



Śūnyatā And Différance: Nāgārjuna's Middle Way, Derrida's Deconstruction, And Their Contemporary Resonances

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative philosophical study of Nāgārjuna, the second-century Buddhist thinker and founder of the *Mādhyamika* school, and Jacques Derrida, the twentieth-century French philosopher who developed the method of deconstruction. Both philosophers interrogate the foundations of essentialist thinking: Nāgārjuna through his doctrine of *Śūnyatā* and *Pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), and Derrida through his critique of logocentrism and his concept of *différance*. By analysing their shared strategies of dismantling fixed categories, their rejection of intrinsic essences, and their insistence on the instability of meaning, the paper argues that Nāgārjuna and Derrida converge as non-essentialist thinkers, albeit working within different philosophical horizons. It also highlights their differences, particularly in the ethical and soteriological dimensions of Nāgārjuna's thought vis-à-vis Derrida's focus on textuality and undecidability. The comparative exploration shows the promise of cross-cultural philosophy in understanding deconstruction not merely as a Western phenomenon but as a global mode of thinking that destabilizes all claims to foundational certainty.

Keywords

Mādhyamika, *Mādhyamika-sāstra*, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Dignāga, *Nirvāṇa*, *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, *Prasannapadā*, *Śūnyatā*, *Svabhāva*, *Svalaksana*, *Śūnyavāda*, *Pratītyasamutpāda*, *Parasparapeksa* *Sidhih*, *Dharmas*, *Apoha-vada*, Derrida, Deconstruction, *Différance*, Non-essentialism, Logocentrism, Double Séance, Tetrpharmakon, Trace, Binary Oppositions

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed a fundamental questioning of traditional assumptions about meaning, truth, and essence in philosophy and literary theory. One of the most significant figures in this development was Jacques Derrida, whose practice of deconstruction unsettled the certainties of Western metaphysics. Centuries earlier, in a very different intellectual milieu, the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna

(c. 150–250 CE) had articulated a radical critique of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), developing the doctrine of *Śūnyatā* that would become central to Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy.

Though separated by time, space, and culture, Derrida and Nāgārjuna both emerge as **deconstructionists and non-essentialists**. Their thought converges on the rejection of inherent essences and stable foundations, and both demonstrate that meaning or reality cannot be reduced to fixed categories. Nāgārjuna's analysis of dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) parallels Derrida's notion of *différance*: both insist that meaning arises only through relationality, never from a self-grounding presence.

This comparative endeavour is not an exercise in collapsing their distinct contexts. Nāgārjuna was writing within the Buddhist soteriological framework, concerned with liberation from suffering, while Derrida was interrogating the structures of Western philosophy, particularly its privileging of presence and speech. Yet, by placing them side by side, we gain new insights into the possibilities of a **global philosophy of deconstruction**, one that transcends the boundaries of East and West.

Nāgārjuna in Context

Nāgārjuna occupies a pivotal place in Buddhist intellectual history. Writing in the second century CE, he founded the *Mādhyamika* school, which remains one of the most influential currents of Mahāyāna thought. His major work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), is a systematic dismantling of metaphysical assumptions that posit intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*).

For Nāgārjuna, all phenomena (*dharma*s) are devoid of inherent existence (*śūnya*) of self-nature because they arise dependently (*Pratītyasamutpāda*). “Devoid of inherent existence” is not a metaphysical absolute but the absence of independent essence: “Whatever has dependently arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way.”¹ This statement, often cited as the core of his philosophy, reveals his strategy: to demonstrate that phenomena cannot be pinned down to any fixed identity, since they exist only in relation to other phenomena.

Nāgārjuna also employs the method of the *Catuṣkoṭi* (tetralemma), a dialectical strategy that rejects four possibilities concerning any proposition: that it is true, false, both, or neither. By denying these exhaustive alternatives, Nāgārjuna destabilizes the very framework of conceptual thought, exposing the limits of language and logic in capturing reality. The aim of this exercise is not mere intellectual play but the dissolution of reified views that perpetuate attachment and suffering. Thus, Nāgārjuna's deconstruction is inseparable from the Buddhist soteriological goal of liberation (*Nirvāṇa*).

¹ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 69.

