C.D. Sebastian

The Cloud of Nothingness

The Negative Way in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

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Everything is right when śūnyatā is possible;
Nothing is right when śūnyatā is impossible
(Nāgārjuna, MK 24, 14).

This knowledge in unknowing
is so overwhelming (John of the Cross, SCE 6)

For
Professor Sebastian Thuruthel
my grand-uncle who taught me to love
wisdom

Foreword

Nāgārjuna is a figure of legend. We know very little about him as a historical personage, and there is considerable debate over which works attributed to him are authentic. Their interpretation is, to say the least, tricky. His dates are uncertain, although he is usually given as round about the second century CE. In Indian Buddhist philosophy Nāgārjuna is, of course, the philosopher of 'emptiness' or 'nothingness', 'voidness' (*śūnyatā*). This is generally well known. He did not originate the concept in Buddhism, and even the use of the concept to apply to all things without any exception almost certainly did not originate with him.

Nevertheless, it is Nāgārjuna we tend to associate with the idea that 'all things are empty', or perhaps stated with more philosophical precision, 'emptiness (nothingness, voidness) is nothing other than a universal property, a property that pertains to things, all things without exception'. This is the case no matter how rarified or spiritually central those things might be. For all *X*, *X* is empty. For all *X*, *X* has the property of emptiness (expressed in English with the '-ness' ending). This applies even to nirvāṇa, a point made elsewhere by one of the [Mahāyāna] Buddhist scriptures quite probably before the time of Nāgārjuna. The same scripture adds that even if there were to be something greater than nirvāṇa, that too would not escape emptiness, nothingness, voidness. And it was Nāgārjuna who considered himself to be capable of showing, using impeccable logic and the principles and tenets accepted by those whom he sought to convince, that the universality of emptiness or nothingness was not just the insight of enlightened beings but also was rationally inescapable.

This 'emptiness' or 'nothingness' is not a vague or imprecise concept. 'Śūnyatā' is a term that takes on a range of meanings across the history of Indian Buddhist philosophy. In different Buddhist traditions, these meanings are by no means always the same or compatible with each other. But it is a feature of Indian Buddhist thought that it thrives on conceptual precision. And for Nāgārjuna, 'emptiness' or 'nothingness' is to be understood very strictly as an equivalent for 'absence of intrinsic nature' (*niḥsvabhāvatā*, 'essencelessness'), a concept that in Nāgārjuna's own usage comes to entail 'absence of intrinsic *existence*'. Thus, each and every thing, no matter how refined, lacks its own intrinsic nature, i.e. it lacks intrinsic existence. This

property of lacking its own intrinsic nature, or its intrinsic existence, is its emptiness or its nothingness.

Why would Nāgārjuna say such a thing? Indeed, why would this be a significant thing for a Buddhist to say? What has it to do with Buddhism as a religion, a path, a praxis with a salvific goal? What Nāgārjuna is saying here needs to be understood within the Buddhist discourse of his day and previous centuries going back to the Buddha himself. It should not be unthinkingly torn out from it. As a spiritual and intellectual soteriology, Buddhism originated in the idea that we suffer because we do not see things the way they really are. We are confused. We suffer as a result of profound ontological ignorance (*avidyā*). We misunderstand the nature of things in a very, very deep way. Hence, we act in a manner that causes us misery (suffering, *duḥkha*). And seeing things the way they really are (*yathābhūtadarśana*) – when it occurs in the deepest way, in a manner that is existentially ingrained in our minds at the deepest possible level – is totally life transformative. It is enlightening, liberating, freeing us from all forms of suffering. It is nirvāṇa. And once attained, it will never be lost.

The person who sees this way has *prajñā*, 'wisdom'. At first in Buddhism, this meant seeing behind the apparent stabilities of the things we meet with in our everyday unenlightened experience, particularly the persons we are, and comprehending their evanescent nature. Our unenlightened seeing of stability when in reality there is change, seeing unity and identity when really there is diversity, is fundamental to the misperception that leads to misery. We hope for permanence, we crave it, but we are faced with change, collapse, decay and death. Understanding the way things really are, the Buddha pointed out, is to see in terms of ever-changing 'aggregates' (*skandha*) of, on the one hand, the flow of the physical world and, on the other, the mental flow, itself consisting of the flows of our feelings, perceptions, intentions/volitions and that awareness which accompanies it all which we call consciousness. This psychophysical flow is the reality out of which we construct stability and, for those of us who are unenlightened to the way things really are, some sort of hoped-for permanence as a refuge from decay and death. Because it so contradicts the true nature of things, that hope is doomed to frustration and failure.

As time passed, this analysis within Buddhism became more refined so that what is *really* there came to be expressed in terms of *dharmas*. In this context, 'dharmas' can best be thought of as conceptually irreducible ontologically fundamental elements which, while in the main causally produced and hence impermanent, are nevertheless held to be *really* there, that is, to be the actual final reality (or, better, realities), in opposition to the constructed way things simply *appear* to be to us unenlightened folk.

Most of these fundamental reals are part of a causally conditioned flow. Each is caused by a previous one and is radically impermanent. It gives rise to its successor in a stream, a flow, of conditionality. In the case of mental events such as sensations, perceptions, or whatever (the mental aggregates), they are fundamental mental moments of the relevant type ('mental atoms'), each again normally the result of causes and giving rise to its successor. These fundamental reals (dharmas) by definition, therefore, must have their natures 'in themselves' (since they are fundamental

reals they have *svabhāva*, their 'own intrinsic nature', an 'essence'). They are onto-logically the very opposite of things that have their natures given to them simply for practical purposes, the stable everyday objects like tables and chairs that we unen-lightened folk think are really there. Dharmas are 'substantially existent' (*dra-vyasat*), not merely 'conceptually existent' (*prajñaptisat*). They are ultimately real, not merely conventionally real, i.e. simply held to be real things for our practical everyday conventional purposes.

But in stating that all things without exception, including all dharmas, lack fun-damental ultimate reality, Nāgārjuna called into question this whole framework as an understanding of 'the way things really (i.e. ultimately) are'. This is because the distinction between something having its own intrinsic nature, being substantially existent, and that which lacks its own intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*) and is merely conceptually existent is itself only an apparent distinction. This must be the case, Nāgārjuna argued, because if things are each one way or another the results of causes and conditions – and he felt this could be demonstrated through the careful use of critical reasoning – then they cannot in reality be ontologically fundamental. Put bluntly, caused existence cannot ever be ontologically fundamental existence. We might say, only something *necessarily* existent could be finally fundamentally existent. And nothing, Nāgārjuna thought, was necessarily existent. Each thing, no matter what, was no more than a product, one way or another, of its causes and conditions.

Thus, there can be no fundamental reals. Hence, reason can demonstrate that all things whatsoever must lack their own intrinsic nature. So all things whatsoever must indeed be empty (*śūnya*) of their own intrinsic existence. And as we have seen, absence of intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāvatā*), for Nāgārjuna equivalent to absence of intrinsic existence, is the very same as emptiness, nothingness (*śūnyatā*).

So when Nāgārjuna speaks of ultimate reality as emptiness, nothingness, what is meant here is that the true nature of things is that they lack any intrinsic and hence ultimate existence. That is, when things are understood in their ontologically final way, since they are the results one way or another of causes and conditions, so they are seen to lack fundamental, intrinsic, existence, to lack any *ultimate* existence intrinsic to them, any existence beyond that extrinsically given to them by their causal conditioning. That property of 'lacking ultimate existence' is their ultimate nature, i.e. what they truly, ontologically, are. That property itself is their nothing-ness, their emptiness.

It should be clear that this way of speaking that we find in Nāgārjuna needs to be totally contextualised within his Buddhist world view and project. This is important because it is too easy for well-meaning cross-cultural comparisons to tear out of context Nāgārjuna's assertion that the ultimate truth is emptiness, nothingness, and seek or hope to equate it with perhaps the intrinsically, fundamentally, absolutely existent Ultimate Reality of, e.g., Śaṅkara's Brahman, or even the God or Godhead of theistic religions. In these cases, a necessarily existent Absolute Reality, hence necessarily intrinsically existent, is said in itself to be *empty of* something or another, empty of the relative, empty of creation, empty of ignorance, empty of all our conceptualities, or whatever. It was in order to avoid such a confused interpretation

of the emptiness, nothingness, spoken of by Nāgārjuna and his tradition in Indian Buddhist thought that his great commentator Candrakīrti used the expression 'a mere negation' (*abhāvamātra*) to refer to emptiness, nothingness. 'Emptiness', 'nothingness', here is not vague, not obscure, not 'mystical' or open to guesses regarding its meaning. It refers for Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti says, to a mere negation of ultimate, intrinsic, necessary, fundamental existence, and this negation is universal, applies to all things without exception. In terms of the Buddhist salvific project, only through direct experiential cognition of this emptiness, nothingness, in the most refined way can a practitioner let go of all egoistic grasping, even the subtlest and most rarified attachment, and attain complete liberation.

Within this perspective, to think that emptiness itself might be an Ultimate Reality, have some sort of ontological pre-eminence, be more real than other things, necessarily existent – as must be the case with Brahman, Creator God, or Godhead – would be a radical misunderstanding of Nāgārjuna's intentions. This is no doubt one reason why he spoke of the emptiness of emptiness itself, nothingness of nothingness (*śūnyatāśūnyatā*), and declared those who would construe emptiness as more than that to be pretty well incurable. From the perspective of theology, in referring to emptiness, nothingness, voidness, Nāgārjuna cannot be construed as remotely talking about the Creator God, or anything even analogous to God.

Well, but theologically, we are invited to bring into dialogue with each other, and also into our own contemporary inter-religious dialogue, all the great thinkers of religious history. Potentially, no one is left out! Dialogue does not necessarily mean agreement. It does not mean an ignoring of or dissolution of differences, differences that are often quite fundamental. But it does mean respect, a sympathetic attempt to understand, and a conversation which is open to mutual learning and – in ways which can be understood in their own terms and contexts by each dialogue partner – perhaps also transformation. And, in terms too of Catholic theology, dialogue might highlight or open us up to 'seeds of the Word' (*semina Verbi*) in the non-Christian dialogue partners, signs of the presence of Christ in their own searching and their own conceptualisation of that search and its results.

Nāgārjuna and St John of the Cross both themselves sought avidly for truth, and clearly that search touched them both in a very deep way. They were both convinced they had found truth, and indeed it is likely that they each considered they had in some way 'touched', experienced, truth 'in their bodies'. In the light of this, when all is said and done, it must still be possible to bring such thinkers (such pray-ers, such meditators) into dialogue with each other, for they share a human concern with ultimate meaning and the search for spiritual understanding and security. Fundamental to the concerns of this present book, both Nāgārjuna and St John of the Cross employed the concept of negation centrally in their theological/philosophical method and also employed it terminologically in describing the focus of their quest. Of course, there can be no grounds for any attempt simply to equate the loving, Trinitarian, Creator God of St John of the Cross, a God who comes to us as Jesus Christ, True God and true man, with the (quite literally, bloodless) emptiness, nothingness, mere absence of intrinsic existence, of Nāgārjuna. But as C.D. Sebastian shows, the fact that both thinkers use negation and negative terminology in their quest means that there is still

some sort of *via negativa* taking place here, and a great deal of creative dialogue and a constructive basis for further future dialogue can still be generated by a careful and respectful comparative treatment of them both. In choosing to focus on the role of negation and negative terminology in the writing of Nāgārjuna and St John of the Cross (rather than perhaps naively suggesting that the goal of their spiritual striving might be similar just because it is described using negative terms or grammatical negatives), C.D. Sebastian makes a very real contribution to the appreciation of Nāgārjuna and St John of the Cross each in the light of the other.

I am unaware of a previous comprehensive and systematic comparative treatment of nothingness in Nāgārjuna and St John of the Cross. It is unusual to find someone as sensitive and knowledgeable in this respect as C.D. Sebastian, who knows the Catholic theological context intimately and from the inside and at the same time has access to the Indian Buddhist Sanskrit sources for understanding Nāgārjuna. Hence, it is with very real enthusiasm that I welcome C.D. Sebastian's book on nothingness, the result of work that he undertook with us during a mutually enriching period of sabbatical leave at the University of Bristol and its Centre for Buddhist Studies. This is a careful and frequently subtle attempt to engage in cross-cultural and inter-religious theological dialogue that will repay attentive reading. While not by any means saying the last word on either of the two dialogue partners or on the fruits of their conversation (could that ever be done?), this is a book that will surely feed into and enhance contemporary religious and scholarly understanding, appreciation and debate.

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C.D. Sebastian has done a great service to three different communities in the writing of this remarkable book. Those three communities are students of religion in general and then, more specifically, both scholars of Christian history and spirituality and scholars of Buddhist history and practice. In addressing these three communities, Sebastian actually inaugurates a fourth community, and one that is becoming increasingly important both in the academy and outside it: those concerned with Buddhist–Christian relations. This latter also builds a bridge that is all important between the scholarly community and actual religious practitioners outside the academy. One can now begin to take in the scope of Sebastian's achievement in this work.

Before saying something about the actual contents of the book, let me say a little about the theology of religions and the relation of that field to this work. The relation is in some senses tangential as Sebastian is a historian, philosopher and linguist, but he is also deeply sensitive to theology and spirituality. Approaching the book from a discipline out of which I work allows us another glimpse into the achievement of Sebastian's book. The theology of religions started by focusing primarily

on how one religion views another, and it tended to be pejoratively in the early nineteenth century when it came to Christians and other religions. Inevitably, there was a complex reaction to that process in part because of increasing scholarship about religions that was developing in tandem during that period and because of an explosion in global travel and migration. No longer was it possible to think that non-Christians were savage heathens who lacked goodness and truth. In the aftermath of the collapse of the European empire, the emergence of various independent nation states that had often been shaped by the empire generated a new project: other religions began to provide a critique of Christian theology of religions, while at the same time such a critique was well under way within Christian theological circles at the heart of the empire. This resulted in a period where the dominant paradigm of conceiving the relations between religions was primarily shaped by what is sometimes called the 'liberal' agenda: all religions are really paths to the same reality that can be known in many different ways. One great advantage of such a movement was that cultural imperialism was unmasked and made way for the possibility of really returning back to the key texts of the giants and shapers of religious traditions as the source of inter-religious engagement. In this respect, after liberalism, movements such as comparative theology initiated by a number of scholars, pre-eminently Francis Clooney SJ, have developed and are flourishing. Other movements, like the scriptural reasoning project which involves closely reading texts of another religion with those from that religion, have also been growing thanks to the pioneering work of scholars such as David Ford and Peter Ochs, amongst many others. For the comparative theologians, the reading is still mounted from a theological perspective. For the scriptural reasoning, likewise. In one respect, we could locate Sebastian's work in this new movement, but while both are theological, his is more historical, phenomenological and philosophical. His work is better located in the comparative philosophy project that grew alongside the theological one I've just described.

Sebastian's work remains within the nineteenth-century comparative philosophy project that was initiated by the great Indologists who wanted to simply read primary texts, understand them in their own proper historical and cultural context and present them with scholarly rigour and sensitivity. Max Müller and C. P. Tiele began the scientific study of religion, *Religionswissenschaft*, that flourished and developed in differing ways in Europe and then the United States. These scholars stepped back from truth claims, although in fact they often had strong convictions and some were religious, but they were equally convinced that these should not intrude into the study. I have some reservations about the epistemological underpinnings of such an endeavour, but the fruits of such studies are difficult to deny. It is within this stream of intellectual history that Sebastian's project fits so well and continues that tradition with considerable ability, intellectual and philosophical sophistication, close textual study and huge imaginative empathy. When I was working with Sebastian on this project at the University of Bristol, I soon saw his care not to fall into all the traps that lurked around projects like these. The more he progressed, the more he opened my eyes to the remarkable value of such patient, textual attention. I learnt greatly from his work. I know readers also will.

    With that methodological genealogy, we can turn to the main achievements of
this study. This is, probably, one of the first full book-length comparative study of
the Christian mystic and teacher St John of the Cross and the great Buddhist phi-
losopher and spiritual ascetic Nāgārjuna, which treats both figures in such careful
and systematic detail. While he is in mastery of a large body of secondary critical
materials, they are used to push the basic concern of understanding and truthful
hermeneutics. There have been studies of emptiness, nothingness and the apophatic,
but in this work, all these concepts come together in an elaborate and thoughtful
treatment of the two thinkers and practitioners. In bringing out the similarities and
differences between John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna, refusing to encase them into
some basic metaphysical framework that reduces them to something other than they
intend, Sebastian walks a careful tightrope walk. He allows each to illuminate the
other, he allows each to talk to the other, and he begins to delicately tease out the
very substantial differences that underlie their similarities. This is done deftly, so we
are left with a raft of challenging questions as to whether we should step forward
and actually compare incomparables, or whether we should learn greatly that what
might seem as similar is more profoundly dissimilar. It is precisely in keeping this
acutely important question open that Sebastian's greatest achievement is found. He
realises that we cannot build up meta-theories and overarching frames of reference,
for we are simply and starkly left with two profound visions of the world and its
meaning, which have overlap and have difference about matters that seem of con-
cern to both.

    Sebastian also coins the terms 'philosophical epiphany' and 'theological epiph-
any' for the idea of nothingness in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, and this is
hugely suggestive. The 'negative way' is an 'enlightened-indifference' in Nāgārjuna
and a 'positive and creative assertion' in John of the Cross. The philosophical epiph-
any may even suggest some interesting speculation about nature and grace, were
one reading this as a Christian theologian, as I do, for it suggests that Nāgārjuna's
towering achievement is one of the most profound philosophical explorations that
opens up a space which reason cannot penetrate further. John seems to dwell in this
space, but draws upon a different resource, not given immediately by reason but
reasoned upon and explicated. This is a challenge that the book sets out to this
reader and a vital one that requires answering. To arrive at this space is the great
contribution Sebastian has made to the four communities I set out above. For this we
should be most grateful.

University of Bristol   Professor Gavin D'Costa
Bristol, UK
2015

Preface

I know that nothing has ever been real
Without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things

> And they come toward me, to meet and be met. (Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of a Monastic Life*, I, 1(p. 43))

The notion of 'nothingness' is the *leitmotif* of this work. Nothingness, *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna and (*la*) *nada* in John of the Cross, two representatives from two different cultural, religious and philosophical traditions of the East and West – Buddhism and Christianity – is the negative way that is discussed in this book. This study is not aimed at looking for the fashionable search for sameness in the scheme of thought that we find in the works of these two great past masters, but it attempts to identify the distinctiveness of each. There is similarity as well as dissimilarity in the negative way paradigms proposed by these two thinkers. There is a striking difference in their goals, for Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist philosopher, speaking from a Buddhist standpoint for whom the *Buddha-vacana*, the Word of the Buddha is of paramount importance, whereas John of the Cross is a Christian mystic speaking from a Judeo-Christian world view and belief for whom *Dabar Yahweh*, the Word of God, is the ultimate source.

My attempt in this study is to look for the negative way employed by these two thinkers. Each of them is speaking from his own tradition, and each of them has the audience of his own religious order in mind. By presenting the negative way in this study in six chapters, I make a comparison and contrast between Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross by drawing attention to the tenets of their negative way, because, I believe, such assessments have been integral to the history of thought. Such attempts in cross-cultural philosophical traditions could 'open a "new" way where concepts developed in different philosophical traditions "illuminate" each other and help us in understanding them better' (Krishna 2006: xvii). In such an attempt, 'without our necessarily having to agree with' the beliefs of Nāgārjuna or John of the Cross, 'when we have discovered' their 'standpoint and horizon', their 'ideas become intelligible' to us (Gadamer 2005: 302).

In the scheme of Nāgārjuna, there is undeniably no interest in stating things affirmatively. He is more interested in negative expressions, but at the end of the day, even the *via negativa* is discarded, as the *via negativa* itself is another position as problematic as its opposite, the positive way. The negative way of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna is not specific in articulating actually what it is all about, thus amounting to a sort of indifference to specifications. The negative way of Nāgārjuna does not subscribe to any *ātma-nairātmya* polarities and conceivable distinctions, and we call it an *enlightened-indifference* (see Chap. 5). This enlightened-indifference ultimately ushers in a realisation of the real nature of reality as *niḥsvabhāvatā*, essencelessness, with the propitious cessation of all hypostatisation (MK 1, 1: 4; MK 27, 30: 248–249). This is more philosophical in nature, and we call it *philosophical epiphany* (see Chap. 5) where one, being in the conventional (*saṁvṛti*), understands the real nature of the conventional (*saṁvṛti*), which is called the ultimate (*paramārtha*), and this is *śūnyatā*.

But when it comes to John of the Cross, in his negative way, there is room for positive and creative facets. The negative way in John of the Cross is not purely negative; it has a positive element. He is like any other Christian thinker, because God is the centre of his experience, and not any abstraction. John of the Cross's negative way will seek for a self-abnegation and emptiness, but the end result is all positive. There is a positive finality in the negative way of John of the Cross. The negative way beautifully expressed in the writings of John of the Cross is intended to do a stripping away of the created world where the 'dark night' helps the soul to be one with God. It is transcendence as it starts from something real in life and goes to something real, an unspeakable union with God. The *negative way* that we find in John of the Cross we call *the theological epiphany* (see Chap. 5), a divine manifestation and experience at the end of the dark night. This is an experience which the soul has in the divine union of spiritual marriage. There is 'now that the perfect union of love between God and the soul', and the soul says, 'let us rejoice, Beloved', 'let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty' 'and further, deep in into the thicket' (SC 36, 3: 611), which means deep into the mysteries of God.

The book is divided into six chapters. Taking the reader's convenience, when read in sequence, the preceding chapter paves the way for the succeeding one, and thus, it provides a comprehensive idea of the *negative way* found in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross with their respective traditions, namely Buddhism and Christianity. At the same time, the book is conceived and arranged in a manner that each chapter could be read independently. The *first chapter* answers the why of study with an introductory note on Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross and their most representative works. In the *second chapter*, I briefly present the trajectory of the concept of nothingness in the negative way in the Buddhist and Christian traditions with its culmination in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, respectively. In the *third chapter*, I consider the negative way of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna, while the *fourth chapter* is devoted to *nada* and the negative way in John of the Cross. The *fifth chapter* I deem as the most important of the study where an attempt has been made to dwell on the similarities and dissimilarities between Nāgārjuna's and John of the Cross's negative way. The *sixth chapter* serves as conclusion to this entire work where I bring the

apophasis, metaphor, metonymy and semiotics in the idea of nothingness that one encounters in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

<div align="center">***</div>

The present study is the outcome of my postdoctoral research carried out under the supervision of Professor Paul Williams (former Director, Centre for Buddhist Studies, and Professor of Indian and Tibetan Philosophy, University of Bristol, UK) and Professor Gavin D'Costa (Professor in Catholic Theology, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Bristol, UK). I am immensely grateful to them for their scholarly guidance and timely help that made this project a success. I thank them for writing the erudite 'Foreword' (not one, but two forewords, to be precise) to this book and, thus, endorsing this study.

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Contents

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List of Abbreviations

AKB   Vasubandhu. 2012. *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya of Vasubandhu,* Vols I-IV. Trans, Louis De La Valle Poussin. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

AMC   John of the Cross. 1991. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel.* In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 101–349. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

BWB   John of the Cross. 1991. *A Romance on the Psalm 'By the Waters of Babylon' (Ps. 137)*. In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 68–70.

DN   John of the Cross. 1991. *The Dark Night.* In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 358–457. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

GSM   John of the Cross. 1991. *A Gloss (with a Spiritual Meaning)*. In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 71–72. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

L   *Letters*. John of the Cross. 1991. *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 735–764.

LFL   John of the Cross. 1991. *The Living Flame of Love.* In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 638–715. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

MK   Nāgārjuna. 1960. *Madhyamakaśāstra of Nāgārjuna with the Commentary Prasannapadā by Chandrakīrti*. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts No.10. Ed. P. L. Vaidya. Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute of Post-graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning.

MKV   Candrakīrti. 1970. *Madhyamakavatāra par Candrakīrti*. 1970. Ed. Louis de la Vallee Poussin. Osnabruck: Biblio Verlag.

R   John of the Cross. 1991. *Romances*. In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 60–68. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

SC   John of the Cross. 1991. *The Spiritual Canticle*. In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 461–630. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

SC-CA   John of the Cross. 1991. *The Spiritual Canticle (First Redaction: CA)*. In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 44–50. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

SC-CB   John of the Cross. 1991. *The Spiritual Canticle (Second Redaction: CB)*. In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 73–80. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

SEC   John of the Cross. 1991. *Stanzas concerning an Ecstasy experienced in high Contemplation*. In, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, 53–54. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

SS   Nāgārjuna. 1987. (*Śūnyatāsaptati.*) *Nāgārjuna's Seventy Stanzas: A Buddhist Psychology of Emptiness*. Trans. David Ross Komito, *et al*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.

VV   Nāgārjuna. 1998. *Vigrahavyāvartanī*: *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna- Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Trans. Kamaleshwar Bhattacharya, and Ed. E. H. Johnston and Arnold Kunst. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publications.

Chapter 1
Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross: An Introduction

We shall differ in our nothingness.

(E. M. Forster, Howards End, Chapter 40).

Abstract The notion of nothingness has a long history. Our intent here is to look for the idea of nothingness taken as *the negative way* in philosophy, theology and literature. This chapter is an introductory to the entire work, and in this chapter we give a brief introduction to Nāgārjuna, to John of the Cross and to their works. What is envisaged in this study is not the fashionable search for commonalities in two traditions, namely, Buddhism and Christianity, and the great thinkers of the negative way in these two traditions – Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross – rather their dissimilarities. This is because we believe that every cultural/religious tradition gives birth to its own thinkability and its own categories to give expression to such thinkabilities. By presenting the negative way in this work in six chapters, we make a comparison and contrast between Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross by highlighting the tenets of their negative way, because we believe that comparison and contrast between the systems of thought have always been there in the history of ideas. Such attempts of comparison and contrast in cross-cultural philosophical traditions will 'open a 'new' way of doing comparative philosophy/theology where concepts developed in different philosophical traditions 'illuminate' each other and help us in understanding them better'.

The idea of 'nothingness' has had a time-honoured trajectory in the history of ideas. Philosophers, mystics, mathematicians and poets have admirably dealt with nothingness, though they might not have conceived it in the same way. John D. Barrow's *The Book of Nothing* (Barrow 2001) gives an enlightening background of 'nothingness' in the history of philosophy, religion, literature, history, science and mathematics, and explains incredibly every facet of nothingness. The philosophy behind the notion of nothingness has different imports. In the history and development of Asian thought, the ideas about *nothingness* have had a deep philosophical

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prominence – in Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic thoughts (Liu and Berger 2014b), and 'the notion of *nothingness* or *emptiness* plays a central role in Asian philosophical traditions from the start' (Liu and Berger 2014a: xi). In this study we take *nothingness* in the sense of *the negative way* that we find in philosophy, theology and literature. The *negative way* import of nothingness that we take in this study could be found in the history of ideas from Neo-Platonists to the contemporary *via negativa* reading in philosophy, theology and literature.[1] There is an added interest to the negative way in the contemporary discourse, whether it is in philosophy, theology (de Vries 1999) or literature and there is evidently an influence of the *via negativa* writers of old on the contemporary thinkers (Lock 1999: 184–188; Buning 2000: 43; Fisher 2001: 529–548, Bradley 2004: 1; de Vries 1999).[2] In this work our focus is on the *negative way* found in the notion of 'nothingness' in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

1.1   Why This Study?

In the light of the present day exploit of *the negative way*, the present study is an attempt to make a Mādhyamika reading of John of the Cross, two of the great past masters of the *negative way* in the Buddhist and Christian traditions, respectively. The primary intent of this study is conceptual and systematic, rather than historical and religious. It tries to unravel the conception of 'nothingness' in the Buddhist and Christian traditions, with special reference to Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, which is a unique and unexplored facet of apophatism.[3] We take recourse to Buning in defining the negative way in this study:

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[1] We refer here to the works of Hent de Vries (de Vries 1999) by Jacques Derrida (Bradley 2004: 9–46), Michel de Certeau (Certeau 1992) John D. Caputo (Caputo 1997), Jeremy Carrette (Carreette 2000), Jean-Luc Marion (Marion 1991) Denys Turner (Turner 1998), Michel Foucault (Foucault 1990) and Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 1999).

[2] Buning says that the *via negativa*'s 'influence on modern philosophy (Heidegger and Derrida) and on modern theology (John Caputo, Mark C. Taylor, Jean-Luc Marion) is beyond doubt today' (Buning 2000: 43). It will not be an exaggeration to say that the *via negativa* paradigm in contemporary continental thought as well as in critical theory (Lock 1999: 184–198) is 'both a way of thinking and a manner of writing' as it 'attempts to articulate the *unsayable*' (Buning 2000: 43). It is also a fact that the 'post-Derridean debates over the radical possibilities of Christian tradition' Pseudo-Dionysius takes a centre place (Fisher 2001: 529–548). Arthur Bradley opined about continental thought today: 'It is now surely incontestable that we are in the midst of a ''theological turn'' in continental thought to rival the much vaunted ethical and political shifts of the 1980s and 1990s (de Vries 1999). Religious themes, questions and problematic abound in current continental thinking from deconstruction to phenomenology and from genealogy to psychoanalysis in a way that would have been thought unimaginable even a decade or so ago' (Bradley 2004: 1).

[3] According to Panikkar we have epistemological apophaticism, gnoseological apophaticism and ontic apophaticism. Panikkar writes: 'The term ''apophatic'' is usually used in reference to an epistemological apophaticism, positing merely that the ultimate reality is *ineffable* – that human intelligence is incapable of grasping, of embracing it – although this ultimate reality itself may be presented as *intelligible*, even supremely intelligible, *in se*. A gnoseological apophaticism, then,

(The negative way) is a manner of dialectic or paradoxical expressions that contains both affirmation (*kataphasis*, 'speaking-with' or saying) and negation (*apophasis*, 'speaking-away' or unsaying), with a semantic force of its own, which perforce subverts the normal semantics of being and nothingness. It is a form of infinite linguistic regress that relentlessly turns back upon its own propositions and generates distinctive paradoxes that include within themselves a large number of radical transformation. (Buning 2000:45).

In the negative way that we consider in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, there is an 'engagement – in double sense of both commitment and confrontation – between theology and contemporary philosophy' (Bradley 2004: 1). It aims at providing an insight into *via negativa* of the Buddhist and Christian traditions, and through this it is envisaged to contribute to East-west cross-cultural philosophical and theological dialogue.

The negative way is a paradigm which will enable us to avoid the customary bifurcation of certain type of intellectual imagination into the domains of philosophy and theology/religious studies. This kind of 'philosophy'-'religious studies' bifurcating predisposition is not seen among the writers of the east, but it is very much there with the academic philosophers of the west. Richard King rightly points out this fact when he says:

Academic philosophers in the west tend to be fiercely protective of the boundaries between their own disciplinary identity and its 'significant other' – namely those cultural traditions that they associate with 'the religious.' In their inability to see this as a *peculiarly* western way of dividing up the world, their orientation is as unreflective as it is Eurocentric. Similarly, in general terms, modern western philosophers show little interest in continuing many of the intellectual debates of their own European Christian heritage. Leave that to the theologians. What is rarely recognized, however, is the extent to which western philosophical debates remain deeply soaked in the Christian history from which they arose. Even, or perhaps one might say *especially*, those who take an avowedly atheistic stance, seem peculiarly unaware of the saturation of their theories in a Christian (or, if you prefer, 'post-Christian') view of the world. (King 2009: 45)

Adding to what we have seen above, the negative way paradigm will also help us to get rid of the prejudice in labelling some cultural-geographical specific thought as philosophy and others as religious studies. Jay L. Garfield voices this concern in this way (as quoted by King 2009: 45):

St Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Descartes's Meditations, including the proofs for the existence of God, Leibnitz's discussion of theodicy are philosophical, while Dharmakīrti's investigation of the structure of induction and the ontological status of the universals, Tsong Khapa's account of reference and meaning, and Nāgārjuna's critique of

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comports an ineffability on the part of the ultimate reality only *quoad nos*. Buddhist apophaticism, on the other hand, seeks to transport this ineffability to the heart of ultimate reality itself, declaring that this reality – inasmuch as its *logos* (its expression and communication) no longer pertains to the order of ultimate reality but precisely to the manifestation of that order – is ineffable not merely in our regard, but as such, *quoad se*. Thus Buddhist apophaticism is an ontic apophaticism. Ultimate reality is so supremely ineffable and transcendent that, strictly speaking, Buddhism will be constrained to deny it the very character of being. Being, after all, is what is; but what is, by the very fact of being, is in some manner thinkable and communicable. It belongs to the order of manifestation, of being. And it cannot be considered to be ultimate reality itself' (Panikkar 1989: 14).

essence and analysis of casual relations are religious. Anyone who has a passing familiarity with all of the relevant texts will agree that something has gone seriously wrong if this distinction is taken seriously. (Garfield 2002: 252, as quoted in King 2009: 45.).

