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Madhyamaka Emptiness and Metaphysical Coherentism

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Abstract

Metaphysical Coherentism is a relatively underexplored position within the analytic philosophical tradition. On the contrary, its two essential features- interdependence and a lack of independent foundations- are thoroughly considered by Madhyamaka Buddhist metaphysics, as a result of Nāgārjuna's development of the doctrine of emptiness. This paper has two main aims. First is to demonstrate that Madhyamaka pictures of interdependence and emptiness can be directly compared with contemporary pictures of coherentism. I defend this comparison by showing that there are close connections between the two components of Swiderski's (2024) *Coherentist Canon*, and the core Madhyamaka concepts of *Śūnyatā* and *Pratītyasamutpāda.* Second, I aim to show that making such a comparison can be mutually beneficial for philosophers working within both the Buddhist tradition and the contemporary analytic tradition. These benefits are explored through applications of various coherentist structures, in a way that sheds light on puzzles surrounding Madhyamaka ontological structure. Further, I offer suggestions of how Buddhist concepts might help the coherentist respond to challenges. Comparative analysis of emptiness and coherentism is argued to be worthwhile given its capacity to provide insight into universal questions to do with fundamentality and reality's structure.

1. Introduction

Contemporary analytic metaphysics is guilty of under-scrutinising the common assumption that there must be something that exists that is fundamental. The search for the nature of fundamentalia often drives analytic enquiry. We search for phenomena can be reduced to, grounded by, or explained by others, in the hope that we may finally reach some ultimate building block(s) that cannot be explained down any further. Whatever we find in this ultimate position is supremely important for the rest of reality. All things depend on it, whilst it depends on nothing.

Despite 'foundationalism' of this kind dominating analytic metaphysics, alternatives have begun to be taken more seriously. Enquiry into 'anti-foundationalist' alternatives has taken two major forms: enquiry into versions of *infinitism* (the thesis that involves 'turtles all the

way down' or an infinite chain of dependence), and enquiry into *coherentism* (the thesis where dependence can behave in a non-standard way, giving rise to webs and loops in addition to standard 'chain-like' structures).

This paper will contribute to the little there is on metaphysical coherentist possibilities. Coherentism embraces interdependence, of the kind where an entity, *(a)*, and another entity, *(b)*, can depend on each other symmetrically. This opens possibilities for structures of dependence where entities and phenomena are mutually dependent, or mutually supporting, so that no independent, ultimate fundamentalia is required to support the structure. Coherentism has received relatively little attention from analytic metaphysicians, with notable recent exceptions including Bliss and Priest (2018), Thompson (2016, 2018), Morganti (2018), Morganti and Calosi (2021) and Swiderski (2024).

I argue that the kind of metaphysical structure that coherentism involves has been more thoroughly examined by Buddhist philosophers. Since the dawn of Mahāyāna Buddhism, majorly influenced by Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, the concept of *emptiness* has played a vital role in the development of Buddhist metaphysics. Authors such as Westerhoff (2007), Priest (2015) and Kang (2025a) provide illumination of the illusive Buddhist concept of emptiness, in terms of *interdependence*. With this precedence for understanding interdependence as the cornerstone of both the Madhyamaka Buddhist concept of emptiness, and the analytic thesis of coherentism, this sets the scene for my analysis and comparison of emptiness and coherentism side by side. Following a similar sentiment as Kang (2025a), I hope to show that tools from contemporary analytic metaphysics and ideas from classical Buddhist philosophy can be mutually informing, illuminating murky details around universal questions to do with dependence and fundamentality.

The plan for achieving this involves first setting out the key pillars of metaphysical coherentism, which means discussing symmetric ontological dependence, and a lack of fundamental foundations (§2). I then elaborate further on the connections between coherentism and emptiness, offering an argument to the effect that we have reason for exploring them in parallel (§3). I outline a number of variations of coherentist pictures (following recent work by Swiderski, 2024) (§4), before applying these variations to interpret Nāgārjuna's metaphysics, and suggesting how a coherentist lens may be helpful for responding to puzzles raised by Madhyamaka emptiness (§5). The final section will offer some suggestions regarding ways in which consideration of emptiness can inform current contemporary discussions about coherentism, and some comparative conclusions (§5).

2. Coherentism's Core Commitments

Metaphysical coherentism is most commonly presented as an alternative to the orthodox position of metaphysical foundationalism. Coherentism offers the possibility that there need not be anything fundamental, when fundamentality is understood in terms of ontological independence.[1] The indicator of any foundationalist view is the commitment to the existence of some entity or phenomena that depends on nothing else for its existence. In contrast, the coherentist holds that all existing things depend on some other thing for their existence. When fundamentality is understood as akin to ontological independence, this renders all coherentist views and varieties as anti-foundationalist.[2]

This rejection of traditional foundationalism forms the first of two core tenets of coherentism, that make up Swiderski's (2024) Coherentist Canon:

"*Coherentist Canon*: (i) For any *x*, there is some *y* such that *y* grounds *x*, and (ii) there is some *z* and some *w* such that *z* (perhaps indirectly) grounds *w* and *vice versa*." (2024: 1864)[3]

The second part of the canon is what sets coherentism apart from versions of anti-foundationalism that commonly receive the most attention: forms of *infinitism*. The infinitist regards reality's structure in line with linear chains of dependence, that conform to strict partial ordering. Infinite chains connect the less fundamental to the more fundamental through asymmetric relations. The key difference between the standard foundationalist and the infinitist is that the former commits to a place where these chains

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[1] For the purposes of this paper, I will assume an understanding of 'fundamental entities' as 'ontologically independent entities'. An understanding of fundamentality in line with 'ontological independence' is less restrictive than one that involves more loaded terms such as 'ungrounded' or 'unbuilt'. The reader is welcome to interpret 'ontological (in)dependence' to involve whatever kinds of metaphysical dependence relations that they take to be relevant to the issue of fundamentality. For more on the issue of characterising fundamentality in terms of *absolute* or *restricted* dependence, see Tahko (2023).