Scholars have noted that Nāgārjuna's approach constitutes a "deconstruction" of metaphysics long before Derrida. David Kalupahana observes that Nāgārjuna is "perhaps the first deconstructionist," dismantling notions of substance and essence in a way that resonates with postmodern critiques.² Yet his emphasis on compassion and liberation situates his philosophy within a framework quite different from Derrida's poststructuralist concerns.

Derrida in Context

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) emerged as a central figure in twentieth-century continental philosophy. His early works --- *Of Grammatology* (1967), *Writing and Difference* (1967), and *Margins of Philosophy* (1972) --- introduced deconstruction, a practice of reading that exposes the instabilities, contradictions, and blind spots within texts.

Derrida's primary target was the **metaphysics of presence**, a tendency in Western thought to privilege presence over absence, speech over writing, identity over difference. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, Derrida argued that meaning in language arises only through differences between signs, never through any inherent link to a fixed essence. Yet he radicalized Saussure by showing that the chain of signifiers has no final ground: meaning is always deferred, never present in full.³

This recognition led Derrida to coin the term *Différance*, a neologism that combines the senses of "to differ" and "to defer." *Différance* designates the process by which meaning is produced through relationality and temporal deferral, without ever arriving at a final signified. "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" --- there is no outside-text --- became his most provocative slogan, often misunderstood as denying reality, but in fact pointing to the impossibility of escaping mediation through language.⁴

Deconstruction, for Derrida, is not a method but a critical practice. He insisted that "every sentence of the type 'deconstruction is x' or 'deconstruction is not x' a priori misses the point."⁵ Rather than offering a determinate theory, deconstruction reveals the impossibility of closure in meaning, the aporias and undecidabilities that haunt texts. In this sense, Derrida shares with Nāgārjuna a suspicion of essentialist definitions and a commitment to exposing the instability of conceptual structures.

Convergence in Non-essentialism

Although Nāgārjuna and Derrida inhabit distinct intellectual worlds --- one Buddhist, the other poststructuralist --- their projects converge in a radical **non-essentialism**. Both reject the idea of intrinsic essence: Nāgārjuna through his analysis of *Śūnyatā*, Derrida through his critique of logocentrism and

² David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 45.

³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Bally & Sechehaye (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 120.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 11.

⁵ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 3.

presence. Both reveal that meaning or existence cannot be grounded in a fixed foundation, but emerges only relationally, through difference or dependent origination.

At the same time, their divergences must be acknowledged. Nāgārjuna's deconstruction is tied to the soteriological aim of liberation from suffering. His philosophy points toward an ethical and practical transformation grounded in compassion and non-attachment. Derrida, by contrast, situates deconstruction within the realm of textuality and philosophy, emphasizing undecidability rather than liberation. Yet, as we will see in later sections, Derrida too gestures toward an ethics of responsibility, suggesting intriguing possibilities for comparative dialogue.

Language and Meaning: Apoha and Différance

Nāgārjuna's deconstruction of intrinsic nature extends to his reflections on **language and meaning**. In Indian Buddhist debates, particularly in response to Brahmanical theories of reference, the Buddhist school of *apoha* (exclusion) became central. According to the *apoha-vāda* theory, words signify not by directly denoting essences but by excluding what they are not. For example, the word "cow" does not refer to some fixed essence of "cowness," but functions by excluding "non-cow."⁶

Derrida's critique of Saussurean linguistics resonates here. Saussure argued that signs gain value only through differences within the linguistic system, not by reference to intrinsic essences. Derrida radicalized this insight by insisting that meaning is not only differential but also deferred, caught in an endless chain of signifiers without final grounding. His notion of *différance* names this interplay of **difference and deferral**.⁷

The parallel is striking --- both Nāgārjuna's *Śūnyatā* and Derrida's *différance* dismantle the illusion of inherent meaning. Words do not transparently mirror essences; they function through relational play, exclusion, and deferral. What Nāgārjuna calls non-essence (*Śūnyatā*), Derrida calls the trace --- the absence within presence, the reminder that meaning is never self-sufficient but always dependent.