This sort of prejudice is what Irvine and Bilimoria termed as the Eurocentric ordering of knowledge, as there is evidently 'a Eurocentric ordering of the world and of knowledge. In doing so, the philosophers do the Eurocentrism the favour of granting it foundational, if not absolute, importance' (Irvine and Bilimoria 2009: 4).

It must be also stated here that the present study is *not comparative religion* which some consider as a platform for building a synthesis of religions or searching for the commonalities with a fictitious presupposition that all religions are one in its aims and basics. Succinctly Bilimoria puts it in this way since some take comparative religion as:

> …a platform on which to build a basis for a *synthesis* of religions, drawing upon insights and wisdom that they believe to be contained in all religions, large and small. The guiding principle in this approach has been the assumption that people everywhere have some basic, essential, religious needs that they all seem to share, and some have gone so far as to suggest that the varying quests lead ultimately to one destination: archetypal perfection, or uniqueness ('God,' the Transcendent, *Ur-Grund*). This is a perspective concern, in that it stipulates how religion *ought* to be. (Bilimoria 2009: 10).

The present study is *not comparative religion*; nevertheless through this study we aim at a *cross-cultural hermeneutics*.[4] 'Cross-cultural hermeneutics is the attempt to traverse cultural boundaries and enter the horizon and worldview of another culture, sometime quite foreign to our own' (Prabhu 2013: 126). In this study we have tried to avoid the 'hermeneutics of suppression' and also the 'hermeneutics of suspicion or contestation', as we have taken into consideration what J. Prabhu has proposed in his new paradigm for a cross-cultural hermeneutics:

> It is not sustainable any longer to have a hermeneutics of suppression as with Hegel or a hermeneutics of suspicion or contestation as in the post-colonial moment. We have entered a new age – the global age – where we need to create a new hermeneutics toward what Michael Oakshott once called the 'Great Conversation of the Mankind'. This new hermeneutics will be a hermeneutics of true intersubjectivity between subjects who share a basic equality and on that basis can attempt a genuine dialogue where Buber's I-Thou dialectic is

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[4] By cross-cultural hermeneutics we mean the way we look at a different cultural/tradition other than one's own to know it in a 'nontrivial and non-imperialistic way' (Panikkar 1979). In cross-cultural hermeneutics we consider whether we can celebrate a paradigm, idea or way of thinking on soil not its own and whether such a category of thought can realise in another culture a function similar to the one it has fulfilled in its home culture. 'We can make legitimate cross-cultural judgements without violently imposing alien standards and norms' (Bernstein 1996:35). There is a universal validity of hermeneutics for a philosophical approach across geographical and cultural boundaries as explained by Gadamer (Pillay 2002: 330–344). Besides that, the cross-cultural communication and dialogue have become a part of our everyday life as we speak across our cultural boundaries. In comparative philosophy Gadamer is the most important thinker whose work has influenced cross-cultural hermeneutics. In cross-cultural hermeneutical dialogue, we, coming from distinctly backgrounds, can seek to each other's meaning. It is not to reach a uniformity of beliefs, but to foster a progressive learning process and appreciate the other (Dallmayr 2009: 23–39).

> reciprocally deployed, that is, the I-Thou positions change and each partner in this dialogue is sometimes 'I' and the other times 'Thou'. (Prabhu 2013: 134).

In this approach we take recourse to Gadamer's hermeneutics (Gadamer 2005) where cross-cultural hermeneutics is more valued, than historical, for a legitimate intellectual rapprochement in cultural and geographical lines (Bernstein 1996: 29–41; Pillay 2002: 330–344). We take an approach in this study that, 'without our necessarily having to agree with' the ideas of Nāgārjuna or John of the Cross, their 'ideas become intelligible' to us (Gadamer 2005: 302),[5] when we make a comparative analysis of the negative way. The main intent of this study is to appreciate the negative way as differently explicated in the works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, and not some sort of a fashionable search for commonalities in two traditions, namely, Buddhism and Christianity, and two of the great thinkers of the via negativa in these two traditions, Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. It is because, as we have stated in the abstract above, we believe that every cultural or religious tradition brings about its own 'thinkability,' and subsequently its own categories to give an expression to such thinkabilities. Surin rightly puts it that 'every culture generates for itself its own "thinkability", and 'its concepts are constitutive of that thinkability' (Surin 2009: 327).

1.2   Significance, Scope and Subject Matter of the Study

The present study explores and examines the notion of 'nothingness' or 'emptiness' in a focussed, and at the same time in a comparative, manner the negative way found in the works of Nāgārjuna (c. 150 AD) and John of the Cross (1542–1591). Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist monk, philosopher, and one of the greatest thinkers of classical India who expounded the Mādhyamika school of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. John of the Cross was a Carmelite monk, outstanding Spanish poet, philosopher, and one of the greatest mystical theologians. The conception of 'nothingness' (*śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna and *nada* in John of the Cross) in both the thinkers points to a paradox of linguistic transcendence and provides a novel insight into *the negative way* that forms the subject matter of this work.

The subject matter of the study is the 'negative way' which has been presented as *via negativa* or *apophatism* in philosophical and religious literature. In order to lay out the study in a comprehensive manner, the work is divided into six chapters. The first chapter gives an introduction to the study by presenting the original works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross where one could trace out the negative way as envisaged by these two thinkers. The author's attempt here is to make a Mādhyamika Buddhist reading of John of the Cross in order to find out the similitude in their methodology and approach, if there is any. However, one finds that, though

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[5]This is a conversion. And as Gadamer says, 'In a conversation, when we have discovered the other person's standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him' (Gadamer 2005: 302).

Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross employ the negative way in their thought, their objectives are different, as Nāgārjuna does no to give an ascription to the (ultimate) reality *per se*, while John of the Cross goes for a theistic account of the ultimate reality.

In the second chapter, we look at the concept implying the negative way in the two traditions, namely, the Buddhist and the Christian. The Buddhist negative way has, we argue, its zenith in Mādhyamika thought with Nāgārjuna and his successors. The negative way has loomed large in mystical accounts of the Eastern Christianity, and it got crystallised in Neo-Platonism and Pseudo-Dionysius, and from there it had a systematic trajectory in the writings of Thomas Aquinas; Marguerite Porete; Meister Eckhart, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*; and finally in John of the Cross, which we briefly discuss in the chapter.

The third chapter is entirely on Nāgārjuna and his negative way. In this chapter the conception of *śūnyatā* and the limits of *saṁvṛti* are dealt with. We take the conception of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna in the first part, while in the second part of the chapter, we discuss about *śūnyatā* and the philosophy of language in Nāgārjuna. The third part of the chapter we discuss the import of the doctrine of two truths in Nāgārjuna, while in the fourth part we deal with the eight negations we find in Nāgārjuna's MK. The fifth part is focused on *śūnyatā* and silence. We have taken into consideration only those aspects in Nāgārjuna that are pertaining to the negative way as we envisage and are interested in.

The fourth chapter is strictly an exposition of the negative way that we find in John of the Cross. The chapter is on *nada* and the limits of the three faculties, namely, intellect, will and memory, in John of the Cross. In this chapter we first look at the conception of 'nothingness' in John of the Cross, and then proceed in the second part to see the paradox of language in the writings of John of the Cross, which is replete with symbolism and negations. In the third part of the chapter, we analyse the doctrine of three faculties and their darkening, while in the fourth part we take up the key idea of the 'unknowing' in the thought of John of the Cross. In the fifth and last part of the chapter, we consider the import of 'silence' that we find in John of the Cross's negative way.

The fifth chapter deals with similarities and dissimilarities in the negative way that we encounter in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. We first look at the similarities of the negative way commonly shared by Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. They may look similar in their philosophical enterprise, but they do not seem to be the same in content in many respects. In the second part of the chapter, we focus on the dissimilarities, which is, in a way, the main contribution of the chapter, a comparison and contrast between the types of the negative way in these two great past masters. This chapter is of great significance as far as this study is concerned, for the reason that, this is the outcome of the study. The notion of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna operates in the limits of *saṁvṛti* in the doctrine of two truths, while the *nada* of John of the Cross operates in the limits of the three faculties in the doctrine of three faculties enunciated by him in his works. Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist Mādhyamika and the conception of a theistic God does not signify anything to his philosophical-religious scheme. John of the Cross is a theist Christian, and God does imply everything to

him. Nāgārjuna does not hold on to an ultimate reality like God, whereas John of the Cross believes and trusts in the Supreme Being whom he calls God. When we say similarities in their negative way, we mean only the negative approach they employ in their thought, and it does not have anything to do with the metaphysical-ontological reality of God, which Nāgārjuna does not speak of, and that John of the Cross believes and affirms in his works.

The sixth and the last chapter is conclusion to this work. In this chapter we look at the notion of 'nothingness' in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, in apophasis and metaphor paradigm. We look at the metaphors that are employed by Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross for apophasis. An account of a select number of representative metaphors that we encounter in the works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross are illustrated at length. Subsequently, the use of metonymy and the import of semiotics in relation to apophasis have been dealt with. Finally we conclude that *śūnyatā* of Nāgārjuna and *nada* of John of the Cross are metaphors meant for an apophasis, the negative way. We conclude by stating that Nāgārjuna is Nāgārjunian, and he is not a Kantian, Vedāntin, Wittgensteinian or Derridean, as he has his own *locus standi* in the history of ideas. The sole goal in his negative way of *śūnyatā* is an uncompromising Buddhist religious *cum* spiritual life, and not just some sort of hair-splitting analysis of things in an arid abstraction. Correspondingly is that of John of the Cross, that is, his theological conviction.

The most important conceptual contribution of this study, we would submit, is our coining of the terms *philosophical epiphany* and *theological epiphany* for 'the end result' of the negative way that we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, respectively. The negative way ends in two different levels in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, and we call them *philosophical epiphany* and *theological epiphany*, respectively, which we deal with in the fifth chapter under the main heading 'dissimilarities'. The epiphany could be termed as the *paśyati* (seeing) of *prañjā* or highest wisdom in Buddhist parlance. In this epiphany there is a clearness which makes us to understand things in their true nature. Epiphany is manifestation; it is a revealing. We do not find any content in the philosophical epiphany that we discover in Nāgārjuna, as it is content-less *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* itself is *śūnya* or emptiness itself is empty. But when it comes to the theological epiphany that we find in John of the Cross, there is a content of that epiphany which operates in experiential level. In the theological epiphany that John of the Cross speaks of in his writings is all positive, yet ineffable, and it is a union of the human soul with the divine where there is a 'transformation of the soul so thorough that she can scarcely recognize herself anymore' (Stein 2002: 172).

We would like to make clear in this introductory chapter that the present study has not been aimed at having the trendy hunt for similitude in the thought of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, or even in their philosophical-religious traditions and convictions. The study is a search for the distinctiveness in the thoughts of these two great past masters. As we have quoted it in the fifth chapter, the words of Daya Krishna on comparative philosophy that such attempts of comparison and contrast in cross-cultural philosophical traditions will 'open a "new" way of doing comparative philosophy where concepts developed in different philosophical traditions

''illuminate'' each other and help us in understanding them better' (Krishna 2006: xvii). Further, it is a verity that there will be difficulties in such comparisons as 'all comparative studies simultaneously imply an identity and a difference, a situation that is replete with intellectual difficulties that give rise to interminable disputes regarding whether we are talking about the same thing or different things' (Krishna 2011: 59). The prospects of difference are inevitable, and, we believe, that makes the study worth attempting. The dissimilarities are very pertinent in the sense that the goal for Nāgārjuna is emptiness of all views, whereas for John of the Cross, it is all about the *emptiness* of human faculties and the ineffable nature of a theistic Godhead. There is no such Godhead in Nāgārjuna's scheme of thought and his is the realisation of the conventional as conventional which is the ultimate. The end result of the negative way is an *enlightened indifference*, we discuss in the fifth chapter, as far as Nāgārjuna is concerned, while it is a positive and creative affirmation for John of the Cross. Since there is a difference between the types of their negative way, there is an optimistic scope for a cross-cultural hermeneutics and dialogue between the thoughts of these two thinkers as well as their representative traditions.

1.3   The Works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

1.3.1   Nāgārjuna

Nāgārjuna is the most prominent figure of the Mādhyamika[6] school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The time and place of the evolution of Mahāyāna tradition and its main philosophical school, namely, the Mādhyamika, are a matter of contention. One of the recent works suggests that the inception of Mahāyāna was 'a relatively small, in some places embattled, movement within Buddhism with no independent institutional status. This state of affairs seemed to persist until at least the fourth or fifth centuries' (A.D.) (Walser 2008: 16). However, Indian scholars do not hesitate to suggest the evolution of Mahāyāna right from the time of the Buddha: 'The evolution of the Mahāyāna may be said to have begun from the time of Buddha's parinirvāṇa (544 or 487 B.C.); it was almost complete by the first century B.C.' (Murti 1998:77). They are of the opinion that in India 'about the second or first century B. C. Mahāyāna Buddhism became a recognised phase of the religion, and

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[6]Mahāyāna comprises of the two main philosophical schools of Buddhism, namely, the Mādhyamika and the Yogācāra – Vijñānavāda. The term *Madhyamaka* or *Madhyamaka Darśana* is an alternative, perhaps an earlier term used for the Middle Way of Nāgārjuna. It is derived from *madhya* (middle) by the addition of *taddhitā* suffixes. The Mādhyamika represents the middle critical phase of Buddhist thought, while the first phase was the Ābhidharmika realism (Sebastian 2005: 1–16). Mādhyamika is used for both the system and its advocates. Non-Buddhist writers invariably refer to the system as well as the adherents of it as Mādhyamika. This school is also labelled as *Śūnyavāda* by the non-Buddhist opponents. The Mādhyamika system has had a continuous history of development from the time of its formulation by Nāgārjuna (c. 150 AD) till eleventh century A.D. (Murti 1998: 83–103).

it gradually passed on to the Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan' (Dutt 2008: 1). (We have dealt with Mahāyāna in the second chapter under the heading Sect. 2.2.1 as well.)

Whatever may be the historical starting point of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Mādhymika School had its presence in India in the first centuries of the current era, and Nāgārjuna is the main proponent of this school. There is a dispute regarding the time and place of Nāgārjuna. In all probability, his period must have been the second century AD, and he might have been from South India (today's state of Andhra Pradesh) (Ichimura 1992: 8–14; Williams 2009: 64; Kalupahana 1994: 160; Nakamura 1999: 235; Murti 1998: 87; Gethin 1998: 237; Ramanan 2002: 25–37). 'The name of Nāgārjuna is occasionally said to be the first great name in Buddhist thought since the Buddha' (Williams 2009: 63), and he is even referred to as the 'second Buddha'[7] (Williams 2009: 63). The account of the influence of Nāgārjuna, one of the greatest Indian thinkers, is even today far from over. Karl Jaspers listed Nāgārjuna among the 'great philosophers' half a century ago (Jaspers 1959: 934–956), and 'even today he commands the greatest attention in the Western world in so far as philosophic Mahāyāna tradition is concerned' (Inada 1993: 3).

Nāgārjuna wrote in Sanskrit and the main works attributed to him are the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* (*Mādhyamikakārikā*), the *Śūnyatāsaptati*, the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*, the *Vyavahārasiddhi*, the *Ratnāvalī*, the *Catuḥstava*, the *Pratītyasamutpādahṛdayakārikā*, and the *Suhṛllekha* (Buston 1998: 50–51; Williams 2009: 64–65; Murti 1998: 88–91; Loizzo 2007: 6–7, 25–28; Ramanan 2002: 36–37). One of the recent comprehensive studies gives a list of 52 works attributed to Nāgārjuna, and among these 52, 13[8] are 'considered genuine' works of Nāgārjuna, and others are considered in two groups, 'spurious' and 'dubious'(Lindtner 2011: 9–18). In our present study, we take mainly the *magnum opus* of Nāgārjuna, the *Mādhyamikakārikā* (MK), as the major source of his philosophical views. Nāgārjuna and his 'thoughts' occupy a significant place in Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular, and in the trajectory of Buddhist thought in general. Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamikakārikā* 'sets forth at least his own interpretation of the fundamental thought of Buddhism' (Inada 1993: 4), and our interest is only in the viewpoint presented strictly in the text MK, and not in adjudging whether it is really the fundamental thought of Buddhism.

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[7] Kenneth Inada would state 'Indeed, so far as Mahāyāna Buddhism is concerned Nāgārjuna stands out as the giant among giants who laid the foundation of religious and philosophical quests. His supreme position has stood firm for centuries … He was, in short, considered to the second Buddha and he always occupied the second position in the lineage of Buddhist patriarchs in the various sectarian developments of Tibet, China and Japan' (Inada 1993: 3).

[8] The list of thirteen works which Chr. Lindtner considers as genuine are *Mādhyamikakārikā*, *Śūnyatāsaptati*, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, *Vaidalyaprakarṇa*, *Vyavahārasiddhi*, *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, *Catuḥstava*, *Ratnāvalī*, *Pratītyasamutpādahṛdayakārikā*, *Sūtrasamuccaya*, *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, *Suhṛllekha* and *Bodhisaṁbhāra[ka]* (Lindtner 2011: 11).

MK is the text in which Nāgārjuna categorically exhorts and asserts the abandonment of any particular view or all views[9] with the use of a technical term '*śūnya*' or '*śūnyatā*'[10] which could mean 'empty', 'void', 'nothing', etc. The import of the term *śūnyatā* would be to get rid of all that is ascribed in mental and conceptual, linguistic and verbal constructions of thought, as 'language does not reflect the forms and characteristics of nature itself and even of human experience' (Inada 1993: 13). There is an inadequacy of language that is found in the text. Nāgārjuna demonstrated the emptiness of things, objects, and concepts, since nothing could be stated as thing-in-itself or the inner core of things, but the reality is interdependent, relative and interacting dynamics of nature (*pratītyasamutpanna*). As we will see in the third chapter, that *śūnyatā* is a device to examine the conceptualizing experience that we have. In this regard, Ichimura states that 'the truth of Śūnyatā is the basis of our conceptual world as well as that of external phenomena' (Ichimura 2001: 125). Siderits and Katsura too have the same opinion, and they say 'emptiness is no more than a useful way of conceptualizing experience' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 278). Since we have the 'conceptualizing experience', Śūnyatā is not nihilism, as Garfield has put in one of his recent exposes, and according to Nāgārjuna, the conventional existence is real existence (Garfield 2014: 53–54). Any attempt to make a 'nihilistic reading of Nāgārjuna is unjustified, and that Nāgārjuna is in fact a robust realist, offering an analysis, not refutation of existence' (Garfield 2014: 44). We will extend our exposition on Nāgārjuna's thought in the third chapter.

1.3.2   John of the Cross

John of the Cross or Juan de Yepes y Alvarez (1542–1591) was one of the foremost Spanish poets, a Carmelite monk and mystic, canonised in 1726, and later recognised as a Doctor of the Universal Church (in Catholic Church) in 1926 (Kavanaugh 1991: 9–38; Tyler 2010: 9–37). 'As a poet, first of all, John presented the rich content of his mystical experience in lyric poetry, and by this has contributed a sublime treasure to Spanish literature' (Kavanaugh 1991: 33; De Jesus 1958).

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[9] With his rejection of all views, of all constructive metaphysics, Nāgārjuna has advocated *śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnām* (MK 13, 8: 108–109).

[10] *Śūnyatā* is the most central doctrine in the entire Buddhism. *Śūnyatā* is not understood in the same way in all the schools of Buddhism. Early Buddhism took the meaning of *śūnyatā* as '*pudgalaśūnyatā*', that is the substance and the whole are unreal, they are void of reality (*śūnya*). The *dharma*s are real here. The Mādhyamika went further and established *pudgalaśūnyatā* and *dharmaśūnyatā*. Unreality, or the essence-less-ness, is not confined to any particular aspect of experience; experience itself is *śūnya*. The term connotes not only unreality, but also reality. Reality itself is *śūnya* being inexpressible through verbal constructions (*dṛṣṭiśūnyatā*). The Yogācāra too advocated *śūnyatā*. There is only consciousness. Consciousness itself is not *śūnya*. *Śūnyatā* pertains only to its mode of appearance as objective. Consciousness is infected by the subject-object categories. This infection is unreal (*grāhadvayaśūnyatā*) (Chatterjee 1987: 21).

John of the Cross's major prose works are four: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living Flame of Love.* They are testaments for his dedication to *unqualified negation* (De Nicolas 1996: 60–61). John of the Cross's poems could be divided into three categories: Songs of Soul, Romances, and Miscellaneous (Jones 2001), and they are highly mystical and precise, as Jones writes that 'St John's thought is very compressed' (Jones 2001: 13). John of the Cross's lyrical works include: *The Spiritual Canticle* (redaction A with 39 stanzas), *The Dark Night*, *The Living Flame of Love*, *Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation*, *Stanzas of the soul that suffers with longing to see God*, *Stanzas given a spiritual meaning*, *Stanzas applied spiritually to Christ and the soul*, *Song of the soul that rejoices in Knowing God through faith*, *Romances* (nine of them), *A romance on the psalm 'By the waters of Babylon'*, *A gloss (with spiritual meaning)*; – *without support yet with support*, *A gloss (with a spiritual meaning)*; – *Not for all of beauty*, *Christmas Refrain*, *The Sum of Perfection*, and *The Spiritual Canticle* (redaction B with 40 stanzas) (John of the Cross 1991: 44–80; John of the Cross 2001: 19–125).

John of the Cross wrote his poems first, and the prose followed later. 'As is well known, John of the Cross, began his treatise on the Ascent of Mount Carmel, which is a commentary on the first two stanzas of the Dark Night, … The poem is evidently not written for the commentary' (Tavard 1988: 56), and 'the poems generally stand by themselves, independent of the commentaries' (Tavard 1988: 57). His other writings include his advices, letters and sayings (John of the Cross 1991: 85–97 & 719–764), among which his *The Precautions*, *Counsels to a Religious on How to Reach Perfection*, and the 33 *Letters* are noteworthy. John of the Cross's sayings under the head *Sayings of Light and Love* are maxims that are 'hard, clean, unsentimental sayings that overflow with spiritual wisdom' (John of the Cross 1991: 83). Though they do not follow an organised way, John of the Cross's sayings are codified into 175 maxims (John of the Cross 1991: 85–97). The sources of influence on John of the Cross's writings could be the Bible, Thomas Aquinas and the scholastic thinkers, St Augustine and Neo-Platonism, German and Spanish mystics, symbolism of Spanish poetry, and the 'symbolic and linguistic influences from Islam' (Kavanaugh 1991: 35–37).

The conception of *nada* (nothingness) in the works of John of the Cross expresses the *negative way* that we find in his thought. The negative way that we encounter in John of the Cross does not imply at all that God is nothingness, but human experience of him is nothingness (Johnston 2003: 121). The negative way of John of the Cross cannot be called the negative theology as John of the Cross affirms that 'a person should behave in a purely negative way… by means of that emptiness, darkness, and nakedness regarding all things' (AMC II, 24, 8: 243) to know God, 'the knowledge of all' (AMC I, 13, 11: 150). John of the Cross explains this negative way and says: 'All things are nothing… God alone is its all' (LFL 1, 32: 655). We will deal with his thought in an elaborate manner in the fourth chapter.

1.4   A Mādhyamika Buddhist (Nāgārjuna) Reading of John of the Cross

The attempt that we are making here is a Mādhyamika Buddhist reading of John of the Cross in the light of negative way paradigm. The notion of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) in Nāgārjuna and the conception of '*nada*' (nothingness) in the works of John of the Cross are two intriguing terms that have a great amount of commonality, and at the same time a good deal of difference. Though we make a Mādhyamika reading of John of the Cross, we keep hold of the Christian philosophical/theological conviction that we find in the works of John of the Cross. We have tried to present the views of each of these two thinkers from the perspectives of their respective traditions, being truthful to cross-cultural hermeneutics[11], we have relied on (Prabhu 2013: 126–134) in this study avoiding the hermeneutics of suppression and suspicion.

In the conceptual framework of *śūnyatā* in the Mādhyamika, the doctrine of two truths plays a significant role. According to the Mādhyamika, the conventional truth is *saṃvṛti satya* and all the descriptions and prescriptions we make are in this truth, whereas the 'real truth' (ultimate truth) is *paramārtha satya*, the real nature of things (MK 25, 1–40: 209–226), which are indescribable. The most important source of the doctrine of two truths is Candrakīrti, the articulate commentator of Nāgārjuna who made Nāgārjuna's cryptic and puzzling *kārikā*s more intelligible to readers, especially through his *Madhyamakavatāra* (MKV). All entities have two natures which are perceived as correct perception and delusory perception. 'The object of correct perception is reality (*tattva*, i.e., emptiness). That of delusory perception is said to be the conventional truth' (Williams 2009: 77). The *paramārtha satya* is *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and it is beyond language. We cannot speak of the *paramārtha* adequately either positively, negatively, both ways and neither way.[12] It transcends both our concepts and the meaning of our words. Whatever our intellect conceives of the *paramārtha* falls short of representing it.

When we turn to John of the Cross, we find him mentioning in his sketch of the mount in his *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*:[13] '*Nada nada nada y aun en la montana nada*' – nothing, nothing, nothing and even on the mountain nothing (John of the Cross 1991: 110–111; De Nicolas 1996: 60–61). John of the Cross has been called 'Doctor of the Nothingness' (*Doctor de la Nada*) (Peers 1943: 96–97), and for him,

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[11] See the discussion under the heading 'Sect. 1.1. Why this study?' and also the footnote 4 above.

[12] Our reference here is to the *Catuṣkoṭi-tarka*. According to *catuṣkoṭi-tarka*, four and only four views are possible: two are primary and the other two are secondary. Nāgārjuna has clearly systematised these four and formulated them into *catuṣkoṭi* and *prajñāpāramitā* is *catuṣkoṭi vinirmukta*. Nāgārjuna tries to express the inexpressible through this. Nāgārjuna gives the four views in the 27th chapter entitled 'Dṛṣṭiparīkṣā' of the *Madhyamakaśāstra*. We have these views in MK 27, 2: 249–250.

[13] The sketch of the mount in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* has four parts, and the second is the middle path in which the word 'nada' (nothing) is repeated seven times (Kavanaugh 1991: 110–111).

words fail to adequately convey God's essence and God experience, as any linguistic description based on the categories of human faculties is inadequate to describe God. The works of John of the Cross are an interpretation unto themselves where he gives us a comprehensive explanation, through his own prose commentaries, of the meaning following his delicate poetic expressions which are metaphysical and mystical. John of the Cross's is an account of the limits of language when it comes to depict the ultimate reality whom he calls God. For John of the Cross, words fail to adequately convey God and 'the secret wisdom' of God, for any linguistic construction will be incapable of depicting God. Human faculties, according to John, – intellect, memory and will – 'must undergo a purification of their respective apprehensions in order to reach union with God', (AMC III, 1, 1: 267), for 'God has no form or image comprehensible' (AMC III, 2, 4: 269). The soul's 'divine union empties and sweeps the phantasy of all forms of knowledge' (AMC III, 2, 4: 269) which are acquired by the help of the three faculties. (We will deal with it in the fourth chapter.) The conception of '*nada*' (nothingness) in the works of John of the Cross shows the limits of language to express the nature of God.

Why John of the Cross? This work is an attempt to make a Mādhyamika Buddhist (Nāgārjuna) reading of John of the Cross for the simple reason that the current author is familiar with Nāgārjuna's works and comfortable with the works of John of the Cross. For some this might sound to be a stultifying reason to undertake such a study as this one, for not for this author. Above all, both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross were fervent seekers of the Truth, and they had realised the Truth in their own way. They were convinced that they had found the Truth and experienced it. Though John of the Cross 'was a consummate poet, John's prose works are clear, measured, and full of interesting conceptual distinctions; Sanjuanist teaching therefore seems far more amenable to philosophical scrutiny than the more impressionistic outpourings of other Christian mystics' (Payne 1990: xiii–xiv). In this study one is not much interested in what other commentators had to say about John of the Cross and his position, but one would like to look at John of the Cross in a new perspective and find meaning in his thought by a systematic comparison (even a contrast) with Nāgārjuna, as Nāgārjuna stands to be the master *par excellence* of the negative way in the history of thought. There could be disagreement and refutations to such a reading, arguing that both the thinkers in discussion are from different traditions, and their negative way is for entirely different goals. However, academic endeavours are democratic, and one wishes to take such a liberty to have an understanding of John of the Cross's texts in the light of Nāgārjuna's philosophy. It must also be mentioned here that the present author does not claim that he has succeeded in his attempt in this work, but the crux of the matter is that an attempt has been made which is more than rewarding as far as the present author is concerned. The author would wish that some others too will find this work useful to appreciate such cross-cultural hermeneutics and cross-cultural philosophy.

1.5   The Similitude in Methodology and Approach: Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

In this work the emphasis is on the negative way – *via negativa* – found in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. For Nāgārjuna *śūnyatā* is an expression or terminology used to unravel the nuances of 'truth' which could be conceived in an essencelessness of reality. The term *śūnyatā* is employed to express the limits of *saṃvṛti*, the conventional, as there is *niḥsvabhāvatā*, essencelessness, of things. Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist monk and the teaching of Buddha (*Buddhaśāsana* and *Buddhadeśana*) was of paramount importance to him. It would be unreasonable to describe him merely a positivist or analytician who did not have anything do with the religious truth. Above all, in his teaching there is a purpose to disprove the other positions, mainly that of the Ābhidharmika Buddhists, and also that of the Vedic traditions and non-Vedic traditions of Indian thought, in order to establish the Buddhist religious conviction on rational grounds.

If one carefully examines the writings of John of the Cross, one could find both the trends of cataphatism and apophatism running through. The similitude of methodology and approach, a common element, could be found in the *negative way* of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. In John of the Cross's framework, 'truth' is God, which is beyond the grasp of the intellect and imagination. The intellect and imagination which might initiate the ascent in meditation to God must be abandoned *in toto* so that the union will be achieved by negation, the negative way or what John of the Cross calls 'knowledge in unknowing': 'I entered into unknowing, and there I remained unknowing, transcending all knowledge' (EC, 1: 53).[14] In John of the Cross's negative way, 'it leaves a person's spiritual and natural faculties not only in darkness, but in emptiness too' (DN II, 8, 4: 411). This emptiness leads to full knowledge, as John of the Cross writes, 'having nothing, yet possessing all things' (DN II, 8, 5: 412).

The negative way we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross may look similar in their respective approaches but each of these two has, in fact, different goals to achieve. Even the similarity of approach between their schemes could be contestable as their goals are different. And I believe that their approaches are also different if we take into account the goals that Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross have had in their philosophical enterprises. Thus, there is an unambiguous difference in the goal of the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, though there could be an apparent similarity we come across. We will deal with this aspect in the fifth chapter under the heading Sect. 5.2.1.

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[14] *Entréme donde no supe, Y quedéme no sabiendo, Toda ciencia transcendiendo* (SEC 1: 53).

1.6   The *Negative Way*: Different Objectives in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

The negative way employed in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross has got different objectives. The negative way in Nāgārjuna is based on a noncommittal philosophical attitude to anything that is fixed and essential, and it is communicated by the notion of *śūnyatā*. There is absolutely no logocentric view in Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna's objective is a *śūnyatā* centric philosophical analysis where he advocates an insight (*paśyati*) of the nothingness of all views and positions or *śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnāṁ* (MK 13, 8: 108). The negative way found in John of the Cross has an altogether different objective. John of the Cross's apophaticism is Christ centred. In this sense, there is a logocentrism evidently seen in John of the Cross's negative way. As Bernard McGinn writes 'John of the Cross stands with Dionysius and Meister Eckhart … as one of the pinnacles of the apophatic tradition in Christianity' (McGinn 2000: 40), and the objective of the negative way in John is to reach God. Here as it has been said, 'Christianity is the bedrock on which John builds. Christ's salvific act is a sine qua non for the union of creatures with their God' (Mahoney 2004: 87). John of the Cross himself writes: 'A person makes progress only in imitating Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life' (AMC II, 7, 8: 272), and Christ is the 'model and light' (AMC II, 7, 9: 272). There is ultimately a theistic goal implied in the negative way in John's writings, and his is 'Christocentric understanding of the apophatic path' (Mahoney 2004: 90). We will elaborate on the divergence of objectives in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross in the fifth chapter under the heading Sect. 5.2.2.

