perhaps: nothing *but* the artifice — a constructed illusion mistaken for what is.

The use of the passive past participle of *pra-vjñā*, *prajñapita*, in §18:6 is particularly revealing:

ātmetyapi prajñapitamanātmetyapi deśitam |

buddhairnātmā na cānātmā kaścidityapi deśitam ||18:6||

The self is *prajñapita*, and non-self is taught.

By Buddhas, it is taught also that neither self nor non-self is the case.

In this verse, *ātman* (self) is described using *prajñapita* — that is, as something conceptually constructed, or “taken in.” In contrast, *anātman* and the negation *na ātman na ca anātman* are rendered with *deśita* (from *vdīś*, “to point out”), which suggests that they are *pointed to* or *indicated*, rather than conceptually internalised. This distinction implies that only the notion of a self (*ātman*) is received as a conceptual construction, whereas its negation — the non-existence of *self* as *non-self* — is not formulated as a concept — it is shown, not seized.

This contrast matters. It signals that certain notions — such as *the self* — are actively formed through conceptualisation, while others — such as the non-self — are not given as cognitive contents in the same way. They are indicated or gestured toward, but not seized upon or grasped in the mode of *prajñapti*.

This brings us back to Time. The impossibility of grasping Time does not stem from its being *svābhāvika* (self-existent), but from its non-apprehensibility in direct experience. As noted in the Preface, we measure Time only indirectly — through motion, such as the revolution of the sun, or mechanical and atomic clocks. Even in Einstein’s theory of relativity, where the speed of light is a constant, that constancy is still *measured* through temporal intervals that depend on change or motion.

In short, we cannot grasp anything temporal in the same way we apprehend the six sense-fields (*ṣaḍāyatana*) or the five aggregates (*pañcaskandha*). Time is not raw data; it is not directly sensed. What we do grasp is the *concept* of Time — a cognitive construct. But then the question arises:

What is it we are looking at, and who is the one looking?

4.4 Conceptualised versus Known

With the above etymological, lexicographical, contextual, and cognitive analyses, it is now in a position to propose that *prajñāpya*, the causative form of *prajñāpaya*, more accurately connotes “to be made conceptualised” rather than merely “to be made known.” This reading does not necessarily contradict Damien Keown’s description of *prajñā* as “intuitive apprehension,” since such intuition — within the framework of *Prajñāpāramitā* — may follow from or rest upon layers of prior conceptualisation.

The key distinction between “to make conceptualised” and “to make known” lies in their cognitive strata. Conceptualisation occurs at a subliminal, pre-reflective level, anterior to knowledge. We spontaneously see things *as* things — not because we consciously choose to do so, but because our cognitive apparatus has already pre-structured our experience through non-conscious discrimination. Thus, to grasp a “table” is not to perceive raw data but to apprehend a constructed concept — a *prajñāpti*.

When Nāgārjuna states that “non-static Time is not grasped, and static Time is not found,” he is not merely making an ontological claim, but a phenomenological one: Time is not within the grasp of empirical experience. This suggests that Time, if it functions at all in cognition, is *a priori*³³ — intimated prior to experience. In this regard, Nāgārjuna may seem to resonate with Kant, for whom “space, time, and causality are pure *a priori* intuitions.” (Wikipedia contributors, 2025, “A priori and a posteriori”). However, this resemblance is superficial.

Yet, on closer scrutiny, Nāgārjuna’s position remains radically open-ended. He makes no affirmative assertion; instead, he proceeds via negation, resisting the temptation to posit new views. As Kalupahana notes³⁴, Nāgārjuna does not reject the reality of temporal

³³ Since an *a priori* object is, by definition, inaccessible to empirical observation, logic appears to be the only viable method for its initial investigation.

³⁴ Kalupahana claims for §19:6 that “this is a rejection not of temporal phenomena, but only of time and phenomena as well as their mutual dependence so long as they are perceived as independent entities” (Kalupahana, 1991, p. 279). However, what does being temporal truly imply? It presupposes that something is “of” or “in” Time. Yet if, as Nāgārjuna argues, Time is ultimately ungraspable, it lies outside the domain of verifiable experience or cognition. If Time cannot be known or experienced, then the assertion that a phenomenon is “temporal”—*i.e.*, within Time—becomes ontologically and epistemically questionable. Furthermore, positing the existence of “temporal phenomena” seems to imply the possible existence of their opposite: “a-temporal phenomena.” Such dichotomy, however, only reinforces the very conceptual structures that Madhyamaka seeks to deconstruct. Thus, the expression “temporal

phenomena per se, but only the conception of Time and its phenomena as independent entities.

Nāgārjuna, unlike Kant, does not affirm the *a priori* as a metaphysical given. His strategy is one of negation, not positing. He neither asserts Time's reality nor affirms it as an *a priori* structure of subjectivity. As Kalupahana notes³⁵, Nāgārjuna rejects Time and phenomena only insofar as they are conceived as independent entities with self-nature (*svabhāva*). But the deeper implication is that any conceptualisation of Time — as either real or unreal — already presupposes what Nāgārjuna suspends: a graspable referent.

This leads us to question whether the very phrase “temporal phenomena” is coherent within Nāgārjuna's framework. To call something *temporal* implies that Time itself is accessible as a medium or structure of experience. But if Time is ungraspable — neither found in experience nor locatable through conceptual analysis — how can any phenomenon be said to be *in* or *of* Time?