Postmodernism and Mādhyamika Buddhism in Context

In the last five decades or so, Postmodernists have emerged as controversial writers in philosophy. There is a strong reaction aimed not at a single philosopher but at the entire modern European Philosophy. The chief exponents of this movement are - Jean Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, etc., to name a few. But none of them have given a clear-cut definition to the question 'What is postmodernism?' They argue postmodernity defies definition and is against any sorts of 'ism', because it is not a given thing. Postmodernists observe that the very essence of postmodernity is to stay away from

⁶ Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇavārttika*; see also Katsura Shoryu, "Apoha Theory Revisited," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 2003. p. 125.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 278.

definitions and objectifications. Hence postmodernism can at best be described as a ‘movement’ which can be found in different disciplines - in philosophy, architecture, music, literature, politics and so on - but in different moods.

This paper highlights that both Mādhyamika thinkers and Derrida develop deconstructive theories of meaning based on the similar ideas of *Différance* and *differentiatum* to deconstruct the western idealism and Buddhist essentialism respectively. Derrida holds that the western idealists from Plato to Heidegger operate through a false conception of language and the history of logocentrism is an outcome of that false conception. They invoke all logos, a linguistic sign, as an intermediary between the transcendental and sensible. Derrida observed, “every name in order to exist and to be meaningful must contain its disputant meanings. Derrida coins the word *Différance*, which means to differ or defer. He argues a sign can’t exist unless it differs spatially and is deferred temporarily from the signified. This being the case, what a name signifies cannot be the pure signified of presence but another signifier, which in turn signifies absence, as well as presence. This goes on and on to infinitude. It follows that the very possibility of the transcendental signified and the Logocentric concepts, supposed in the history of philosophy are all caught in an infinite circularity of signifiers.”⁸

Like Derrida, the Mādhyamika thinkers seek to demolish the onto-theological arguments of Buddhist essentialists by exposing their false conception of language. Whereas Derrida invalidates the intrinsic nature of the logos by demonstrating the Phone as a conventional sign in difference, the Mādhyamika philosophers nullify the ‘intrinsic identity’ (*Svalaksana*) of the name of Non-Existence by showing its conventionality.⁹ Candrakīrti, a great Indian Mādhyamika thinker believes that “whatever meaning they (words) had was acquired by a process of mutual dependence (*Parasparapeksa Sidhih*), with one word depending for its meaning on the network of those that were used before it.”¹⁰ Hence like Derrida, Candrakīrti conceives Linguistic Signification as an interplay of signifiers, and argues on that as a ground against the notion that a word has an intrinsic essence within itself.

Dignāga’s *Apoha-vada* of early Mādhyamika School¹¹ can have an effective comparison with the Semiological base of Derridean Deconstruction.

Derrida seeks to overturn the superiority of the *phone* at the first phase of his deconstruction; and he focuses on the *gram* at the second phase to prevent the re-institution of Logocentrism in the form of materialism. Derrida marks the materialist texts of Marx and Lenin as typical cases, where the signifier

⁸ Jacques, Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1978, pp. 279-80.

⁹ Please refer G.C. Nayak, “The Mādhyamika attack on Essentialism: A critical appraisal”, *Philosophy: East and West* (29), 1979, pp. 467-490.

¹⁰ Malcom, D., Eckel, “Bhavaviveka and the Early Mādhyamika Theories of Language,” *Philosophy: East and West*, 28, 1978, p. 325.

¹¹ Please refer, *On the influence of the early Mādhyamika on Dignāga’s Theory of Apoha*, F. Th. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*, Dover, New York, Vol.1, 1962, pp. 27-31.

‘matter’ has become the absolute cosmological and socio-historical principle. In other words, the signified is reified and turned into a transcendental signified to by most idealists from Plato to Heidegger. To prevent his own *Of Grammatology* from being “re-invested” with the “logocentric values”, Derrida advocates a simultaneous deconstruction of the *gram* and the *phone* and calls such a practice “Biface or biphasé”, “double séance” or “double register in grammatological practice”.¹²