   This chapter is an introductory one presenting the significance, scope and subject matter of the study. Having briefly given the list of the works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, this introductory chapter went on to give an outline of the Mādhyamika Buddhist reading of John of the Cross. One could see clearly two important facets of these writers: *firstly*, there is an apparent similitude in methodology and approach in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross when they employ their negative way and, *secondly*, it is evident that they both have different objectives in employing the negative way, namely, a *śūnyatā* – centric philosophical objective and a Christ-centric understanding of apophatic path. In conclusion, it shall be borne in mind that the primary intent of this study is conceptual and systematic, rather than historical and religious, and we shall be more interested in knowing the dissimilarities in the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross which we show in the fifth chapter.

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Abbreviations of Original Sources

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DN: *The Dark Night*. John of the Cross, Saint. (1991). *The collected works of Saint John of the Cross*. (K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodriguez, Trans.) (pp. 351–457). Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

LFL: John of the Cross. (1991). *The Living Flame of Love.* In *The collected works of Saint John of the Cross*. K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodriguez, Trans.) (pp. 638–715). Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

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Chapter 2
Nothingness: Two Traditions and a Concept

> *Learning to touch deeply the jewels of our own tradition will*
> *allow us to understand and appreciate the values of other*
> *traditions, and this will benefit everyone.*
>
> (Thich Nhat Hanh, Living Buddha, Living Christ, p. 90)

Abstract The negative way that we discuss here is *apophatism* or *via negativa* which has a long history. In this chapter we look at the concept implying the negative way in the two traditions, namely, the Buddhist and the Christian. The negative way is called *śūnyatā* in Buddhism, and it is *via negativa* or *apophatism* in the Christian tradition, though the implication in both the traditions would vary. The import of these terms is indeed the negative way, but they operate in different nuances in both these traditions. The Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā* does not have anything to do with the theistic understanding of the ineffability of God. In the Christian tradition, the negative way comes to play a role in knowing God, a knowing in unknowing, whereas in the Buddhist parlance, *śūnyatā* is an operator; it is a device or stratagem that calls for an avoidance or 'cessation of hypostatization' with regard to what is purportedly real and purportedly unreal. In this chapter, we first look at the Buddhist tradition and the negative way found therein, highlighting the Mahāyāna tradition first, then, taking up the Mādhyamika system of Nāgārjuna and the concept of *śūnyatā*. In the latter part of the chapter, we make a brief account of the trajectory of the negative way in the Christian tradition up to John of the Cross, starting with 'Christian orient and the negative way' and then proceeding to Neoplatonism and Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart and *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Keywords Apophatism • Buddhism • Christianity • John of the cross • Mādhyamika • Mahāyāna • Nāgārjuna • Neoplatonism • *Śūnyatā* • The negative way • *Via negativa*

The negative way, more often than not, is called *apophatism* or *via negativa* in religious and philosophical discourse. The apophatic tradition has a long history with its 'metaphors of negativity' (Turner 1998: 1, 35–40). The 'metaphors of negativity' came to be called as *apophatism* in the Greek tradition and *via negativa* in the Latin

tradition in the West. When it comes to Indian tradition, the 'negative way' got similar expressions in the *śūnyatā* notion of the Buddhist tradition and the *neti neti* of the Upaniṣadic tradition. The metaphors of negativity inform us that any predication about the ultimate reality is impossible. In the *via negativa*, there is a 'failure of speech' or verbal construction, whereas 'cataphatic' is the 'verbose element' in describing what is real, and it 'uses as many voices as it can'. It looks like 'a kind of riot, an anarchy of disorder in which anything goes' (Turner 1998: 20). The negative way is sort of linguistic stratagem to transcend the limits of language. Denys Turner writes in this connection that 'the apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language' (Turner 1998: 34).

In this chapter we look at the concept implying the negative way in the two traditions, namely, the Buddhist and the Christian. We first look at the Buddhist tradition and the negative way found therein, highlighting the Mahāyāna tradition first and then taking up the Mādhyamika system of Nāgārjuna and the concept of *śūnyatā*. Subsequently, we make a brief account of the trajectory of the negative way in the Christian tradition up to John of the Cross, starting with 'Christian orient and the negative way' and then proceeding to Neoplatonism and Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart and *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

2.1 The Negative Way Paradigms in the Buddhist and Christian Traditions

The negative way paradigms could be seen in both the Buddhist and Christian religious-philosophical discourses. At the outset itself, let us remind ourselves that the negative way in Buddhism is not exactly the *via negativa* of negative theology. It has been opined that in the early centuries of current era (AD), the *via negativa* philosophical/theological reflection was very much prevalent in the monasteries – both in the Buddhist monasteries in India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and China and in the Eastern Christian monasteries in Syria, Edessa, Nisibis (modern Turkey), Iran and Baghdad. Plott writes in this regard: 'The *via negativa* was in full force equally in the Syrian desert among the monasteries of what is now Iran and Afghanistan, as well as at Edessa, Baghdad, and all over India and China' (Plott 1993:51). But the content and goal of *via negativa* varied in both the traditions.

The Buddhist paradigm of *via negativa* with all the 'metaphors of negativity' was not about any theocentric view as we encounter it in the Christian tradition. The negative way is inherent in the Buddhist thought right from the beginning, and it could be seen in all the schools of Buddhism. A. K. Chatterjee has rightly pointed out that 'negativism is inherent in the structure of Buddhist thought. Negativism beginning with the doctrine of *avyākṛta* (inexpressible), through the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, adopted by both Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, finally culminates in the theory of language in Dinnāga School' (Chatterjee 2007: 13). The entire career of Buddhist thought has been embedded with negativism (Mishra 2008: 49–139). The negative way is an employment of language in the Buddhist thought which unravels

the riddle of language in its semantics and expresses the asymmetry between language and reality. It is because according to Buddhist interpretation 'what is signified by a word is neither a subjective idea nor an objective reality, but something fictitious and unreal' (Mookerjee 2006: 116).[1] We find that the negative way is inherent in Buddhist thought whether it is the *avyākṛta* (inexpressible), *śūnyatā* (emptiness) or *apoha* (exclusion) (Sebastian 2015: 375–383).[2] We will come to this later.

The Christian paradigm of *via negativa* is a theocentric view. The negative way or 'way of negation' in the Christian philosophical-theological enterprise is seen in the intellectual approach to God, using intellect to transcend intellect and reason. God is not like every creature that can be known by human intelligence. The discursive reason cannot penetrate God's nature. 'We know of God what he is not rather than what he is. In regard, therefore, to positive knowledge of the divine nature our minds are in a state of "ignorance"'' as Nicholas of Cusa would counsel (Copleston, III 1985: 235). In other words, 'this leads to the *via negativa* to approach the divine not by positive or anthropomorphic language but by negative language, by paradoxical or contradictory language, or by insisting on the inadequacy of all language to describe His transcendence' (Bradley 2004: 12).[3] It has been said that to know God through 'unknowing' is the goal of via negativa. John of the Cross writes: 'I entered into unknowing, and there I remained unknowing, transcending all knowledge'.[4] The negative way seen in the Christian tradition does not employ the objective propositions involved in rational methods and rules of logic, but it is some

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[1] Satkari Mookerjee explains this: 'The fact of the matter is that both the speaker and the hearer apprehend in fact and reality a mental image, a subjective content and not any objective fact; but the speaker thinks that he presents an objective fact to the hearer and the hearer too is deluded into thinking that the presented meaning is not a mental image, but an objective verity. The speaker and the hearer are both laboring under a common delusion' (Mookerjee 2006: 116).

[2] It could be further clarified with the explanation of negative constituent, while dealing with 'exclusion' (*apoha*) in one of the recent studies that takes recourse to the late Indian Buddhist philosopher Jñānaśrīmitra (972–1025 AD). It goes like this: '…the content of our verbal (and also inferential and conceptual) awareness must be taken to be a complex object consisting of both a positive and a negative element. In accordance with our everyday linguistic experiences, a positive object must be taken to be what is primarily expressed by language. But an additional negative element, exclusion, must be taken to be a qualifier of that positive object. While we can act only towards positive entities, it is only through exclusion that we can pick out the appropriate objects for that activity by distinguishing them from those that are inappropriate' (McCrea and Patil 2010: 28).

[3] Arthur Bradley, taking recourse to Louth (1980), Mortley (1986), McGinn (1991) and Bulhoff and ten Kate (2000) defines via negativa in this way: 'The negative way names a theological tradition that insists that the divine cannot be understood in human terms because it is radically transcendent. This leads to the *via negativa* to approach the divine not by positive or anthropomorphic language but by negative language, by paradoxical or contradictory language, or by insisting on the inadequacy of all language describe His transcendence. In simple terms, then negative theology is a theology that says what God is not rather than what He is; that insists on His radical otherness from all human images and irreducibility to human thought' (Bradley 2004: 12).

[4] *Entréme donde no supe, Y quedéme no sabiendo, Toda ciencia transcendiendo* (St John of the Cross, 'Stanzas concerning an Ecstasy experienced in high Contemplation' (Kavanaugh 1991: 53)

sort of trans-empirical experience of meeting with the living God, like that of Moses of old in the burning bush (Exodus 3: 1–21). 'It is by *unknowing* (αγνωσία) that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge' (Lossky 1968: 25). It is an ecstatic (*ekstatic*) experience, one which transcends the limitations of created existence, including all human forms of knowledge. This does not mean that rationality is rejected outrightly in apophatism. 'The emphasis on a mystical union with God beyond reason did not necessarily entail the rejection of rationality in the life and expression of faith. A cursory reading of apologetic texts and those commenting on the ascetical life reveal the importance of the role of reason for the Eastern Christian tradition' (Papanikolaou 2002: 244). Further, it must be said that in the Christian tradition, there is cataphatic import as well in apophatism. Turner explains this in this way:

> The apophatic therefore presupposes the cataphatic 'dialectically' in the sense that the silence of the negative way is the silence achieved only at the point at which talk about God has been exhausted. The theologian is, as it were, embarrassed into silence by the very prolixity, as in a seminar one can be embarrassed into silence in the shameful realisation that one had hogged the conversation and begun to babble beyond one's power of understanding. Theology, one might say, is an *excess* of babble. (Turner 2004: 18)

In the Christian tradition, the negative way was to understand God, and, thus, through negative way of negation, a positive affirmation was posited. Apophatic and cataphatic are not independent stratagems in understanding God. The negative way is not 'the way of simply saying nothing about God, nor yet is it the way simply of saying that God is "nothing"' (Turner 2004: 18). This is the realisation of the inadequacy of our language to represent and describe God.

2.2 The Negative Way in Buddhism

The negative way is integral to the Buddhist thought. As we have mentioned earlier, the negative way in the Buddhist thought is not the *via negativa* paradigm of negative theology. In the Buddhist thought, there is an obvious intent of the inadequacy of language implied in the negative way or *via negativa*. The fourteen unanswered questions and even the silence of the Buddha before his first preaching indirectly indicated the negative way. (However that *silence* of the Buddha could be subjected to different interpretations.) And the negative way in the Buddhist thought, in that sense, started right from the Buddha (Nagao 1992: 41) and it has had long trajectory. The 'inexpressible' (*avyākata* in Pāli or *avyākṛta-vastūni* in Sanskrit) occurs in many dialogues of the Buddha himself.[5] In his *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, Vasubandhu

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[5] The *Cūḷa-Māluṅkyasutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya* is the classical example to it (*Majhima Nikāya* I, 426–432: Vol. II, 97–101). 'Wherefore, Māluṅkyaputta, understand as not explained what has not been explained by me' (*Majjhima Nikāya* I, 432: Vol. II, 101). Again the *Aggi-Vacchagottasutta* is another example (*Majjhima Nikāya* I, 484–489: Vol. II, 162–167). 'Freed from denotation by material shape is the Tathāgata, Vaccha, he is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable as is the great ocean.

explains the 'inexpressible' as questions that does not deserve an answer, and, thus, such an answer should be declined. He says:

> The Sūtra calls *indeterminate* (*avyākṛta*) the questions to which an answer should not be given (*sthāpanīyapraśna*), that is to say, this question is known as 'not answered' (*avyākṛta*); it is not explained (*kathita*) because it should be declined. The object of such a question is called an *indeterminate point* (*avyākṛta-vastu*). (AKB V, 21: 1691)

When it comes to Mahāyāna tradition, the negative way gets more prominence. The Mādhyamika thought with its notion of *śūnyatā* harbours much on *via negativa*. The Buddhist logical school, with Dignāga[6] (fifth/sixth century AD) and his renowned commentator Dharmakīrti[7] (seventh century AD), with its theory of *apoha*, furthers the negative way paradigm with its theory of double negation (Siderits et al. 2011).[8] In the hands of the later Buddhist thinkers like Śāntarakṣita[9] (eighth century AD) and Ratnakīrti[10] (tenth century AD), the negative way gets a newer twist. Śāntarakṣita establishes the negative way, with reference to *apoha*, on two levels, namely, relative and absolute negations. The relative negation (*paryudāsa*) still has two kinds of negation – negation of the ideal universal or conception (*buddhyātman*) and negation of object (*arthātman*). A recent study states:

> He (Śāntarakṣita) establishes that *apoha* is of two kinds due to the difference between relative and absolute negation. Again the relative negation is also of two kinds due to the difference of conception of idea and object. … Absolute negation (*prasajya pratiṣedha*) is complete denial or prohibition. In the relative negation the negative suffix which bears this meaning (as in *anātman*, the negative suffix *ana*) posits two facts – that there is a negation of some positive/present entity and simultaneously it also states that instead of that entity which has been negated something is present. Consider the very technical term in Buddhist philosophy – *anātman*. It denies the existence of *ātman* on one hand and on the other it posits the existence of *dharma*. … Śāntarakṣita defines now what is the absolute negation. In the statement like 'cow' is not non-cow, there is absolute/complete negation of 'non-cow'. (Mishra 2008: 115–117)

"Arises" does not apply, "does not arise" does not apply, "both arises and does not arise" does not apply, "neither arises not does not arise" does not apply. That feeling, …That perception… Those habitual tendencies …That consciousness by one recognizing the Tathāgata might recognize him – that consciousness has been got rid of by Tathāgata, cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump that can come to no further existence and is not liable to arise again in future' (*Majjhima Nikāya* I, 487–488: Vol. II, 166).

[6] Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya* deals with *apoha*, especially its second chapter titled *Svārthānumāna* and the fifth chapter titled *Apoha*.

[7] Dharmakīrti wrote a commentary on *Pramāṇasamuccaya* of Dignāga after the name *Pramāṇavārttikakārikā* or simply *Pramāṇavārttika*. Dharmakirti's *Pramāṇavārttika* deals with *apoha*, especially the first chapter *Pramāṇasiddhiḥ*, the second chapter *Pratyakṣam* and the third chapter *Svārthānumānaṁ*.

[8] One could get the latest discussions and debates on *apoha* by the contemporary Buddhist scholars in this volume.

[9] Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṁgraha*, verses 867–1212, deals with *apoha* and the negative way implied therein.

[10] Ratnakīrti's *Apohasiddhi*, the complete work, deals with *apoha* and negative way (Ratnakirti 1995).

Ratnakīrti gave a new orientation to the negative way in the Buddhist thought by interpreting *apoha* as 'positive qualified by negation' (Mishra 2008: 136); in the sense, *apoha* is not merely an exclusion of non-X, 'but the meaning of a term is the positive thing qualified by the exclusion of the other' (Mishra 2008: 121). The negative way in Buddhism has the import of 'inexpressible' (McCrea and Patil 2010: 96–97),[11] whether it is with regard to properties of things or any entity *per se*.

2.2.1 *Mahāyāna Buddhism*

Mahāyāna Buddhism originated in India and got spread across Asia. (We have dealt with Mahāyāna in the first chapter under the heading 1.3 as well.) Mahāyāna is the prevailing form of Buddhism in East Asia. The origin of Mahāyāna could be sometime between second and first century BC.[12] Some scholars opine that Mahāyāna developed out of the Mahāsāṅghika School.[13] It might be partially true, as the Sthaviras were more influential in western and northern parts of India, while the Mahāsāṅghikas were influential in central and southern parts of India (Hirakawa 1998: 119–123). Mahāyāna Buddhism existed in India together with non-Mahāyāna schools. According to the palaeographic records and the other evidences from the writings of Chinese travellers in India like Faxian (in India during 399–414 AD), Yijing (c. 690 AD) and Xuanzang (in India during 629–645 AD) who described the monasteries throughout India that they were a mixture of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna Buddhist followers in the early centuries of the current era (Walser 2008: 39–43). Besides that, as Gregory Schopen writes, the 'early Mahāyāna in India was a small isolated, embattled minority group struggling for recognition within larger dominant groups' (Schopen 2000: 19).

It was widely accepted by Western and Japanese scholars that 'the origins of Mahāyāna can be traced to the activities of the laity, a lay revolt against the arrogance and pretentions of the monks' (Williams 2009: 21). The Japanese scholars,

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[11] Explaining it with recourse to Jñānaśrīmitra, the later Indian Buddhist philosopher, McCrea and Patil explain: 'If the question is ''What is it that is expressed by words?'' then, having set out these options (1) on the basis of appearance, (2) on the basis of determination, or (3) really, the answers are, in order, (1) ''the image that is excluded from what is other, that resides in conceptual awareness''; (2) ''the particular that is excluded from what is other''; or (3) ''nothing.'' This has already been said. Therefore, establishing the position that words and inferential reasons have exclusions as their objects is for the sake of making it known that all properties are inexpressible' (McCrea and Patil 2010: 96–97).

[12] As Reginald A. Ray holds, there could be two stages of Mahāyāna origins. The first stage must have had an origin as a forest movement of the laity sometime in the first century BC and the second stage sometime in the third–fourth century AD as a monastic one by the monks (Ray 1999: 412).

[13] The origin of the term Mahāyāna may be traceable to an earlier school known as *Mahāsāṅghikas*. In the Council of Vaiśāli, a hundred years after the *mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, the *Saṅgha* was divided into two opposing camps, the *Sthaviras* or the order of elders and the *Mahāsāṅghika*s or the order of the majority. The elders (*sthavira*s) denounced the *Mahāsaṅghika*s.

until very recently, held that Mahāyāna tradition came up among 'an identifiable order of Bodhisattvas, composed of lay and renunciate members of equal status' (Williams 2009: 22) as there was a new practice of Buddha cult where the importance of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas came to prevail. This sort of Buddha cult was centred on the *stūpas* and relic shrines,[14] which were not associated with any of the monasteries and monks and where the lay people were the major stakeholders (Hirakawa 1998: 269–274). Though laity might have had some role in the Mahāyāna movement, it might not be entirely correct to hold that the Mahāyāna doctrinal advances, like Bodhisattva ideal, came entirely from the laity, but they were religious and intellectual contributions from the monks (Williams 2009: 23–27; Ray 1999: 404–417; Harrison 1995: 67–69; Walser 2008:16–36).

It must be mentioned here that sometime in the first century BC, a novel literature, namely, the *Prajñāpāramitā* or the Perfection Wisdom started to emerge in Buddhism (Conze 1978) which claimed to be the real *Buddha-vacana* (word of the Buddha).[15] This new literature paved way for a movement and interpretation in the direction of Mahāyāna. Let us remind ourselves that later on the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature became the basis for the classical study of Mahāyāna. The new literature was 'not the product of some organized or unitary movement, and appears to have been produced by well within the existing Buddhist traditions' (Williams 2009: 43). The Mahāyāna sūtras became some sort of object of worship, and among them the perfection wisdom sūtras (*Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*) are greater significance for the progress of Mahāyāna tradition.

The canonical and classical Mahāyāna literature falls into two categories, namely, *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Tathāgatagarbha* classes. A. K. Chatterjee writes in this connection:

> Canonical and classical Mahāyāna literature falls into two classes, viz., Prajñāpāramitā and the Tathāgatagarbha classes. This distinction is essentially rooted in the doctrine of Two Truths admitted in Mahāyāna, viz., Paramārtha and Saṃvṛti. Paramārtha or the ultimate truth is that of Śūnyatā, and it is with this that the Prajñāpāramitā literature is in general concerned. Saṃvṛti is empirical truth; the phenomenal world, including human beings, cannot just be dismissed as void, since this constitutes our existential predicament. Here the

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[14] There are scholars who disagree with Hirakawa's thesis of stūpa and relic cult in relation to the beginning of Mahāyāna movement. Paul Williams writes in this connection: 'Hirakawa's paper relies on too many suppositions to be fully convincing, and Gregory Schopen has argued against Hirakawa that a number of important early Mahāyāna sūtras show a distinctly hostile attitude to the stūpa cult. Schopen's suggestion, a suggestion that has had considerable influence, is that reference to worshipping texts themselves, an extremely reverential attitude to the Mahāyāna sūtras, indicates that in cultic terms early Mahāyāna may well have been centred on a number of book cults, groups of followers who studied and worshipped particular sūtras' (Williams 2009: 23).

[15] For a detailed study of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, its origin and texts, see Conze 1978. In this work Conze gives a sketch of the historical development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras and the main texts which became the foundation of Mahāyāna Buddhism particularly in India and Tibet. There are some 40 *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, some very long and some short, which mainly explore the key conceptions of Mahāyāna Buddhism, like *śūnyatā*, a position against discursive thought as *prajñā* is not discursive analysis, the Bodhisattva ideal, *mahākaruṇā* (compassion) together with *prajñā* (wisdom).

Tathāgata comes to fore, accessible to man since the latter is essentially one (Tathāgatagarbha) with Him. This predicament and how it is resolved is dealt with the other class of canonical literature, viz., the Tathāgatagarbha class. (Chatterjee 2005: vii)

In the initial phase of Mahāyāna development in India, the differentiation between the *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Tathāgatagarbha* tenets were not clearly marked out, though there were, in fact, different classes of literature. Both the traditions took *śūnyatā* as central to their systems of thought and praxis (Sebastian 2005a: 11–59). Mahāyāna teachings in the first centuries of current era 'used the *via negativa* in ways that made being a Buddha wholly different from anything else in our experience. The result is that the Buddha that appeared in his *nirmāṇakāya* is not at all as the Buddha nature is in the true reality of the *dharmakāya*' (Gier 2000: 166). Thus, the negative way could be seen in both the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature as well the *Tathāgatagarbha* literature as these two traditions adhered to *śūnyatā*.

2.2.2   *Nāgārjuna and the Mādhyamika School*

Nāgārjuna gets an unparalleled place in the entire career of Buddhist thought and religion. There is an indictment from some quarters that he made a radical departure from the original doctrine of the Buddha. In this context, let us retell that we know the Buddha only from the writings that came to exist after the time of the Buddha, for the Buddha never did write anything. In this sense, 'the adherents of the Mādhyamika school are undoubtedly justified in asserting that their interpretation represents true import of the doctrine of the Buddha and the essence of Buddhism' (Jamspal et al. 2008: xiii). We are not interested in the legendry life of Nāgārjuna. Two sides of Nāgārjuna's career could be seen: his early period as a monk in a Mahāsāṅghika or a Saṁmitīya monastery, somewhere near Mathura in the north India, and his later travel back to Andhra *deśa*, where he was also an adviser to a king (Walser 2008: 59–88). There is also a great debate over which works can accurately be accredited to the philosopher Nāgārjuna. As far as Mādhyamika philosophy is concerned, there is a certain scholarly agreement on some of the main texts which could be reasonably attributed to Nāgārjuna. They are the *Mādhyamikakārikā*, the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* (sixty verses on reasoning) and the *Śūnyatāsaptati* (seventy verses on *śūnyatā*) (Williams 2009: 141–142).

Many scholars in Buddhist studies take Nāgārjuna and his writings as ideal Mahāyāna philosophy. They assume that the works of Nāgārjuna were directed to either the Mahāyāna followers or his opponents both Buddhists (Sarvāstivādins and others) and non-Buddhists like Sāṁkhya and others (Walser 2008: 2–3). However, as Joseph Walser suggests, there could have been 'a third and functionally more important audience – the monks and laypeople in control of the resources that Mahāyānists needed' (Walser 2008: 3). The opinion of contemporary researchers is that Nāgārjuna must have lived in a mixed monastery where the Mahāyānists and

the non-Mahāyānists coexisted with sharp difference in their philosophical convic-
tion though they professed the same religious belief.[16]

Nāgārjuna and his main disciple Āryadeva 'are credited with founding the
Mādhyamika (''Middling'' or ''Middle Way'') as a school' (Williams 2009: 63). The
other prominent Mādhyamika teachers after Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva were
Buddhapālita (fifth–sixth century AD), Bhāvaviveka (sixth century AD), Candrakīrti
(seventh century AD) and Śāntideva (eighth century AD). Among them Candrakīrti
stands out to be most prominent commentator of Nāgārjuna. Following Tibetan
tradition (especially that of Tsong Khapa[17]), scholars had divided the Mādhyamika
School into a couple of sub-schools, like Svātantrika Mādhyamika and Prāsaṅgika
Mādhyamika, and the former was further divided into Sautrāntika-Svātantrika
Mādhyamika and Yogācāra-Svātantrika Mādhyamika (Murti 1998: 87–103). This
distinction of Mādhyamika had dominated the scholarship, but the recent researches,
in the last three decades or so, do not make such an arbitrary distinction (Dreyfus
and McClintock 2003), as this distinction was a 'Tibetan conceptual construction
based on Indian commentaries' (Edleglass 2004: 416).

The main tenet of the Mādhyamika thought, if allowed to be put in such a way,
would be an advocacy of 'absence of own/intrinsic nature' (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) of
things[18] and the correlative notion of 'nothingness' or 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*). By
śūnyatā it is meant that any inherent or intrinsic nature of an existence is empty
(*śūnya*), or it does not exist at all. Things exist relatively, relative to their causes and
conditions. As Paul Williams writes 'the intention is not to negate, e.g., tables and
chairs as such, but tables and chairs conceived as intrinsically, inherently, existing
and therefore, in the Buddhist context, as permanent and fully satisfying' (Williams
2009: 69). This negative way of *śūnyatā* is applicable to self, non-self and even
nirvāṇa which operates within the parameters of 'language games' and enabling one
to see things as they really are, going beyond the conceptualising and categorising
tenacity of the conventional thought process of language and mind (MK 18: 7–9;
MK 25: 5–10). In order to achieve this real seeing of things (*paśyati*), the
Mādhyamika devised the doctrine of two truths, conventional (*loka-samvṛti*) and
ultimate (*paramārtha*), and placed all the everyday practice and interplay of mind
and language (*vyavahāra*) in the conventional realm, while the ultimate is neither
taught nor spoken of (MK 24: 8–10). The ultimate truth is the realisation of the
samvṛti as *samvṛti*.

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[16] 'In view of the discussion concerning Nāgārjuna's date and location, and the evidence from
inscriptions, Chinese pilgrims, and Buddhist doxographies discussed in the introduction, it is
highly unlikely that Nāgārjuna could have lived in an exclusively Mahāyāna monastery. If we look
at the inscriptions from the Andhra area, we must concede that in the lower Krishna Valley toward
the end of the second century there simply were no Mahāyāna monasteries, either under the name
''Mahāyāna'' or under the name ''Śākyabhikṣu'' ' (Walser 2008: 87).

[17] Tsong Khapa (1357–1419) was the most prominent Tibetan proponent of Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika
distinction. This distinction had dominated the modern scholarship in India and the West.

[18] Own nature or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) is only a conceptual construct, and there can be no
intrinsic nature of things.

2.2.3 The Conception of Śūnyatā: The Negative Way

The conception of *śūnyatā* is taken as the negative way in this study. At the outset, it must be said that one must distinguish the negative way implied in *śūnyatā* from negative theology. The purport of *via negativa* in theology is an affirmation; by negation an affirmation is put in place. As Nagatomo writes (though he writes in a different context), 'an act of affirmation is an affirmation qua negation. There is no affirmation pure and simple. Both affirmation and negation presupposes each other; they are dependent and relative to each other. In other words, an act of affirmation is an identity of contradiction, (Nagatomo 2010: 203). In a similar way, with the stratagem of the *via negativa* in theological discourse, an affirmation is established.[19] The negative way of *śūnyatā* is different as we will deal with it in the following part.

The conception of *śūnyatā* has been accepted by all the schools of Buddhism, but its interpretation varies in different schools and traditions. *Śūnyatā* could be considered the most central doctrine in the entire career of Buddhism, but different schools take to mean it in different ways. In early schools of Buddhism, *śūnyatā* was taken as *pudgalaśūnyatā*, rejecting the notion of the whole or the enduring substance. The Mādhyamika went a step ahead in declaring *śūnyatā* as both *pudgalaśūnyatā* and *dharmaśūnyatā*, saying that everything lacks the nature of its own, and it is void of reality (*niḥsvabhāvatā*). A. K. Chatterjee explains it in this way:

> Every category of thought is infected with relativity and is therefore void of reality (*niḥsvabhāva*). As such it is purely imaginary, is subjective. In early Buddhism only one aspect of experience was subjective; difference, change and particularity were objectively real. The Mādhyamika however repudiates the reality of all experience; all thought-categories. The whole is unreal (*pudgalanairātmya*); the discrete and momentary elements on which the whole is supposed to have been superimposed are no less unreal (*dharmanairātmya*), as they become meaningless without the whole. (Chatterjee 1987: 10)

As stated above, 'Early Hīnayāna Buddhism understood śūnyatā to mean merely pudgalaśūnyatā' and 'the dharmas however are real (*aśūnya*) existents' (Chatterjee 1987: 21). The Mādhyamika intensified the conception of *śūnyatā* and held on to the essencelessness (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) of everything. But when it came to Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism, *śūnyat*ā has had a different import as the unreality of object-subject categories (*grāhya-grāhaka śūnyatā* or *grāhadvayaśūnyatā*). Let me quote an Indian Buddhist scholar A. K. Chatterjee again to make it clear:

> The Mādhyamika deepened the conception of śūnyatā. Unreality or essencelessness is not confined to any particular aspect of experience; experience itself in all its entirety is unreal and void (śūnya). It has no real existence. Peculiarly enough, the term connotes not only unreality, but also reality. … For the Yogācāra also, whatever appears to confront experience is unreal (śūnya). There is nothing other than consciousness. Consciousness itself is not however śūnya. It has an ontological existence. Śūnyatā pertains therefore only to its mode of appearance as something objective. Consciousness is infected by the correlative

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[19]Caputo writes with reference to Derrida's take on negative theology: '…negative theology, however negative it may be, is always a theology, and as such committed to a positive, hyperbolic hyper-affirmation of hyper essential being (*hyperousios*), viz. God' (Caputo 1999: 187).

categories of the object and the subject. This infection alone is unreal (grāhadvayaśūnyatā).
(Chatterjee 1987: 21)

Thus, if one wants to look for the thematic unity in Buddhism, it is on the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, though different schools have dissimilar take on it (Sebastian 2005b: 1–16). Now let us consider the notion of *śūnyatā* as construed in the Mādhyamika thought.

The entire corpus of the Mādhyamika literature celebrates *śūnyatā*. The term *śūnyatā* has been translated as 'voidness', 'nothingness' or 'emptiness'. As we have stated earlier, the intent of negative way is *not to negate* an entity (Williams 2009: 69) but to divest oneself of the perceiving or conceiving fixation of an entity as *this* or *that*. The assertive labelling of something as *this* and *that* (or such and such) distorts the *that-ness* or *such-ness* (*tathatā*) of an entity, and, thus, such labelling is a sort of violence in/of language and thought. *Śūnyatā*, considered in this way, is a liberative method and process which one knows yet not ready to spell out. *Śūnyatā* is an operator, it is a device, and it is not an entity and not even a theory. It calls for an avoidance or 'cessation of hypostatization' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 194) with regard to what is real and unreal (MK 18, 8: 157–160).[20] Whatever way one tries, one cannot discover *the real as it is* (*tathatā*) and put forward the same in propositions, for the real or the 'truth is not primarily a property of propositions' (Hirota 2008: 65). There is an element of indeterminacy and incompleteness in all that one perceives and holds.