Furthermore, the idea of “temporal” phenomena implies the possible existence of *a*-temporal phenomena. But this dualism — temporal versus *a*-temporal — reintroduces the ontological bifurcation that Nāgārjuna consistently undermines. Without a graspable Time, the entire discourse of temporal categorisation collapses. The concept “temporal” becomes semantically inert, pointing to nothing but its own conceptual emptiness.

Thus, the distinction between the conceptualised and the known is not merely a psychological distinction, but a profound philosophical fault-line. Time fails both as a substance and as a sign — not because it is false or illusory, but because its very *conceivability* presupposes what Nāgārjuna refuses to grant: a ground for grasp.

From this vantage point, we may now integrate question #3 into a refined formulation:

#4 how could that ungraspable Time *be conceptualised by* [?], *the fact of which is made by* [me]?

This revision is best understood in relation to the initial query:

#0 How could that ungraspable Time be grasped by [Me].

Together, #0 and #4 articulate two epistemic phases — both operating in a subjunctive

phenomena” may itself be seen as philosophically equivocal and in need of rigorous scrutiny.

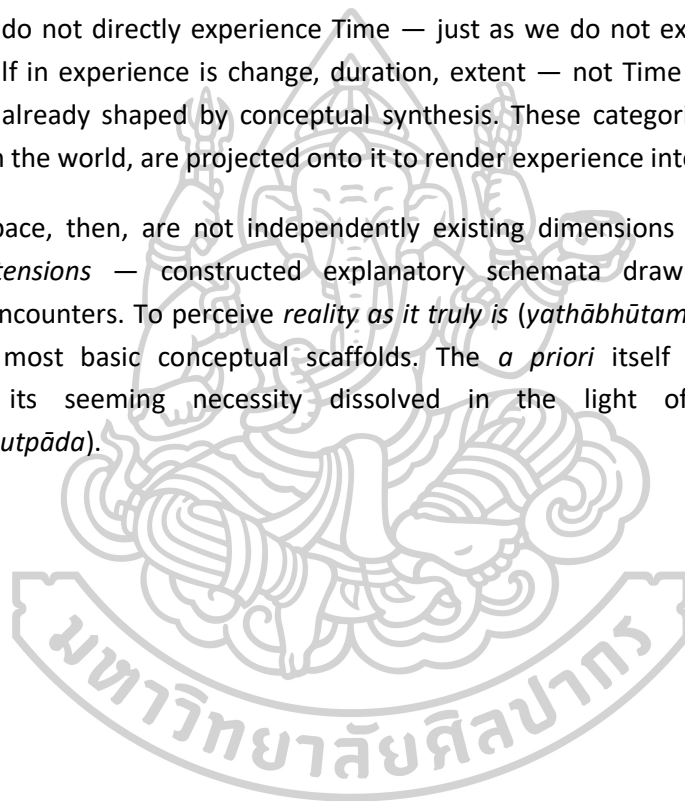
³⁵ Kalupahana interprets MMK §19:6 as “a rejection not of temporal phenomena, but only of time and phenomena as well as their mutual dependence so long as they are perceived as independent entities” (Kalupahana, 1991, p. 279).

register, as appropriate for Nāgārjuna's dialectical method of refutation³⁶. The first poses the possibility of contact (*grasp*), while the second considers the transformation of that encounter into conceptual form (*conceptualisation*).

It is significant that only from §19:5 onward does *Kālaparīkṣā* explicitly present *Time* as a conceptual object³⁷. This conceptual status is not affirmed but immediately undermined. The text does not deny that clocks move or that the world unfolds in motion — to do so would be to fall into naïve idealism. Rather, it denies that *Time*, as we ordinarily conceive it, possesses any ontological grounding. Our very act of thinking *Time* presupposes its substantial existence (*svabhāva*), yet no such entity is ever experienced.

In truth, we do not directly experience *Time* — just as we do not experience *Space*. What presents itself in experience is change, duration, extent — not *Time* or *Space* as such, but phenomena already shaped by conceptual synthesis. These categories, rather than being discovered in the world, are projected onto it to render experience intelligible.

Time and *Space*, then, are not independently existing dimensions of the real. They are *notional extensions* — constructed explanatory schemata drawn from accumulated perceptual encounters. To perceive *reality as it truly is* (*yathābhūtam*), one must dismantle even these most basic conceptual scaffolds. The *a priori* itself must be exposed as contingent, its seeming necessity dissolved in the light of dependent arising (*pratīyasamutpāda*).



³⁶ Nāgārjuna's method here is not to propose a positive metaphysical position, but rather to refute assumptions through *reductio* — a hallmark of Mādhyamika dialectics.

³⁷ Verses §19:1–4 deal solely with the logical impossibility of temporal parts (past, present, future) and do not yet treat *Time* as a conceptual object.

4.5 upādāna versus upādāya

To deconstruct *what is seen*, one must first ask: what is being looked-at, and who is the one looking?

Returning to the epistemological question raised in #4 — who or what serves as the implicit instrumental agent in the passive-causative structure of *prajñāpyate* — we find partial clues in §19:5.2. Although instrumentals are not explicitly stated there, their grammatical necessity is implied by the voice and mood of the verb. Their absence in expression does not negate their functional presence. Given the passive-causative form, one must infer that Nāgārjuna implicitly considered such agents while composing the verse.