[2] When fundamentality is understood otherwise, coherentism can be compatible with the existence of something fundamental. For example, Morganti and Dorato's (2022) coherentist proposal suggests that entities that ontologically depend on others could be understood as fundamental. This compatibility between a coherentist picture and fundamental entities parts ways with the majority of the literature, and requires giving up Hume's dictum (see Morganti and Dorato 2022: 16-18).

[3] Whilst Swiderski uses 'grounding' terminology, I prefer more neutral 'dependence' terminology. According to some accounts, grounding relations cannot be symmetric, which is why I prefer dependence. For purposes of simplicity, I treat Swiderski's claims about what grounds what as equivalent to claims about what depends on what. I also part ways with Swiderski by discussing coherentism that involves relations between *entities* rather than relations between *facts*, in alignment with other parts of the limited literature on coherentism.

of dependence must 'bottom out', or end, wherever there is some fundamentalia that depend on nothing else. In contrast, the latter commit to the infinite descent of these chains of dependence, so that ontologically independent fundamentalia are never reached.

Coherentism parts ways with both pictures just described, by accepting the possibility of symmetric instances of dependence relations. This possibility is unorthodox for analytic metaphysicians to accept. Asymmetry is one of three standardly accepted structural properties of ontological dependence relations, alongside irreflexivity and transitivity.[4] Together, these three standard properties ensure that dependence relations can only function in limited ways, that adhere to our intuitive understanding. These limitations can be understood as a set of rules that produce strict partial ordering of entities that enter into dependence relations.

To illustrate, take the familiar (and simplified) physicalist claim that the any mental phenomenon, say, the experience of an emotion, depends on some physical phenomenon, such as neural activity in the brain. This dependence relation is typically taken to be irreflexive, asymmetric and transitive. The emotion cannot depend upon itself, it must depend on something else, like physical processes in the brain. Therefore, the relation is not reflexive. If the mental phenomenon depends on the physical phenomenon, then the physical phenomenon cannot depend on the mental phenomenon. Therefore, the relation is not symmetric. If some social phenomenon depends on the mental (the experience of the emotion), and the mental depends on the physical (the occurrence of neural activity), then the social phenomenon depends on the physical phenomenon. Therefore, the relation is transitive.

The key place where the coherentist parts ways with these standard claims about dependence, is regarding the requirement for all instances of dependence to be asymmetric. Recently, analytic metaphysicians have argued for the existence of counterexamples to the asymmetry of dependence. Most notably, these include Bliss and Priest (2018), Thompson (2018), Barnes (2018) and Morganti and Calosi (2021). Potential counterexamples to asymmetric dependence that they identify include the mutual dependence between:

- The north pole of a magnet and the south pole of a magnet. (Bliss and Priest, 2018: 14).

[4] See Bliss and Priest (2018), 'The Geography of Fundamentality' for an overview.

- The proposition A = <B is true> and the proposition B = <A is true> (in a case where both A and B are true). (Thompson 2018: 111).
- A number and any other number (according to the mathematical structuralist) (Barnes 2018: 66)
- Any two entangled quantum systems (Morganti and Calosi 2021: 881-885)

To give detail of the arguments for why these should be taken as genuine instances of symmetrical ontological dependence is beyond the scope of this paper. I present them here merely to demonstrate that there are doubts surrounding the orthodox rule of the asymmetry of all ontological dependence relations. If it is possible that there are instances where <A depends on B>, whilst simultaneously <B depends on A>, then there is reason to pay coherentist structures more attention than they currently get. Undermining this constraint on dependence relations means opening up new possibilities for structures that dependence relations can create, beyond only linear chains and simple hierarchies. The possibility of cases of symmetric dependence introduces room for dependence loops, circular structures, or complex web-like structures. For an illustration of the difference made by accepting the possibility of symmetric dependence relations, compare the dependence structures represented by the figures below.

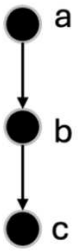


Figure 1: A simple structure containing only asymmetric dependence relations (represented by single ended arrows), between three entities (represented by a, b and c).

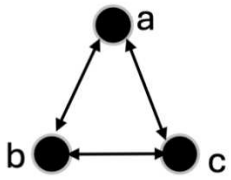


Figure 2: A simple structure containing only symmetric dependence relations (represented by double ended arrows), between three entities (represented by a, b and c).

The commitment to at least one instance of a symmetrical dependence relation makes up the second part of Swiderski's Coherentist Canon. Together with the commitment that all things depend on some other thing, these two commitments characterise coherentism in its broadest terms. Any position that makes these two commitments can be understood as

coherentist (2024: 1864). For clarity, a reminder of the Coherentist Canon (CC) is provided below:

"Coherentist Canon: (i) For any *x*, there is some *y* such that *y* grounds *x*, and (ii) there is some *z* and some *w* such that *z* (perhaps indirectly) grounds *w* and *vice versa*." (2024: 1864).

3. Connections between Coherentist Commitments and Buddhist Concepts

I turn to motivating the forthcoming comparisons between the coherentist structures and Madhyamaka metaphysics. This motivation involves drawing a parallel between the two criteria for coherentism set out in Swiderski's (CC) and two core concepts that lie at the heart Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy; *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*.