It must be said that '*śūnyatā* goes beyond affirming or negating the proper names of being, or even goes beyond negative way that is seen to supplement the positive way of approaching the truth' (Zhang 2006: 116). Nāgārjuna in his MK 22, 11 says that *śūnya* (empty) and *aśūnya* (non-empty) are also used only for the sake of making it somehow comprehendible (*prajñaptyartham tu kathyate*).[21] Siderits and Katsura explaining this verse writes 'When a Mādhyamika says that things are empty, this is not to be understood as stating the ultimate truth about the ultimate nature of reality. Instead this is just a useful pedagogical device, a way of instructing others who happen to believe there is such a thing as the ultimate truth about the ultimate nature of reality' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 247). However, one would suggest that the negative way in Nāgārjuna was a critical questioning of determinate reality. Nāgārjuna insisted that 'all alleged real things are void' (Mabbett 2006: 23). One could agree very well with Mabbett that the *śūnyatā* notion in Nāgārjuna did not mean 'nonexistent'. Mabbett writes:

Though it is commonly held view, the notion that Nāgārjuna's 'voidness' means either 'non-existence' or 'falsity' must be rejected; it is easy to show, from the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*

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[20] MK 18, 8: 'All is real, or all is unreal, all is both real and unreal, all is neither unreal nor real; this is the graded teaching of the Buddha' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 200).

[21] MK 22, 11: 'Nothing could be asserted to be *śūnya*, *aśūnya*, both *śūnya* and *aśūnya*, and neither *śūnya* nor *aśūnya*. They are asserted only for the purpose of provisional understanding' (Inanda 1993: 134). Siderits and Katsura translate it: ' "It is empty" is not to be said, nor "It is non-empty," nor that it is both, nor that it is neither; ["empty"] is said only for the sake of instruction' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 247).

that by 'void' Nāgārjuna did not mean 'non-existent.' What is void is unreal, lacking substance; it is not exactly existent (being unreal) and not exactly non-existent (being manifest, however delusively). An unreal figure (a robot, or a phantom, or a figure seen in a dream) may utter a true statement; similarly, though all things are void including the utterance of the teaching of voidness, this utterance can serve as the vehicle of truth. This is made quite clear in *VV* XXII (autocommentary). (Mabbett 2006: 24)

In this sense, *śūnyatā* is not an outright negation and dismissal of anything, but the entire intent of *śūnyatā* is indeterminacy and incompleteness of considering a thing as real. This is a philosophical enterprise that resists any attempt to confine anything into conceptualisation, rather, a hypostatisation, and thereby putting forward a definition. This is a resistance to name the unnamable, though the unnamable may have names,[22] but one is not bothered about them or burdened by them. Paul D. Numrich explains what is implied in the negative way of *śūnyatā* notion in the Mahāyāna tradition in this way:

. … *śūnyatā* (Sanskrit, emptiness) in Mahāyāna tradition, epitomizes the Buddhist view of the limits of conventional knowledge, and especially the limits of knowledge, for it 'is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality which is Nirvāṇa' (Rahula 1974, 35).[23] Nirvāṇa/ Truth/ Reality eludes discursive, propositional, and calculative thinking… Thus, it is often expressed *via negativa*, with negative appellations, given that it is not like anything we know in ordinary reality, though this does not imply that it is a negative state – it transcends all dualities like positive/negative. (Numrich 2008:14)

Thus, *śūnyatā*, the negative way, means the limits of language, and it is an expression of the unspeakable[24] nature of the unnameable. It is a deliberate resistance to spell out the real nature of things either positively or negatively, thus salvaging or liberating oneself from the thraldom of holding on to any view or position. Let me conclude this section with MK 13, 8: it says that *śūnyatā* is nothing but the emptiness of all views (*śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnām*).[25] Here 'the *śūnyatā* of all views' would

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[22] My reference here is to Jin Y. Park's statement that 'The unnameable has names, though as will become clear as we move on, such as ''the middle path,'' ''the middle voice,'' ''the dependent-co-arising,''… These concepts are unnameable because they violate the basic rules of language, but they have names because we need to discuss them' (Park 2006: 8).

[23] Reference here is to the work of Walpola Rahula titled *What the Buddha Taught* (Rahula 1974).

[24] While defining what is 'Nibbāna', Rhys Davids and Stede in the Pali Text Society's *Pali English Dictionary* write '…is the untranslatable expression of the Unspeakable, of that for which in the Buddha's own saying there *is* no word, which cannot be grasped in terms of reasoning and cool logic, the Nameless, the Undefinable' (Rhys Davids and Stede 2009: 405).

[25] Inada's translation of the verse goes like this: 'The wise men (i.e., enlightened ones) have said that *śūnyatā* or the nature of thusness is the relinquishing of all false views. Yet it is said that those who adhere to the idea or concept of *śūnyatā* are incorrigible' (Inanda 1993: 93). In their recent work with MK translation, Siderits and Katsura translate it as 'Emptiness is taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get rid of all (metaphysical) views. But those for whom emptiness is a (metaphysical) view have been called incurable' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 145). Siderits and Katsura's commentary on the verse ends like this: 'So to the extent that emptiness gets rid of all metaphysical views, including itself interpreted as a metaphysical view, it might be called a metaphysic. Buddhapālita sums up the situation more positively by describing those who do not make this error and instead see things correctly: ''They see that emptiness is also empty'' ' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 145–146).

mean to refrain from defining anything as real or unreal. It is a resistance to take any position with regard to the ultimate nature of reality, as Siderits and Katsura put it: 'The "views" in question concern the ultimate nature of reality, or metaphysical theories' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 145). Thus, one would submit that *śūnyatā*, the negative way, that one finds in Nāgārjuna, has a deep signification as *śūnyatā* itself is *śūnya*[26] – emptiness itself is empty. Garfield suggests that the *doctrine of emptiness of emptiness*, which is 'the central thesis of Mādhyamika philosophy' (Garfiled 1995: 318), comes into sight unswervingly from MK 24, 18 where it is said that whatever is dependently arisen is nothing but emptiness (MK 24, 18: 219–220). Garfield writes that the *emptiness of emptiness*:

> …simply amounts to the identification of emptiness with the property of being dependently arisen and with the property of having an identity just in virtue of conventional, verbal designation. It is the fact that emptiness is no more than this that makes it empty, just as it is the fact that conventional phenomena in general are no more than conventional and no more than their parts and status in the causal nexus that makes them empty. (Garfield 1995: 318)

In his exposition on MK 24, 40, Garfield would explain further that Nāgārjuna's notion of *śūnyatā* is more of a philosophical approach where the 'version of the nihilistic reading' Nāgārjuna does avoid 'with a metalinguistic twist'. Garfield continues in this connection that:

> …in Nāgārjuna's philosophical approach the sense of the term is more ontological than logical: To say of a phenomenon or of a fact that is conventional is to characterize its mode of subsistence. It is to say that it is without an independent nature. … So the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness can be seen as inextricably linked with Nāgārjuna's distinctive account of the relation between the two truths. For Nāgārjuna, as is also evident in this crucial verse (that is, MK 24, 40 here), it is a mistake to distinguish conventional from ultimate reality – the dependently arisen from emptiness – at an ontological level. Emptiness just is the emptiness of conventional phenomena. (Garfield 1995: 319)

This is the negative way that we find in the notion of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna. In short, *śūnyatā* is not an imprecise concept in Buddhism.

As we have stated earlier, in different Buddhist schools and traditions, the meanings of *śūnyatā* have never been the same or compatible with each other. And in Nāgārjuna *śūnyatā* is to be deciphered very strictly as an equivalent for 'essence-lessness' or 'absence of intrinsic nature' (*niḥsvabhāvatā*). It would mean a concept that in Nāgārjuna's own usage appears to entail 'absence of intrinsic *existence*'. Each and every thing lacks its own *intrinsic nature* or it *lacks intrinsic existence*. Paul Williams would hold that this property of lacking its own intrinsic nature, or its intrinsic existence, is its emptiness, its nothingness or its *śūnyatā* (Williams 2009: 68–71).

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[26] MK 24, 18: 'Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It (emptiness) is a dependent concept; just that it the middle path' (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 277). Inada's translation goes like this: 'We declare that whatever is relational origination is *śūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the middle path' (Inanda 1993: 148).

2.3   The Negative Way in Christianity

The apophatism or *via negativa* is the celebrated negative way in Christian tradition. It speaks of the 'unknowability of God' with an uncompromising belief in the existence of God and at the same time with a demonstrable unknowability of the nature of God. For there is an element of indeterminacy of God as far as human knowledge is concerned. Our knowledge of God, if we try to express, would be something that falls within the domain of our language, and it would limit the nature of God within our web of understanding. And there will be a *theological incompleteness* (Turner 2011: 283–290) in such attempts and descriptions. Taking recourse to Thomas Aquinas, Turner writes that 'God is a grammatically descriptive term, a common noun, and that we cannot know the nature of it describes' (Turner 2011: 291). Turner explains it with the help of an example from Herbert McCabe (McCabe 2004: 76–93):

> … I do not know what a computer is; I am nowhere near being in possession of a definition. However, I know well enough how to use one, … I do not need to know what a computer is to be able to use one, and I can know how to use the word *computer* in appropriately truth-bearing sentence, knowing only that whatever a computer is, … I can know the grammar of the word *computer* from its effects on my writing, without knowing what the word *computer* means. Just so, Thomas says, with God: in the place of definition of God, arguments for God's existence reply on Knowledge of the divine effects. … So we can know that *God* is a common noun grammatically, that is to say, that it functions as a description without knowing otherwise what, as Thomas puts it, 'God is in himself.' That knowledge, he insists, is altogether beyond us. Nothing of which you could give a definition could be God. (Turner 2011: 290)

God can have no name as God is not a name at all, but it is *apropos* a 'place-holder' (Colledge and McGinn 1981: 180) for the unnameable being.

It should be said here that there could be a subtle difference between the *aim* of *via negativa* in mystical experience and the *object* of *via negativa* in mystical thought. The former is an ontological claim, while the latter is an epistemological one. Hart puts it succinctly in this way:

> The religious practice and the theological reflection are often inextricably entwined, but the distinction is nonetheless useful. Whereas the aim of the *via negativa* is union with God, the critical object of negative theology is the concept of God. In order to embark upon the *via negativa* one must be motivated by love; yet while the love of God may prompt one to engage with negative theology, this is also elicited by epistemological concerns. (Hart 2000: 176)

Though one finds such a delicate difference between the *aim* and *object* of *via negativa*, when the articulation of the same is the concern, the difference gets obliterated. The *via negativa* is a 'strategy of knowing based on unknowing', that is, 'a cognitive state stripped of the concepts and certainties' (Petrolle 2008: 53). We cannot *know* what God really is, but there is an unflinching faith in God and that 'faith is a life lived, as it were, in the medium of that unknowability' (Turner 2011: 293). In such a life of faith, 'one can recognize God's action everywhere in history without a normative revelatory event in which God is definitively revealed and recognized'

(D'Costa 1986: 132). There is a 'mystery of God and God's transcendence over and above every particular articulation' (D'Costa 1990: 17), for God is an unfathomable and unknowable mystery.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, in mystical discourse there are both the paradigms of affirmation and negation, which are called *kataphatism* (*cataphatism*) and *apophatism*, respectively. In the negative way, 'silence' becomes the indicator of what is unspeakable. Augustine had suggested to *pass over in silence what cannot to be spoken of* and resolved verbally.[27] In this silence, there is an idea of nothingness that cannot be communicated and that nothingness is not an 'empty' *pro nihilo*, but it is an absorption *ad plenum*. This 'silence' has the building blocks of 'inwardness', 'solitude', 'stillness' (Bryden 1998), 'absence', 'ascent' and 'light-darkness' taken together, and they have an impact on the language of mystical experiences which are distinctively 'negative' or 'apophatic', and Turner calls them 'metaphors of negativity' (Turner 1998:1, 35–40). The silence emerging out of the feeling of nothingness has no language. There is no ' "apophatic" *language* at all. For the apophatic is what is achieved, whether by means of affirmative or by means of negative discourse, when language *breaks down*. The "apophatic" is the recognition of how ''silence'' lies, as it were, all around the perimeter of language' (Turner 1998: 150).

The negative way in Christian writings has a long time-honoured legacy (Rocca 2004: 3–26). The writings of early Eastern monks, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, Bonaventure, *The Cloud* and John of the Cross are the most prominent of them all. Influence of mediaeval *via negativa* writers like Eckhart could be seen on contemporary thinkers, as Buning puts it that such an 'influence on modern philosophy (Heidegger and Derrida) and on modern theology (John Caputo, Mark C. Taylor, Jean-Luc Marion) is beyond doubt today' (Buning 2000: 43). It will not be an exaggeration to say that the *via negativa* paradigm in contemporary continental thought as well as in critical theory[28] (Lock 1999: 184–198) is 'both a way of thinking and a manner of writing' as it 'attempts to articulate

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[27]Augustine writes 'Have I spoken of God, or uttered His praise, in any worthy way? Nay, I feel that I have done nothing more than desire to speak; and if I have said anything, it is not what I desired to say. How do I know this, except from the fact that God is unspeakable? But what I have said, if it had been unspeakable, could not have been spoken. And so God is not even to be called "unspeakable," because to say even this is to speak of Him. Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. *And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained away by speech*. And yet God, although nothing worthy of His greatness can be said of Him, has condescended to accept the worship of men's mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise. For on this principle it is that He is called Dues (God). For the sound of those two syllables in itself conveys no true knowledge of His nature…' (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine 1, 6, at http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/ddc1.html accessed on 8 June 2015). One finds an echo of the same 'passing over in silence' in Wittgenstein (of twentieth century): 'Whereof one cannot speak of, thereof one must be silent' (*Tractutus Logico-Philosophicus* 7: Wittgenstein 1983: 189). See also in this connection Smith (Smith 2000).
[28]In the 'post-Derridean debates over the radical possibilities of Christian tradition', Pseudo-Dionysius takes a centre place (Fisher 2001: 529–548).

the *unsayable*' (Buning 2000: 43).[29] In the negative way, there is a 'great absence' and an 'empty silence within', as R. S. Thomas has expressed in his celebrated poem *Via Negativa*,[30] and that the absence and silence stand for the ineffable. Furthermore, in the negative way, when we say that God is incomprehensible, and there is, if we put it differently, an 'unknowing' involved in it. It does not mean at all that this position is akin to *agnosticism*. God is very much there, and we are certain about God's existence, but we are not able to predicate anything about God, because of our limitations. We say God is incapable of predication. Panikkar puts the 'silence' and 'absence' of God this way:

> God is denied both to be and not to be, inasmuch as any human affirmation, we are told, implies an attribution of nonbeing: after all, any affirmation is always a limitation, inasmuch as it succeeds in affirming only by virtue of a contraposition to a presumed horizon against which it is possible to make such affirmation. (Panikkar 1989: 130)

Thus, in the negative way, one finds that no verbal attempt is made to unravel the mystery of divinity so that it does not become another re-veiling of it, which would amount to a greater erring (Taylor 1981, 1990: 110) and feigning. The negative way is, thus, a 'mystical language of unsaying' (Sells 1994) which does not rephrase or rewrite the paradoxes of the unsayable in discursive terms and terminologies.

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[29] Buning defines the negative way in this manner: '…(it) is a manner of dialectic or paradoxical expressions that contains both affirmation (*kataphasis*, "speaking-with" or saying) and negation (*apophasis*, "speaking-away" or unsaying), with a semantic force of its own, which perforce subverts the normal semantics of being and nothingness. It is a form of infinite linguistic regress that relentlessly turns back upon its own propositions and generates distinctive paradoxes that include within themselves a large number of radical transformation' (Buning 2000:45).

[30] R. S. Thomas' celebrated poem *Via Negativa* goes like this:

Why no! I never thought other than

That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection. (http://allpoetry.com/Via-Negativa Accessed on 5 June 2015).

2.3.1   The Christian Orient and the Negative Way

The Christian orient in the early centuries had an extraordinary place given to the negative way paradigm in theologising. It had great fervour for *via negativa*, and it always held that 'there are no experts where the knowledge of God is concerned' and the negative way of 'the Eastern Christian tradition at its best is grounded' in that firm conviction and 'recognition' (Hall 2013: 9). While in the West there was a strong tenacity to 'know God' (after the mould of Greek philosophising)[31] and to explain his nature rationally and theologically (*kataphasis*),[32] in the East the search was to experience and realise that reality without erring to phrase it in discursive terms. There was an immediate apprehension of the Divine, and God was 'no longer regarded as objective to the soul, but becomes a subjective experience' (Smith 1995: 3). Though we have larger pool of literature on Western mysticism and the *via negativa* therein[33] than that of the Eastern tradition, the Christian orient had more ascetics and monks who experienced the *via negativa*. Calian says in this connection:

> Unfortunately, the Eastern Christian tradition of *via negativa* or apophatic theologizing has not been employed in the West. It could serve, I believe, as useful ecumenical corrective upon Western theologizing. Apophatic theologizing tends to inform and humble us at the same time. We simply cannot know God's essence…. (Calian 1998:25)

The *negative way* in the Christian orient has been a spiritual tradition that had 'a radical letting go off all images, all names, all role-playing to sink in to darkness, where God without a name' (Fox 1983:100) and form exists. It was sometime in the late fifth century AD that an unknown Syrian monk from the Christian orient, under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite, who gave an organised enunciation of mystical doctrine and its *via negativa* in his *The Mystical Theology* (Dionysius the Areopagite 2004) which had a tremendous 'influence far beyond his original home in the East', and 'centuries later teachers and mystics in the West drew upon his insights' (Irvin and Sunquist 2001: 248) and directions.

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[31] Aristotle wrote that all men by nature desire to know, and, hence, the chief among the faculties of soul for the Greeks is faculty of knowledge: 'All men naturally desire knowledge. An indication of this is our esteem for the senses; for apart from their use we esteem them for their own sake, and most of all the sense of sight. Not only with a view to action, but even when no action is contemplated, we prefer sight, generally speaking, to all the other senses. The reason of this is that of all the senses sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I: 1: 980a).

[32] In Western Christian tradition, 'the Hellenistic era was dominated by the desire to reach God' (Spidlik 1986: 329). While the Gnostics emphasised on knowledge alone, by excluding faith and charity, the Fathers declared that everything has been created for the sake of the knowledge of God (Spidlik 1961: 11–15). The via negativa of the Platonic tradition has influenced the Christian West tremendously. For a detailed account, see Carabine 1995.

[33] We can find a large pool of literature on via negative in Western mysticism. Besides that any standard volume on mysticism will give an amplified version of Western tradition (as for instance see King 2001: 1–190).

The Syriac Church[34] of the East had the heritage of the gifted writers[35] like Aphrahat (Aphraates), the 'Persian Sage',[36] Ephrem[37] and Isaac of Nineveh[38] who had used the rich imageries, symbols and paradoxes in their sermons and writings. Ephrem's 'typology' could be understood in relation to his 'symbolism' and 'mysteries' (*raza* in Syriac) and 'analogies'. Ephrem had great disregard for 'inflexible rationalism', and his polemics against it could be seen in his writings where 'he takes his stand on the rightness of a symbolic and contemplative method as opposed to a rationalizing and argumentative one' (Murray 1975:3). The *via negativa* elements in the writings of Ephrem (Ephrem 1989) show 'God's absolute transcendence, the incommunicability of his names to men and the inapplicability of human terms to him' (Murray 1975: 11). Ephrem in his eleventh *Hymn on Paradise* says that if someone envisages God simply as in the metaphors and imageries, she/he misrepresents and errs in comprehending God (11: 6), and human intellect cannot grasp him (11:7), nor the eyes can see him (11:8) (Ephrem 1990: 153–158). 'Silence' is golden for Ephrem, as we see in the first verse of the twentieth *Hymn on Faith*: 'To you, Lord, do I offer up my faith with my voice, for prayer and petition can both be conceived in the mind and brought to birth in silence, without using the voice' (Brock 1987: 33). The *via negativa* was 'strongest' in the Christian orient (Wilkinson 2010: 253), and from the East it spread to the West gradually.

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[34] By Syriac Church I mean the Aramaic-/Syriac-speaking and Aramaic-/Syriac-writing Christian communities of the East in the second and third centuries of the Christian era in Syria, Mesopotamia and India, and today it would be the region comprising Syria, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and India (Kerala). It had its beginning sometime in 40 AD at Adiabene – present day Arbil in Iraq – with the conversion of a local ruling dynasty to Judaism which in turn became Christians. Later on Edessa – present day Urfa in southeast Turkey – became the centre of this Aramaic-/Syriac-speaking Christian communities in the second/third century AD (Murre-van den Berg 2010: 249–268).

[35] Spidlik writes 'Among the Syrian Church Fathers the two most illustrious names come from the fourth century: Aphraates (Aphrahat) and Ephrem. … Syrian ascetic teaching goes back to primitive spirituality with no loss of originality. … Certainly, their psychological observations were generally more refined than those of the Greeks. Their sacred hymnography and the metrical homilies (*memrè*) contain passages which are among the most beautiful Christian poetry ever written, (Spidlik 1986: 15).

[36] Aphrahat is the first major Syriac writer of the mid-fourth century (c. 340) AD whose works survive. He must have been an Abbot of the famous monastery of Mar Mattai, near Mosul in north Iraq. He has left 23 homilies, and they are known as *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat. See also chapter 1 of Brock 1987: 1–28.

[37] Ephrem, a poet and theologian, is unsurpassed among Syriac writers and he has justly been acclaimed as 'the greatest poet of the patristic age and perhaps the only theologian poet' (Brock 1987: 30).

[38] Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century AD) was born in Qatar in Persian Gulf, which was an important centre of Christianity, and he was ordained the bishop of Nineveh (Mosul) in the great monastery of Beth Abe in north Iraq, but left his diocese after 5 months and retired to the mountains of Khuzistan to lead a solitary life. He is one of the most profound writers on spirituality produced by Syriac Churches. See also Chapter 12 in Brock 1987: 242–301.

2.3.2   Neoplatonism and Pseudo-Dionysius

The negative way in Christian tradition had an important phase in the hands of Pseudo-Dionysius who must have been, in all probability, influenced by Neoplatonism. In this connection let us have a brief glance at Neoplatonism in relation to Christian tradition before going to Pseudo-Dionysius's negative way. The theologizing of the Christian orient was faithful to the Biblical thinking, as the Christian theological concerns owe a great deal to the Judaic environment. Ancient Semitic way of viewing reality differed from that of the Greco-Roman. A learned scholar on Eastern theology, Spidlik, writes:

> … we discover that Judaeo-Christian theology is indeed a theology in the true sense of the word: an attempt to create a total view, an abiding concern to indicate that all the events in life of Christ and of the Church are realizations of God's eternal plan. Judeo-Christian theology is a theology of history but it has a cosmic character: the activity of the Word, prefigured in the history of Israel, fills all the spiritual space there is, and all of creation. Several elements of this primitive theology have passed into the tradition of the Greek fathers, and they continue to live especially among the Christians of Semitic extraction – Syrians, Ethiopians – and also among the Armenians. (Spidlik 1986: 9)

Christianity had its roots in Judaic world which was already in contact with Hellenism.[39] We could find many of the early Christian writers were wary of the Greek thought, as they 'were deeply engaged in stressing the gulf between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God (Cf. Rm 1: 18, 2: 14ff)' (Spidlik 1986: 10). The Hellenistic thought influenced[40] the early Christianity (Tillich 1972:3), particularly the influence of Neoplatonism was evidently apparent.

Neoplatonism had its beginning in the third century AD with Plotinus (204/5–270 AD) where the thought of Plato and the early Platonists got prominence. The four major figures of the Neoplatonic tradition are Plotinus, Porphyry (234–305 AD), Iamblichus (245–325 AD) and Proclus (412–485 AD) (Dillon and Gerson 2004: viii–xxii). Though Neoplatonism's mainstay was Plato, it was a result of syncretism to which Gnosticism, the Hermetic tradition and the Hebrew ideas from the *Septuagint* and Buddhism got in. As it is opined that 'Plotinus may have been exposed to the influences of Buddhism in Alexandria or on his journey to the East' and 'for Christians, Plotinus was respected as a religious philosopher; for modern non-Christians he is used for Idealistic philosophy of identity. More importantly, he is concerned with Being which he sees as divine' (Gawronnski 1995: 26). One of main characteristics of Neoplatonism is its emphasis on the *incomprehensibility of God*. Another major trait of Neoplatonism is the intellectual quest for a 'monistic,

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[39] There is a clear-cut distinction between classical period and Hellenistic period of Greek philosophy. Classical period ends with Aristotle, whereas the Hellenistic period would include the Stoics, Epicureans, neopythagoreans, Skeptics and Neoplatonists (Long 1986).

[40] The early Fathers of the Church 'were exposed in the schools above all to the philosophic doctrines which, more than anything else, created the atmosphere in which they lived: … Middle Platonism, and later Neoplatonism… We must think in terms of a subtle interplay of action and reaction rather than of a systematic influence' (Spidlik 1986:9).

non-materialistic, mystically inspired, but intelligently developed and cogently presented system of thought' (Mayer 1992: 2). The principal idea in Neoplatonism, particularly in Plotinus, was that there is just one exalted God, the supreme power, the final cause and the cosmic force which is the highest spiritual and creative being (Michaelson 2009: 28–30). If Platonism introduced some key elements into the philosophy of negation, so 'it was with Neoplatonism that the negative way to knowledge of transcendent is articulated most explicitly' (Bradley 2004: 12).

As stated earlier, Dionysius the Areopagite or Pseudo-Dionysius was a late fifth century unknown Syrian monk. In his *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius draws distinction between *kataphatic* and *apophatic* ways. In his negative way, Pseudo-Dionysius begins 'precisely there where the deepest problems of human language lie, i.e., the fundamental incongruity between the human linguistic apparatus and its divine object' (Otten 1999: 442). According to Pseudo-Dionysius the *kataphatic* gives the knowledge of God, but it is an imperfect knowledge, while the *apophatic* leads to the ignorance of God for God is unsayable and unknowable in the categories of human language. Pseudo-Dionysius's work did not have an exceptional influence on the Christian orient, but in the West his work had an extensive impact. Janet P. Williams writes in this connection:

> The schoolmen of early Middle Ages appealed to him as an authority not only on mysticism but also on issues of church governess; some of the mystics of the period had drunk deep of his ideas, particularly the unknown fourteenth-century English author of The Cloud of Unknowing, fifteenth-century Nicholas of Cusa, and the sixteenth-century Spaniard, John of the Cross. His texts were an inspiration to the humanist thinkers of the Reformation, affecting even the young Luther. (Williams 2004: 187)

Scholars have differences of opinion regarding the Neoplatonic roots of Pseudo-Dionysius, as some of them opining that he was true to the Biblical tradition while others holding on to his Platonic moorings. Lossky, for instance, is one who does not accept Pseudo-Dionysius as a Neoplatonist. There is a striking resemblance between his take on God and that of Plotinus. However, Lossky argues that the God of Dionysius is the God of the Bible, who created everything *ex nihilo*, and not the primordial God-Unity (the One, έν) of the Neoplatonists.[41] Among the scholars who perceive Neoplatonic influences of Pseudo-Dionysius is Denys Turner who proposes both Platonic and Neoplatonic influences on Pseudo-Dionysius.[42] There are also

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[41] Lossky writes 'There have been many attempts to make a neoplatonist of Dionysius. … The God of Dionysius, incomprehensible by nature, the God of Psalms: "who made darkness his secret place," is not the primordial God-Unity of the neoplatonists. … In his refusal to attribute to God the properties which make up the matter of affirmative theology, Dionysius is aiming expressly at the neo-platonist definitions: "He is neither One, nor Unity" (ουδε έν, ουδε ένότης). In his treatise *Of the Divine Names*, in examining the name of the One, which can be applied to God, he shows its insufficiency and compares with it another and "most sublime" name – that of the Trinity, which teaches us that God is neither one nor many but that He transcends this antinomy, being unknowable in what He is [*Of the Divine Names* XIII: 3]' (Lossky 1968: 29–31).

[42] For Turner, the foundation of western Christian mystical tradition is 'the "Allegory of the Cave" in the Book 7 of Plato's Republic and the story in the Exodus of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai' (Turner 1998: 11), and Turner explains it by relying on Pseudo-Dionysius' writings

critics who disparage Pseudo-Dionysius for his 'strong Platonism', but for von Balthasar Pseudo-Dionysius stands to be the greatest Christian incorporator of the aesthetic-metaphysical vision of the Greeks (Gawronnski 1995: 51–56). Further, as Sebastian Brock has shown, for the Semitic tradition, heart is the seat of the intellect. But for the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, this was not the case, and Christian writers in this tradition like Dionysius showed no interest in the heart as centre of spiritual life, as they spoke of the *nous* – the mind or intellect (Brock 1988: 42).[43] Hence, we might go with the view that Pseudo-Dionysius's negative way might have been influenced more by the Neoplatonic thought than the Hebraic Biblical ethos.

2.3.3   *Aquinas, Marguerite Porete, Eckhart and* The Cloud

The negative way had many intellectual inheritors after Pseudo-Dionysius. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, Bonaventure, John Scotus Eriugena, Nicholas of Cusa and the unknown author of *The Cloud* were remarkable advocates of the negative way. John of the Cross followed them in a different way. It must also be mentioned here that sometime a century before Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine had his take on the negative way. The writings of Augustine are luxuriously affirmative, but this does not imply that he had given up the *apophatism* completely. The often quoted 'silencing' of everything that is not God in Augustine's *Confessions* is a classic example of *apophatism*.[44] One of the recent

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and Plato (Turner 1998: 11–18). Further, Turner refers to the 'Allegory of the Cave' in Plato's *Republic* and writes, 'Plato, then intended this fiction as an allegory of the philosopher's ascent to knowledge. Christians read it as an allegory of the ascent to God' (Turner 1998: 15). Turner explains again: 'Denys invented the genre for the Latin Church; and for sure, he forged the language, or a good part of it, and he made a theology out of those central metaphors without which there could not have been the mystical tradition that there has been: "light" and "darkness," "ascent" and "descent," that love of God and *eros*. This is the vocabulary of our mysticism: historically we owe it to Denys; and he owed it, as he saw it, to Plato and Moses' (Turner 1998: 13).

[43] Brock writes 'Wherever the influence of the Dionysian writings was strong (and it was strong in both East and West but above all in the West), the heart is not important location in the spiritual geography of the human being. It has become separated on this map of sacred space from the intellect (and in some cases more or less replaced by it). This is why, in the Western Christian tradition "prayer of the heart" usually has a somewhat narrower sense than it has in most of the Eastern Christian tradition, for in the West the heart is simply the seat of emotions, of affective prayer, whereas in the East it has (among certain writers at any rate) retained its biblical role of being the seat of the intellect and as well' (Brock 1988: 42).

[44] The often quoted 'silencing' of everything that is not God in Augustine's *Confessions* is a classic example of apophatism in Augustine. It goes like this: 'If to any man the tumult of the flesh grew silent, silent the images of earth and sea and air; and if the heavens grew silent, and the very soul grew silent to herself and by not thinking of self mounted beyond self: if all dreams and imagined visions grew silent, and every tongue and every sign and whatsoever is transient – for indeed if any man could hear them, he should hear them saying with one voice: We did not make ourselves, but He made us who abides for ever: but if, having uttered this and so set us to listening to Him who

studies on Augustine puts forth the thesis that Augustine must be understood as a thinker of the negative way (van Geest 2011).