Throughout *MMK*, constructions with *prajñāpyate* and explicit instrumentals are rare. The only clear instance appears in §22:8:

tattvānyatvena yo nāsti mṛgyamāṇasca pañcadhā |22:8.1|

upādānena sa kathaṃ prajñāpyate tathāgataḥ ||22:8.2||

Here, *upādāna*, the action noun derived from *upa-ā-vdā* (“to receive, accept, assume”), designates the act of appropriation — taking something as one’s own. The verse may thus be read:

“Having examined in five ways that the Tathāgata does not exist as either identical or different, how can he be conceptualised by what is assumed (as his self)?”

The implication is clear: *prajñāpti* (conceptualisation) cannot arise on the basis of *upādāna* — that is, on the basis of grasping something as a fixed referent. What is externally appropriated (whether as a form, predicate, or convention) cannot by itself ground the act of conceptualisation.

A more dynamic usage of the same verbal root appears in §24:18:

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tām pracakṣmahe |24:18.1|

sā prajñāptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā ||24:18.2||

The term *upādāya* here is not a noun but an undeclined gerund. Grammatically, it modifies an implied copula — likely *bhavati* or *asti* — and syntactically belongs to the subject *sā*, referring back to *śūnyatā*. Thus, the phrase reads literally:

That [śūnyatā], having assumed [something], is *prajñāpti*, and that alone is the middle path.

This nuanced structure, however, is largely flattened in existing translations. Most renderings treat *upādāya* adjectivally — as “provisional,” “dependent,” or “conventional” — thus obscuring the gerund’s dynamic force. For example:

Kumārajīva: renders *prajñapti* simply as “假名” (borrowed name), omitting *upādāya*’s active role.³⁸

Inada, Garfield, Tsongkhapa, and Siderits & Katsura all translate *upādāya* as a static qualifier, thereby bypassing its verbal aspect.³⁹

Kalupahana alone gestures toward the actional aspect with “dependent upon convention,” though this still focuses on the condition of dependence rather than the epistemic act.⁴⁰

Yet grammatically, *upādāya* cannot be reduced to a mere adjective. It denotes a verbal action whose agent — *śūnyatā* in the nominative — is not acted upon but acts itself. Hence,

³⁸ Kumārajīva’s Chinese rendering of Madhyamakakārikā 19 reads: 「眾因緣生法，我說即是無，亦為是假名，亦是中道義」 — “The various Pratītyasamutpāda phenomena, as I say, are precisely emptiness, also designated as borrowed names (假名), and that is the meaning of the Middle Path.” Here, *prajñaptir upādāya* is rendered as 假名, omitting the active instrumental function of *upādāya* (“on the basis of”, “depending on”).

³⁹ All four renderings flatten the instrumental gerund *upādāya* into a static adjectival form.

- Inada: “We declare that whatever is relational origination is *śūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the middle path”. (Inada, 1970, p. 148)

- Garfield: “Whatever is dependently co-arisen that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way” (Garfield, 1995, p. 304):

- Tsongkhapa: “That which is dependent origination is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way” (Tsongkhapa, 2006, p. 503)

- Siderits & Katsura: “Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It [emptiness] is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path” (Siderits & Katsura, 2013, chapter. 24)

⁴⁰ Kalupahana translates the verse as: “We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle path” (Kalupahana, 1991, p. 339). While his phrasing “dependent upon convention” acknowledges a relational ground, it nonetheless bypasses the verbal, instrumental force of *upādāya*, which implies an act of conceptual imputation — not merely a condition of dependence, but a cognitive operation.

a more accurate reading would be:

[That] emptiness, having assumed [something], becomes conceptualisation.

This subtle shift — from describing *prajñapti* as *borrowed* (via *upādāna*) viewing it as arising through a dynamic act (*upādāya*) — is philosophically significant. In §22:8, the Tathāgata cannot be conceptualised by what is grasped. In §24:18, *śūnyatā* becomes conceptualisation precisely through the act of assumption. Despite sharing a root, *upādāna* and *upādāya* are not interchangeable.

We may propose the following distinction:

- *Upādāna*: denotes the object appropriated — the external content taken as referent.
- *Upādāya*: signifies the act of mental appropriation — the internal process of assuming or construing.

If *upādāna* is inadequate to establish *prajñapti*, then *upādāya* marks the transformation whereby *śūnyatā* enters conceptual discourse. It is not that emptiness gains ontological substance, but rather that the act of cognition imparts intelligibility. *Prajñapti* thus emerges not as illusion, but as an epistemic product — one shaped by assumption, projection, and designation.

In this way, *upādāya* encodes the very operation of the cognitive agent — the *seer*, the *grasper*. It names the moment at which what is seen becomes grasped, structured, and rendered intelligible. Thus it affirms an earlier claim:

“What is taken into mind cannot be the same as what remains concealed.”

In *upādāya*, we discern the very architecture of cognition itself.

4.6 The Only Option for the Unknown

If Time is to be conceptualised, it must be through *upādāya* rather than *upādāna*. Yet *upādāna* remains significant — not as a sufficient condition, but as a clue that helps us edge closer to understanding the nature of *upādāya*.

In §22:8:

tattvānyatvena yo nāsti mṛgyamāṇaśca pañcadhā |

upādānena sa kathaṃ prajñāpyate tathāgataḥ ||

"Having examined in five ways that the Tathāgata does not exist either as identical or as different, how can he be conceptualised by what is grasped (as his self)?"

Here, *upādāna* denotes the five aggregates (*skandhas*). In §23:10⁴¹, *aśubha* becomes dependent on *śubha*. In §9:3⁴², *bhāva* presupposes *darśana-śravaṇa-vedanādi*. All these notions share a common pattern: what is grasped (*upādāna*) coexists with its conceptualisation (*prajñāpti*). Conventionally, these appropriated elements are treated as the mereological parts of what they represent.