Reasoning to motivate this comparison can be summarised as follows:

1) Component (i) of the CC (anti-foundationalism) is closely connected to *Śūnyatā.*

2) Component (ii) of the CC (interdependence) is closely connected to *Pratītyasamutpāda*.

3) *Śūnyatā* and *Pratītyasamutpāda* are central concepts throughout Madhyamaka Buddhism.

Therefore, we have reason to investigate forms of coherentism and forms of Madhyamaka emptiness in conjunction.

I begin with (1). *Śūnyata,* often translated as 'emptiness', can be understood as the way that all phenomena are empty of 'intrinsic', 'inherent', or 'independent' nature, captured by the Buddhist term *svabhava* (Westerhoff 2007: 17, Priest 2009: 467). Despite vast variation of interpretations of emptiness, there one point on which all commentators agree: that *śūnyatā* is the universal absence of *svabhava.*

Nāgārjuna's most vital work detailing a series of arguments in favour of *śūnyatā* was the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK, or *The Fundamental Verses of The Middle Way*). Candrakīrti's commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* suggests that 15:2b offers a definition of *svabhava* in terms of ontological independence: 'This is the definition of it: *Svabhava* is not artificially created and not dependent on anything else.' (Trans Westerhoff, 2007: 21). A number of other authors and commentators have followed, characterising the *svabhava* as

akin to ontological independence. For example, according to Priest, 'something that has *svabhava* is something which is what it is independently of anything else. It's kind of a metaphysical atom, if you like' (2018b). If an entity does not have *svabhava,* it does not exist 'from its own side' (Garfield, 1995: 89). An entity that possesses *svabhava* can be appropriately understood as an entity that is foundational or fundamental. It depends on nothing else for its existence or nature.

Nāgārjuna's arguments in the MMK follow a formula which involves identifying a candidate substance or phenomena which we naturally assume to have independent existence. Each argument then systematically eliminates all possible ways in which this candidate could be understood to possess *svabhava*. The conclusion is one of universal emptiness, where all things depend on something else for their existence; a radical revision of previous Buddhist ideas.[5]

By understanding *svabhava* in terms of ontological independence, the existence of which indicates some form of foundationalism, we can read off an understanding of *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* can be understood as the universal lack of any existing entity with ontological independence and hence, *śūnyatā* is an indicator of anti-foundationalism. This understanding is shared by Garfield (1995: 88) who translates emptiness as 'the Buddhist technical term for the lack of independent existence, inherent existence, or essence in things' and by Bliss (2026: 12), who explicitly connects Nāgārjuna's arguments for *śūnyatā* with anti-foundationalism:

"According to the doctrine of emptiness as presented in the MMK… absolutely everything is purely dependently existent; there is nothing that exists independently. In other words, the metaphysic presented in the MMK is a species of anti-foundationalism — the view according to which there is nothing fundamental"

If this interpretation is accurate, and *śūnyatā* implies the lack of existence of fundamentalia, then *śūnyatā* can be directly compared with the first requirement of the Coherentist Canon- the denial of anything that exists independently or fundamentally.

[5] *Śūnyatā* comes from *Śūnya*, a foundational concept in Buddhism since the Pali Canon. Early Abhidharma Buddhist schools considered objects and selves to be empty (*Śūnya*), dependent for their nature on *dharmas* and *skandhas* (Pappu 2019: 40). Mahāyāna schools universalise this idea into emptiness (*Śūnyatā*), arguing that it is not only objects and selves that lack independent existence, but also *dharmas, skandas*, and everything else.

Turning towards defending (2), I argue that the second requirement of the CC, the presence of some instance of symmetric dependence, is implied by a second central Buddhist concept: *pratītyasamutpāda*. Garfield's influential 1995 translation of the MMK features the term *pratītyasamutpāda* translated as 'co-dependent arising'. Through 'co-dependent arising', each entity may lack their own intrinsic nature, and instead possess a relational nature, comprised of the influence of a multitude of other phenomena on which it depends. Entities that arise and cease through *pratītyasamutpāda* can be thought of as being dependent on other entities for their existence and nature. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2012) puts it, something that is 'empty' of one's own nature, can be understood as 'full' of the nature of other things. In this way, *pratītyasamutpāda* introduces interdependence into the picture, and can be directly compared with the second requirement of the *Coherentist Canon*.

This is a point on which my interpretation parts ways with those of Bliss (2026) and Priest (2018). In her recent paper, Bliss (2026: 14) characterises Nāgārjuna and his Madhyamaka metaphysics as 'infinitist'. That is, lacking any instance of symmetric dependence. Priest shares the same sentiment in his (2018) chapter 'Buddhist dependence', describing the Madhyamaka position as endorsing dependence relations that are irreflexive, transitive, extendable and *asymmetric* (2018a: 130). This means that there are no cases of mutual dependence between two entities, whilst the acceptance of extendibility means that chains of dependence adhering to a strict partial order can extend (or descend) infinitely, making it possible for all things to depend on some other. Given these conflicting interpretations, some further work needs to be done to show that it is appropriate to consider Nāgārjuna in line with coherentism, and that *pratītyasamutpāda* indicates alignment with the second requirement of the CC.

I argue that there are a number of reasons for considering Nāgārjuna as accepting symmetric ontological dependence. First, it seems that there are cases were Nāgārjuna directly refers to symmetric dependence in the MMK, for example 8:12:

'A doer arises dependent on a doing,

and a doing arises dependent on a doer.'

(Trans. Hopkins 1996: 168).