Thomas Aquinas's negative way is the negative path to God. There are three ways to God in Aquinas's scheme, namely, the way of causality, the way of pre-eminence and the way of negation. The way of negation is represented by terms like *abratio*, *privatio*, *separatio*, *segragatio*, *abnegatio*, *remotio* and *negatio*, and among them the last two are most frequently used (Rocca 2004: 49–74). Aquinas says 'We know God most perfectly in the present life when we realize him to be above all that our intellect can conceive; and thus we are joined to him as to one unknown' [*Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* 4.49. 2.1ad3] (Rocca 2004: 56). From a thorough study of Aquinas's *via negativa*, Rocca enumerates that there are three types of negative way as found in Aquinas, namely, qualitative modal, objective modal and subjective modal (Rocca 2004: 58–62). Rocca explains this:

> A qualitative negation is the total and absolute denial of quality, property or characteristic of God, … An objective modal negation denies the creaturely objective mode of a perfection to God, … A subjective modal denies of God the usual ways humans tend to think of God and express the divine attributes, due to the manner in which humans inevitably understand and signify by means of propositions. (Rocca 2004: 58)

As for Aquinas human language is imperfect and human beings are created creatures. Humans cannot fully comprehend God, and he is not knowable in this sense, as Pseudo-Dionysius would say. Human knowledge of him is deficient, and the way of negation in Aquinas brings home these elements (O'Grady 2014: 151–180). However, Aquinas's way of negation presupposes an affirmation, 'a prior affirmation with respect to God as cause' (Velde 2006: 74). So the negative way in Aquinas has the dialectic of affirmation implied in it, as 'having but imperfect knowledge of God apparently does not exclude the possibility of affirming something of God which is positively verified about him' (Velde 2006: 74). The way of negation in Aquinas does not say that God, in the ultimate sense, is unknowable, and the '*esse* as said of God entails fullness of perfection' (Velde 2006: 65–92). Thus, Aquinas's negative way, we would submit, is an indirect affirmation.

Marguerite Porete was a woman mystic of early fourteenth century who had to sacrifice her life[45] for her advocacy of the negative way which was labelled as 'heresy' by the then Church authorities. Her *The Mirror of Simple Souls* invariably influenced mystics after her down the centuries and among them was Meister Eckhart (Lichtman 1994: 65–86). *The Mirror of Simple Souls* has both *apophatic* and *kataphatic* elements, as she upheld the supremacy of love. Marguerite Porete upheld the negative way as she wrote that the simple souls do not know God, 'knowing nothing'. Such souls do not know how to speak of God, where he is and how he

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made them, they all grew silent, and in their silence He alone spoke to us, not by them but by Himself: so that we should hear His word, not by any tongue of flesh nor the voice an angel, nor the sound of any thunder, nor in the darkness of a parable, but that we should hear Himself …' (Augustine 2006: *Confessions*, Book IX, 25, 179).

[45] Marguerite Porete was burned to death on 1 June 1310 in the Paris inquisition. For a detailed account of her life and trial, see Babinsky 1993: 5–47.

is (Babinsky 1993: 101). 'It is not possible to know God, both because God as object has disappeared and because the self who would be the knower has vanished as well into the all-consuming mirror of nothingness' (Lichtman 1998: 218). However, one finds also Porete's positive descriptions about God as He is eternal, One, etc. In her scholarly *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls,* Joanna Maguire Robinson, referring to *The Mirror of Simple Souls* and making a detailed exposition on the annihilation of the soul (the third chapter of the book titled 'God, the Soul and No-thingness' (Robinson 2001: 49–76), concisely presents the negative way in Porete:

> Porete's speculations about God range from radically apophatic statements to formulaic assertions about God's absolute qualities. The *Mirror* makes positive assertions about God while maintaining that 'God is none other than the one about whom one can understand nothing perfectly. For God that one alone is my God, about whom one does not know how to say a word.' God is infinitely more than that he shares with humanity; therefore, humanity must be content with the 'lesser' part of Himself that God shares with the world and accept that His 'greater' part is beyond human thought and understanding. That part of God that is unexpressed in creation is that which the soul finds and loves in annihilation. In the embodied life, however, the soul cannot understand even the goodness that is God. 'The Soul loves better that which is in God, which never was nor is nor will be given, that she (loves) what she has and will have.' Triumph in the struggle to name God – which consists in abandoning the struggle entirely – opens the door to annihilation. (Robinson 2001: 52)

Marguerite Porte's negative way exhorts us to give up the struggle to name God and to present him the way human intellect comprehends, for one does not know how to say a word about him. It also must be mentioned here that Porete has a greater element of negation of subjectivity or as Patrick Wright puts 'the self-abnegating subjectivity' (Wright 2009: 63, 63–98), which is a hallmark of her negative way.

The negative way that one finds in Meister Eckhart (1260–1328 AD) is simple and pure 'nothingness'. In Eckhart's negative way, God is beyond any name and form, and it is nothingness.[46] In the words of Eckhart, 'it is neither this nor that, and yet it is something which is higher above this and that… yet whatever fine names, whatever words we use, they are telling lies, and it is far above them. It is free of all names, it is bare of all forms, wholly empty and free' (Eckhart, Sermon 2 1981: 180). For him God is nothing, as he is neither this thing not that thing (Fox 2014: 131–133), and as Fox, taking recourse to the statements of Eckhart, says, 'the kind of nothingness Eckhart is inviting us into is an experiential nothingness' for 'all creatures "are a mere nothing", and God is 'a nameless nothingness' (Fox 2014: 132). The nothingness that Eckhart speaks of is not a *nihilum in toto* or there is 'a kenosis of God' (Kelly 2008: 187), but 'there is something… which is to say *nothingness*… it has nothing in common with anything at all… It is a strange land and a

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[46] Richard Woods explains the via negativa in Eckhart in this way: 'In so far as a path or a way to God exists, it is the *via negativa*, the simplification and unification of consciousness. It has two lanes, so to speak – one is *aphairesis*, stripping away all ideas, images, concepts of God so as to rest in Truth, the simple apprehension of God's grounding presence. The other is *apatheia* – the achievement of emotional calmness by detachment from all possessiveness, dividedness and self-centredness, so as to abide in selfless love of God and neighbor' (Woods 2011: 109).

desert; it is more without a name than nameable, more unknown than knowable' (Eckhart 1936: 437–438, Turner 1998: 141). For Eckhart there are two sorts of nothingness, a transcendent nothingness of God and a dependant nothingness of creatures, and they 'are mirrors of each other. His thought seeks to mediate the tension between these two spheres of nothingness' (Moran 2013: 686). Besides that nothingness will not allow one to compare and contrast, 'because there is no "thing" or no form, by which or against which to measure' (Wendlinder 2014: 170). And in final analysis 'even nothingness is not outside of God' (Wendlinder 2014: 187). Thus, in Eckhart, nothingness does not mean the negation of being, but his nothingness remains in the Trinitarian theistic God, within the being of God. (As an aside, let us remind ourselves that the influence of Eckhart's thought gets reflected in many contemporary thinkers like Wittgenstein.)[47]

The Cloud of Unknowing or simply called *The Cloud* was written by an unknown author[48] in the fourteenth century (c. 1370) which takes the negative way in its approach to God. C. S. Lewis says, as far as negative theology is concerned, *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the 'most striking representative in English' (Lewis 1992: 70). The negative way, *The Cloud* indicates, could be understood only by the discriminating minds, as the text gives the recommendation at the beginning and end that it should not be given to all but only to the deserving persons. The text speaks of two faculties (or powers, as the in the text) of the human soul, namely, the *faculty of knowing* and the *faculty of loving*. As for knowledge, *The Cloud* speaks of the inability of human intellect to know God, 'God is unknowable' (Obbard 2008: 24). The 'problem of unknowing' (Johnston 1967: 17–30) looms large in *The Cloud*. The text employs frequently the two paradoxical terms 'knowing' and 'unknowing' and says God can be known only by 'unknowing'. *The Cloud* says:

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[47] Thanks to my familiarity with the thought of Eckhart, I had strong inkling after reading Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* that there must have been an influence of Eckhart on Wittgenstein. This has been confirmed by Turner in one of his recent writings. Turner writes: '…Wittgenstein was much influenced by Schopenhauer. When that student (Turner's PhD scholar), Andy King, digging deeper into Schopenhauer's sources, was able to show that he, in turn, was deeply indebted to the fourteenth-century Dominican friar known as Meister Eckhart, on whom I was working at that time, it was then that there seemed to be better reasons than mere whim to wonder as a potential analogy between Wittgenstein and Eckhart. For now it seemed that there were grounds for exploring links in a traceable line of intellectual continuity. … he (Wittgenstein) is not in the least inclined attach the name "God" in any way to those unsayable conditions, as Eckhart did. However, when, for his part, Eckhart demonstrates that this "God" has not, and cannot, have a "name" – for "God," he insists, is not properly speaking, a name at all but is, as it were, a "place-holder" for the unnamable "ground" of that which we can name (Colledge and McGinn 1981, 180) – then the analogy continues to tease, for all that Wittgenstein himself refused any satisfyingly theological consummation. For was not Eckhart thereby concluding in his own way that even if God, as the extra-linguistic condition of the possibility of language, can be "shown," most certainly he cannot be "said"?' (Turner 2011: 280).

[48] *The Cloud of Unknowing* gives only just minimal clues of the identity of the author. The author is a male and 24-year old at the time of its composition. 'The blessing conferred on his readers, in the final paragraph, may indicate that he was a priest' and 'it would appear that he kept his identity a secret in an attempt to direct reader's attention to God rather than himself' (Root 2001: 273).

> …in our struggle to know God himself. Similar limitations apply. It doesn't matter how much profound wisdom we possess about created spiritual beings; our understanding cannot help us gain knowledge about any uncreated spiritual being, who is God alone. But the failure of our understanding can help us. When we reach the end of what we know, that's where we find God. That's why St. Dionysius said that the best, most divine knowledge of God is that which is known by not-knowing. (Butcher 2009:156)

Thus, we can say that *The Cloud* has the same negative way that we find in Pseudo-Dionysius, as its *leitmotif* is a knowing God in not-knowing. [It must be mentioned here that scholars have opined *The Cloud*'s metaphysical outlook might be closer to that of Buddhism than that of Christianity (Smart 1992: 103–122; Will 1993: 63–70; Spearing 2001: xviii), which is an interesting piece of study to be explored further.]

2.3.4   John of the Cross and the Negative Way

The flowering of the negative way in Christian tradition, we would submit, is in John of the Cross (1542–1591). A brief introduction on John of the Cross and his works has already been given in the first chapter under the heading 1.2. John of the Cross employs both *apophatic* and *kataphatic* ways, but his *apophatism* is the main concern of this study. In the negative way of John of the Cross, God is intellectually and rationally unreachable. Human faculties and capabilities cannot encompass God. The 'soul must strip itself of everything' pertaining to creatures and 'its abilities' to reach God (AMC II, 5, 4: 163), and these abilities of the soul are 'its understanding, satisfaction, and feeling' (AMC II, 2, 5, 4: 163). John of the Cross does not value the activity of the intelligence in the pursuit of realising God, as God is beyond the grasp of the intellect. The intellect and imagination which might initiate the ascent to God in meditation must be abandoned *in toto* so that the union will be achieved by negating all that is not God.

The negative way of unknowing is seen throughout the works of John of the Cross. As for instance, John writes:

> I entered into unknowing,
> and there I remained unknowing
> transcending all knowledge. (SEC 1: 53)[49]

And again:

> The higher he ascends
> the less he understands,
> because the cloud is dark
> which lit up the night;
> whoever knows this

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[49] Entréme donde no supe,
  Y quedéme no sabiendo,
  Toda ciencia transcendiendo. (SE, 1: 53)

remains always in unknowing
transcending all knowledge. (SEC 5: 54)

The 'unknowing' which John of the Cross emphasises is nothing but negation of knowledge in ordinary sense that shows the incapability of intellect to reach the Ultimate. This is the running theme in John of the Cross's *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* as well. This is against the Platonic view where the intellect is depicted as capable of reaching the Ultimate. John gives expression to the same intent again in SEC:

This knowledge in unknowing
is so overwhelming
that wise men disputing
can never overthrow it,
for their knowledge does not reach
to the understanding of not understanding,
transcending all knowledge.

And this supreme knowledge is so exalted
that no power of man or learning can grasp it;
he who masters himself
will, with knowledge in unknowing
always be transcending. (SEC 6 &7: 54)

In the scheme of the negative way in John of the Cross, which is the 'knowledge in unknowing' (SEC, 6: 54), the realisation of God is not with intellect, but faith plays a crucial role. John of the Cross writes:

God transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to it. Hence while the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from him. It must withdraw from itself and from its knowledge so as to journey to God in faith, by believing, and not understanding. In this way it reaches perfection, because it is joined to God by faith and not by any other means, and it reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding. (LFL III, 48: 692)

In the negative way of John of the Cross, an emptying of the sense has also been spoken of, and it is the 'emptiness of the senses'. This is also termed as 'night' and 'darkness' in his writings. In the words of John of the Cross, 'by depriving itself of its appetites for the delights of hearing, a soul lives in darkness and emptiness in this sense faculty' (AMC I, 3, 2: 122). All the senses are emptied of their respective functions in the process of the knowing by unknowing, and it is an 'emptiness' and 'darkness' of the sense of hearing, emptiness of 'pleasure of seeing things', where there is the 'darkness' of the 'faculty of sight', emptiness of 'fragrances pleasing to the sense of smell', keeping the sense faculty of taste 'in the void and in darkness' and keeping the sense of touch 'in darkness and in void' (AMC I, 3, 2: 122). All the senses are quiescent of their respective activities. This is the negative way that John of the Cross is presenting in his writings. We will discuss the negative way of John of the Cross in detail in the fourth chapter.

So far we have been making a survey of the trajectory of the negative way found in Christian tradition. There are many other writers of negative way, but we have limited the review to Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, Marguerite Porete, Eckhart, *The*

Cloud and John of the Cross. All these writers agree on the foremost import of the negative way that the human intellect, language and the metaphors are not fully capable of capturing God *qua* God. It does not imply that the negative way of the Christian writers is akin to agnosticism or atheism. There are authors who are averse to the negative way approach to the Christian notion of God, since such an attempt, they hold, would amount to some sort of atheism or agnosticism. A. C. Spearing expresses this concern very neatly:

> The gap between God and human language is such that we cannot truly say that God lives or that he is good or father or son or spirit or that he exists or that he does not exist (language will no more express atheism than it express belief); we cannot even say that he is God; there is no way whatever that we can know him; nor does he know any of the things that exist as they are in themselves. There is an absolute fissure between God and everything human. It may be hard to see how such beliefs could be compatible with Christianity itself, especially with its central doctrine of the Incarnation: if God became man, taking on human language and flesh, how can this absolute gap and this absolute incapacity of human language exist? (Spearing 2001: xviii)

In order to understand what the real purport of the *via negativa* in Pseudo-Dionysius and others, we have to understand the import and intent of the negative way presented by such thinkers. Panikkar would address this concern in a different way:

> The morphological difference between apophaticism and atheism consists in this, that atheism proclaims its incompatibility with any theistic, deistic, or pantheistic assertion, but apophaticism allows room for the most diverse affirmations concerning divinity. It will only beg that these affirmations not be absolutized and converted into idols. In other words: atheism takes its position on the cataphatic level and from there develops a destructive critique of all affirmations concerning God; apophaticism takes an antecedent stand, from which any affirmation or negation of God loses all absolute, definitive signification – hence its recourse to nothingness, the void, and nonbeing. (Panikkar 1989: 134)

Thus, the negative way is the way of nothingness. It is simply ineffable. It neither affirms nor negates God, as God cannot be an 'object' of human knowing, willing and feeling. For any affirmation or negation in knowing, willing and feeling originates in and with us, the finite.

In summing up this chapter, let us recall that in this chapter our attempt has been to present the negative way as seen in the Buddhist and Christian traditions. The negative way is called *śūnyatā* in Buddhism and it is *via negativa* or *apophatism* in the Christian tradition. The import of these terms is indeed the negative way, but they operate with different nuances in both these traditions. The Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā* does not have anything to do with the theistic understanding of the ineffability of God. In the Christian tradition, the negative way comes to play a role in knowing God, a knowing in unknowing, whereas in the Buddhist parlance *śūnyatā* is an operator, it is a device or stratagem that calls for an avoidance or 'cessation of hypostatization' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 194) with regard to what is purportedly real and purportedly unreal. The two traditions, namely, Buddhism and Christian apophatism, have employed a concept – *śūnyatā* or nothingness, which is the negative way in these two traditions.

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Chapter 3
Śūnyatā and the Limits of *Saṁvṛti* in Nāgārjuna

Everything is right when śūnyatā is possible; Nothing is right when śūnyatā is impossible.

(Nāgārjuna, MK 24, 14).

Abstract The notion of *śūnyatā* gets a significant place in the entire career of Buddhist thought, though its signification might vary in different Buddhist schools. The term *śūnyatā* has different nuances in the Mādhyamika thought; *dharmas* are *śūnya*, *pudgala* is *śūnya* and *śūnyatā* itself is *śūnya*. According to Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* follows from the doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), for nothing has an intrinsic existence. And *śūnyatā* itself is empty as it does not have an intrinsic existence of its own. One gets a hunch that Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* is not simply a means of analysing away whatever is untenable as things lack inherent nature (*svabhāva*), but it is a creative enterprise without being arbitrarily speculative and arbitrarily another. We take the conception of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna in the first part of the chapter, while in the second part, we discuss about *śūnyatā* and the philosophy of language in Nāgārjuna. In the third part we discuss the import of the doctrine of two truths in Nāgārjuna, while in the fourth part we deal with the eight negations we find in Nāgārjuna's MK. The fifth part is focused on *śūnyatā* and silence.

Keywords Eight negations • Mādhyamika • Nāgārjuna • *Niḥsvabhāvatā* • Silence • *Śūnyatā* • The negative way • Two truths

The notion of *śūnyatā* gets a preeminent place in the entire career of Buddhist thought, though the signification of the term might vary in different Buddhist schools. The emphasis on *śūnyatā* is well known in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, and it had great influence in the development of Mahāyāna thought. In the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* is the key concept, and that is the reason he is even in somewhat pejoratively called the *śūnyavādin*, the propounder of 'nihilism' or emptiness, in the texts of other Indian philosophical traditions.[1] It must be mentioned

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[1] In the orthdox schools of Indian philosophy the Mādhyamika thought is perjuratively called as *Śūnyavāda*. Nāgārjuna has been read as a nihilist, as Garfield writes, 'both by classical Indian

that Nāgārjuna's influence on Indian thought, almost on all the systems, is evident from the writings of his opponents who tried their best to repudiate him. Even in our day Nāgārjuna's philosophy is received with great interest in many quarters in the East and the West. This is because, as Nagao opined, 'even from the view point of world's history of ideas, Nāgārjuna's unique contribution should not go unnoticed in that the underlying principle of his philosophy was a thoroughgoing negativism' (Nagao 1992: 173).

We have already highlighted in the second chapter under the headings 2.2.2 on Mādhyamika and Nāgārjuna and 2.2.3 on the notion of *śūnyatā*. However, it must be mentioned at the outset of this chapter that what did Nāgārjuna really mean by the term *śūnyatā* is far from clear, though many have attempted to explicate it. We also do not claim to give any authentic import of *śūnyatā* as it was understood by Nāgārjuna himself but make an attempt to articulate whether some cognitive meaning could be assigned to it or conceived of. We take the conception of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna in the first part, while in the second part of the chapter, we discuss about *śūnyatā* and the philosophy of language in Nāgārjuna. In the third part we discuss the import of the doctrine of two truths in Nāgārjuna, while in the fourth part we deal with eight negations we find in Nāgārjuna's MK. The fifth part is focused on *śūnyatā* and silence.

3.1   Conception of 'Nothingness' in Nāgārjuna

In this study 'nothingness' is used for the term *śūnyatā* that we find in Buddhist thought. The term *śūnyatā* has an entirely different nuance in the Mādhyamika thought from that of other Buddhist schools and traditions. In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* of Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* has been used for nothingness or emptiness of dharmas (*dharma-nairātmya* or *dharma-śūnyatā*), of person or whole (*pudgala-nairātmya* or *pudgala-śūnyatā*), and even for the nothingness of nothingness or emptiness of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). According to the Ābdhidharmika system, *dharmas*[2] are the constituent elements or building blocks of the existents, and the

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interlocutors, especially the Naiyāyikas, and by such contemporary commentators as B. K. Matilal (2002) and Thomas Wood (1994)' (Garfield 2014: 53). Even some of the modern writers on Indian philosophy use the term *śūnyavāda*, though the pejorative sense might not be implied in their usage. Historians of Indian philosophy like S. N. Dasgupta employ the term 'śūnyavāda' and 'śūnyavādin' with the translation 'nihilistic Buddhists' in his writings (Dasgupta 1992: 138, 301). Western authors too use the term śūnyavāda to refer to the Mādhyamika School (Plott et al. 1997: 155). The terms *Śūnyavāda* and *Vijnānavāda* are used for the schools of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda in the syllabi of Indian universities and university texts on Buddhism even today. See also the book by Mittal titled *Śūnyavāda* (Mittal 1993).

[2] The term *dharma* has a peculiar meaning in Buddhist literature. It means the fundamental element of existents or the building blocks which construct the living world. Paul Williams makes it clear in this way: 'The main concern of the Abhidharma, at least as it was eventually systematized by Buddhist scholars, is the analysis of the totality, of all that is, into the building blocks which, through different combinations, we construct into our lived world. The name given to these build-

dharmas are ultimately real, though persons or whole (*pudgala*)[3] is ultimately unreal. As stated earlier, Nāgārjuna, in his analysis, states that both *dharmas* and whole (*pudgala*) are ultimately unreal (*śūnya*).[4] Nāgārjuna declares even the nothingness is nothing (emptiness is empty) or *śūnyatā* itself is *śūnya* in the ultimate analysis (MK 18, 8: 157–160; 22, 11: 192–194; and 24, 18: 219–220). Thus, *dharmas* are *śūnya*, *pudgala* is *śūnya* and *śūnyatā* itself is *śūnya*.

Śūnyatā could be understood if one gets an idea of what the notion of *svabhāva* is in the Mādhyamika texts (Westerhoff 2009: 19–52).[5] 'The notion of *svabhāva* is regarded as a conceptual superimposition as something that is automatically projected on to a world of objects that actually lack it' (Westerhoff 2009: 13). It means

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ing blocks, which are said to be ultimate realities in the sense that they cannot be reduced further to other constituents, is *dharmas* (*dhammas* in Pāli; not to be confused with Dharma, meaning the Doctrine). In the Theravāda doctrine there are 82 classes of such constituents. Eighty-one are said to be of conditioned *dhammas*, and one, nirvāṇa (Pāli: *nibbāna*), is unconditioned. In the Sarvāstivāda doctrine there are 75, and among them 72 conditioned and 3 unconditioned. Conditioned constituents arise and cease in a continuous stream. They are the results of causes, exist for very short time indeed, and yet, unlike the objects of our everyday world, which have merely conventional or conceptual existence, all *dharmas* in some fundamental sense really exist' (Williams 2009: 16). Ronkin pointedly explains what is meant by *dhammas* in this way: 'By *dhammas*, then, the Buddha and his immediate followers understood the physical and mental process that make up one's experiential world, and the nature of this experience was analyzed in such terms as the five aggregates, the twelve sense spheres, and the eighteen elements (*khandha, āyatana, dhātu*). The Abhidhamma, though, developed yet another mode of analysis that in its view was the most comprehensive and exhaustive, namely, the analysis of experience in terms of *dhammas*' (Ronkin 2009: 17).

[3] The term *pudgala* needs a clarification from the point of view of pudgalavāda doctrines of the *person*. Dan Lusthaus says that pudgalavāda is not a proper name of a sect or school. But it is a label attached to the Vātsīputrīya, Saṁmitīya, etc. Dan Lusthaus opines that 'no Buddhist schools has been more vilified by its Buddhist peers or misunderstood by modern scholars than the so called pudgalavāda. Other Buddhists accused them of violating the fundamental Buddhist tenet of no-self (*anātman*) by holding the view that a real ontological self exists that, their accusers argued, pudgalavādins try to camouflage by calling it *pudgala* (person) rather than ātman (*self*)' (Lusthaus 2009: 274). Pudgala is fiction. 'A "fiction" in this sense, does not simply mean something unreal, but rather, like any good work of fiction, something that does explain, in a non-literal way, something real, and that can move, inspire, elicit, and evoke meaningful thought and actions. The pudgala is that type of "fiction". The self as permanent selfhood is unreal. But the experience of individual personhood is a fiction everyone experiences. While for the pudgalavādins there is no ontological "self" or permanent, substantial person, there is a fictitious "person" that is neither the same as nor different from the actual ontological processes accepted by all other Buddhist as "real" constituents of a being, namely, the *skandhas, āyatanas*, and so on' (Lusthaus 2009: 278).

[4] In his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* mainly the chapters 13 titled *Saṁskāra-parīkṣā*, 15 titled *Svabhāva-parīkṣā*, 18 titled *Ātma-parīkṣā*, 22 titled *Tathāgata-parīkṣā*, and 24 titled *Āryasatya-parīkṣā* deal with both *dharma-nairātmya* or *dharma-śūnyatā* and *pudgala-nairātmya* or *pudgala-śūnyatā*.

[5] One could get a detailed account of the interpretations of *svabāva* in the second chapter of Westerhoff 2009: 19–52. See also Westerhoff 2009: 12–14 for the significance of *svabhāva* in Mādhyamika framework.

that nothing has an intrinsic or inherent nature (*svabhāva*),[6] as Nāgārjuna argues that everything is dependently originating, and anything that is dependently originating due to causes and conditions does not have an intrinsic nature of its own, and thus, it is *śūnya* (empty) (MK 15, 1–11: 114–122). The Mādhyamika texts explain that *śūnyatā*, thus, is the absence of an intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāvatā*), as it is nothing but *an abstraction*. Paul Williams explains concisely how it is just an abstraction:

> Emptiness itself is in a sense an abstraction. It is absence of *svabhāva* and is seen through *prajñā*, analytic understanding in its various forms. Emptiness is not a vague absence, still less an Absolute Reality. It is a 'mere absence' (*abhāvamātra*), but the absence of a very specific thing. It is the absence of *svabhāva*, intrinsic existence itself, related to the object which is being critically examined in order to find out if it has intrinsic existence. (Williams 2009: 70)

We could put it in this way that *śūnyatā* implies *niḥsvabhāvatā*, the absence of own nature, which is an individuating identity of its own. It rectifies the false certainty of an intrinsic nature.[7] It also means 'the understanding that phenomena are dependently originated, and thus lack essence and ultimate, substantial existence beyond the conventional meanings ascribed to them' (Edelglass 2009: 391). According to Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* follows from all that is dependently arising, for nothing has an intrinsic existence. And *śūnyatā* itself is empty as it does not have an intrinsic nature of its own. 'It is not self-existent void standing behind a veil of illusion comprising conventional reality, but merely a characteristics of conventional reality' (Garfield 1995: 91). Further, *śūnyatā* is neither *being* nor *non-being*, and hence, this is the middle path that the Buddha has taught (MK 24, 18: 219–220).[8] Explaining MK 24, 18 Siderits and Katsura explain, in clear terms, the real heart of *śūnyatā*:

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[6] Williams says that *svabhāva* in the Mādhyamika gets an import as 'intrinsic existence' or 'inherent existence'. He writes: 'The concept of intrinsic nature (svabhāva), however, seems to undergo a subtle shift in meaning in the Mādhyamika. It eventually comes to signify "intrinsic existence" (or "inherent existence") in the sense of causally independent fundamentally real existence. For X to have svabhāva is for X to exist in its own right and therefore quite independently, that is, for it to exist inherently or intrinsically' (Williams 2009: 68).

[7] Barry Allen writes: 'Emptiness in Nāgārjuna means absence or nonpresence. What is not present, what Nāgārjuna says the world is empty of, is *svabhāva*, a Sanskrit word, meaning "self-nature," "inherent existence," or "own being." Something is *svabhāva* when it has a characteristic property that individuates it and renders it nameable and knowable . … Nāgārjuna's teaching on emptiness corrects the mistaken belief in *svabhāva*. The emptiness he reveals is the radical absence of *svabhāva* being. *Svabhāva* is miscognition, an inextricable fallacy built right into concept and their use' (Allen 2015: 144–145). Akira Saito explains *niḥsvabhāva* in relation to *śūnyatā*: 'According to Nāgārjuna's definition of *svabhāva* in MK 15.2 cd, *niḥsvabhāva* at the same time means "dependence on others" (*paratra apekṣaḥ*) or "artificially made" (*kṛtrima*). This idea is also attested in his identification of *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*, "dependent arising" in MK 24. 18ab. Therefore, because of the absence of own-nature, all things can be dependently produced, can dependently named (*upādāya prajñaptiḥ*), and can bring their own purpose (*kārya/prayojana*) into being. This message of Nāgārjuna's is worth noting, for, though often overlooked, it was clearly asserted in MK 24 and VV. *Śūnyatā* in the sense of *pratītyasamutpāda* is stressed there in the context of removing a nihilistic understanding of *śūnyatā* in the sense of "non-existence"' (Saito 2008: 333).

[8] Inada translates MK 24: 18 as: 'We declare that whatever is relational origination is *śūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the

> This is the most celebrated verse (MK 24.18) of the work, … emptiness is not the same thing as dependent origination; it is rather something that follows from dependent origination. Anything that is dependently originated must be empty, … To say of emptiness that it is a dependent concept is to say that it is like the chariot, a mere conceptual fiction. Since the chariot is a mere conceptual fiction because it lacks intrinsic nature (it is only conceived of in dependence on its parts, so its nature is wholly borrowed from its parts), it would then follow that emptiness is likewise without intrinsic nature. That is, emptiness is itself empty. Emptiness is not an ultimately real entity nor a property of ultimately real entities. Emptiness is no more than a useful way of conceptualizing experience. … To call emptiness middle path is to say that it avoids the two extreme views of being and nonbeing. It avoids the extreme view of being by denying that there are ultimately real existents, things with intrinsic nature. But at the same time it avoids the extreme view of nonbeing by denying that ultimate reality is characterized by the absence of being. It is able to avoid both extremes because it denies that there is such a thing as the ultimate nature of reality. (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 277–278)

Śūnyatā is not a metaphysical concept, and it does not have any ontological status.[9] Barry Allen writes in one of his recent studies: 'Emptiness is not a metaphysical concept or ontological reality; it is not the ultimate truth of the world, and not a name for being' (Allen 2015: 146).

Separately and together, if one takes the notion of *śūnyatā* as nothingness (emptiness) of *dharma*, *pudgala* and *śūnyatā* itself, Nāgārjuna stands out to be the philosopher of *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna does not advocate an absolute nothingness, and his notion of *śūnyatā* does not stand for an absolute reality either. When he uses the term *śūnyatā*, 'this is not be understood as stating the ultimate truth about the ultimate nature of reality' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 247). When we survey the literature on the Mādhyamika's notion of *śūnyatā*, we find that there have been instances where authors on Nāgārjuna construed *śūnyatā* as a position akin to the absolute. Nāgārjuna did not hold on to any philosophical doctrine as his own. In this connection, Kalupahana wrote that taking Nāgārjuna as having no thesis of his own (Fatone 1981: 124), considering him as a critical or analytical thinker and, thereby, reducing his entire philosophical enterprise to a mere critiquing, is misinformation and misinterpretation of Nāgārjuna. Kalupahana alleges it as the 'Vedāntic interpretation' (Kalupahana 1986: 86) presented by T.R.V. Murti (Murti 1998) some six decades ago. Kalupahana says:

> Such an interpretation has led to two more related theories being attributed to Nāgārjuna. The first is an admission of the inadequacy of conceptual thinking, and therefore of language, to express the ultimate truth. The second is the attribution of a concept of ultimate truth in the form of 'absolute emptiness' or 'absolute nothingness' inexpressible through

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middle path' (Inada 1993: 148). Siderits and Katsura make it more clearly in their translation: 'Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It (emptiness) is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 277).