⁴¹ अनपेक्ष्य शुभं नास्त्यशुभं प्रज्ञपयेमहि ।

यत्प्रतीत्य शुभं तस्माच्छुभं नैवोपपद्यते ॥२३:१०॥

Translation: "Something is called "pleasant" in dependence on the unpleasant. Since that would not exist without relation to the pleasant, therefore, the pleasant is not tenable."

This verse demonstrates Nāgārjuna's method of *prajñāpti* by relational negation — what appears as pleasant (*śubha*) exists only through contrast with unpleasant (*aśubha*), rendering both conceptually empty. It echoes the *prajñāptivāda* tendency to treat all attributes as dependently posited (*upādāya-prajñāpti*).

⁴² दर्शनश्रवणादिभ्यो वेदनादिभ्य एव च ।

यः प्राग्व्यवस्थितो भावः केन प्रज्ञप्यते 'थ सः ॥९:३॥

Translation: "What makes known that thing which is present before seeing and hearing etc. and feeling etc.?"

This verse problematises the idea that *bhāva* (being) could precede perceptual and affective faculties. The question "*kena prajñāpyate*" — by what is it made known — targets the epistemic inaccessibility of any "prior" reality.

But Time resists such treatment. What presents itself temporally can only be *present*. If we attempt to posit *dharmasantāna* — a succession of phenomena — as the basis (*upādāna*) of Time, the dual questions in §19:6 immediately refute such imputation: whence, and from what, could it arise? This holds whether Time is taken as *svabhāva* or *a-svabhāva*; indeed, if Time lacks inherent existence, it becomes even less plausible to anchor it in *bhāva*. Hence, §19:6 gains further force.

The only dependence Nāgārjuna seems to allow in *Kālaparīkṣā* is notional dependence of the mereological parts — specifically, the mental partitioning of Past, Present, and Future. He rejects external dependence, but, intriguingly, leaves the question of exogenous non-dependence unexamined.

When Time cannot be mereologically dependent, is outside of experience, and cannot be exogenously dependent, Time would have such characteristics:

1. Not self-produced,
2. Transcendental,
3. Independent of objects and motion.

One might argue that these conditions point to the nonexistence of Time. Yet Nāgārjuna's recurring use of the word *bhāva* complicates this conclusion. He employs *bhāva* and *svabhāva* throughout *MMK*, including in discussions of externally-referential concepts such as the Tathāgata. Notably, they are absent in only four chapters: *Samskāraparīkṣā*, *Bandhanamokṣaparīkṣā*, *Ātmaparīkṣā*, and *Dvādaśāṅgaparīkṣā* — Contact, Bondage and Liberation, Self, and Twelffold Chain, all concerned, in a conventional reading, with internal cognition or subjective structure. By contrast, the Tathāgata operates as an external referent. This contrast suggests that *bhāva* does not primarily denote internal cognition.

Consider §19:1, where the use of future tense ("the present will be in the past") spans the entire temporal range. This trivalent construction — like Nāgārjuna's deployment of *ekatvādīn* — appears to deliberately destabilise temporal grammar. Even if this usage were incidental, it is swiftly followed by the confutation of temporal parts altogether. The implication is clear: Time, lacking both *upādāna* and empirical accessibility, does not arise from what is seen, but from the very act of seeing. It is not a given object of knowledge, but a cognitive construction — a conceptual residue of perception itself.

Neither the *Tathāgata*, nor *aśubha*, nor even *bhāva*, can be conceived without some external ground. But Time, like Space and Identity-Discrimination, may be exceptions. If they lack *upādāna*, then their only intelligibility arises through *upādāya*. That is, there is no object-being-seen, only the seeing itself. And if so, what is seen can only be oneself: the seer and the seen co-arise.

This helps clarify the instrumental ambiguity in §19:5.2. The agent of conceptualisation is *me* — but this *me* is internally bifurcated:

1. The first, whom we ordinarily recognise as ourselves, assumes what presents itself as the Present;
2. The second, a deeper schematic layer of subjectivity, assumes that very assumption, thereby engendering the concept of Time.

We are able to experience the Present because only this second layer — the *Me* — performs the act of *upādāya* (mental appropriation). It is from this *Me* that the concept of Time is received.

In this bifurcation of the cognitive subject, Nāgārjuna's critique does not deny that there is perception or conceptualisation at work; rather, it dissolves the illusion that such acts arise from a unified, stable perceiver. The "self" that appears to perceive is, upon analysis, a layered construction: what seems like a single agent is in fact a reflexive process, where one aspect of selfhood is appropriated by another. It is this illusion of unity in "that which perceives" — the supposed singular subject — that Nāgārjuna exposes as conceptually untenable in §19.5.

To invoke such a *Me* within the framework of Buddhist philosophy — especially after Nāgārjuna's devastating critique of selfhood in the preceding *Ātmaparīkṣā* — may seem absurd. But this speculative gesture is justified, first, to localise the site of refutation, and second, to preserve space for epistemological inquiry.

Consider this: after dreamless sleep or coma, we often wake with an immediate sense of how much time has passed. If we truly lacked such a sense, it would feel as though the moment of falling asleep were seamlessly contiguous with waking. But this is rarely, if ever, the case.

One may propose a biological explanation — residual neural activity persisting during unconsciousness. Yet if Time were purely dependent on motion or memory, how could we awaken from cognitive blackout with an intuitive sense of duration? Even if such a Time-sense arises from obscure or irretrievable brain activity, it implies that when *me* is deactivated, there is still a *Me* who later assumes and integrates that activity into a coherent temporal experience.

