



David F. Burton. *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy.* London: Curzon Press, 1999. xvi + 233 pages, ISBN 0-7007-1066-3 (cloth), £ 40.

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This work is a “substantially revised” (xi) version of a doctoral thesis prepared at the University of Bristol in England between 1994 and 1997. The advisor for that work appears to have been Paul Williams, whose work on the interpretation of both Indian and Tibetan Buddhist thought will be well known to some readers of this journal; the introductory material contains acknowledgments to Damien Keown and Rupert Gettin, whose work on Buddhist ethics and Theravāda Abhidhamma, respectively, is also likely to be known. This work is therefore a product of the English system, and of those concerned with the interpretation and analysis of Buddhist philosophical thought in that country. It is also the work of a self-described Buddhist who bears (he tells us in the preface) the name Dharmacari Asanga in addition to the name printed on the book’s cover.

Burton attempts two things in this book. The first is an expository restatement of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy of emptiness, by which is meant, roughly, Nāgārjuna’s argumentative and analytical use of *śūnyatā* as a technical term in ontological and epistemological contexts. For this part of his enterprise, Burton uses the works that “are least controversially attributed to Nāgārjuna” (13), and by this he means—with minor modifications—the list arrived at by Chr. Lindtner in his work, *Nāgārjuniana*.

The second part of the enterprise involves evaluation of the success of Nāgārjuna’s philosophical enterprise. By this the author means, principally,

the offering of arguments about the internal coherence of Nāgārjuna's project and about those among its implications that Nāgārjuna would be unlikely to accept if he had clearly understood them. For this part of the project, Burton uses the anglophone philosopher's "standard-issue" battery of technical terms (ontology, epistemology, skepticism, and so on). The style of his thought belongs to what is still sometimes called anglophone analytical philosophy, and parts of the book will be difficult reading for those not at home in that idiom.

As an expositor, Burton's first conclusion is that Nāgārjuna is not—either explicitly or implicitly—a skeptic, whether of the Pyrrhonian or academic kind. By this he means, roughly, that Nāgārjuna exhibits no interest in arguing for the impropriety of making claims to knowledge about the way things really are and that the texts sometimes read to imply such an interest can more convincingly and coherently be read as denials that emptiness should be construed in a particular substantive way. For Burton, then, Nāgārjuna does make strong claims to knowledge of the way things are, paradigmatic among which is the claim that nothing has an essential nature, a *svabhāva*. Because Nāgārjuna makes such claims, according to Burton, he cannot be called a skeptic.

Burton's second conclusion has to do with Nāgārjuna and nihilism. By "nihilism," Burton means the view that there are no entities. A nihilist, then, destroys "the manifold world of entities" (90). On Burton's reading, Nāgārjuna is not explicitly a nihilist (here he remains in exegetical mode), but is committed to nihilism as an entailment of what he does explicitly say (here he enters critical mode). The argument here, very briefly, is that Nāgārjuna entertains only two kinds of existence as conceptual possibilities: existence as (or with) *svabhāva* and existence as designation or concept (*prajñapti*). He denies the first explicitly and with argument, and affirms the second in the context of affirming and arguing for existence-as-dependently-coarisen (*pratīyasamutpanna*). But Burton's understanding of this affirmation is that it entails the denial of any kind of existence whatever because it makes inevitable the affirmation that there "can be nothing unconstructed out of which conceptually constructed entities are constructed" (109), and so also the affirmation that construction (whose products are *prajñaptayah*) extends universally. Burton takes this conclusion to indicate an incoherence in Nāgārjuna's philosophy, for it is very clear that Nāgārjuna wants explicitly to deny that the affirmation of emptiness entails nihilism.

Burton's third exegetical conclusion is uncontroversial: it is that Nāgārjuna must reject any epistemology that implies realism, any epistemology, that is to say, that requires or entails the view that there are real, individuatable extra-mental things or the view that there are real, individuatable means by which such things can be known. Because Nāgārjuna must reject such epistemologies, he engages in extended argument against tokens of that type; Burton provides

a detailed exposition of these arguments, paying special attention to the question of how (and whether) cognition-producing instruments (*pramāṇa*-s) can noncircularly be shown to be what they must be on a realist epistemology. Burton's normative judgment here is that Nāgārjuna's arguments against such epistemologies fail, most often because they assume a form of nihilism that is precisely what is at issue in such debates.

If Burton is right, philosophically speaking, not much survives of Nāgārjuna's argumentative uses of *śūnyatā*. But it is far from clear that he is. I will suggest only three difficulties in the hope that the questions that Burton raises will be given further discussion. The first difficulty is one endemic to all scholarship on Nāgārjuna. It is that Nāgārjuna's works are, in this reviewer's judgment, insufficiently precise and systematic to make debates about what he really meant, philosophically speaking, very useful. Interpretation of the corpus in India shows major divergences, as does that in the West. I do not think that appeal to the texts will resolve such divergence, and Burton has altogether too much interpretive confidence in the possibility of getting Nāgārjuna right. Second, with special reference to the attribution of nihilism to Nāgārjuna, Burton's argument likely confuses the claim "there is no principle by which entities may be individuated" (which is, I think, an entailment of the views that he attributes to Nāgārjuna, whether or not his attribution of those views is exegetically defensible), with the claim "there are no entities" (which is not). The former claim does not entail the latter, and if it does not, Burton's attribution of nihilism to (his version of) Nāgārjuna will require adjustment. Third, in the discussion of Nāgārjuna's critique of realist epistemologies, it may be that Burton's exegesis pays insufficient attention to the possibility that much (or perhaps all) of Nāgārjuna's argumentation is devoted not to showing that validation of *pramāṇa*-s is impossible (much less that there aren't any), but only to showing that on Naiyāyika assumptions of what validation consists on, it can't be done. This is a different and more modest project than the one that Burton attributes to Nāgārjuna, and criticism of it would have to proceed differently than his does.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Burton's handling of texts is, for the most part, quite careful. His translations and comments are always at least defensible, and the number of errors in representing Sanskrit and Tibetan in roman type is quite small (though in transcribing Sanskrit, he oddly does not avail himself of the opportunity provided by writing in roman letters to indicate more word-breaks—without, of course, removing *sandhi*—than the conventions of writing in *nāgarī* permit). His philosophical argumentation is also serious and careful, and will repay detailed attention and engagement. The same cannot be said, though, for engagement with secondary scholarship whose reading of Nāgārjuna is different from his. There is, for instance, insufficient discussion

of the important views of Jay Garfield; what is more, there is no mention at all of Claus Oetke's significant work on the structure of Mādhyamika argument. The reader can get no real idea from Burton's work of where his reading fits on the gamut of such readings, and this is an important lack in a book of this sort. There are also some oddities in English. But for the most part this is a lucid, careful, and philosophically interesting book—a worthy contribution to the never-ending stream of work on what Nāgārjuna really meant.