[9] David Burton argues that Nāgārjuna does not mean any unconceptualisable reality. He writes: 'My own judgement is that Nāgārjuna probably meant to assert to that there is no other ultimate truth/reality than the absence of *svabhāva* of entities. He does not mean to claim that there is an unconceptualizable reality, known only be a nonconceptual knowledge. The occasional verses in which Nāgārjuna writes of non-conceptuality can be explained as descriptions of meditative knowledge-experience of an unconceptualizable reality' (Burton 2001: 55).

ordinary human linguistic apparatus. Thus, we are led to one of the most troublesome questions relating to Nāgārjuna's philosophical enterprise. (Kalupahana 1986: 86)

It might also be incorrect to construe *śūnyatā* in Kantian paradigm of *thing-in-itself* or *things-in-themselves* that T.R.V. Murti (Murti 1998) and others have employed.[10] Nāgārjuna's explication of *śūnyatā* is 'more than just delimit a Kantian-like limit beyond which reason cannot pass. For Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* is not an entity – an *X*, a "that'', a realm of things-in-themselves – about which we must be silent' (Brainard 2000: 109). It must also be mentioned that while Kant spells out what *noumenon* is and 'often seems to treat the notion as indicating a metaphysical reality ''behind,'' so to speak, the phenomena, Nāgārjuna says extremely little that might indicate this sort of orientation' (Martin 1991: 102). As a result of reading Nāgārjuna in a Kantian scheme, the 'Mādhyamika dialectic and the concept of *śūnyatā* have been surrounded by an aura of myth, which has in turn, made demythologization necessary' (Ichimura 1982: 42). It is, in fact, unjustifiable to take Nāgārjuna in Kantian perspective and interpret him in Kantian, yet in some cases on Vedāntic, schema. Similarly contestable is the application of a deconstructivist framework to Nāgārjuna which is in vogue today.[11] Further, it is to be contested whether we need 'to legitimate a study by setting out to show him to be a proto-Kant, a proto-Wittgenstein, or a proto-Derrida' (Westerhoff 2009:12) and put on a differance lens to understand and interpret him. Nāgṛjuna is Nāgājunian, and he is not a Kantian, Vedāntin,

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[10] Huntington and Wangchen writes: 'The second phase of Western Mādhyamika scholarship dealt with what Candrakīrti might have called an "absolutist interpretation." Quite a few eminent names are associated with this phase, as well as some masterful studies, particularly those of the Russian scholar Theodore Stcherbatsky, who was convinced that the Mādhyamika was essentially a very sophisticated doctrine of monism explicating "transcendental or absolute existence." A more recent example of the type appears in T. R. V. Murti's widely acclaimed study, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. If Stcherbatsky represents classical statement of the absolutist interpretation, then Murti is certainly its baroque – his Vedāntic/Kantian spectacles distorts the Mādhyamika's message in a much more subtle and persuasive fashion than any nihilistic interpretation ever could, and for that reason have unfortunately done a great deal to prevent us from deepening our understanding of these texts. Once Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are viewed as Murti suggests we view them – through the medium of Saṅkara's and Kant's epistemological presuppositions – we are immediately stuck with all old philosophical problems, related arguments, and counter arguments, which will never lead beyond themselves in the way Murti hopes. … Murti places himself and his reader in the mainstream of a philosophical debate including the entire range of Vedāntic vocabulary, which is consistently and very self-consciously avoided in early Indian Mādhyamika texts. As Wittgenstein would say, Murti is playing an altogether different language game' (Huntington and Wangchen 2007:26–27). But it is interesting to note how Scharfstein has defended the attempt to compare Nāgārjuna and Kant by Murti and others in his work (Scharfstein 1998: 504–507).

[11] As, for instance, see how Magliola makes the comparison between the concepts in Nāgārjuna and Derrida: 'Nāgārjuna goes on, however, to prefigure Derrida still more. … Notice that even the name concept of *śūnyatā* is "provisional," that is, "crossed-out." *Śūnyatā*, like Derridean *differance*, should not be hypostatized and cannot be framed by ratiocination. Remark as well that *śūnyatā* is the "middle path." Clearly Nāgārjuna means *middle* in the sense of the Derridean *between*, tracking its "and/or" (absolute constitution and absolute negation) between the conventional "and/or" proposed by entitative theory' (Magliola 1984: 115–116). There is another scholarly work of comparison between the Mādhyamika and Derrida: See Cai 2006: 47–62 and Mabbett 1995: 203–225.

Wittgensteinian or Derridean. He has his own *locus standi* in the domain of thought and ideas.

Śūnyatā is a device to think of the conceptualising experience that we have. Ichimura says that 'the truth of śūnyatā is the basis of our conceptual world as well as that of external phenomena' (Ichimura 2001: 125). Siderits and Katsura too echo the same thought when they say that 'emptiness is no more than a useful way of conceptualizing experience' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 278). Since we have the 'conceptualising experience', *śūnyatā* is not nihilism presenting some sort of *nihilum* either. As Garfield has put in one of his recent exposes, *śūnyatā* is not nihilism, and according to Nāgārjuna the conventional existence is real existence (Garfield 2014: 53–54). Any attempt to make a 'nihilistic reading of Nāgārjuna is unjustified, and that Nāgārjuna is in fact a robust realist, offering an analysis, not refutation of existence' (Garfield 2014: 44). So *śūnyatā* is not nihilism, it is just nothingness. 'While existence can be permitted to be universally shared property of all existent things, nothingness cannot be taken seriously as ontologically permissible universal' (Chakrabarti 2014: 8). Nothingness is nothingness, nothing other than that. Hence, all is possible when *śūnyatā* is possible; and nothing is possible when *śūnyatā* is impossible (MK 24, 14: 118). It will be further elaborated in the following parts.

3.2 *Śūnyatā* and Nāgārjuna's Philosophy of Language

Has Nāgārjuna got a philosophy of language? We would submit that Nāgārjuna has one,[12] though it is not given an explicit exposition in the works of Nāgārjuna. It should be stated here that we do not make an attempt to compare Nāgārjuna with Wittgenstein or Derrida, as some have done (Gudmudsen 1977; Anderson 1985: 157–169; Coward 1990: 125–146; Magliola 1984: 87–129),[13] as far as the philosophy of language is concerned. In the Mādhyamika (i.e. in Nāgārjuna and later thinkers in Mādhyamika tradition) scheme, language is empty of reality, but 'theories of language play an important part' as individual thinkers, like Nāgārjuna and others, 'were interested in constructing a positive semantic theory' (Eckel 1978: 323)[14] in presenting their viewpoints.

We come across many terms and terminologies peculiar to the writings of the Mādhyamika which have special import in the Mādhyamika system of thought. The terms *śūnyatā*, *svabhāva*, *niḥsvabhāva*, *prapañca*, *prajñapti*, *pratītyasamutpāda*,

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[12]Huntington and Wangchen speak of the 'philosophical language of the Mādhyamika' and they have devoted a section on it (Huntington and Wangchen 2007: 25–67), but in this section they briefly give a sketch of the Mādhyamika teachers and the key concepts.

[13]In this article Anderson does not endorse a comparison, but he refers to those who make such strange comparisons.

[14]Eckel's article is a scholarly work on the theory/theories of language that we encounter in Nāgārjuna, Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti (Eckel 1978: 323–337).

paramārtha, *saṃvṛti* and the like are found often in the philosophical idioms of the Mādhyamika. These terms have particular function to drive home the desired implications, though one may not find any cognitive function of those terms as such. M. Sprung had opined some three decades ago that there is no cognitive function of language in Nāgārjuna and this stance one would agree with. M. Sprung wrote, in the paradigm of Nāgārjuna, that 'language, in short, has no cognitive capacity; its role is instrumental, it suggests what to expect from things and what to do with them: it conducts. Words are guides; they preserve proven ways of coping with things' (Sprung 1978: 47). He takes, for instance, the term *prapañca* and says that the term *prapañca* is used to mean 'language' and all that could be said in language without any cognitive capacity of its own:

> It is sometimes taken to mean *language* as it includes names as well as what is named; it is sometime translated as *phenomena*, as it includes the object correlate of the name. Certainly both aspects should be held together and so to translate the term as *named-thing*. As it is most often used as collective noun like forest or army, I think of as the *manifold of named things*: the entire world that can be captured in language and which must be coped with by means of language. Its reference is usually outward; it is external pole corresponding to the *loka*, the ordinary man; *prapañca* is *saṃvṛti* when it is understood as made up named-things. It is this inseparability of the names of speech and what is named through speech that is characteristic of Mādhyamika. (Sprung 1978: 45–46)

It shall be said here, like *prapañca*, it seems, the term *saṃvṛti* also stands for language in the Mādhyamika parlance. Taking recourse to Candrakīrti's interpretation, Nagao gives the etymological meaning of *saṃvṛti* (1989: 39–40), analyses the implication of *saṃvṛti* and language in Candrakīrti (Nagao 1989: 39–42) and says: 'Candrakīrti does identify worldly convention as language, a theme common to both Mādhyamika and Yogācāra' (Nagao 1989: 42). This *prapañca* is the 'hypostatising' language, and end of this 'hypostatising' is *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna asserts that the heart of Buddha's teaching is the disposal of *prapañca* (MK 25, 24: 236–237). Thus, we could see Nāgārjuna employing his own terminological idioms in his philosophy of language, and they do their role well in unravelling his intent.

Similarly let us take the word 'exist/ence' in Nāgārjuna's phraseology. Existence does not mean an ultimate existence or ontological existence. There is no inherent existence (*svabhāvatā*) in an ontological sense of the term at all. Things exist only conventionally, or when we say 'exist', it should be taken as a conventional existence. Garfield makes it clear along these lines by stating that when we pronounce 'exist':

> We might mean *exist inherently*, that is, in virtue of being a substance independent of its attributes, in virtue of having an essence, and so forth, or we might mean *exist conventionally* that is to exist dependently, to be a conventional referent of a term, but not to have any independent existence. No phenomenon, Nāgārjuna will argue, exists in the first sense. But that does *not* entail that all phenomena are nonexistent tout court. Rather, to the degree that anything exists, it exists in the latter sense, that is, nominally, or conventionally. It will be important to keep this ambiguity in 'exists' in mind throughout the text (here Garfield refers to MK), particularly in order to see the subtle interplay between the two truths and the way in which the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness resolves apparent paradoxes in the account. (Garfield 1995:90)

Let us take, again, the term or the concept of *śūnyatā* which we have looked at under the heading 3.1 above. The term *śūnyatā*, as seen in the phraseological idiom in the philosophy of language of Nāgārjuna, has a reflexive meaning of signification. It does not designate anything, as it is *śūnya*, but it drives home something without having any ontological import. Daye calls *śūnyatā* as a 'reflexive third-order concept' in Mādhyamika, the others being *pratītyasamutpāda* and *svabhāva*. Daye writes:

> This reflexive third order concept of emptiness is derivative and logically dependent on the two concepts of dependent and (or relational) origination and own-being. The *Mūla-Mādhyamika-Kārikās* holds that emptiness is a reflexive designation (*prajñapti*); it is a descriptive device which has no ontological import. In fact to reify emptiness is again to make a category mistake. Emptiness is a third order context-restricted term: emptiness denotes or designates nothing. (Daye 1996: 92)

Daye says in the above quote, 'emptiness' – *śūnyatā* – is a reflexive designation, *prajñapti*, as he calls it, which does not have any ontological import. M. Sprung too has indicated the same intent for *prajñapti* (Sprung 1995:133).[15] Though *śūnyatā* designates nothing, it is employed by the Mādhyamika to convey his thought, and it represents his language, the medium through which he unravels his import. In this language of his, what he attempts to communicate is that nothing can be said ontologically on anything. Let us quote Daye again in this context:

> Language and its correct, consistent use guarantee nothing except itself; it is empty. Words, then, are useful, pragmatic constructs constantly reinforced by personal, emotional, conceptual habits and general socio-linguistic cultural patterns. Nothing more is possible; nothing more can be described. However, a language which possesses a reflexive component can describe its own ontological limitations. The language of Mādhyamika just does this in the metaconcepts of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and language construct (*prajñapti*). (Daye 1996: 93)

A close look at the philosophy of language in Nāgārjuna could make us realise that there are certain apparent contradictions in him. Even his advocacy of *śūnyatā* is *śūnya*. It means that 'there is only ever emptiness', that is, there is 'the self-erasing expression: emptiness is of emptiness too' (Bilimoria 2012: 511). The con-

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[15] Sprung writes: '*Prajñapti* has, in Mādhyamika usage, two meanings, a general and a peculiar one. In general all words which would name anything are *prajñaptis*: that is, nothing is found in the object to which they point, which corresponds uniquely to the putative name. For example, the name "chariot" corresponds to no ontic element over and above the components of a chariot. In its peculiar sense a *prajñapti* is only such a name as leads, via the Buddhist discipline, to the Buddhist truth. The term *svabhāva*, for example, which was analytically nonsense, yet led, by some hidden connection, unerringly to the truth of things. That other names, e.g., matter, atom, self, do not have this odd power sets the problem. … Ideas of reason *prajñaptis* are, however, not arbitrary fictions but apparently indefeasible ways of orienting and understanding ourselves. They are both guiding, conductal notions. That is, their relation to the way things are is not cognitive one. It is in a sense, "practical," but this should not be pushed very far, for *prajñaptis* are effective at a level beyond everyday. One difference between Kant and Nāgārjuna is this: Kant held ideas to be inseparable from the faculty of reason; Nāgārjuna held *prajñaptis* to be eradicable through Buddhist discipline' (Sprung 1995: 133–135).

cluding verse of his MK exhorts us to abandon all views (MK 27, 30: 248–249).[16] If this advice is taken seriously, we will be forced to give up the ideas put forward by Nāgārjuna too. Garfield opines in this regard that Nāgārjuna is beset with contradictions. He writes:

> … his (Nāgārjuna's) seeming willingness to embrace contradictions, on the one hand, while making use of class *reductio* arguments, implicating his endorsement of the law of noncontradiction, on the other. Another reason is his apparent willingness to saw off the limbs on which he sits. He asserts that there are two truths, and that they are one; that everything both exists and does not exist; that nothing is existent or nonexistent; that he rejects all philosophical views including his own, that he asserts nothing. And he appears to mean every word of it. Making sense of all of this is sometimes difficult. (Garfield 2002: 86–87)

Whatever contradiction one finds in Nāgārjuna, his intent is clear for a discerning mind. His philosophy of language operates differently, and it is peculiar to him.

In one of the recent studies, Gandolfo argues that the Mādhyamika language operator is denegation which, in turn, makes Mādhyamika a sort of 'weak deflationism' (Gandolfo 2014). But one cannot comply with such a take on the Mādhyamika because in the 'scepticism' that one finds in deflationism, whether in 'weak' or the other, there is a holding on to truth, maybe, as simple and clear concept, though one can find an implied rejection of *substantive*.[17] Nāgārjuna's philosophy is not meant for simple abstraction, but there is the praxis of Buddhist life involved in it. In this sense, divorcing Nāgārjuna from his Buddhist existence and the convictions therein would be incorrect. The language of *śūnyatā* is a silencing language, silencing all that is contrary to a Buddhist life and praxis. As Brainard says:

> Śūnyatā is silencing of propositional language (including, by implication, publicity-presence awareness language). For Nāgārjuna, there is no śūnya, no non-śūnya, no presence, no non-presence. Yet at the same time, he conveys a sense that if we leave reason behind in the appropriate way, there is an insight to be had, an insight that frees one from suffering and grant access into some other, wiser form of awareness and to Bodhisattva praxis. (Brainard 2000: 109)

Thus, there is a philosophy of language in Nāgārjuna. This is philosophy of language of *śūnyatā*, and we call it the negative way of Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna in his philosophy of language 'tests all theories known to him, and in the end he rejects ontological categories as ways of making sense. Only the devoidness of being (*śūnyatā*), he says, binds all things together in sense' (Sprung 1995: 137). The language that Nāgārjuna uses does not have any 'metaphysical transgression of the limits of language through essentialist thought-construction' (Nayak 2001: 30).[18]

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[16] Inada translates MK 27, 30 as: 'I reverently bow to Gautama (the Buddha) who out of compassion has taught the truth of being (*saddharma*) in order to destroy all (false) views' (Inanda 1993: 171). Siderits and Katsura's translation goes like this: 'I salute Gautama, who, based on compassion, taught the true Dharma for the abandonment of all views' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 334).

[17] See for a critique on and promise for Deflationism: McGrath 1997, and McGrath 2013: 25–51, and for a critique of Deflationism: Gupta 1993.

[18] G. C. Nayak writes: '…*loka vyavahāra*, the conventional truth which is alright in its own sphere so long as there is no metaphysical transgression of the limits of language through essentialist thought-construction. If we speak of the reality of something like symbolic system being dis-

This is the language of nothingness, speaking of nothingness, for a meaningful Buddhist life without any bondage of intellectual affectations. This is the true middle way, the Mādhyamika path.

3.3 *Śūnyatā* and the Doctrine of Two Truths

The doctrine of two truths in Nāgārjuna's scheme is of great importance for a flawless understanding of his thought. Let us remind ourselves here that the audience of MK, for Nāgārjuna, was his fellow Buddhists themselves, mainly the followers of the Ābhidharmika system and thought (Kalupahana 1986: 81; Williams and Tribe 2000: 143–145; Siderits and Katsura 2013: 4),[19] and the doctrine of two truths is elucidated by Nāgārjuna to his own fellow Buddhists. The real import of the doctrine of two truths in the Mādhyamika is a matter of dispute among the scholars. There is no disagreement among the scholars that Nāgārjuna has definitely stated about the two truths, namely, *loka-saṁvṛti-satya* (conventional truth) and *paramārtha-satya* (real/ultimate truth). It also informs us that the entire teaching of the Buddha is based on the two truths (MK 24, 8: 215).[20] Nāgārjuna further made it clear that those who do not know the distinction between these two truths do not

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counted, it would give an impression of another transcendental reality superseding the earlier one and that would lead to further essentialist thought construction of a transcendental metaphysics to which the Mādhyamikas don't subscribe in any form' (Nayak 2001: 30–31).

[19] Williams and Tribe writes: '…Madhyamaka represents a strategy within an Abhidharma debate, an affirmation of the Abhidharma analysis as far as it goes combined with a claim to detect a contradiction in any ontological distinction between primary and secondary existence. … Thus a conceptual existent does not have its existence contained within itself. It does not have own-existence, *svabhāva*. Its existence is such given to it by conceptual construction. Thus, it is *niḥsvabhāva*, lacking own-existence' (Williams and Tribe 2000: 144).

[20] Inada translates MK 24, 8 as: 'The teaching of the Dharma by the various Buddhas is based on two truths; namely, the relative (worldly) truth and the absolute truth (supreme) truth' (Inada 1993: 146). Siderits and Katsura translate it as: 'The Dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 272). The lucid explanation that Siderits and Katsura have given on the two truths goes like this: 'There are two ways in which a statement may be true, conventionally and ultimately. (a) To say of a statement that is conventionally true is to say that action based on its acceptance reliably leads to successful practice. Our commonsense convictions concerning ourselves and the world are for the most part conventionally true, since they reflect conventions that have been found to be useful in everyday practice. (b) To say a statement that it is ultimately true is to say that it corresponds to the nature of reality and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any mere conceptual fiction. A conceptual fiction is something that is thought to exist only because of facts about us concept-users and concepts that we happen to employ. For instance, a chariot is a conceptual fiction. When a set of parts is assembled in the right way, we only believe there is a chariot in addition to the parts because of the facts about our interests and our cognitive limitations. We have an interest in assemblages that facilitates transportation, and we would have trouble listing all the parts and all their connections. The ultimate truth is absolutely objective; it reflects the way the world is independently of what happens to be useful for us. No statement about a chariot could be ultimately true (or ultimately false)' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 4–5).

fathom the deep significations of the Buddha's teaching (MK 24, 9: 215). All Mādhyamika treatises take the two truths as fundamental to the system. Garfield speaks of two realities and two truths in this way: 'conventional reality and ultimate reality. Correspondingly there are Two Truths: conventional truth, the truth about conventional reality; and ultimate truth, the truth about the ultimate reality – qua ultimate reality' (Garfield 2002: 90).

What is conventional truth? Conventional truth is that which we normally take in our everyday experience. In MK it is termed as *saṃvṛti-satya* (MK 24, 8: 215) or *vyavahāra* (*satya*) (MK 24, 10: 216). It is the 'truth of the world as it appears to ordinary consciousness and as it is constituted by our conventions and practices, including prominently our linguistic and cognitive practices' (Garfield 2002: 171). *Saṃvṛti* has another meaning, referring to that which 'conceals' or 'hides'. Siderits and Katsura, taking recourse to Candrakīrti, neatly give three different etymological meanings to *saṃvṛti*, and they write:

> On one etymology, the root meaning is that of "concealing," so conventional truth would be all those ways of thinking and speaking that conceal the real state of affairs from ordinary people (*loka*). The second explains the term to mean "mutual dependency." On the third etymology, the term refers to conventions involved in customary practices of the world, the customs governing daily conduct of the ordinary people (*loka*). He (Candrakīrti) adds that this *saṃvṛti* is of the nature of (the relation between) term and referent, cognition and the cognized, and the like. So on this understanding, conventional truth is a set of beliefs that ordinary people (*loka*) use in their daily conduct, and it is conventional (*saṃvṛti*) because of its reliance on conventions concerning semantic and cognitive relations. (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 272)

Garfield explains further that 'a *saṃvṛti-satya* is something that conceals the truth, or its real nature, or as it is sometimes glossed in the tradition, something regarded as a truth by an obscured or a deluded mind' (Garfield 2002: 90–91). So there is a possibility of concealment and distortion in *saṃvṛti*.

What is *paramārtha-satya*, the ultimate truth? *Paramārtha-satya* is the *śūnyatā* of *saṃvṛti*, *śūnyatā* of *vyavahāra*, or the emptiness of all phenomena. It is the realisation of *niḥsvabhāvatā* – the absence of inherent existence or own nature – that we have explained above under the heading 3.1. The ultimate truth, which is the emptiness of all phenomena, is not 'nonexistence, but rather as a lack of essence or interdependence; more positively it is understood as being interdependent' (Garfield 2002: 172). That is, interdependency is the mark of reality, and nothing exists on its own. This is the ultimate truth.

However, Nāgārjuna never denies *saṃvṛti* or its validity. *Saṃvṛti* is necessary for *paramārtha*, the ultimate (MK 24, 10: 216). With regard to the two truths, Kalupahana says that Nāgārjuna did 'not divorce *paramārtha* from *saṃvṛti*' and '*paramārtha* had to be based on *saṃvṛti*' (Kalupahana 1986: 89). Nāgārjuna makes this a point to state that the world of everyday experience, and all that we do in our everyday life, is not at all null and void nor it is a mere false appearance or illusion (*mithyā*). This attitude of holding on to and appreciating the everyday life of here and now is true to the fundamental Buddhist attitude towards life in the Bodhisattva praxis. Kalupahana says:

> The fact that Nāgārjuna was not prepared to create an unbridgeable chasm between *saṁvṛti* or *vyavahāra* on the one hand and *paramārtha* on the other is clearly expressed in his famous statement that without the former the latter is not expressed [*vyahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate*, XXIV. 10]. (Kalupahana 1986: 89)

Thus, if we analyse the text, it seems both the truths are identical or complementary. In MK 24, 10 Nāgārjuna says that without a depending on conventional truth (*vyavahāra*), the ultimate (truth) cannot be taught, and without arriving at the significance of ultimate (*paramārtha*), nirvāṇa cannot be attained (MK 24, 10: 216). Again Nāgārjuna says that there is not the slightest difference of *saṁsāra* (empirical existence) from *nirvāṇa*, and at the same time there is not the slightest difference of *nirvāṇa* from *saṁsāra* (MK 25, 19: 234). And the end of *nirvāṇa* is the end of *saṁsāra* as well, as there is no difference between them, not even in the subtlest manner (MK 25, 20: 235). We take the terms *saṁsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, used in MK 25, 19 and 20, compatible with terms *saṁvṛti* and *paramārtha* as used in the text. They both stand for empirical truth/reality and ultimate truth/reality. If it is taken in this nuance, the statement of Siderits and Katsura makes more sense to us:

> Note, however, that this says nothing about the conventional status of nirvāṇa and saṁsāra. A Mādhyamika can still hold it to be conventionally true that nirvāṇa and saṁsāra are very different states, that the former should be sought while the latter should be stopped, and so on. (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 303)

But there are the limits of *saṁvṛti*. *Saṁvṛti* conceals, and it might even distort. The ultimate truth is ineffable. There is an inexpressibility of the ultimate truth and the ultimate reality (Garfield 2002: 170–183). *Paramārtha* cannot be explicated in the paradigms of *saṁvṛti*. A paradigm shift is necessary for understanding *paramārtha*, though presented in the *saṁvṛti* terms and terminologies. One wonders whether this was not the reason why Nāgārjuna speaks of the mark of the reality (*tattvasya lakṣaṇam*) in MK 18, 9 (MK 18, 9: 158–160). The translation of the verse by Garfield goes like this: 'Not dependent on another, peaceful and not fabricated by mental fabrication, not thought, without distinctions, that is the character of reality (that-ness)' (Garfield 1995: 49).[21] The term *nirvikalpa* in MK 18, 9b would imply without any *vikalpa*. What is that is meant by *nirvikalpa* in Nāgārjuna? It is translated as 'devoid of falsifying conceptualization' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 202), 'non-discriminative' (Inada 1993: 115) and 'not thought' (Garfield 1995: 49). Kalupahana explains that the term *nirvikalpa* does not mean just 'nonconceptual', but it implies a reference in alternate paradigms like 'existence' and 'non-existence' and not any sort of discrimination. Kalupahana says:

> *Nirvikalpa* would, therefore, mean something else. In the course of analysis of the *Kārikā*, it was pointed out that Nāgārjuna was critical of a specific form of discrimination, a dis-

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[21] Siderits and Katsura translate the verse as: 'Not to be attained by means of another, free (from intrinsic nature), not populated by hypostatization, devoid of falsifying conceptualization, not having many separate meanings – this is the nature of reality' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 202). Inada translates it as: 'Non-conditionality related to any entity, quiescent, non-conceptualized by conceptual play, non-discriminative, and non-differentiated. These are the characteristics of reality (i.e., descriptive of one who has gained the Buddhist truth)' (Inada 1993: 115).

crimination that produced polarities in human thinking. These consisted of existence and non-existence, substance and quality, self-nature and other-nature, permanence and annihilation. In such a context, *nirvikalpa* would refer to polar discriminations, not any and every form of discrimination. (Kalupahana 2004: 88)

If this sort of discrimination or any other discrimination is implied in *nirvikalpa*, it has to do something with the conceptualising mind that will conceptualise things in terms of their having intrinsic natures (*svabhāva*). *Vikalpa* is conceptualisation. Akira Saito has given a lucid exposition of *vikalpa* and *prapañca* in one of his recent studies (Saito 2010), and he equates *vikalpa* with 'conceptualisation' and *prapañca* with verbal proliferation (Saito 2010: 1215–1213). What Nāgārjuna stressed in this regard is that the teaching of *śūnyatā* is significant because it is able to lead the Buddhist practitioner to the quiescence of verbal proliferation (*prapañcopaśama*) (MK 1, 2: 4). 'For Nāgārjuna, root of defilements (*kleśa*) is conceptualization (*vikalpa*) which itself is again rooted in verbal proliferation (*prapañca*)', and Akira Saito substantiates this with MK 18, 5 (Saito 2010: 1215).[22] So *nirvikalpa* would mean that it has something to do with *niḥsvabhāvatā* or *śūnyatā* where false conceptualisation (*vikalpa*) and its verbal corollary (*prapañca*) are ceased. Explaining the nuance of MK 18, 9, Nagao explains it concisely in this way:

> Once ultimate meaning is seen to exist apart from the generation of words and concepts, there is no differentiation of meaning between self and other, unity and difference, and so forth, as when one being has many descriptions or one term many meanings. Thus, 'the mark of reality' transcends worldly convention absolutely and, as Candrakīrti explains, must be described as the mark of emptiness (*śūnyatālakṣaṇa*). (Nagao 1989: 68)

The reality (*tattva*),[23] whatever it may be, is *nirvikalpa*, and it is 'devoid of falsifying conceptualization' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 202), 'non-discrimination' (Inada 1993: 115) or 'not thought' (Garfield 1995: 49). Thus, we suggest that there are limits of *saṃvṛti* and in that sense, limits of thought and language. Garfield would say it is 'because of the inability to express a convention-independent perspective on the ordinary world' (Garfield 2002: 182).

The doctrine of two truths needs to be seen in the light of the early existence of an idea that there are two levels of truths in Buddhism, and the Buddhist discourse was in these two levels. The Buddhist discourse remained in two levels, namely, *neyārtha* and *nītārtha*, the implicit meaning and the explicit meaning, respectively (Harris 1991: 100–124). It must be mentioned here that the *neyārtha-nītārtha* division in early Buddhist hermeneutics was a device invented by the early Buddhist

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[22] MK 18, 5: 'Liberation is attained through the destruction of actions and defilements; actions and defilements arise because of falsifying conceptualization; but hypostatization is extinguished in emptiness' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 197).

[23] G.C. Nayak says in connection with an explanation of MK 18, 9 that the *tattva* Nāgārjuna uses here has nothing to do with a reality or the Absolute. He writes: '…aparapratyayam śāntam prapañcairaprapañcitaṁ. All these descriptions are not applied here to an Absolute transcending thought; they are only the description of the state of affairs when one realizes the *śūnyatā* or *niḥsvabhāvatā*, i.e., essencelessness of all our ideas or concepts. It is said to be bhūtapratyavekṣā or perception of the real nature of the fact, i.e., *niḥsvabhāvatā*; here again there is no indication of the perception of a transcendent Reality' (Nayak 2001: 20).

writers to ward off the confusion among the listeners and practitioners. This distinc-
tion was virtuously a means to classify the different teachings of the Buddha
(Nicholson 2010: 95). In the *neyārtha-nītārtha* paradigm, 'the first reflects the
worldly usage while the second is technical and indicates the user's Buddhist
insight' (Harris 1991: 100) of *śūnyatā*. The *neyārtha* would imply an 'indirect'
meaning while *nītārtha* a 'direct' meaning; or it could mean a 'provisional' mean-
ing and a 'definite' meaning, respectively. Even the Buddhist texts and their imports
were categorised under these two terms.[24] It has much of an implication and signifi-
cance in the Tibetan sources and tradition. Even the Buddhist traditions get catego-
rised in these levels as it has been said: '*Śrāvaka* and *Yogācāra* belong to the level
of *neyārtha*, and *Mādhyamika* to the level of *nītārtha*' (Lindtner 1986: 245). There
are scholars who explain MK 18, 8 and MK 22, 11 as specimen examples of
neyārtha-nītārtha import in the words of Nāgārjuna (Wetlesen 2010: 243).[25] Thus,
the terms *neyārtha* and *nītārtha* get their nuance of secondary import and primary/
final import only when they are seen under the purview of the doctrine of two truths.
The doctrine of two truths is all about phenomena. Conventionally they are true and
existent, and ultimately they are non-existent (Garfield 2002: 38–40). *Saṁvṛti* and
paramārtha 'conventional and ultimate are thus not two realities, two realms
opposed to each other' (Williams 2009: 79),[26] operating in empirical and nonem-
pirical levels. It is neither like the phenomenon and noumenon of the Kantians nor
the *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* of the Advaitins. Garfield makes it clear explain-
ing that the doctrine of two truths has nothing to do with the doctrine of appearance
and reality:

> It might appear that the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality is tantamount
> to the distinction between appearance and reality, and that Nāgārjuna holds that the conven-
> tional truth is merely illusion, in virtue of being empty, while the ultimate truth – empti-
> ness – is what is real. But Nāgārjuna argues that emptiness is also empty, that it is
> essenceless, and exists only conventionally as well. The conventional truth is hence no less
> real than the ultimate, the ultimate no more real than the conventional. Nāgārjuna hence

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[24] Murti writes: 'The doctrine of two truths enables Mādhyamika not only to accommodate all
views as in some measure and manner leading to the ultimate, but also to sympathize and evaluate
scriptural texts and their doctrines. Texts are divided, on the basis of paramārtha and vyavahāra,
into nītārtha and neyārtha respectively. Those texts which speak of the means, of the path, and of
reality of this and that (ātman, skandhas, etc.) are neyārtha; they are not to be taken literally true,
they are of secondary import (ābhiprāyika) only an must be subordinated to the texts which speak
of the Absolute negative terms. The nītārtha, on the other hand, are not concerned with the means,
but with the end (phala), the ultimate goal; they are of primary import' (Murti 1998: 254).

[25] MK 22, 11 says at the end of the verse: '… *iti prajñaptyartham tu kathyate*', meaning, 'it is said
only for the sake of instruction or make it understandable' (MK 22, 11: 192–193). MK 18, 8 says
at the end '*etad Buddhānuśāsanaṁ*', meaning, 'this is the teaching of the Buddha' (MK 18, 8:
157–158).