Hence, we may ask:

*#5-finale: How could that ungraspable Time be grasped — be conceptualised — by **Me**, the fact of which is made by **me**.*

Here, *Me* names the schematic agent; *me*, the familiar subject of attribution. This is not to suggest Nāgārjuna posits a Kantian-style transcendental ego. Rather, by entertaining this

speculative bifurcation, we begin to appreciate the deeper logic behind his juxtaposition in §19:4 of temporal phases, spatial triads, and the enigmatic category of *ekatva*. All of these collapse, not due to the mere failure of reference, but through the dismantling of the illusion that there is a unified, self-sufficient subject who perceives, temporalises, and designates.



4.7 Time, Space, and Identity as Cognitive Schemata devoid of Ontological Ground

If we group the three foundational schemata — Time, Space, and Identity — under a common lens, we may examine the conceptual impasses they each entail:

1. Flowing Time cannot be captured⁴³. Non-flowing Time cannot be found.
2. A spanning line cannot be measured⁴⁴ (mathematically, i.e., notionally). A non-spanning line is not found.
3. A discernible entity cannot be identified⁴⁵. A non-discernible entity is not found.

Each pair marks a paradox: when these notions are shaped by the qualities we impose upon them — flowing, spanning, discernible — they become ungraspable, for they are not realities but assumptions enacted by *Me*. They are assumed by *Me*, yet cannot be grasped by *me*, just as a hand cannot grasp itself. Though we distinguish between two levels of “me” (the schematic and the empirical), they operate in synchrony when experience arises. Hence, the illusion is not formed by volitional imagination alone, but constantly by the foundational activity of *Me*.

These schemata are mutually reinforcing and deeply embedded in cognition, masquerading as substantial realities. What Nāgārjuna exposes in the *Kālaparīkṣā* is the madness of these very assumptions — constructs fabricated by *Me* in the unconscious depths of cognition, while we dwell, half-aware, on the surface of the visible world.

Whereas Kant saw Time, Space, and Causality as *a priori* forms of intuition, Nāgārjuna anticipates this structure but places Identity, rather than Causality, at the root of cognitive schemata. This divergence is not incidental. Identification — knowing what something is and what it is not — is the precondition for conceiving both Causality and Motion. Without the

⁴³ Flowing Time (*i.e.*, the common conception of time as continuous passage) cannot be truly grasped, because grasping implies arresting or fixing something — which contradicts the very idea of flow.

⁴⁴ A spanning line (like one extended in space) is what we use to conceptually measure distance. But because its span is already a mental construct, it cannot itself be precisely measured without presupposing the very notion of space we’re trying to explain — circularity ensues.

⁴⁵ A discernible entity (something distinguishable) is never stable or fully self-identical; to identify it requires positing fixed criteria, but all such discernment relies on relational contrasts with other ‘entities’ — hence, no pure identity.

ability to discriminate Identity and Difference, we could not even posit motion, much less cause and effect. Thus, Time, Space, and Identity form an interdependent triad without which cognition and reasoning collapse.

Nāgārjuna makes this deconstruction explicit when he asks:

bhāvaṃ pratītya kālaścetskālo bhāvādṛte kutaḥ | 19:6.1 |

na ca kaścana bhāvo 'sti kutaḥ kālo bhaviṣyati | | 19:6.2 | |

If Time (be) dependent on (an) existent, from where (could) Time (be) without (this) existent?

(There is) not any existent. From where *will* Time be?

In the end, where could Time be located? There is no objective support for any of these schemata. Time is seemingly constructed by *Me* — but this *Me* remains inaccessible to me. It is transcendental, but even so, it is still dependent on other structures. At the very least, we can say that without the schemata of Identification and Spatial relation, we could neither measure Temporality nor conceptualise Time.

It is not me but Me who temporalises all.

In this way, Reference finds its origin. It is *me* who sets references like Present, Middle, and *bhedābheda* (identity-in-difference).

Knowing as synchronous with *me* gives rise to the experience of Present, and thereby of Past and Future.

Knowing as equivalent to *me* produces the Middle, from which Upper and Lower derive.

Identity-in-Difference is the very structure of self-awareness, the form through which we remember and anticipate. It is neither identical with memory nor wholly different from expectancy. Upon this primordial schema of reference, the '*I*' construct both world and self — through illusion, in service of a supposed *continuity*.

Chapter 5

Conclusion, Findings and Discussion

This study begins with a close reading of *Kālaparīkṣā*, proposing a new interpretation of *ekatva* in §19:4. Contextual analysis of §19:1–3 reveals a setting devoid of subjectivity, thereby shifting attention to the problem of Reference.

A close reading of §19:5, particularly the dual instrumental implications of the passive-causative form of *pra-vjñā*, led to a distinction between *upādāna* and *upādāya*. This allowed for an analysis of how phenomena are conceptualised through fundamental cognitive schemata — Time, Space, and Identity — which operate beneath awareness to produce the tangible yet illusory categories by which the world is ordered. These fundamental schemata stabilise perception by creating apparent references, which produce the very categories that perception mistakes as givens.

By refuting the Time-concept — and, by extension, Space (more precisely, Line) and Discrimination (as a suggested third term⁴⁶) — Nāgārjuna exposes the paradox inherent in our most basic perceptual operations. These concepts appear substantial, but are instead products of cognitive schemata enacted by *Me*. The admission of their reality is not a matter of deliberate error, but of structural illusion.