Here it is implied that the 'doer' and the 'doing' are the same in both cases, meaning there is interdependence between the 'doer' and the 'doing'. This isn't a one-off case, as Kang describes: 'Many of Nāgārjuna's arguments appeal to the mutual dependence within

specific clusters of things: causes and their effects, objects and their defining characteristics, agents and their actions, three temporal phases of past, present and future…' (2024: 2)

A second line of reasoning for considering Nāgārjuna to treat *pratītyasamutpāda* in a way that involves symmetry, comes from considering secondary literature that analyses Madhyamaka metaphysics. Authors such as Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (2011) and Bitbol (2019) have suggested understanding *pratītyasamutpāda* in a way that gives rise to 'complex non-linear systems' and the 'cyclic character of chains of dependence', both of which imply that symmetry is feature of co-dependent arising. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (2011) makes a case for understanding *pratītyasamutpāda* as analogous to the dependence at work within 'complex nonlinear systems' found frequently in natural phenomena:

'Systems such as the weather, turbulence in air or liquids, the rise and fall of animal populations or predators and prey, and the behaviour of physical structures, such as bridges… are apt analogues for dependent co-arising in that, despite the fact that their behaviour sometimes seems chaotic, their behaviour actually contains deep, regular patterns.' (2011: 27)

Each of these examples are plausibly understood to contain instances of synchronic symmetrical dependence, arranged in such a pattern that forms a complex dependence network. Similarly, Bitbol (2019:106) emphasises that the 'reciprocity' of the conditioning relation (or the idea that co-dependence arising is mutual) can be supported by the cyclic nature of arising and ceasing phenomena. For example, if we have a simple cyclic dependence loop where (a) depends on (b), (b) depends on (c), and (c) depends on (a), then it is both the case that (a) depends on (b), meanwhile (b) depends (indirectly) on (a), by following the loop around.

With these reasons to accept that Nāgārjuna's view utilizes symmetrical dependence relations, as well as rejecting the existence of any ontologically independent phenomena, I aim to have demonstrated that Nāgārjuna's defence of universal emptiness can be understood as an endorsement of the two the parts of Coherentist Canon. Very little is needed in support of (3)- *Śūnyatā* and *Pratītyasamutpāda* appear frequently throughout the MMK and are commonly accepted as central features of Madhyamaka philosophy both across primary literature and its commentaries and scholarship. Madhyamaka was highly influential in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the universalisation of the doctrine of no-self, so that all things (*dharmas*) beyond just selves, were considered empty (*śūnya)* of 'own being' (*svabhava*). (Hamilton 2001: 93)

I aim to have shown that it is appropriate to understand the Madhyamaka school to be in favour of a view that has connections with metaphysical coherentism, and it is appropriate to investigate this connection further. In the following section, I introduce Swiderski's taxonomy of four different kinds of coherentist structure, so that they can offer opportunities to understand more about the kind of metaphysical picture defended by the Madhyamika.

4. Diversity of Coherentist Models

The *Coherentist Canon* leaves room for a number of diverse positions regarding how entities are structured that can come under the heading 'coherentism'. Swiderski (2024) sets out a useful framework for understanding four variations of coherentist structure, ranging in their level of revision and diversion away from standard, orthodox foundationalism. Here I will outline four different varieties identified by Swiderski[6], in order to be able to show how diverse coherentist structures may be utilized by the Buddhist when responding to puzzles surrounding Madhyamaka metaphysics.

Holism

'Holist coherentism' is the 'purest' form of coherentism. It refers to a structure in which a single web of interdependence relates all existing entities through symmetrical ontological dependence relations. Holism could be considered the paradigm coherentist picture. There are those including Morganti (2018: 269) who consider holist coherentism to be the only form of true coherentism, with all other coherentist options to be explored shortly as 'hybrid' impure forms of coherentism. Its maximal dependence between all entities ensures that there couldn't possibly be any additional unique dependence relations[7], as represented by Figure 3.

[6] Swiderski highlights that the four variations of coherentism he identifies are not exclusive. There may be further options created by hybrid cases, which may 'blend' or 'cross-pollinate' those set out under the four broad headings (2024: 1884).

[7] Here, I am referring to the maximum number of dependence relations that *hold between non-identical entities*, rather than including potential reflexive dependence relations.

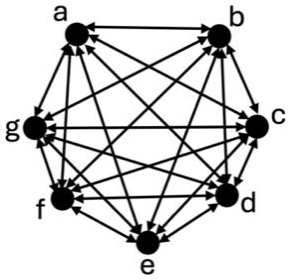


Figure 3: A Holist Coherentist Network

Every entity is related through symmetrical dependence to every other entity in the network, meaning all relations 'horizontally' connect all entities, existing at the 'same level' of priority or fundamentality. Swiderski warns that holist coherentism is strongly revisionary, and is the furthest departure from standard foundationalism of any of the coherentist options. With this in mind, there are three less radical coherentist options to introduce.

Insularism

'Insularism' is a form of coherentism within which there are multiple structures, each with the maximum number of dependence relations between the entities they contain. Each structure is disconnected from the others, like 'islands'. Within a single island, all entities are symmetrically dependent on all other entities. There are no dependence relations between members of different islands. A world structured in this way, containing multiple separated island networks can successfully meet the two coherentist criteria, by resisting commitment to any independent entities, and by exhibiting instances of symmetrical dependence relations.

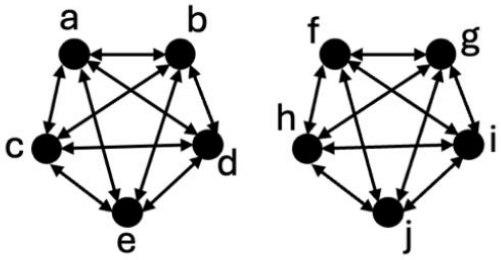


Figure 4: Insularist coherentist structure (containing multiple disconnected networks).