Mādhyaṃika double negation bears the close resemblance to Derridean double seance, as the *Mādhyaṃikas* seek to reduce the physical phenomenon to a mere language thought construct and thereby destroy all realistic schools. Both Mādhyaṃika and Derrida described their double registered deconstruction in terms of “neither/nor.” In the *Positions*, Derrida double negates a host of conceptual opposites endowed with trans-linguistic significance as “the PHARMAKON, which is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither speech nor writing, the supplement is neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside, neither the accident nor essence., etc.,...”¹³

Nāgārjuna also theorizes his destructive dialectics in the same terms of neither/nor logic. Nāgārjuna observes in the *Mādhyaṃika-Kārikā* that from the absolute standpoint, there is neither destruction nor production, neither nihilism nor eternalism, neither unity nor plurality, neither coming in nor going out.¹⁴

Derrida envisions his operation of difference or textual dissemination as “a fourth term”.¹⁵ He renames “Pharmakon”- one of his principal examples of difference as “tetrapharmakon.”¹⁶

Nāgārjuna’s dialectics is marked by four-cornered method of argument, which is best known as – *Catuṣkoṭi*. Like Derrida, Nāgārjuna in order to nullify the three existing kinds of ontological claims, introduces the neither/nor as the fourth term; A thing can originate neither out of itself nor out of a not-self nor out of both nor out of neither.¹⁷ Hence, Derrida and Nāgārjuna aim to destroy not only the fundamental oppositions of being and non-being but also all its attendant duplicities and triplicities.

Both Nāgārjuna and Derrida disposed of their fourth term in order to avoid a fresh dualism between the three preceding terms and their own fourth term. To overcome any sorts of re-inscription, both Derrida and Nāgārjuna undertook self-deconstruction. Derrida writes, “Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one”.¹⁸ Similarly, for instance, the Mādhyaṃikas used the term *Śūnyatā* to deconstruct itself and develop a self-deconstructive doctrine of *Śūnyatā-Śūnyatā* (non-essence of non-essence). We

¹² Derrida, Jacques, *Positions*, Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago university press, Chicago, 1972, pp. 42-45.

¹³ Derrida, Jacques, *Positions*, Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago university press, Chicago, 1972, p. 43.

¹⁴ Nāgārjuna, *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, Ed. By Poussin, Bib. Bud. IV, St. Petersburg, 1903, (taken from Sharma, C.D., A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987, p. 907).

¹⁵ Derrida, Jacques, *Dissemination*, Trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago University Press, Chicago., p.25

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 350.

¹⁷ Quoted in C.D. Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁸ Derrida, Jacques, “Letter to a Japanese friend”, in D. Wood and R Bernasconi, *Derrida and Difference*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988, p.3.

find the following elucidations of Śūnyatā-Śūnyatā – ““non-essence” (Sunya), “non-empty” (asunya), “both” (Śūnya and asūnya), “neither” (Śūnya nor asūnya) -- these should not be declared. It is expressed only for the purpose of communication.”¹⁹

Like Derrida, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti believe that they can truly abolish their own arguments merely by disclaiming them. Hence, they treat *Catuṣkoṭi*, the deconstructive apotheosis, as “mere medicine” and a ‘magically formed phantom’, rather than a positive entity.

To conclude, Derridean and Mādhyamika deconstruction is an attempt to prevent the possibility of theorising a transcendental signifier such as Being or Truth. They do not propagate a theory. They have just done a post-mortem to unravel that it’s naïve to ascribe a transcendental significance status to the referent of language.

Śūnyatā-Śūnyatā and Self-Deconstruction

A particularly radical moment in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is his insistence that even the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) must itself be seen as empty. “Those for whom emptiness is a view are incurable,” he warns.²⁰ In other words, if emptiness is reified into a doctrine, it becomes another dogma, subject to the same critique as other metaphysical claims. Emptiness must therefore deconstruct itself, dissolving even the attachment to emptiness.

Derrida’s deconstruction similarly applies to itself. Deconstruction is not a method or theory that can stand outside what it critiques. As Derrida insists, “deconstruction is not something we impose on texts from the outside; it happens in the text itself.”²¹ Deconstruction deconstructs itself, refusing to become a closed system. This self-reflexivity mirrors Nāgārjuna’s warning: emptiness must not harden into doctrine, just as deconstruction must not harden into method.