MMK generally aims to expose the metaphysical commitments underlying Sarvāstivādin doctrines. Nāgārjuna remains positionless, committed only to the relinquishing of views. *Kālaparīkṣā* follows this trajectory. It offers no positive doctrine of Time, but merely refutes its *svabhāva* — its inherent nature.

In §24:38, Nāgārjuna characterises the *svābhāvika* world thus:

ajātamanirūddhaṃ ca kūṭasthaṃ ca bhaviṣyati |

vicitrābhiravasthābhiḥ svabhāve rahitaṃ jagat || 24:38 ||

The world would be *unborn, unceasing, and unchanging*;

it would be devoid of its manifold appearances — if it had an intrinsic nature.

⁴⁶ Cf. §2.3, where Time, Space (specifically, Line), and Discrimination are analysed as **cognitive schemata** rather than ontological realities. Nāgārjuna's critique is not a mere denial of empirical phenomena, but a **deconstruction of the epistemic conditions** that render such conceptualisations possible in the first place.

Applied to Time, the implication is stark: it would be static, unborn, and devoid of appearance — collapsing all phenomena like birth, cessation, and transformation that rely on temporality for intelligibility. In this sense, Time is more fundamental than Causality, Motion, or even Self.

Time and Space are not passive perceptions, nor objects within cognition; they are the very conditions of cognition — reflexive projections that stabilise the flux of becoming. We do not perceive them as we do colours or sounds — they are known only through and as the very act of knowing itself. Nāgārjuna appears acutely aware of this, for he treats the problem of Space and Discrimination *in the same manner*. Though §19:1–3 refutes Time’s *svabhāva* by revealing its internal asynchrony, the same method cannot be straightforwardly extended to Space and Discrimination. Instead, as argued in Chapter 2 *Gatāgataparīkṣā*, these must be seen as latent distortions woven into the structure of cognition itself. That chapter demonstrates how motion, though which seems intuitively real, collapses, upon analysis, into incoherent fragments once we withdraw the presupposition of a stable reference frame: a traverser, a traversed path, and a destination. The argument does not rest merely on the impossibility of locating movement in any of the three times, but rather enacts a broader diagnostic gesture: Nāgārjuna is not correcting empirical errors but unmasking structural projections — schemata such as temporal sequence, spatial extension, and agency — by which cognition stabilises flux into perceived reality. These are not passive perceptions, but active impositions, reflexively enacted by cognition in its attempt to constitute the world as intelligible.

In this sense, *Gatāgataparīkṣā* prefigures the more radical dismantling of *Kālaparīkṣā*, wherein Time, Space, and Identity are not revealed as independently existing realities, but as cognitive posits. Once their supposed ontological independence is interrogated, they unravel as illusory scaffolds erected by *Me*, and misrecognised as objective givens by *me*.

Furthermore, §19:5–6 can be read as valid regardless of whether Time is posited as *svābhāvika*. If Nāgārjuna only denied the metaphor of Time as a flowing river, he would be dismantling only the conceptual representation, not the cognitive structure that enables it. But his deeper critique points to the very faculty that produces the concept of Time — the *Me* who temporalises. Without addressing this layer, one cannot explain how Nāgārjuna himself could write the text — existing in and through Temporality — while denying Time’s reality.

It becomes evident now that Nāgārjuna’s claim that the same critique applies to spatial and discriminatory concepts implicates not only the *svabhāva* of Time, but the *svabhāva* of the cognitive schemata that generate Time, Space, and Discrimination. This explains the deep structural difficulties encountered between §19:4 and §19:6. If these are all seen as schematisations internal to consciousness, the paradoxes dissolve: the unordered and unperceived becomes ordered and knowable through the operation of *Me*. The world — and

the sense of self — arise through this scaffolding of reference and naming.

Surprisingly, this echoes the insight of Laozi: “The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; the named is the mother of all things”⁴⁷ (Bynner, 1944, ch. 1). Here, *Name* is not merely a linguistic label, but the very schema through which the undivided is perceived divided, the fluid is held fixed, and the formless is rendered intelligible. Nāgārjuna’s critique thus converges, across centuries and traditions, with this ancient recognition: that the world we experience is not disclosed, not born from what is, but configured, from how it is structured, by conceptualisation, by the act of naming.

Hence, the philosophical imperative becomes to transcend these schemata — to transcend *Me*. At the heart of the illusion lies the *svābhāvika* Self. In this reading, *Kālaparīkṣā* is not simply a critique of temporal concepts, but a dismantling of the cognitive authority that constructs the illusion of an ordered, substantial world. Nāgārjuna’s critique thus nullifies the legitimacy of cognition built from the bottom up, under the shadow of an assumed Self. Even a “new view” offers no salvation; it would simply reframe the illusion with the same self-constructed schemata.

Seen in this light, Nāgārjuna’s remark in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*⁴⁸ (Kumārajīva 鳩摩

⁴⁷ 「無名，天地之始；有名，萬物之母」— Dao De Jing (道德經) §1. See also the discussion in Chapter 2.3 regarding *nāma* as a schematising function parallel to *prajñapti*, not merely linguistic:

§19.4—Discrimination of spatial/relational categories through naming—Conceptual labelling

§19.5—Grasping via naming = possibility of *prajñapti*—Constructed knowledge

§19.6—Conceptual dependence of Time/Phenomena—Emptiness of named constructs.