Hierarchism

A 'hierarchist' coherentist structure retains differences in ontological priority, by positing asymmetrical relations between different 'levels' of reality. However, each of these 'levels' contains extensive webs of symmetrical dependence within. Hierarchism could be seen as a hybrid structure, reconciling both linear, asymmetric dependence, and non-linear symmetric dependence. It maintains a more traditional 'layered' conception of reality, whilst also retaining interdependent networks at each layer. Figure 5 illustrates such a structure.

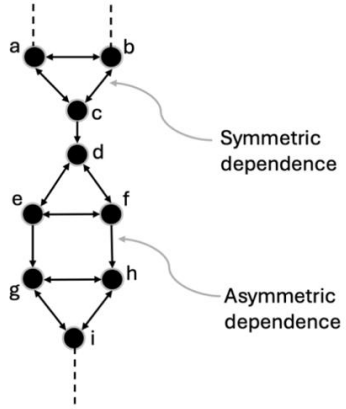


Figure 5: Hierarchist coherentist structure

The representation of a simple hierarchist structure that is given in Figure 5 contains three layers, each containing the maximum number of symmetrical dependence relations between three nodes (a, b and c), (d, e and f) and (g, h and i). Each layer containing mutually dependent entities is linked by an asymmetric dependence relation to create a linear and hierarchical structure, reminiscent of traditional foundationalism.

A hierarchist structure may permit infinite descent or infinite ascent of layers, each consisting of a contained network of mutual dependence (as illustrated above by the dotted lines above and below the structure). If the hierarchist prefers their picture to be open to infinite layers at either end, then their position can be characterised by an infinite chain of layers (that differ in level of ontological priority), in which every layer contains complex webs of dependence.

Rebarism

The fourth option, 'rebarism', falls furthest in the direction of traditional foundationalism. For the rebarist, there is only one 'layer' that is structured as a web of mutual dependence, which is the 'most fundamental' level. This level exists at the bottom of a chain of

asymmetric dependence. All other derivative things stand in typical asymmetric relations, producing a standard foundationalist structure. Figure 6 illustrates a rebarist structure, in which the layer of the greatest ontological priority (d, e and f) is the only layer that contains symmetric dependence relations, and is structured as an interdependent web.

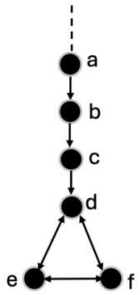


Figure 6: Rebarist coherentist structure.

Rather than interdependent webs at every level, the rebarist holds that it is only the foundational level where entities mutually support each other. The foundation of the rebarist structure is analogous to the physical foundations of a tall building or skyscraper, which give support to the structure through interwoven pieces of metal to create a *rebar*. Rebarism is compatible with infinite ascent of layers, however the structure must be closed at the bottom. There must be a final 'supporting' layer of the chain, which is unique for containing dependence loops, where the rest of the structure contains only asymmetric dependence.

Both hierarchism and rebarism depart from 'pure' or 'full blown' coherentism, due to their inclusion of asymmetric dependence relations. The asymmetry of the relations which hold between different layers of reality introduce differences in ontological priority between parts of the world. The resulting structures fail to retain maximal interdependence- the inclusion of some asymmetric relations means that not all entities depend on all other entities. For this reason, hierarchism and rebarism might be considered 'hybrid' views between coherentism and foundationalism. Bliss (2011, 187–188), for example, refers to structures such as these as "weak coherence", that can be contrasted with the "strong coherence" of a structure that contains maximal interdependence. However, according to Swiderski's coherentist canon, all four of the variations introduced qualify as full-blown forms of coherentism, since they adhere to the two requirements of the CC.

5. Applying Coherentist Variations to Madhyamaka Puzzles

After outlining the various kinds of structure that can fall under the Coherentist umbrella according to Swiderrski's account, I turn towards applying these, to see how we might use coherentist variations to shed light on puzzles surrounding Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy. This section explores two cases intended to show how coherentist structures can help clarify the details of a Madhyamaka picture of emptiness, and its relationships with other Buddhist schools. I begin with addressing the issue of how to differentiate between Madhyamaka commitments, and those of other Mahāyāna schools that followed. More specifically, I'm interested in addressing how we might make sense of the Madhyamaka position that all things depend on *some* other thing, as opposed to all things depending on *all* other things.

5.1 Madhyamaka and Chinese Buddhist Metaphysics

It is generally accepted that one key difference between the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, and the Chinese developments of emptiness that came later, is the shift from *some* interdependence to *total* interdependence. This difference is summarised by Kang (2025a: 2): "Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness, while foundational for Chinese Buddhism, differs crucially from later theses of pervasive interconnectedness. The absence of primary existents entails only that everything depends on something—not that everything depends on everything else."

Swiderski's four variations of coherentism allow us to cash out this difference. The only form of coherentism that commits to pervasive or total interdependence, is holist coherentism. This makes holist coherentism the most promising candidate for capturing the metaphysical commitments made by Chinese Buddhist schools like Sanlun and Huayan. As previously noted, coherentism consisting of total interdependence (holist coherentism) has often been considered the *only* form of coherentism. This may be the reason that motivates Priest (2018a) and Bliss (2026) to characterise Nāgārjuna as infinitist rather than coherentist. If coherentism were to require that all things depend on *all* other things, and Nāgārjuna's position is that all things depend on *some* other things, then Nāgārjuna's position falls short of coherentism, and is best characterised as a form of infinitism. However, Swiderski demonstrates that coherentist possibilities can extend

beyond holist coherentism. Madhyamaka emptiness is open to interpretation in terms of any of the other three forms of coherentism: insularism, hierarchism and rebarism.