Shared Destabilization of Binary Oppositions

Nāgārjuna and Derrida converge most clearly in their destabilization of **binary oppositions**. Nāgārjuna shows that categories such as existence/non-existence, samsara/*Nirvāṇa*, subject/object, cannot be upheld in ultimate terms. Derrida demonstrates that binaries such as speech/writing, presence/absence, male/female, rely on hierarchical exclusions that are always unstable. Both thinkers reveal the relationality of concepts and the impossibility of grounding them in intrinsic essence.²²

¹⁹ Nāgārjuna, *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, (Nāgārjuna: The philosophy of middle way), ed/tr by David J. Kalupahana, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1986, p. 307.

²⁰ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), ch. 13, verse 8, trans. Jay L. Garfield, The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 36.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41.

²² Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 18.

The Problem of Nihilism

Both Nāgārjuna and Derrida faced accusations of nihilism. Critics of Nāgārjuna charged that his doctrine of *Śūnyavāda* denies reality, reducing everything to nothingness. Critics of Derrida accused him of relativism, undermining truth and meaning. Both thinkers rejected these charges.

Nāgārjuna insisted that *Śūnyatā* is not nothingness but the relational nature of phenomena. To misunderstand *Śūnyavāda* as nihilism is to miss the Middle Way. Similarly, Derrida insisted that deconstruction does not destroy meaning but reveals its plurality and complexity. Far from negating truth, deconstruction opens texts to multiple meanings, resisting the tyranny of single interpretations.

Philosophy of Language: Nāgārjuna and Derrida

Language occupies a central place in both Nāgārjuna's and Derrida's projects. For Nāgārjuna, language is an indispensable tool but also a source of delusion when reified. Words carve reality into categories, generating the illusion of essences. The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* demonstrates that all linguistic designations (*prajñapti*) are conventional, arising in dependence on other terms and contexts. Nāgārjuna does not deny the utility of language at the conventional level but insists that it cannot capture ultimate truth (*paramārtha*). Language is a raft, useful but not to be clung to once the crossing has been made.²³

Derrida's critique of logocentrism parallels this insight. Western philosophy, he argues, has privileged speech over writing, assuming that spoken words provide direct access to thought and presence. Writing was relegated to a derivative status, a mere supplement. Derrida overturns this hierarchy, showing that speech itself is marked by **iterability**: words function because they can be repeated in contexts beyond their origin. This repeatability makes communication possible but also means that meaning is never fully secured.²⁴

When read together, Nāgārjuna and Derrida present a powerful **non-essentialist philosophy of language**. Nāgārjuna demonstrates that linguistic designations lack inherent reference; Derrida shows that they lack stable presence. Both reveal language as a system of relational play rather than a transparent medium of essence. Yet their purposes diverge: Nāgārjuna deploys this critique to dissolve attachment and cultivate compassion, while Derrida emphasizes the undecidability and openness of meaning as an ethical demand for responsibility.

²³ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), ch. 24, verse 18, trans. Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 69.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 65.

Ethics and Responsibility: Compassion and Undecidability

A crucial difference between Nāgārjuna and Derrida lies in their ethical orientations. Nāgārjuna's philosophy is rooted in the **Buddhist soteriological project**: to free beings from suffering. The realization of emptiness is not an end in itself but a means of cultivating non-attachment and compassion. If all beings are empty of intrinsic essence, then clinging to self and other is misguided. This recognition fosters the Bodhisattva ideal: the commitment to work for the liberation of all beings. Emptiness thus grounds a profoundly compassionate ethic.²⁵

Derrida, writing in a postmodern, secular context, does not frame his philosophy in soteriological terms. Yet, he too articulates an ethic of responsibility. Deconstruction reveals that decisions must be made without the guarantee of final justification. This undecidability does not absolve us of responsibility but intensifies it: every decision involves risk, openness to the other, and the impossibility of complete certainty. Derrida's reflections on justice, hospitality, and forgiveness emphasize that these values cannot be codified into definitive rules; they remain **"undeconstructible" horizons** toward which we must strive without closure.²⁶

The ethical convergence between Nāgārjuna and Derrida lies in their refusal of absolute certainty. For Nāgārjuna, clinging to views perpetuates suffering; for Derrida, clinging to fixed categories forecloses ethical responsibility. Both cultivate humility: Nāgārjuna through compassion grounded in emptiness, Derrida through responsibility grounded in undecidability.