⁴⁸ “This matter is not answered because there is no such reality. ‘Dharmas are permanent’ — there is no such reality. ‘Dharmas are annihilated’ — again, there is no such reality. The Buddha does not answer because of this.

For example, if someone asks: ‘How many litres of milk can be extracted from a cow’s horn?’ This is not a valid question, so the Buddha does not answer. Again, someone says: ‘The world is boundless like a wheel, without beginning or end.’ To answer such a question brings no benefit but only harm, leading to false views.

The Buddha knows the fourteen inexpressibles (Skt. *avyākṛta*) and always turns back to the reality of the Four Noble Truths. If there are venomous snakes on a ferry, it is not appropriate to ferry people across there; they should instead be ferried where it is safe.

羅什 Trans., n.d., Vol. 2, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association [CBETA]) — that “this matter cannot be understood by anyone but the Omniscient. It is because the People cannot know that the Buddha does not answer” — becomes intelligible. If rational analysis were sufficient, there would be no need for silence. But what is at stake is not propositional knowledge, but the seeing-through of the very structure of conceptuality — that is, the unmasking of cognition’s own schematising acts. The Buddha’s silence, in this view, is not ignorance but insight: to answer would be to validate a mistaken frame of reference, as if to extract milk from a cow-horn.

And so, as Nāgārjuna opens MMK by refuting causality, it follows that the term *pratītya* in *pratītyasamutpāda* need not be temporal. The phrase is already *upādāya* — a conceptual construct. Its truth lies not in what it says, but in the matrix of its function: a schema for deconstructing schema. The Middle is also such a matrix. Time, as a schematising function, obscures this. Identity-in-difference is likewise a product of concealment.

Therefore, when Saint Augustine asks:

— “*what, then, is time?*”

One must confess:

— “*I know not! I know not how to extract milk from a cow-horn.*”

This thesis has undertaken a comprehensive philosophical analysis of Nāgārjuna’s Kālaparīkṣā (Chapter 19 of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā), focusing on the interplay of time, space, and identity within the Madhyamaka framework. By engaging with primary Sanskrit texts, classical commentaries, and modern interpretations, the study has addressed key interpretive challenges and proposed innovative solutions. This conclusion systematically reviews the three primary objectives outlined in Chapter 1.2 Goal and Objective. For each objective, a summary of the findings is provided, followed by an explanation of how it was achieved and a critical evaluation of its strengths and limitations. Finally, the chapter highlights the new knowledge generated by this research and assesses its impact on relevant

Thus, someone says: “This matter cannot be understood by anyone but the Omniscient.’ It is because ordinary people cannot know — and that is why the Buddha does not answer.”

Original Chinese Text: 「此事無實故不答，『諸法有常』，無此理，『諸法斷』，亦無此理，以是故佛不答。譬如人問：『構牛角得幾升乳？』是為非問，不應答。復次，『世界無窮如車輪，無初無後。』復次，答此無利，有失，墮惡邪中。佛知十四難，常覆四諦諸法實相，如渡處有惡蟲，不應將人渡，安隱無患處可示人令渡。復次，有人言：『是事非一切智人不能解。』以人不能知，故佛不答。」

academic fields.

Objective 1: Examining Nāgārjuna's Critique of Time's Ontological Coherence and Its Extension to Space and Identity

The first objective was to examine Nāgārjuna's critique of the ontological coherence of time in Kālaparīkṣā and to explore how this critique extends to the conceptual structures of space and identity, demonstrating their mutual interdependence and lack of inherent existence (*svabhāva*).

Summary of Findings: Through a detailed reconstruction in Chapter 2, the thesis demonstrates that Nāgārjuna's temporal method (§19:1–3) reveals the mereological incoherence of temporal phases (past, present, future), their mutual dependency, and the impossibility of time as either flowing or static (§19:5). This critique extends to space and identity (*ekatva*), as analysed in Chapters 3 and 4, where spatial triads (upper, middle, lower) are shown to differ due to simultaneity rather than asynchrony, and *ekatvādīn* is reframed as "Identity – Neither Identity nor Difference – Difference" (*ekatvābhedabheda*), a relational schema devoid of ontological ground. All three — time, space, and identity — are revealed as interdependent cognitive schemata (*prajñapti*), empty of *svabhāva*, aligning with Nāgārjuna's broader refutation of substantial realities. Notably, in this context, *ekatvādīn* is here employed only as a formal relational series parallel to the temporal triad, without presuming the semantic field of "one–many." Its grammatical, conceptual, and applicative scope is examined in detail in Chapter 3 §3.3, where its precise function and philosophical implications are clarified.

Explanation: This objective was achieved via close reading of the Sanskrit text, philosophical reconstruction of verses, and comparative analysis with commentaries (e.g., Candrakīrti's emphasis on relational dependence and Westerhoff's logical critiques). The extension to space and identity was supported by highlighting structural divergences (e.g., temporal asynchrony vs. spatial simultaneity) while maintaining their shared emptiness through *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination).

Critique: The analysis effectively integrates ontological and cognitive dimensions, strengthening the argument against *svabhāva*. However, it relies heavily on modern phenomenological interpretations (e.g., drawing parallels to Kant's forms of intuition), which may introduce anachronistic elements not explicit in Nāgārjuna's text. Critically, while the extension to space and identity is logically sound, it could be further bolstered by additional cross-references to other MMK chapters (e.g., Gatāgataparīkṣā on motion), potentially addressing any perceived overgeneralisation from Kālaparīkṣā alone.