There is reason to consider insularist coherentism as the most natural fit for Madhyamaka Buddhism. Consider again, Kang (2025a: 2): "Many of Nāgārjuna's arguments appeal to the mutual dependence within *specific clusters* of things: causes and their effects, objects and their defining characteristics, agents and their actions, arising and dissolution, the three temporal phases of past, present, and future, and so on… Although Nāgārjuna identifies *specific clusters* of mutual dependence… these limited scopes fall short of the kind of pervasive interconnectedness developed in Chinese Buddhism."

These 'clusters', with their limited scopes could be understood as 'islands' of insularist coherentism. Following Kang's characterisation, one way of carving up phenomena into distinct island networks of co-dependent arising, is to suggest that each island contains just those phenomena found within a single argument in the MMK. This would result in an island of interdependence containing concrete phenomena that act as causes and effects, a separate island of interdependence consisting of particulars and properties, another island of interdependence containing temporal phases, and so on.

However, there is also reason to doubt an insularist interpretation of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. The complete disconnect between insularist 'islands' poses a problem when seriously considering emptiness. If there is no dependence between 'islands', it is unclear how they are to co-arise, and how each island refrains from having svabhava. Those who are suspicious that 'islands' of dependence can be so disconnected, may prefer a heirarchist or rebarist interpretation, as long as they are willing to accept that Nāgārjuna introduces ontological hierarchy somewhere within his formulation of emptiness.

As a final alternative, I circle back to considering the compatibility between Nāgārjuna's emptiness and holist coherentism. The reasoning used by the Huayan Buddhist to go from *some* interdependence to *all,* is 'perfectly sound with Madhyamaka reasoning' according to Priest (2015: 225), though he notes that the reasoning is not explicitly given within Madhyamaka texts. Though holist coherentism is not explicitly endorsed by Nāgārjuna, it is not ruled out either. Given that the following reasoning is sound according to both schools, Nāgārjuna's more moderate interdependence is consistent with the Huayan school's more extreme interdependence.

(1) Everything is empty.

(2) Emptiness itself, is empty (emptiness does not have *svabhava*).

(3) Emptiness itself must depend on other things.

(4) Emptiness itself depends on empty entities.

(5) By the transitivity of dependence, all empty entities depend on all other empty entities. [8]

This reasoning draws upon the 'emptiness of emptiness', a feature found within the MMK that is notoriously difficult to interpret. Here, 'emptiness itself' as a feature of all entities, is reified in a way that allows it capacity to be empty, and hence, dependent on other things. This kind of reification that allows for the transitivity of dependence to be applied could be considered controversial. On the other hand, it could be argued that claiming emptiness itself is something capable of being empty, is just to say that emptiness lacks any self- being, which opposes reification, and should be considered uncontroversial. Depending on one's interpretation of the emptiness of emptiness, and whether one accepts the above reasoning, one may be inclined to consider Madhyamaka metaphysics as compatible with holist coherentism.

5.2 Yogācāra-Madhyamaka

The second application of coherentism I consider involves its capacity to offer resolutions to the puzzle of the internal consistency of Yogācāra-Madhyamaka. I this section, move on from showing how coherentism can help distinguish Madhyamaka from other Mahāyāna schools, and instead explore how coherentism can help show how two traditionally opposed Mahāyāna schools can be consistent when merged.

Yogācāra-Madhyamaka emerged out of a relationship between the two principle Mahāyāna schools, most commonly understood as rivals. This development in Buddhist philosophy began being recorded during the 8th century, synthesising the Madhyamika's emphasis on universal emptiness, and the 'mind-only' metaphysical approach characteristic of Yogācāra. Traditionally, the Yogācāra school is thought to conflict with Madhyamaka, by committing to the view that mental phenomena like consciousness exist at the ultimate fundamental

[8] This reasoning is reconstructed from Priest (2015: 225).

level, on which all of the external reality that we perceive depends. For this reason, the possibility of this synthesis itself raises a puzzle, since it is straightforward to show that these two schools seem to be incompatible. As Garfield and Westerhoff explain, 'the Madhyamika claims to have shown that all attempts to postulate some kind of substantial entity with an intrinsic nature, something existing by *svabhava*, leads to a contradiction. Yet the Yogacarin does precisely this when claiming that there is one fundamental way reality really is- that it is all mental.' (2015: 166). At their heart, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra seem directly opposed; whilst the Madhyamika is an anti-foundationalist, the Yogacarin commits to consciousness at the foundational level of reality.

Nevertheless, a synthesis of these two systems known as Yogācāra-Madhyamaka was formulated by Indian master Śāntarakṣita, who's famous verse of the *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* tells us that both Yogācāra and Madhyamaka thought is required to achieve true Mahāyāna philosophy:

'Riding the chariot of the two systems, holding the reigns of reasoning, the Mahāyāna is indeed obtained' (92-93 trans. Garfield and Westerhoff 2015: 7).