[26] Williams writes: 'Conventional and ultimate are thus not two distinct realities, two realms
opposed to each other. It should be clear that the ultimate, emptiness, is what is ultimately the case
concerning the object under investigation. It is what makes the object a conventional entity and not
an ultimate one, as we think it is. Emptiness makes conventional conventional. Conventional and
ultimate are hence not separate. … Nevertheless, conventional and ultimate are also not the same'
(Williams 2009: 79).

strives to develop a middle path between a realism that takes real phenomena to be ultimately existent in virtue of being actual, and a nihilism that takes all phenomena to be nonexistent in virtue of being empty. Instead, he argues that reality and emptiness are coexistensive, and that only coherent mode of existence is conventional existence. (Garfield 2009: 27–28)

Śūnyatā is the ultimate as it makes the conventional devoid of any intrinsic nature. And we could very well say that *śūnyatā* makes *saṁvṛti saṁvṛti*, and this understanding is nothing but *paramārtha*.

3.4 *Śūnyatā* and the 'Eight Negations' of Nāgārjuna

The celebrated 'eight negations' of Nāgārjuna presented in the introductory verse of MK explicitly show the negative way in the Mādhyamika. As far as this study is concerned, these eight negations have great significance, as they bring home the real import of the negative way that we find in Nāgārjuna. The introductory verse of MK gives these eight negations in four pairs of opposites. The verse goes like this: there is neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor eternality, neither unity nor plurality and neither arrival nor departure (MK 1, 1: 1–4).[27] These four pairs of opposites presenting the eight negations are an elucidation of the Buddha's fundamental teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) with the knowledge of which one quietens or puts an end to (*upaśama*) the conceptual categorisation and its corollary, the verbal proliferation (*papañca*) (MK 1, 2: 4).[28] In their scholarly commentary on the eight negations, Siderits and Katsura explain it further:

> These negations are said to describe the content of the Buddha's central teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The verse thus claims that when we say everything is subject to dependent origination, what this actually means is that nothing really ceases or arises, nothing is ever annihilated nor is there anything eternal, that things are neither really one nor are they many distinct things, and that nothing really ever comes here from elsewhere or goes away from here. … The purpose is not to shock, though. Instead, the commentators tell us, the point of understanding dependent origination through these eight negations is to bring about nirvāṇa by bringing an end to hypostatizing (*prapañca*). (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 14–15)

Whatever is dependently originated, dependently known and dependently communicated lacks its own essence. This is the import of *pratītyasamutpāda* in the Mādhyamika. And the eight negations we mentioned unravel this Mādhyamika

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[27] *Anirodhaṁ-anutpādaṁ   anucchedaṁ-aśāśvataṁ,   anekārthaṁ-anānārthaṁ   anāgamaṁ-anirgamaṁ* (MK 1,1). Siderits and Katsura translate the verse as '…there is neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor the eternal, neither singularity nor plurality, neither the coming not the going' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 13). Inada's translation: 'non-origination, non-extinction; non-destruction, non-permanence; non-identity, non-difference; non-coming (into being), non-going (out of being)' (Inada 1993: 39).

[28] *Yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṁ prapañcopaśamaṁ śivaṁ, deśayāmāsa saṁbuddhastaṁ vande vadatāṁ varaṁ* (MK 1, 2).

claim of *pratītyasamutpāda*. It says that whatever is believed to have an existence has only 'mutually dependent existence' (Burton 2001: 145–150). This indicates to the very fact of *niḥsvabhāvatā* or the absence of intrinsic nature that looms large in the entire corpus of the Mādhyamika literature which we have highlighted earlier.

However, it must be mentioned here again that the eight negations which explain the dependent origination (MK 1, 1–2: 1–4) bring the import of *niḥsvabhāvatā*. *Niḥsvabhāvatā* or *śūnyatā* is not a position against the essentialist position alone, or rather it should not be said that it is a position akin to anti-essentialism as some tend to put forward. As we understand the intent of *niḥsvabhāvatā* is directed towards all theoretical views that objectify reality and present it in *vikalpa* and *prapañaca* – conceptualisation and verbal proliferation. The explication of *niḥsvabhāvatā* by Ives makes it clearer:

> It must be noted here, however, that the empty (*niḥsvabhāva*) way of thinking or experiencing is not a theory advanced in opposition to theories based on substantialist *svabhāvic* thought. Rather, it cuts through all cognition, all theoretical standpoints that attempt to objectify reality and grasp its nature conceptually. (Emptiness serves to circumvent such thought, not to give it a correct object to ponder.) Nāgārjuna asks us to empty ourselves of such objectification, discrimination, and conceptualization – and then experience in terms of *prajñā*. (Ives 2015: 74)

The *niḥsvabhāvatā* is thus an openness to be free from/of all grasping – cognitive and conceptual – with a fixed nature of things, realising an 'open-endedness of *pratītyasamutpāda*' (McCagney 1997: 102). There is no fixed nature of any 'thing', as everything is devoid of any sort of intrinsic nature.

The eight negations that have been arranged in four pairs are in relational manner to the other one, like non-cessation (*anirodha*) and non-origination (*anutpāda*). This sort of opposing and paired categorisation is what Kalupahana calls 'polar discrimination', the kind of discriminative cognising and verbalising 'that produced polarities in human thinking' (Kalupahana 2004: 88). As for instance, in the second pair of opposition in eight negations, it is said that there is neither annihilation (*anuccheda*) nor eternality (*aśāśvata*). We grasp things either in one of these polar discriminations. Nāgārjuna takes up this again in MK 15, 10 telling us that the wise one should not hold on to any of these annihilation (*uccheda*) or eternality (*śāśvata*) positions (MK 15, 10: 119).[29] It again gets reflected in MK 22, 22 as well where it is said that how can one say things in terms of eternal, non-eternal, both or neither eternal and non-eternal terms of the tetralemma or like having an end and non-end terms (MK 22, 12: 194).[30]

It must also be said that these eight negations explain the inner core of the doctrine of two truths. It indicates the *śūnyatā* of everything which is the ultimate truth. As Shih writes, 'Nāgārjuna sets out the eight negations in order to reveal the true

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[29] Siderits and Katsura's translations of MK 15, 10 goes like this: '"It exists" is an eternalist view; "It does not exist" is an annihilationist idea. Therefore the wise one should not have recourse to either existence or nonexistence' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 161).

[30] Siderits and Katsura's translation: 'How can "It is eternal," "It is noneternal," and the rest of this tetralemma apply (to the Tathāgata), who is free of intrinsic nature? And how cam "It has an end," and "It does not have an end," and the rest of this tetralemma apply to (to the Tathāgata), who is free of intrinsic nature?' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 249).

nature of phenomena' (Shih 2004: 91), so that we will not falsify and conceptualise them, in 'the process of reification or "thing-ifying"; taking what is actually just useful form of speech to refer to some real entity' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 15). Thus, through this device of eight negations of Nāgārjuna, every possible concept is proved to be *śūnya*. Ikeda explains this negation strategy of Nāgārjuna as *śūnyatā*, non-substantiality and middle way which is the heart of Nāgārjuna's thought. Ikeda writes:

> …the word *eight* is not intended to be limiting. The meaning is not 'eight negations, no more and no less,' but rather 'numerous negations' or even 'infinite negations.' It is through this process of negation of every possible concept that one arrives at an understanding of the śūnyatā, or non-substantiality, that is the core of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the Middle Way. (Ikeda 2009: 147)

The negation is the negative way of *śūnyatā* that remedies the false construing of concept with reality or confusing concept with reality. Nāgārjuna must have chosen these eight negations 'because they are most important representative statement of the numerous negations needed to clarify the real aspect of the emptiness of things' (Nakamura 1964: 55). The negations have a special purpose in Nāgārjuna's thought,[31] and it is 'to extinguish all the extreme views' (Shih 2004: 89).

We could sum up the eight negations as the sum and substance of Nāgārjuna's thought where *pratītyasamutpāda*, *niḥsvabhāvatā* and *śūnyatā* are endorsed, for after eight negations in four opposing 'polar discriminative' pairs (MK 1, 1: 1–4), Nāgārjuna says that this is what the Buddha taught as *pratītyasamutpāda* (MK 1, 2). Whatever is of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is *śūnyatā* and that is the middle path (MK 24, 18: 219–220). And one who discerns what is *pratītyasamutpāda* he discerns rightly the noble truths (MK 24, 40: 225–226).[32] The eight negations thus become the middle path of all negations and the avoiding all the extreme views like annihilationism (*anuccheda*) or eternalism (*aśāśvata*), etc. (MK 1, 1–4). These eightfold negations function at the core of Mādhyamika thought.

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[31] Cheng says: 'Mādhyamika eight fold negations is a convenient term for the negations of origination, extinction, permanence, impermanence, identity, difference, arrival and departure. There are eight negations because Nāgārjuna selected and refuted eight characteristics which were then commonly considered essential to any event. Actually the thrust is a wholesale negation of attempts to characterizing things' (Cheng 1991: 36).

[32] In The *Seventy Stanzas* of Nāgārjuna, verse 69: 'Because all things are empty of inherent existence the Peerless Tathāgata has shown the emptiness of inherent existence of dependent arising as the reality of all things' (Stanza 68). Its commentary goes: '… By asserting dependent arising, nihilism is avoided, and by asserting the emptiness of inherent existence, eternalism is avoided. The reality revealed by the Buddha in the middle view is the empty nature of dependent arising. Its reverse face is conventional appearance of things. In certain sense the two complement each other, like concave and convex, because they are two aspects of one reality' (Komito et al. 1987: 177–178).

3.5 *Śūnyatā* and Silence

There is a special and deliberate silence in the Mādhyamika. *Śūnyatā* is silent, as it has nothing to say, nothing to teach and nothing to claim. The Buddha too had the 'golden silence' on many occasions (Nagao 1992: 35–49), and Nagao would say that it was due to the 'inadequacy of language' (Nagao 1992: 41) that the Buddha kept the golden silence now and then, even the 'silence before his initial preaching' (Nagao 1992: 41). Some say that the Buddha never answered certain questions of metaphysical bearings, and silence was the best expression of reality (Valez de Cea 2004: 119–141). Murti, following his Kantian and Advaitic paradigm in interpreting the Mādhyamika, had opined some six decades ago that silence of Buddha 'can only be interpreted as meaning the consciousness of the indescribable nature of the Unconditioned Reality' (Murti 1998: 48). Taking this line of construal from Murti, some even hold that the silence of the Buddha was 'seminal anticipation of the Mādhyamika' and 'the Mādhyamika is to be understood as the exploration and systematic expression of the Buddha's silence' (Mipham 2002: 6). Whatever may be the meaning of that silence, we are certain that there is an unambiguous silence in *śūnyatā*.

The silence in the Mādhyamika is subjected to varied interpretations. Garfield would hold that 'Mādhyamika silence reflects the impossibility of expressing the truth about the conventional world' (Garfield 2002: 183), and it has nothing to do with a transcendental reality or unspeakable reality. Graham Priest and Garfield too would argue that Nāgārjuna is not saying 'that one must be reduced to total silence' (Priest and Garfield 2002: 261) in his advocacy of *śūnyatā*. However, Brainard sees the elements of mysticism in the Mādhyamika enterprise (Brainard 2000: 69–126); and the silence of *śūnyatā* is a mystical silence for Brainard where it does not give any description of the ultimate but acts as a device to achieve a state of consciousness of higher truth. Brainard writes in this regard:

> Buddhism as a mysticism, however, aims higher than a clear analysis of presence. In this respect, *śūnyatā* is not description of ultimacy, but rather a heuristic device to achieve a state of consciousness – both non-ordinary and in that it grants awareness of what is intrinsically beyond description and orthodoxy, and profound, in that it grants illuminations touching directly on ultimate life issues – on foundational matters of which one's sense of reality and truth originate. Nāgārjuna's paramārtha satya suggests a state of awareness wherein one touches what is of principal metaphysical value and interest – wherein one experiences a bliss that comes coincidently with the dawn of a higher truth beyond the conventional truths of saṁsāra. (Brainard 2000: 116)

However, perceiving the Mādhyamika silence as mystical is not agreeable to many contemporary authors on Nāgārjuna. Garfield says: 'Mādhyamika provides a non-mystical, immanent characterization of the nature of reality, of limits of thought and language, and of the nature of our knowledge of Two *Truths* about *one reality*' (Garfield 2002: 182). Again Priest and Garfield would argue that Nāgārjuna 'is committed to the cannon of rational argument and criticism. He is not a mystic. He believes that reasoned argument can lead to the abandonment of error and to knowledge' (Priest and Garfield 2002: 260). But the silence of the Mādhyamika in *śūnyatā*

needs an explanation. The following is the possible explanation we would like to propose:

Firstly, Nāgārjuna does not have a theory of his own, and he does not care to frame one. He does not have a theory of language of his own (VV 29: 14).[33] Our language is a 'colourably translucent window',[34] and it will always colour and shape the thing/reality as one wishes to depict it. And we know that 'worldly and conventional truth involves emotional and intellectual attachment to what one perceives, and hence, the objects of knowledge are considered determinate, bound and fixed' (Cheng 1991: 40). This determined and fixed way of presenting things happens in our *everydayness*. If one attempts to describe the reality, one cannot do it without describing it in a language (Putnam 1992: 123), and thus, we will be forced to acknowledge the plurality of language games. Let us remember that no language is exempt from context sensitivity (Putnam 2001: 460–461) and personal colouring of one's own perception. When one tries to speak of the real or the ultimate, it is only the perception of the person concerned. Wittgenstein's counsel was in this line that 'what is excluded by the law of causality cannot be described' (Wittgenstein 1983: 179)[35] and also 'whereof one cannot speak of, thereof one must be silent' (Wittgenstein 1983: 189).[36]

Language plays the role in the conventional realm (*saṁvṛti*). We try to express things in terms of the familiar everyday vocabulary of ours. With the help of language, we always seek to express things in terms of their identity as if they had an intrinsic nature of their own (*svabhāva*) or as Siderits and Katsura term it 'thing-ifying' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 15) them. Even if one is going to use language as only a symbol, it is inadequate. If we take symbolism or symbolic system to interpret the language of Nāgārjuna, it would give an impression that we are construing 'another transcendental reality' after the model of 'essentialist thought-construction of a transcendentalist metaphysics to which the Mādhyamikas don't subscribe in any form' (Nayak 2001: 31). We cannot speak of *paramārtha* adequately either positively, negatively, both ways and neither

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[33] Nāgārjuna says, '*nāsti ca mama pratijñā*', 'I have no proposition', or anything to put forward, for when all things are appeased (*atyantopaśānta*) and by nature isolated (*prakṛtivivikta*), how can there be a proposition? (VV29:14–15). *Yadi kācana pratijñā syānme tata eṣa me bhaveddoṣaḥ. Nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmānnaivāsti me doṣaḥ* (VV: 29). Commenting on it, Nāgārjuna says: *Yadi ca kācana mama pratijñā syāt tato mama pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptatvātpūrvako doṣo yathā tvayouktastathā mama syāt. Na mama kācidasti pratijñā. Tasmāt sarvabhāveṣu sūnyeṣvatyantopaśānteṣu prakṛtivivikteṣu kutaḥ pratijñā. Kutaḥ pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptiḥ. Kutaḥ pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptikṛto doṣaḥ* (VV: 29, 14).

[34] If we look at our contemporary discourse, it is not in tune with the position of Michel Foucault who said 'words and phrases in their very reality have an original relationship with truth… The mode of philosophical language is to be etumos, that is to say, so bare and simple, so in keeping with the very movement of thought, just as it is without embellishment, it will be appropriate to what it refers to' (Foucault 2010: 374–375).

[35] Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.362

[36] Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 7

way, as we see in the Mādhyamika critique of tetralemma.[37] It transcends both
our concepts and the meaning of our words. It does not mean that there is reality
beyond appearance (Garfield 2009: 27). No, it is not the intent here. We are con-
ventional creatures evaluating things in conventional parameters, and 'we are
bound by epistemic functions based on empirical and rational data' (Inada 1997:
121). In our daily experience, there is a concurrence of conventional (*saṁvṛti*)
and nonconventional (*paramārtha*), and hence, Nāgārjuna would exhort us to
appreciate that 'without relying on everyday common practices' (Inada 1993:
146), the ultimate cannot be realised (MK 24, 10: 216). 'The Mādhyamika phi-
losophy can be taken to challenge language itself as a useful source of thought,
which makes it appear paradoxical, since it is itself expressed in language'
(Leaman 2004: 211). The sole aim of Nāgārjuna, it seems, is to free the human
mind of the net of conceptualisation (*vikalpa-jāla*) and its corollary verbal pro-
liferation (*prapañca*). There are, in fact, 'the limits of language' (Wittgenstein
1963: 119), and one has to accept it. Hence, one can give a good reason for the
position of Nāgārjuna in his consideration that all views and speculative systems
are uncritical and dogmatic approaches, for what is ultimately real is *beyond
concepts and language*. His attempt seems to get rid false 'hypostatisation'
which could become another view. This might be the reason Nāgārjuna ends his
magnum opus with the famous verse on the cessation of all views (MK 27, 30:
258–259).[38] With his rejection of all views, of all constructive metaphysics,
Nāgārjuna advocated the emptiness of all the views (MK 13, 8: 108–109).[39] This
could be considered the import of silence in Nāgārjuna.

Secondly, *śūnyatā* is unspeakable, and there is a silence in it if one attempted to
articulate what *paramārtha* is. Nāgārjuna uses both syllogistic (in his
Vigrahavyāvartanī) and dialectical method to put forward his notion of *śūnyatā*.
Ichimura puts it neatly in this manner:

> Both Mādhyamika syllogistic and dialectical methods are intended to review our ordinary
> experience in terms of the insight of śūnyatā, and ultimately, I believe, to dissolve the sen-
> tential construction of the subject (predicated) and the predicate (predicable), which consti-
> tute the basis of convention. (Ichimura 1982: 48)

Nāgārjuna's dialectic is the key contrivance in his MK. By dialectic we mean here the
reductio ad absurdum method, as Ichimura would say that 'by "dialectic" I am
referring to Nagarjuanian method of *reductio-ad-absurdum* argument (prasaṅga-
vākya)' (Ichimura 2001: 124). 'The force' of Nāgārjuna's 'logic goes to show the

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[37] My reference here is to the *catuṣkoṭi-tarka* that we speak in the Mādhyamika as four-cornered
logic.

[38] Inada's translation. 'I reverently bow to Gautama (the Buddha) who out of compassion has
taught the truth of being (*saddharma*) in order to destroy all (false) views' (Inada 1993: 171).
Siderits and Katsura's translation: 'I salute Gautama, who, based on compassion, taught the true
Dharma for the abandonment of all views' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 334).

[39] Inada's translation: 'The wise men (i.e. enlightened ones) have said that śūnyatā or the nature of
thusness is the relinquishing of all false views. Yet it is said that those who adhere to the idea or
concept of śūnyatā are incorrigible' (Inada 1993: 92).

limitation of reason as applied to matters of ultimate reality and meaning'
(Hoffman 2000, 190). Nāgārjuna shows the untenability of intellectual enterprise
and thereby guides us to get rid of such viewpoints (MK 13: 8 and MK 27, 30)
which will make us reach nirvāṇa (MK 25, 3: 228–229). Nāgārjuna explains what
nirvāṇa is in his MK 25, 3.[40] When Nāgārjuna says what is nirvāṇa in MK 25, 3,
'Nāgārjuna has something deeper in his mind' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 292).
We cannot just ignore the silence of the Buddha if we analyse it in the light of
Nāgārjuna's explication of *niḥsvabhāvatā* of things in logical formulation.

Taking cue from MK 25, 3 and considering the entire enterprise of *śūnyatā*, one
tends to ask this question: Then what is that the Mādhyamika speaking of? There is
an insight of the higher order in the entire enterprise of *śūnyatā*, and we may call it
prajñā, wisdom, which is a higher level of philosophy. A. K. Chatterjee would call
it some sort of metaphilosophy. 'The Mādhyamika philosophy is correspondingly a
philosophy of a higher order, and is characterizable only as metaphilosophy'
(Chatterjee 1973: 30). Though the opinion of Chatterjee on Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā*
was voiced some four decades ago, and a different interpretation has been in vogue
in recent times, especially, among the Western scholars as far as scholarship on
Nāgārjuna is concerned, one tends to agree with Chatterjee. Daye has echoed this
strain of thought when he mentions 'the metaconcepts of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and
language construct (*prajñapti*)' (Daye 1996: 93). This way of looking at the
Mādhyamika calls for an insightful reorientation of our perspectives:

> The philosophy of *śūnyatā* is an invitation to do this type of metaphysical introspection.
> This introspective awareness is, at the same time freedom, it liberates the spirit from our
> narrow and dogmatic sectarianism, from the vicious and intolerant confines of subjectivity.
> This is metaphilosophy, speaking a meta-language. (Chatterjee 1973: 31)

One gets a hunch that Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* is not simply a means of analysing away
whatever is untenable as things lack inherent nature (*svabhāva*), but it is a creative
enterprise without being arbitrarily speculative and arbitrarily another. As Nāgārjuna
was an ardent opponent of canons, to claim that he had a specific canon of his own
will be self-contradictory or self-stultifying. Otherwise it would be only another
metaphysical construction; its oblique references to 'reality' – *tattva* (*aparapraty-
aya*, *santa,* etc., in MK 18, 9) – are all negative. To say that nothing can be said is
not really to say anything but only a '*façon de parler*', pretence to speak.[41] Thus,
this silence speaks much; perhaps, it is deeper and more profound.

The Mādhyamika never points out an incommunicability of our knowledge in
any language whatever, rather he points out its incommunicability through the lan-
guage we normally have (Padhye 1988: 82). Syntax and semantics are linguistic
phenomena which come into play only when there is a language. The Mādhyamika

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[40] Inada's translation of MK 25, 3 goes like this: 'What is never cast off, seized, interrupted, con-
stant, extinguished, and produced… this is called nirvana' (Inada 1993: 154). Siderits and Katsura's
translation goes like this: 'Not abandoned, no acquired, not ahhihilated, not eternal, not ceased, not
arisen, thus is nirvana said to be' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 291).

[41] I owe this interpretation to Professor A. K. Chatterjee of Banaras Hindu University who explained
to me the import of śūnyatā as he perceives it.

does not have a first-order language, or it would be vitiated by the same fallacies that it seeks to refute. But this refutation itself is expressed and communicated and thus utilises linguistic equipment, so there have to be a syntax and a semantics for his use of language. Sentences have to be 'well formed' (syntax) and have to say something (semantics) even if only about its own incompetence. Language creates pictures of reality and these pictures hold us in thraldom or bondage. So we utilise language to break out of it; and this is what the Mādhyamika metalanguage is all about.[42] *Śūnyatā* shall be taken as an 'insight into propositionlessness' as all propositions, views and theories are discarded in the Mādhyamika (MK13, 8). It means that no view is here adhered to. This is a metalanguage which Nāgārjuna is employing. Guy Bugault writes in this regard:

> One should not confuse the fact-system and the symbol system, or as we say in French, *sens* and *siginification*: as Husserl remarked, the 'dog' does not bite. So, in brief, *śūnyatā* belongs to the metalanguage first of all. Consequently, asking if a dog bites, or if a king of France is bald or not, only has meaning (*sens*) if dogs and kings are actually given in experience. Otherwise, it is possible that the question is simply irrelevant. (Bugault 1983: 28)

The metalanguage spoken of is not 'brought about by propositions but by pointing out the contradictions in other propositions which render them false or meaningless' (Kakol 2009: 211). Nāgārjuna says in MK 18, 7 (MK 18, 7: 154–157) 'where mind's functional realm ceases, the realm of words also ceases' (Inada 1993: 115).[43] Here Nāgārjuna is not denying the everyday phenomenal experience and language. He is not condemning language either. G. C. Nayak succinctly writes in this connection:

> Language, however, never condemned as a form of expression meant for practical purposes; this is what is known as '*loka saṁvṛti satya.*' Language, when it is stretched beyond its legitimate limit and a strain, is put on it from metaphysical and speculative angles as well as from a dogmatic standpoint, simply breaks down and it can no longer do its normal function. The categories of thought, when taken in an absolute sense, cannot stand the scrutiny of philosophical analysis although they may be alright from practical standpoint. (Nayak 2001: 78)

It simply means that the ultimate meaning is ineffable. It is ineffable 'not because it negates language, but it is devoid of all mental activity' (Nagao 1989: 67). Nāgārjuna 'accepts an absolute reality (*tattva*) beyond the range of discursive thought (*vikalpa*)' (Lindtner 1981: 161), and there is that tension between conventional and ultimate. 'The antagonism between these two worlds – an absolute one beyond plurality and relative one of plurality – he attempts to solve, not by discarding one of them, but seeking a principle of interpretation so as to reconcile them' (Lindtner 1981: 162). And this is Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā*, its silence, and the negative way.

In summing up the chapter, let us recapitulate what we have been saying so far. We first looked at the conception of nothingness (emptiness) in Nāgārjuna before analysing his language of the negative way. An analysis of the doctrine of two truths

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[42] I owe this interpretation too to Professor A. K. Chatterjee.

[43] *Nivṛttamabhidhātavyaṁ nivṛtte cittagocare* (MK 18:7). Siderits and Katsura translate it as: 'The domain of objects of consciousness having ceased, what is to be named is ceased' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 200).

in Nāgārjuna, which is pivotal to his thought, followed, and it was supplemented by the eightfold negations and the import of silence in *śūnyatā*. The crux of the matter in the doctrine of two truths, namely, the conventional and the ultimate, is that there is no ultimate truth that one can present in the conventional truth, because everything is empty. 'Ultimate truths are those about ultimate reality. But since everything is empty, there is no ultimate reality. There are, therefore, no ultimate truths' (Priest and Garfield 2002: 260). Our predications are rooted in the conventional. We speak of things as we perceive them in our conventional way, in our *saṃvṛti*, which is loaded with conceptualisation (*vikalpa*) and its corollary verbal proliferation (*prapañca*). Our language is a product of that *saṃvṛti*. 'To express anything in language is to express truth that depends on language, and so this cannot be an expression of the way things are ultimately. All truths, then, are merely conventional' (Priest and Garfield 2002: 260).[44] If Nāgārjuna speaks of the two truths and advocates that whatever we consider as the *svabhāva* of the things is *śūnya*, then there is an attempt in the entire stratagem to show the limits of *saṃvṛti*. The limits of *saṃvṛti* are 'the limits of language and thought', that we have 'because of the inability to express a convention-independent perspective of ordinary world' (Garfield 2002: 182). It is for the reason that the 'ultimate reality is contained within the limit of the non-inherent existence of a thing' (SS 69: 178).[45] And we call this as the negative way in Nāgārjuna.

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[44] Priest and Garfield do not mean an ineffability of the ultimate. They do not see Nāgārjuna as a mystic (Priest and Garfield 2002: 260), and everything is not reduced into total silence in Nāgārjuna (Priest and Garfield 2002: 261).

[45] Nāgārjuna's *Śūnyatāsaptati*, stanza 69: '*Ultimate reality* is contained within the *limit* of the non-inherent existence of a thing. For that reason, the *Accomplished Buddha*, the *Subduer*, *has imputed various terms in the manner of the world* through comparison'. Its commentary goes like this: 'Reality is not beyond the limit of what is known by a valid direct perceiver. This limit must also subsume conventional reality. Within this limit the Buddha makes two kinds of comparisons. One is to examine whether the names used to designate these objects are actually suitable for this purpose. In the second case, he compares the different aspects an object to each other and to their names. These comparisons require that the Buddha utilizes the different conventional terms used by people of the world in order to examine the objects which they believe to exist. This process will eventually lead to the creation of a mental image of emptiness whose actual limit corresponds to that reality' (Komito et al. 1987: 178).

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Chapter 4
Nada and the Limits of Faculties in John of the Cross

> *I entered into unknowing, And there I remained unknowing, Transcending all knowledge.*

> (John of the Cross, SEC: 53)

Abstract The conception of 'nothingness' or *nada* in the writings of John of the Cross is explored here. Though clear elements of *kataphatism* could be found in John of the Cross, our main focus in this chapter is *apophatism* in his works. The negative way of John of the Cross is *nada*, and it is 'knowledge in unknowing', where one perceives the limits of the faculties, namely, intellect, memory and will, and goes beyond them in an emptying and darkening 'way' of the 'night' which gives an idea that 'no adequate report of its contents can be given in words'. The faculties 'must undergo a purification of their respective apprehensions in order to reach union with God', for 'God has no form or image comprehensible'. The negative way in John of the Cross is 'the nakedness of the soul bereft of all knowledge'. Though God experience is ineffable, John uses a language to bring home his intent. In this chapter we first look at the conception of 'nothingness' in John of the Cross and then proceed in the second part to see the paradox of language in the writings of John of the Cross, which is replete with symbolism and negations. In the third part of the chapter, we analyse the doctrine of three faculties and their darkening, while in the fourth part we take up the key idea of the 'unknowing' in the thought of John of the Cross. In the fifth and last part of the chapter, we consider the import of 'silence' that we find in John of the Cross.

Keywords Darkness • Faculties • John of the Cross • *Nada* • Nothingness • Silence • The negative way • The unknowing • Union with God • *Via negativa*

The conception of *la Nada* or simply *nada* (nothingness) in the works of John of the Cross expresses the negative way that we find in his thought. It shows the limits of human faculties in comprehending and describing God. In this chapter we take the works of John of the Cross, for the most part, his tetralogy,[1] the *Ascent of Mount*

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[1] The four major works of John of the Cross mentioned above are called the *tetralogy* of John of the Cross (Wilhelmsen 1986: 300). I would call them the four treatises or discourses of John of the

Carmel, the *Dark Night of the Soul*, the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love* to unravel the negative way. For John of the Cross any linguistic description, or even mental construction, based on the categories of human faculties is inadequate to describe God. According to him the three human faculties, namely, intellect, memory and will 'must undergo a purification of their respective apprehensions in order to reach union with God' (AMC III, 1, 1: 267), for 'God has no form or image comprehensible', (AMC III, 2, 4: 269). The 'divine union empties and sweeps the phantasy of all forms of knowledge' (AMC III, 2, 4: 269).

Though the elements of katapahtism could be seen in John of the Cross, our main purport is to see the negative way in his writings. John of the Cross rejects all specific and distinctive ideas, apprehensions or images in the realization of the divine. John of the Cross does not seek the 'knowledge of heavenly things, but the nakedness of the soul bereft of all knowledge' (Werblowsky 1966: 179), which is 'nothingness' (*la nada*) of the negative way we explore in this chapter. John of the Cross said 'Since God cannot be encompassed by any image, form, or particular knowledge, in order to be united with him the soul should not be limited by any particular form or knowledge' (AMC II, 16, 7: 201). Thus, an open, 'general' (as opposed to 'particular') nothingness is the 'unknowing' of John of the Cross.

In this chapter we first look at the conception of 'nothingness' in John of the Cross and then proceed in the second part to see the paradox of language in the writings of John of the Cross, which is replete with symbolism and negations. In the third part of the chapter, we analyse the doctrine of three faculties and their darkening, while in the fourth part, we take up the key idea of the 'unknowing' in the thought of John of the Cross. In the fifth and last part of the chapter, we consider the import of 'silence' that we find in John of the Cross.

4.1 Conception of 'Nothingness' in John of the Cross

The conception of 'nothingness' or *nada* in the writings of John of the Cross is explored here. John of the Cross's 'path was the path to "*nada*" (nothing)' (de Nicolas 1996: 60), or we could say, John of the Cross's negative way was a path *of* and *to* 'nothing'. John of the Cross explains the path of nothing, which is a desireless (desiring nothing) and a negating path, in his AMC:

> To reach satisfaction in all
> Desire satisfaction in nothing.
> To come to possess all
> Desire the possession of nothing.
> To arrive at being all
> Desire to be nothing.
> To come to the knowledge of all

Cross. They are four distinct works of John of the Cross, but in order to have an understanding of his thought, one has to have a grasp of these four distinct works which act as a compendium of John of the Cross's corpus, as they are complementary treatises.

Desire the knowledge of nothing.
To come to enjoy what you have not
You must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not
You must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not
You must go by a way in which you possess not.
To come to be what you are not
You must go by a way in which you are not. (AMC, I, 13, 11: 150)

John of the Cross is exhorting us to go by a way in which, as he says, 'you enjoy not', 'you know not', 'you possess not' and 'you are not'. The term 'possessions' that John of the Cross mentions is 'not only material goods but all things, both material and spiritual, to which human being cling for security' (Johnston 1994: 274). In the verses quoted above, John of the Cross sheds light on the contrast between 'all' and 'nothing'. He 'expressed the antithesis between *todo*, everything, and *nada*, nothing, that lies at the root of his thinking and feeling' (Brenan 1975: 133). It must be mentioned here that John of the Cross's negative way is directed towards *nothingness of God* as well as the *nothingness of self*. The *nothingness of God* does not mean 'God is nothing', but the description we make of him is incapable of saying what he is. Further, in the negative way of John of the Cross, he does not say that God is nothing or nothingness,[2] but human predication of him is 'nothingness'. John of the Cross 'does not say that God is darkness and emptiness and nothingness; but he does say that the human experience of God is darkness and emptiness and nothingness' (Johnston 2003: 121).