Objective 2: Investigating Grammatical and Logical Problems in MMK §19:4 and §19:5

The second objective was to investigate the grammatical and logical problems in MMK §19:4 and §19:5, particularly concerning spatial triads (uttama–madhyama–adhama) and the ambiguous term *ekatvādīn*, and to demonstrate how these challenge the application of temporal logic to spatial and identity schemas.

Summary of Findings: Chapter 3 identifies two key difficulties: the inapplicability of temporal asynchrony to spatial simultaneity (§19:4.1) and the grammatical anomaly of masculine *-ādīn* with neuter *ekatva* (§19:4.2). The thesis proposes that spatial relations rely on notional dependence rather than causal or existential interdependence, and reinterprets *ekatvādīn* as "Identity – Neither Identity nor Difference – Difference" rather than mere unity/plurality. This challenges temporal analogies by emphasising distinct relational modalities, while §19:5's agency ambiguity (*grhyate/prajñapyate*) underscores the cognitive projection of these schemas.

Explanation: The investigation employed linguistic analysis and logical reconstruction (e.g., responding to Westerhoff's contiguity interpretation). Evidence from classical sources (e.g., Kumārajīva's translations) and modern scholarship (e.g., Garfield's relational views) was integrated to clarify ambiguities and demonstrate challenges to cross-domain application.

Critique: This objective's strength lies in its rigorous grammatical focus, resolving long-standing ambiguities (e.g., *ekatvādīn*) with novel interpretations like "Identity – Neither Identity nor Difference – Difference," which better captures Nāgārjuna's dialectical intent. However, the critique of existing interpretations (e.g., Candrakīrti's triads) could be seen as overly dismissive, potentially underestimating metrical compromises in verse composition. Additionally, while logical problems are well-demonstrated, the analysis might benefit from quantitative metrics (e.g., corpus linguistics on *-tva* forms across MMK) to enhance empirical support, mitigating any subjective bias in semantic proposals.

Objective 3: Reconstructing the Cognitive Architecture in Nāgārjuna's Critique

The third objective was to reconstruct the implicit cognitive architecture in Nāgārjuna's critique, starting from overlooked temporal relations (earlier, simultaneous, later), showing their dependence on a schematic subject (Me), exploring grammatical ambiguities of agency, roles of *prajñapti* and *upādāya*, and proposing a dual-layered self (Me/me) underlying temporal construction.

Summary of Findings: Chapter 4 reconstructs this architecture by distinguishing the schematic "Me" (temporaliser/conceptualiser) from the constructed "me" (empirical self). Temporal relations depend upon "Me" for structuration, with *prajñāpyate* implying passive-causative agency and *upādāya* denoting mental appropriation over clinging (*upādāna*). Time, space, and identity emerge as empty cognitive schemata, generated by "Me" but misrecognised as real by "me," echoing broader Madhyamaka themes of illusion and emptiness.

Explanation: Reconstruction involved phenomenological reflection on verses (e.g., §19:5's voice shifts) and differentiation of terms (e.g., *pra-vjñā* as conceptualisation vs. knowledge). Parallels to non-Buddhist traditions (e.g., Laozi's naming) and footnotes (e.g., on *avyākṛta* questions) enriched the proposal of the Me/me distinction as a heuristic for understanding *prajñāpti-upādāya* dynamics.

Critique: The innovative Me/me distinction effectively bridges ontology and cognition, offering a fresh heuristic for Nāgārjuna's implicit psychology. Its explanatory power is evident in resolving agency ambiguities, but critics might argue it imposes a modern dualism (e.g., Kantian transcendental/empirical self) onto Madhyamaka, risking reification of "Me" despite disclaimers. Limitations include the hypothetical nature of the reconstruction, which could be strengthened by empirical cognitive science correlations (e.g., neurophenomenology), though this aligns with the thesis's delimited scope.

New Knowledge and Academic Impact

This thesis generates several novel contributions to Madhyamaka scholarship. It ultimately proposes a definitive reinterpretation of *ekatvādīn* as "Identity – Neither Identity nor Difference – Difference" (*ekatvābhedabheda*), developed through the grammatical and logical analysis in Chapter 3 §3.3. This model resolves the masculine inflectional anomaly in §19:4 and reframes *ekatvādīn* as a relational schema parallel to the temporal triad, providing a more precise conceptual scope that aligns with relational paradoxes, diverging from traditional unity/plurality readings. Additionally, the Me/me distinction introduces a cognitive heuristic absent in prior commentaries, illuminating *prajñāpti* and *upādāya* as active processes in illusion-formation. The emphasis on cognitive schemata extends Nāgārjuna's critique beyond ontology to epistemology, bridging Madhyamaka with phenomenology and comparative philosophy (e.g., Kant, Laozi).

These insights significantly impact academic fields. In Buddhist studies, they refine interpretations of MMK Chapter 19, potentially influencing future translations and commentaries by highlighting overlooked triads (e.g., earlier-simultaneous-later) and by establishing *ekatvādīn* as a structural key that unifies Nāgārjuna's analysis of time, space, and identity. In philosophy of mind and cognition, the Me/me framework offers tools for

analysing self-illusion, resonating with contemporary debates on consciousness (e.g., in analytic philosophy). Comparatively, it fosters dialogues between Eastern and Western traditions, enhancing interdisciplinary approaches.

Overall, while modest in scope, this research challenges reductive views of Nāgārjuna as mere ontologist, promoting a cognitively informed Madhyamaka that could inspire further empirical and philosophical integrations, with lasting implications for understanding emptiness in global philosophical discourse.



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