Intercultural Philosophy: Bridging East and West

The comparative study of Nāgārjuna and Derrida exemplifies the potential of **intercultural philosophy**. Too often, philosophy has been framed as either "Eastern" or "Western," with little cross-dialogue. Yet the parallels between Nāgārjuna and Derrida reveal that fundamental questions about essence, meaning, and language transcend cultural boundaries.

Nāgārjuna demonstrates that the critique of essence is not uniquely postmodern but has deep roots in Buddhist thought. Derrida shows that deconstruction is not an exotic import but arises from the tensions within Western metaphysics itself. By bringing them together, we can articulate a global discourse of **non-essentialist critique** that enriches both traditions.

²⁵ David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 189.

²⁶ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 24.

Such intercultural dialogue also challenges stereotypes. Buddhism is often caricatured as mystical or irrational, while deconstruction is dismissed as nihilistic or relativistic. In fact, both are rigorous philosophical projects that interrogate the very conditions of meaning and existence. By studying them together, we open new pathways for philosophy that are neither narrowly Eurocentric nor limited to cultural essentialisms.

Contemporary Relevance: Literature and Hermeneutics

Deconstruction has had a transformative impact on literary theory, challenging the idea of stable meaning and authorial intention. Nāgārjuna's emphasis on emptiness similarly destabilizes fixed interpretations. In both cases, texts become open fields of meaning, resisting closure. Comparative readings could show how *Mādhyamika* hermeneutics and deconstruction converge in treating interpretation as an ongoing process rather than a recovery of essence.

Contemporary Relevance: Law and Justice

Derrida's essay "Force of Law" demonstrates how legal systems rest on undecidable foundations, requiring decisions without ultimate justification.²⁷ Nāgārjuna's insight that concepts are empty resonates here: laws, like *dharma*s, lack intrinsic essence, functioning only through relational convention. Both perspectives can inform contemporary legal theory, highlighting the necessity of humility and compassion in judgment.

Contemporary Relevance: Feminism and Postcolonial Studies

Deconstruction has been influential in feminist and postcolonial theory by exposing the hierarchical binaries (male/female, colonizer/colonized) that structure discourse. Nāgārjuna's critique of intrinsic nature offers a complementary resource: gender and identity are empty of essence, constructed relationally. Bringing *Mādhyamika* insights into dialogue with deconstruction enriches critiques of essentialism in contemporary identity politics.

In our present era, questions of meaning and interpretation extend into the realm of technology. Machine learning systems operate through differential relations, statistical models that echo Derrida's *différance*. At the same time, these systems risk reifying biases into rigid categories. A Nāgārjunian perspective on emptiness could remind us that categories lack intrinsic essence, cautioning against treating algorithmic classifications as final truths. Together, Derrida and Nāgārjuna provide resources for a critical ethics of technology --- alert to undecidability, openness, and the dangers of reification.²⁸

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 242.

²⁸ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 33.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Nāgārjuna and Derrida reveals a striking convergence in their radical non-essentialism. Both reject intrinsic essences, destabilize binary oppositions, and reveal the relational and unstable character of meaning. Nāgārjuna articulates this through *Śūnyavāda* and dependent origination; Derrida through deconstruction and *différance*. Both apply their critique reflexively: *Śūnyatā* itself must not be grasped as a metaphysical view (*dṛṣṭi*), deconstruction deconstructs itself.

Yet the differences are equally significant. Nāgārjuna situates his philosophy within a Buddhist soteriological framework, aiming at liberation and compassion. Derrida, by contrast, emphasizes undecidability and ethical responsibility within textual and philosophical contexts. The former moves toward non-attachment and *Nirvāṇa*; the latter toward openness and justice-to-come.

Taken together, Nāgārjuna and Derrida exemplify a **global philosophy of deconstruction**, one that transcends cultural boundaries and addresses universal questions about meaning, essence, and responsibility. In a time of cultural fragmentation and technological transformation, their insights remain profoundly relevant, reminding us that truth lies not in fixed essences but in the openness of relationality and the humility of non-attachment.