'The realization of Mahāyāna is therefore not obtained by choosing between two contradictory philosophical systems, but by applying the arguments of each in its proper place' (Garfield and Westerhoff 2015: 7)

I argue that the varieties of coherentist structure offer ways of rendering Madhyamaka and Yogācāra as consistent with each other. In order to demonstrate how, consider the following metaphor by Bhāviveka, found in his *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā*: "As the succession of leaves etc. comes from the great power in the lotus root, streams of objects come from the mind, though the mind is not fundamentally real" (5.48 trans. Westerhoff and Garfield 2015: 7). By comparing the mind to the lotus flower, Bhāviveka illustrates how the mind can produce all other phenomena, as the lotus flower covers a lake with leaves and flowers that grow from it, *without* needing roots into the ground that act as ultimate foundations. The lotus flower floats on top of the water, giving rise to more life, without embedding roots in the ground, or without having fundamental status. Westerhoff explains 'What we find here is an argument with the key Yogācāra idea that the world is mind-made, without taking on board the further assumption that the mind plays a foundational ontological role' (2015: 7). This kind of ontological structure can be captured by some forms of coherentism. By utilising a hierarchist or rebarist coherentism, the ontological priority of the mind and anti-foundationalism can be reconciled. Both kinds of coherentist structure allow for a network

of mental phenomena that together support all other things, like physical phenomena, without any mental entity being rendered ultimately fundamental, or ontologically independent. Such possibilities are represented by figures 7 and 8.

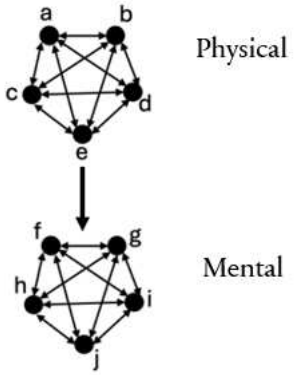


Figure 7: Hierarchist structure containing a network of physical phenomena that depends asymmetrically on a network of mental phenomena.

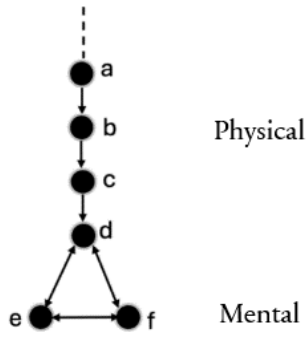


Figure 8: Rebarist structure containing a linear chain of physical phenomena that depend asymmetrically on a network of mental phenomena.

Within both structures represented above, there is no entity that is rendered as 'ultimate' in a way that violates Madhyamaka emptiness, since there is no entity that exists independently, in a way that would possess *svabhava*. Even at the 'bottom' layer, or at the layer with greatest ontological priority (represented by the lotus root), there is a network of dependence that renders all mental phenomena within the network non-fundamental, and empty of *svabhava*. The Yogacarin's priority of the mind and the Madhyamika's rejection of ultimate foundations can both be satisfied within a single picture of the structure of reality if we adopt heirarchist or rebarist coherentism.

There are two further complications to consider. First, is another point over which Madhyamikas and Yogacarins typically disagree. This is to do with whether entities at different ontological levels of reality *depend* on others, or can be *reduced* to others. The Madhyamika holds that the co-dependent arising through which all entities come about renders these entities part of 'conventional' reality rather than 'ultimate reality;' nevertheless, they maintain that these 'conventional' entities *do exist*. However, when the Yogacarin talks

of the mental phenomena at the level of ultimate reality, that give rise to all other entities in the external world that have conventional reality, they will often cast doubt over whether these entities that the level of conventional reality actually do exist. In other words, the relation that prioritises the mental over the physical functions less like ontological dependence, and instead functions like one of reduction. The physical world can be reduced to consciousness, and therefore the physical world doesn't really exist. 'For Yogacara the real [ultimate] exists but the conventional does not exist. For Madhyamaka the real [ultimate] does not exist but the conventional does exist' (Yijing 635-713 trans Lusthause, in Eckel 2008: 69. My parenthesis added).

We can use Swiderski's coherentist variations to represent the structures of reality that emerge if we prefer the Madhyamika's relations of dependence, or the Yogacarin's reduction. If the take the physical world to be related to the mental world through dependence, then we get a heirarchist or rebarist structure like the ones represented earlier by figures 7 and 8. Instead, if we prefer the Yogacarin's suggestion that the physical world is reducible to the mental world, then we get a holist structure, within which the network contains only mental phenomena, represented by figure 9. If all other entities reduce to a network of mental entities, then the only part of the structures represented by figures 7 and 8 that remain is the network at the 'bottom' layer of the structure.

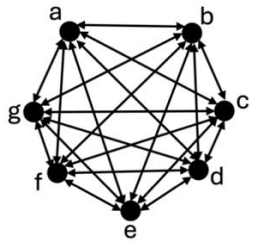


Figure 9: Holist coherentist structure containing only mental phenomena

The second further consideration, involves a different way of reconciling the two systems. This alternative takes a step further in the direction of Madhyamaka. The alternative involves accepting the Yogacarin's view that the physical world depends on the mental. However, also accepting that this is only half of the complete picture. Nāgārjuna argues that the Yogacarin is correct to identify the dependence of the physical on the mental, but that in addition, there must be dependence in the opposite direction, since the activity of consciousness must depend on the physical body (Westerhoff 2015: 174). This alternative possibility for reconciliation involves positing additional dependence relations to the Yogācāra view, so that the mental and physical exist in a mutually dependent way, and the mental does not play a foundational role.

'This means that we do not have a well-founded chain of existential dependence with macroscopic objects depending on the four great elements, which in turn depend on consciousness, which is the basic foundation of all that exists. Instead, we have a circular dependence structure: matter existentially depends on consciousness in the way that the Yogacarin has just indicated, but it is also the case that consciousness depends on matter (and more specifically, on the body), since without matter there would be no manifestation of consciousness.' (Westerhoff 2015: 174).

By taking this route towards compatibility between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, we result, once again, in a holist coherentist structure. According to this picture, there is a symmetrical dependence relation posited between a network of mental phenomena and a network of physical phenomena, as shown in figure 10. The two networks exist 'horizontally' at the 'same level of reality'. By the transitivity of dependence, all phenomena in the mental network depend on all phenomena in the physical, and vice versa, thereby resulting in a holist network containing both physical and mental.

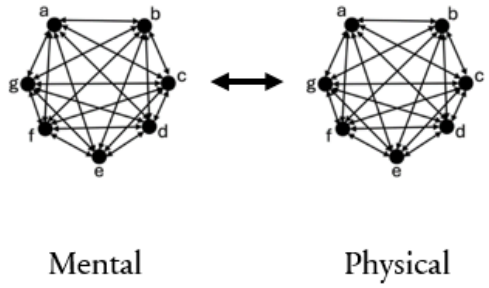


Figure 10: Mental and physical networks symmetrically depend on each other, resulting in holist coherentism.

With this alternative solution, I hope to have shown that coherentism's variations provide a versatile framework for accommodating a number of different solutions to the puzzle of compatibility between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. On a broader note, I aim for this section to have demonstrated just some of the potential applications of coherentist variations to shed light on puzzles surrounding Madhyamaka metaphysics, and as a result, the value of considering coherentism and Madhyamaka side by side. In the final section, I offer some tentative suggestions of how consideration of Buddhist philosophy might offer resources to the Coherentist when responding to potential challenges, in order to show that the comparative advantages are mutual.

6. Madhyamaka and Coherentism: A Mutually Enriching Relationship

To conclude, I aim to show that the benefits of comparison between Madhyamaka and Coherentism go both ways. To achieve this, I consider two kinds of objection raised against the coherentist, and offer some brief responses inspired by Madhyamaka philosophy. Swiderski offers an outline of these two objections, which he labels 'fragility' and 'incredulity' challenges. I consider each in turn.

The fragility challenge highlights how all varieties of coherentism commit to a greater number of dependence relations than we are naturally used to. This makes any entity in the network more fragile and vulnerable to the effects of change or cessation of some other entity in the network. This ripple effect is particularly extreme for pictures of all-pervasive dependence like holist coherentism. According to this kind of picture, a change to the identity of any entity affects the identity of every other existing entity in some way. As a result, such all-pervasive interdependence may be highly revisionary or counterintuitive for anyone who is committed to the stability of identity of any entity over time. The identity of any entity becomes extremely fragile.

In response to this challenge, the Madhyamika might emphasise that the metaphysical anxiety or discomfort that comes with this kind of fragility is already part of the Buddhist package. For any Buddhist, it is important to understand and accept the impermanence of all things, which means accepting the lack of persistence of identity over time. This radical impermanence an essential feature of a Madhyamaka Buddhist's view of reality. Impermanence is one of the three Buddhist marks of existence, and impermanence and fragility go hand in hand.

The 'incredulity' challenge is linked to the 'fragility' challenge. It also begins by observing that any kind of coherentism suggests that we commit to many more dependence relations than we usually would. Holist coherentism, as the most extreme form, suggests that we commit to *all* kinds of dependence relations. An adaptation of an example of one of these dependence relations offered by Swiderski, is that my consciousness depends on the Eiffel Tower, and vice versa- a result that might incur an incredulous stare. Whilst this on its own is not a decisive objection, Swiderski stresses that such examples are more worrying once we consider how our intuitive judgements about what depends on what are often informed by our best current science. He suggests that this means holist coherentism is not just counterintuitive, but may be at odds with our best current evidence about the nature of reality (2024: 1866).

One response to this challenge might involve highlighting that there has been recent work on metaphysical dependence structures that suggest that coherentism as a promising candidate for capturing our best scientific theories, especially quantum theory and its various interpretations.[9] More relevant here, are the possible responses which draw upon emptiness scholarship. One way of making the commitment to counter-intuitive dependence relations more palatable, is to suggest that not all dependence relations are the same- they can be stronger or weaker. Kang (2025b: 340) explains this suggestion: 'While we tend to treat dependence like a binary switch- a thing either depends on another or not- [an] account of degrees of dependence treats ontological dependence like a volume knob, acknowledging varying degrees of dependence.'

The Eiffel Tower may be one of a huge multitude of things that my consciousness partially depends on[10], and vice versa. Among this huge multitude of things that any entity partially depends on, it may depend to a greater extent on some more than others. Priest offers an analogy involving gravitational theory to illustrate this idea, whilst explaining how the emptiness of the self might work: '[Not all] the relations involved are equally important… But all of the relations have some role in the making. The matter is rather like that in classical gravitational theory. Every object exerts a gravitational influence on every other, however far apart. Thus, the net gravitational force on me is partly determined by a rock on a planet in another galaxy. Of course, since gravitation attraction falls off rapidly with distance, this will be very small, but it is there, none the less. So it is with the relations which constitute me.' (Priest 2015: 25).

In effect, consideration of the literature on Madhyamaka emptiness can provide the coherentist with ways of responding to worries to do with fragility and incredulity. With this in mind, there is reason to pursue further comparative investigation of metaphysical coherentism and Madhyamaka emptiness, given there is potential to yield productive results and provide solutions to problems on both sides.

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[9] Calosi and Morganti (2021) argue that coherentism can be used to capture the symmetric dependence going on within quantum entanglement, and Jaura (2024) argues that coherentism is the most promising structure for accommodating Rovelli's relational interpretation of quantum mechanics.

[10] Here, 'partial dependence' is meant in a sense that is opposite to 'full dependence'. My consciousness does not *fully* depend on the Eiffel Tower, as the Eiffel Tower is not the only entity it depends on.

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