This nothingness operates in the affective and cognitive states of the soul (Wolosky 1995: 14). The entire enterprise in John of the Cross is a journey and a path, and he 'speaks of his journey as a negative way' (Barnstone 1999: xii). John of the Cross employs in his works a number of terms to bring home his notion of nothingness. The terms are nothingness, emptiness, darkness, night, dark night, unknowing, solitude, silent, tranquil, peace, secret, void, *nada* and so on. But these are the terms used in his writings as indicators to nothingness. Taken together and separately, the intent of *nothingness* that John of the Cross has is a *self-emptying nothingness* – in thinking, feeling and willing – or in 'doing' and 'being'. John of the Cross explains the nothingness by taking the example of Christ getting reduced into nothing at the moment of his death. John of the Cross writes:

…at the moment of his death he was certainly annihilated in his soul, without any consolation or relief. This was the most extreme abandonment, sensitively, that he had suffered in his life. And by it he accomplished the most marvellous work of his whole life, surpassing all the works and deeds and miracles that he had ever performed on earth or in heaven. … The Lord achieved this, as I say, at the moment in which he was most annihilated in all things: in his reputation before people, since in watching him die they mocked him instead of esteeming him; in his human nature, by dying; …annihilated and reduced to nothing. (AMC II, 8, 11: 172)

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[2] Johnston writes 'St. John of the Cross will affirm that God is everything. He is light; he is fullness; He is all; He is the source of being and beauty. In this he would seem to be very opposite of the absolute nothingness about which Oriental mysticism speaks. But (and here again we come against great paradox) while God is light in Himself, He is darkness to us; while He is all in Himself, he is nothing to us; while he is all in fullness, He is emptiness to us' (Johnston 2003: 121).

As a close reading of the above passage from AMC, we come to understand that the conception of nothingness that John of the Cross has is opposed to all kinds of triumphalism – physical, emotional or psychological and intellectual. Nietzsche has explained it magnificently well in his *The Anti-Christ*, 35 (Nietzsche 2003: 159–160).[3] The import of the nothingness is kenosis[4] in John of the Cross where there is a radical self-abandonment. Kenosis is not an act alone or 'doing' alone, but it is both 'doing' and 'being', the very existence.

4.2   *Nada* and John of the Cross's Paradox of Language

We investigate the import of *nada* and the symbolic language that John of the Cross uses in his writings to show the paradox[5] and inadequacy of language.[6] John says that it is not possible to speak about God in human language. There is some sort of 'scepticism of intellect and language' (Dombrowski 1992: 137) in John of the Cross. He says 'May the tongue I speak with cling to my palate' (BWB: 69), for it is not possible to speak. John of the Cross is a poet, and he uses imageries, metaphors and symbolisms to usher in his negative way. Barnstone says that John of the Cross is a 'poet, and he uses symbolic images to chart his passage from *via* to *via*' (Barnstone 1999: xii). Even the naming of his works is symbolic like the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night*.

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[3] 'This "bringer of glad tidings" died as he lived, as he *taught* – *not* to "redeem mankind" but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to mankind is his practice: his bearing before judges, before guards, before the accusers and every kind of calumny and mockery – his bearing on the cross. He does not resist, he does not defend his rights, he takes no steps to avert the worst that can happen to him – more, *he provokes it*. …And he entreats, he suffers, he loves with those, in those who are doing evil to him. His words to the thief on the Cross contain the whole Evangel. "That was verily a divine man, a child of God!" – says the thief. "If thou feelest this" – answers the redeemer – "*thou art in paradise*, thou are a child of God." *Not* to defend oneself, *not* to grow angry, not to make responsible. … But not to resist even the evil man – to *love* him…' (Nietzsche 2003: 159–160).

[4] Kenosis is self-emptying. It is an 'emptying out'. It is 'a surrender of our prerogatives, real and imagery, as we live with and for others'. This emptying will lead us to discover our true selves (Laporte 1997: 229–230).

[5] Nieto opines that John of the Cross takes recourse to the mystical language which is a language of paradox and negation. He writes 'Mystical experience and knowledge as well the way to achieve them belong to a different kind of world, a world which is not comprehended by the world of common experience, be it of an aesthetic or of a religious nature. Thus, when John attempts to convey the nature and essence of his mystical knowledge and experience, he finds that the religious and aesthetic symbols and terminology he often uses do not adequately convey it. The results of this mystical awareness are expressed by John in the language of universal mysticism which is the language of paradox and negation' (Nieto 1979: 118).

[6] One could find a detailed study on the language of John of the Cross in the fifth chapter of Dombrowski's *St John of the Cross*: *An Appreciation* (Dombrowski 1992: 135–164).

John of the Cross uses metaphors, imageries and other symbols in his writings. Among them are darkness,[7] dark night, night, way, secret, ladder, disguised, silence, solitude and tranquillity. John of the Cross speaks of two 'nights' in his works: *the night of the sensory faculties* and *the night of the spiritual faculties*. He writes:

> We are using the expression 'night' to signify a deprival of the gratification of the appetites in all things. Just as night is nothing but the privation of light and, consequently, of all objects visible by means of the light – darkness and emptiness, then for the faculty of sight – the mortification of the appetites can be called a night for the soul. To deprive oneself of the gratification of the appetites in all things is like living in darkness and in void. (AMC I, 3, 1: 121–122)

Similarly, 'way'[8] is a symbol in John of the Cross. The way gives the central image of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* which deals with the ascent to the mount, and the way is the way of nothingness, *nada*.

John of the Cross says that no one can describe or explain in any language what the divine experience is. John of the Cross warns about the hazard that the imageries and figures could be some sort of absurdities and not reasonable utterances. He says:

> Who can describe in writing the understanding he gives to loving souls in whom he dwells? And who can express with words the experience he imparts to them? Who, finally, can explain the desires he gives them? Certainly no one can! Not even they who receive these communications. As a result these persons let something of their experience overflow in figures, comparisons and similitudes, and from the abundance of their spirit pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations. …they will seem to be absurdities rather than reasonable utterances…. (SC, Prologue 1: 469)

John of the Cross explains that the divine knowledge is not something specific or particular. He writes 'This divine knowledge of God never deals with particular things, since its object is the Supreme Principle. …in no way can anything be said of that divine knowledge' (AMC II, 26, 5: 246). Whatever we try to say in our way of expressions will always remain inadequate or false, as John of the Cross says, for 'it is the intellect that forms the statements of its own power, as we stated. Consequently the statements are often false, or only apparent, or defective' (AMC II, 29, 3: 256–257). Further, God does not need our knowledge, because he is the ultimate. What John of the Cross says here could be explained further in the words of Panikkar in this way:

> Ultimate reality, by virtue of its very ultimacy, has no need of our knowledge, our concern, or indeed that we should have any care for it at all. To treat it as 'something' in some manner dependent on our cognition, our concern for it, our affirmation or negation of it, our appre-

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[7] The 'darkness' is a metaphor in John of the Cross. This is the 'promise of the night as a path to the Divine presented by John of the Cross, Johann Arndt, John Donne, or Claude Hopil' (Koslofsky 2011: 279). An exposition of 'seeking the Lord in the night' could be seen in this work (Koslofsky 2011: 46–89).

[8] 'Its use may be a delicate homage to Teresa of Avila, whose Way of Perfection, … In fact John of the Cross also speaks of ''the way of perfection'': the image appears as early as the prologue of the *Ascent*, in the form of both the verb *encaminar* (to walk along the way) and the noun *camino* (way)' (Tavard 1988: 63).

hension of it, experience of it, or what you will – this would ineluctably be to consider it as something intramundane, one being among beings, however earnest the protest of our lips and even of our heart that it is sublime, transcendent and ineffable. (Panikkar 1989: 15)

Even if God does not need our knowledge and our description about him in any language, humans are humans, and they communicate their human experience. John of the Cross too tries to communicate the same through his symbolic expressions. It cannot be denied that there is experience of God and there is the existence of God, though it might not be fully communicable in our ordinary language. This sort of indescribability is expressed in the term 'what' which occurs in many places in John of the Cross's works. As, for instance, in SC stanza 38, we find the term 'what' used in the last line: ' "what" you gave me on that other day' (SC-CB 38: 80). John of the Cross explains it as ineffability of God experience and God himself: 'Since it has no name, the soul calls it "what." The "what," in point of fact, is the vision of God, but that which the vision of God is to the soul has no other name than "what" ' (SC 38, 6: 620). And that, this 'what', whatever it might be, 'cannot be understood by one word, nor at one time' (SC 38, 7: 620). This is even inexpressible. 'All expressions of excellence, grandeur, and goodness are fitting, but do not explain it, not even when taken together' (SC 38, 8: 621). John of the Cross calls it just 'I-don't-know-what':

> But there beyond all beauty,
> And what is and what will be and was,
> *He tastes I-don't-know-what*
> *Which is so gladly found.* (GSM 7: 72)

> Do not send me
> Any more messengers;
> They cannot tell me what I must
> Hear. (SC-CA 6: 45)

God communicates with the soul, and the language of God is silence. 'The language of God has this trait: Since it is very spiritual and intimate to the soul, transcending everything sensory, it immediately silences the entire ability and harmonious composite of the exterior and interior senses' (DN II, 17, 3: 436). There is an ineffability of divine language: 'We have examples of this ineffability of divine language' (DN II, 17, 4: 436). The contemplative experience is the language of God to the soul and that cannot be communicated in human language. John of the Cross explains it in this way:

> Since the wisdom of this contemplation is the language of God to the soul, of Pure Spirit to pure spirit, all that is less than spirit, such as the sensory, fails to perceive it. Consequently this wisdom is secret to the senses; they have neither the knowledge nor the ability to speak of it, nor do they even desire to do so because it is beyond words. (DN II, 17, 4: 437)

The experience of God is a verity but that very 'experience is ineffable', (DN II, 17, 5: 437) for 'pure contemplation is indescribable' (DN II, 17, 5: 437).[9] John of the

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[9] John of the Cross says in his SC: 'The wisdom of the world is ignorance to the wisdom of God, and the wisdom of God is ignorance to the wisdom of the world' (SC 26, 13: 578), and there is a limit of language.

Cross uses a language that looks like paradox in the dichotomies of kataphasis and apophasis but resolving the two. Appreciating the language of John of the Cross in this regard, Gawronski aptly writes:

> He insists on the nada and yet, as Balthasar indicates, he is a poet who loves, and yet who will see everything only in God. … If the language of John of the Cross is not the dialectics of the Reformers nor the prose of theology, how much less is the 'empty speculation' of philosophical ways. It is a language of poetry which transcends the dichotomies of prose and silence, of cataphatic and apophatic theology – not thereby discovering some trite 'third way' which resolves the first two. But persevering in the first, the way of affirmation, and in the second, the way of negation, John of the Cross breaks through to the word of poetry, the most adequate way to treat Word of God. (Gawronski 1995: 72)

John of the Cross rejects extremes: both affirmation and negation. One can see 'the tremendous tension of a man of negative theology par excellence – on a par with Evagrius – who yet was able to keep it so in tension with his positive theology that a true Christian vision emerged' (Gawronski 1995: 74). There is paradox of language in John of the Cross's writings. When it comes to describe God, John of the Cross has these expressions like 'while God is light in Himself, He is darkness to us; while He is all in Himself, he is nothing to us; while he is all in fullness, He is emptiness to us' (Johnston 2003: 121). It means that our experience is nothing and not the essence of God. God is not 'nothing', nor nothingness.

Though God experience is ineffable, John of the Cross uses a language to bring home to us his point. The language of John of the Cross is 'literal, symbolic and interpretive' (Dombrowski 1992: 144). It is true that 'John does not talk at any length about inferring God's existence from that of the world' (Payne 1990: 27–28), but he speaks of God and 'regarding the abstract features of God, John of the Cross speaks literally' (Dombrowski 1992: 144). Regarding 'the *mode* of God's existence', John of the cross uses analogy and symbolisms (Dombrowski 1992: 144–145). Analogy is a 'hermeneutical tool' (Palakeel 1995: 336)[10] to unravel the inexpressibility of certain things in language which gives a 'great similarity in greater dissimilarity' (Palakeel 1995: 321–322). Further, John of the Cross's lan-

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[10] Joseph Palakeel in his *The Use of Analogy in Theological Discourse* explains it in this way: 'Analogy is the hermeneutical tool… Analogy also provides the key for understanding and reconciling most theological problems and tendencies, binding together even the mutually excluding alternatives in a unity in diversity, after the model of God-man Jesus Christ, who unites the divine and the human in his theandric person as *the concrete analogy* and the *paradigm* for all theology. Not only the God-man relationship, but even the theological, philosophical, cultural and religious pluralism can be reconciled in a wondrous exchange' (Palakeel 1995: 336). 'Analogy was introduced into theological discourse by St. Thomas as linguistic-logical alternative to univocal and equivocal speech. It had a double function in theology: to abrogate the scandal of anthropomorphism and overcome the speechlessness of theology. Although the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of analogy were stressed in the subsequent centuries, the post-modern analogy signals a return to the original linguistic nature of analogy' (Palakeel 1995: 316), and 'analogy is eminently a linguistic phenomenon. Such a new positive view of language makes God speakable without univocity (anthropomorphism) and equivocity (ineffability), and, thus, resolves the aporia of traditional analogy' (Palakeel 1995: 317).

guage has a poetic beauty in itself and his words are well chosen. They act as a means to the union with God, as Dombrowski says:

> … John of the Cross views language purely as means to achieve union with God (or to achieve an understanding of that union), or language should be savoured as an end in itself. He gives evidence for both. The careful placement of words in his poetry leads one to believe that the words are to be savoured. (Dombrowski 1992: 142)

Though John of the Cross uses a very melodious poetic language to bring home his negative way of *nada*, he does not speak what that experience is. He does not want to speak about it at all. When he entered into unknowing, he says 'I understood great things; I will not say what I felt, for I remained in unknowing transcending all knowledge' (SEC 1: 53).[11] That is it. It is ineffable nothingness.

4.3   *Nada* and the Doctrine of Three Faculties

John of the Cross speaks of 'the three faculties' of the soul, namely, 'intellect, memory and will' (AMC II, 6, 1: 166) in his writings, especially in books two and three of his the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. These three faculties are the 'three basic human faculties' (O'Keefe 2014: 65). In his *The Living Flame of Love*, John of the Cross calls the three faculties as 'three caverns'[12] (LFL 3: 17–22: 680–682). In the first book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John gives a detailed exposition of the five senses and the importance of their mortifications. The doctrine of the three faculties of the soul is seen in all his major works.

John of the Cross explains that there are the limits to these three faculties in reaching God for they operate in human 'creaturely' realm. God is unreachable by these 'creaturely' faculties. John of the Cross writes:

> No creature, none of its actions and abilities, can reach or encompass God's nature. Consequently, a soul must strip itself of everything pertaining to creatures and of its actions and abilities (of its understanding, satisfaction, and feeling), so that when everything unlike and unconfirmed to God is cast out, it may receive the likeness of God. (AMC II, 5, 4: 163)

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[11] Explaining this Nieto writes 'The mystic's knowledge gained in his experience is paradoxically conveyed as ''no knowledge transcending all knowledge'' because it is not the type of knowledge that one commonly knows or talks about. It is not factual, informational or ideational knowledge, yet it is knowledge of another kind, transcending all the knowledge one commonly identifies as knowledge' (Nieto 1979: 120).

[12] Foley writes 'The soul calls these three faculties (intellect, memory and will) ''the deep caverns of feeling'' because through them and in them it deeply experiences and enjoys the grandeurs of God's wisdom and excellence' (F 3, 69)' (Foley 2002: 144). According to D'Souza, 'The faculties are the caverns and when these caverns are emptied of their stomachs they are hungry: ''these caverns have deep stomachs, they suffer profoundly; for the food they lack, which as I say is God, is also profound'' (F 3, xviii). When emptied and purified, ''the intellect, will and memory go out immediately toward God, and the affections, senses, desires and appetites, hope, joy and all the energy from the first instant incline toward God'' (C 28, v; cfr F 1, xii). This inclination for God is stimulated by the emptiness caused in the faculties through purification' (D'Souza 1996: 241).

John of the Cross further explains the 'abilities' of these faculties as 'understanding, satisfaction and feeling' (AMC II, 5, 4: 163), and they are equivalent to the faculty of knowing, the faculty of willing and the faculty of feeling through which one comprehends the three facets of reality, *truth*, *goodness* and *beauty*, respectively, in our phenomenal world.

These three faculties cannot reach God as they have their limits in the finitude of the humans. So John of the Cross instructs us to empty these faculties of their natural abilities in order to be able to have the union with God. In this process of emptying, first the senses need to be emptied of satisfaction in the manner of mortification. 'By this method should endeavour, then to leave the senses as though in darkness, mortified and empty of that satisfaction' (AMC, I, 13, 4: 149). In this process one desires to have the 'satisfaction in nothing', 'possession of nothing' and 'knowledge of nothing' (AMC I, 13, 11: 150).

In the doctrine of three faculties in John of the Cross, *the first faculty is intellect*. John of the Cross says that human intellect and the knowledge that one gets through intellect cannot know God (AMC II, 8, 1–7: 173–176). 'Thus, no creature can serve the intellect as a proportionate means to the attainment of God' (AMC II, 8, 3: 174), for means must be proportionate to their end. God cannot be confined to the finite human intellectual enterprise, as God is beyond the parameters of human intellectual domain.[13] John of the Cross writes:

> Nothing in this life that could be imagined or received and understood by the intellect can be a proximate means of union with God. In our natural way of knowing, the intellect can grasp an object only through the forms and phantasms of things perceived by the bodily sense. Since, as we said, these things cannot serve as a means, the intellect cannot profit from its natural knowing. If we speak of supernatural knowing, in so far as one can in this life, we must say that the intellect of its ordinary power, while in the prison of this body, is neither capable of nor prepared for the perception of the clear knowledge of God. Such knowledge does not belong to our earthly state; either one must die or go without this knowledge. (AMC II, 8, 4: 175)

Human intellect is limited. As stated above, the infinitude of God does not allow the intellect to know God. 'In this mortal life no supernatural knowledge or apprehension can serve as a proximate means for high union with God' (AMC II, 8, 5: 175). There is a means with which the intellect can approach God, and in this way the *intellect advances by unknowing*. John of the Cross says:

> Manifestly, then, none of these ideas can serve the intellect as a proximate means leading to God. In order to draw nearer the divine ray, the intellect must advance by unknowing rather than by the desire to know, and by blinding itself and remaining in darkness rather than by opening its eyes. (AMC II, 8, 5: 176)

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[13] Panikkar opined that when we give attributes to God and make God a reality fully confined in our human understanding and comprehension, we contaminate God. He says: '… in various degrees, and out of various philosophical and cultural matrices, apophaticism has always sought in one way or another to deny of God any attribution, even that of being, in order not to contaminate God with our own creatureliness' (Panikkar 1989: 134).

This approach of the intellect in advancing by *unknowing* is because 'there is no ladder among all created, knowable things by which the intellect can reach this high Lord' (AMC II, 8, 7: 176). This advancement and the process therein effect a silencing and pacifying of intellect, thus an emptying of it, as John of the Cross writes: 'the intellect must be cleansed and emptied of everything relating to sense, divested and liberated of everything clearly intelligible, inwardly pacified and silenced' (AMC II, 9, 1: 177). The intellect, thus, will realise that God is darkness to it: 'God is darkness to our intellect' (AMC II, 9, 1: 177). And the knowledge of God is dark and unintelligible, and John of the Cross says in this effect: 'Since God is unintelligible in this life, knowledge of him is dark' (LFL 3, 49: 693), and 'God soars above all understanding' (AMC II, 9, 2: 177).

The *second faculty* in the doctrine of three faculties according to John of the Cross is *memory*. John of the Cross says that there are 'three different objects of memory: natural, imaginative and spiritual' (AMC III, 1, 2: 267). John of the Cross explains the *natural knowledge in memory* in this way:

> To begin with natural knowledge in memory, I include under this heading all that can be formed from the objects of the five corporeal senses (hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch), and everything like this sensory knowledge that the memory can evoke and fashion. It must strip and empty itself of all this knowledge and these forms and strive to lose the imaginative apprehension of them. It should do this in such a way that no knowledge or trace of them remains in it; rather it should be bare and clear, as though nothing passed through it, forgetful of all and suspended. (AMC III, 1, 4: 268–269)

Subsequently the other objects of memory are *imaginative* and *spiritual*. God is beyond all these three objects of memory, and memory can never have a complete grasp of God in its capacity. God is beyond comprehension of memory as John of the Cross says:

> Creatures, earthly or heavenly, and all distinct ideas and images, natural and supernatural, that can be objects of a person's faculties are incomparable and unproportioned to God's being. God does not fall under the classification of genus and species. (AMC III, 12, 1: 284)

Memory cannot imagine God, and in this regard John of the Cross says 'Since God is formless and figureless, the memory walks safely when empty of forms and figures' of God (LFL 3, 52: 694–695). God is 'unimaginable – God cannot be grasped by the imagination' (LFL 3, 52: 695), for God 'has neither image, nor form, nor figure' (AMC III, 13, 1: 285). Hence John of the Cross calls for an annihilation of memory. He writes:

> There is no way to union with God without annihilating the memory as to all forms. This union cannot be wrought without a complete separation of the memory from all forms that are not God. … since God has no form or image comprehensible to the memory, the memory is without form and without figure when united with God. Its imagination being lost in great forgetfulness without the remembrance of anything. (AMC III, 2, 4: 269)

The memory has to divest itself of all forms and images to reach God.[14] This is the negative way that empties the memory of all imaginations in great forgetfulness.

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[14] The emptiness of memory is needed to reach God. Memory should be void of forms and figures. 'Since God is formless and figureless, the memory walks safely when empty of form and figure, and it draws closer to God' (LFL 3, 52: 694–695). Memory makes imaginations. God is unimaginable. Hence the emptying of memory is a must to reach God. John writes 'The more it

The *third faculty* in the doctrine of three faculties according to John of the Cross is *will*. Will has the emotions and appetites. There are four emotions or passions of the will, 'joy, hope, sorrow, and fear' (AMC III, 16, 2: 292). Joy can come from six kinds of goods and objects: 'temporal, natural, sensory, moral, supernatural and spiritual' (AMC III, 17, 2: 294). The faculty of will with its four emotions and appetites together with their pacification gets a detailed exposition in his AMC (III, 18: 1- III, 35, 8: 295–333). The will, due to its appetites and emotions of the mundane life, gets confined to the mundane and becomes incapable of reaching God. The will too has to darken itself in its advancement towards God so that its journey in darkness ends in the sublime union with God.

John of the Cross explains the role of the will further in his LFL. The function of the will is to love. 'Love is therefore present in the will in the manner that knowledge is present in the intellect' (LFL 3: 49: 693). John of the Cross says that God 'informs these two faculties (intellect and will) with knowledge and love' (LFL 3, 49: 693). There can be false notion of God and the love of God, because the understanding of that 'God of love' is through the medium of intellect, as John says 'Since God is unintelligible in this life, knowledge of him is dark, as I say, and the love present in the will is fashioned after this knowledge' (LFL 3, 49: 693).

The senses have to be emptied of its appetites. 'By depriving itself of its appetites for the delights of hearing, a soul lives in darkness and emptiness in this sense faculty' (AMC I, 3, 2: 122). There needs to be an 'emptiness' and 'darkness' of the sense of hearing, emptiness of 'pleasure of seeing things', where there is 'darkness' of the 'faculty of sight', emptiness of 'fragrances pleasing to the sense of smell', keeping the sense faculty of taste 'in the void and in darkness' and keeping the sense of touch 'in darkness and in void' (AMC I, 3, 2: 122). Thus, the emptied senses will enable the soul to traverse to God.

The three faculties and their abilities are incapable of knowing God, for they are created and finite in their nature.[15] 'Since created things, as it has been said, have no proportion to God's being, all imaginings fashioned from the likeness of creatures are incapable of serving as proximate means toward union with God' (AMC II, 12,

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leans on the imagination, the farther away it moves from God and the more serious is its danger; for in being what he is – unimaginable – God cannot be grasped by the imagination' (LFL 3, 52: 695). Imagination makes idols of God. It imagines, phantasises, envisions and constructs a concept of God. Imagination calls God what is not God and 'thus living an idolatrous life in small and big ways' (Perrin 1997: 49). Thus, memory and its by-product imagination is a net that does not allow one to know God as God really is. 'The memory of the old self envisions God in a particular way and believes it possesses God. But the appetite of the memory is for the possession of the truth of God who is not possessible. Therefore, memory must hope for nothing possessible' (Perrin 1997: 49).

[15] John of the Cross would advise that God is absent to human senses and faculties (SC 1, 4: 479), 'deeply hidden from every mortal eye and every creature' (SC 1, 5: 480). God 'is inaccessible and concealed' (SC 1, 12: 482) and 'you must always regard him as hidden, and serve him who is hidden in a secret way. Do not be like the many foolish ones who, in their lowly understanding of God, think that when they do not understand, taste, or experience him, he is far away and utterly concealed. The contrary belief would be truer. The less distinct is their understanding of him, the closer they approach him' (SC 1, 12: 482).

4: 186). Further, John of the Cross says 'Everything the intellect can understand, the will enjoy, and the imagination picture is most unlike and disproportioned to God' (AMC II, 8, 5: 175). John of the Cross exhorts for an attainment 'in their faculties the nakedness and emptiness that are required for the simple union' (AMCII, 5, 11: 166). He speaks of the *active purification* of these three faculties to have a union with God. 'They are called active purifications because we ourselves have to pay a dominant role in this purification process through our own self-mortification' (Scherrer 2009: 29). God plays a dominant role in the *passive purification*, and the soul remains passive. In his the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross explains the active purifications, and in his *Dark Night*, he explains the passive purifications.[16] There is an 'active' night of the senses (Meninger 2014: 3–10)and a 'passive' night of the soul. The 'active' 'nights' are those moments when the individual has to 'make decisions' and the 'passive' 'nights' are those moments 'when God is more active' in an individual's life (Perrin 1997: 56). Active nights are four, and passive nights are three in John's spiritual development model, and the latter are passive night of the sense, active night of the spirit and finally the passive night of the spirit. 'It is the Passive Night of the Spirit which is commonly known as the "Dark Night of the Soul"'. (Perrin 1997: 57).

Our natural faculties of intellect, memory and will can deceive us in our journey towards God. One may have to close the eyes of intellect and take the path of darkness in order to reach God. John of the Cross asks us to suspend the senses to reach God, and he says in DN 'suspending all my senses' (DN 7: 51), for 'the very light' of our 'natural eyes' is 'first to deceive' us in our 'journey to God', and we 'must keep' our 'eyes shut and tread the path in darkness', which are our 'senses and faculties' (DN II, 16, 12: 434). The *darkness* is safe for the soul as it is bereft of all that is ungodly. John of the Cross says:

> Another basic reason the soul walks securely in darkness is that this light, or obscure wisdom, so absorbs and engulfs the soul in the dark night of contemplation and brings it so near God that it is protected and freed from all that is not God. (DN II, 16, 10: 433)

After the purifications, soul's natural appetites get changed and soul gets absorbed into the divine life, in union with God, and the faculties are alive, deeply and profoundly attuned to God (Hunt 1990: 155–167; Doohan 1995: 67–69). Purification of the faculties is a prerequisite for supernatural reception, knowing and the union with God. That happens in the darkening of the faculties:

> Since these natural faculties do not have the purity, strength, or capacity to receive and taste supernatural things in a supernatural or divine mode, but only according to their own mode, which is human and lowly, as we said, these faculties must also be darkened regarding the divine, so that weaned, purged, and annihilated in their natural way they might lose that

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[16] The three books of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* are dedicated to the active night, while the two of the *Dark Night of the Soul* deal with the passive night. The *Spiritual Canticle* also treats these two nights in a broad way. Each one of the spheres undergoes an active and a passive purification. Thus it is that the dark night is divided into four stages: active night of the sense (*Ascent*, book 1), active night of the spirit (*Ascent*, book 2 and 3), passive night of the sense (*Dark Night*, book 1) and the passive night of the spirit (*Dark Night*, book 2) (Wilhelmsen 1993: 63).

lowly and human mode of receiving and working. Thus all these faculties and appetites of
the soul are tempered and prepared for the sublime reception, experience, and savour of the
divine and supernatural, which cannot be received until the old self dies. (DN II, 16, 4:
431–432)

The purging of the natural faculties is done in the light of unknowing. 'The spiritual
light is so bright and so transcendent that it blinds and darkens the natural intellect'
(DN II, 16, 11: 434). The spiritual light that comes from God makes the soul to soar
in unknowing, for it blinds and darkens all that is natural to human faculties. At that
point there is an ascent in unknowing (we will take up the *unknowing* facet of John
of the Cross's negative way under the heading 4.4 below).

The emptiness of the three faculties is possible only by the three virtues, namely,
faith, hope and charity. Faith in intellect, hope in memory and charity in will make
the darkness and emptiness of these faculties possible. John of the Cross says:

…emptiness and darkness in their respective faculties: faith in the intellect, hope in the
memory, and charity in will. …in order to journey to God the intellect must be perfected in
the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope, and the will in the nakedness
and absence of every affection… They darken and empty it of all things. (AMC II, 6, 1:
166)

John of the Cross would explain further that the three virtues make the faculties
empty and void of all that is not God, whether in knowing, willing and feeling:
'these three virtues place a soul in darkness and emptiness in respect to all things'
(AMC II, 6, 4: 167). John of the Cross further writes:

The virtues, as we said, void the faculties: Faith causes darkness and a void of understand-
ing in the intellect, hope begets an emptiness of possessions in memory, and charity pro-
duces the nakedness and emptiness of affection and joy in all that is not God. (AMC II, 6,
2: 166)

Among these three faculties, the intellect gets perfection when faith enters as it
produces emptiness in itself regarding its natural abilities and objects. Karol Wojtyla
writes that 'together with the negation of the clear, particular species received by the
intellect, there is an affirmation of the divine form as known in its unlimited dark-
ness' (Wojtyla 1981: 143).[17] Thus, when the sense and faculties are empty of all
apprehensions, they reach divine light that is simple and pure. John of the Cross
writes:

Since this light is so simple, so pure, and so general, and is unaffected and unrestricted by
any particular intelligible object, natural or divine, and since the faculties are empty and
annihilated of all these apprehensions, the soul with universality and great facility perceives
and penetrates anything, earthly and heavenly, that is presented to it. (DN II, 8, 5: 411)

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[17] The role of intellect and faith in the pursuit of the knowledge of God is the subject matter of the
work of Karol Wojtyla titled *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross* (Wojtyla 1981). In this
work we see how the cognitive power of humans which is the *ratio* in them is touched by the
divine, and it is possible only in faith. So Wojtyla emphasises both faith and reason (intellect) *fides
et ratio* in this work.

The 'excessive light of faith', hope and charity, the three virtues, makes the soul 'the subject' to remain 'in darkness' (Wojtyla 1981: 200). The 'darkness' is indeed beneficial to the soul as there will be soon the immersion of the soul in the 'union' with God.

It must also be mentioned here that in the doctrine of the three faculties, there is *no complete cessation of the three faculties* that we see in the writings of John of the Cross.[18] Faculties have their role, but they have a proper place and they need to be relegated. In LFL, stanza 3, the faculties of intellect, memory and will are called 'the deep caverns' and the commentary on this verse speaks of the value of these three faculties (LFL 3, 18–22: 680–682). Intellect, will and memory will get transformed after the 'dark night'. In this stage the natural sense will not have any role to play as 'the senses are bypassed' (LFL 3, 34: 671). Intellect gets the 'contemplative knowledge, which is a ray of darkness for the intellect' (LFL 3, 49: 693 & LFL 3, 49–52: 694–695). Will and memory also get transformed in the 'dark night'.

One has to realise their limits and rise above them, without denying their proper functions and operations (Green 1986: 33). All faculties are silenced and darkened. John of the Cross writes:

> One dark night,
> Fired with love's urgent longings
> -Ah, the sheer grace –
> I went out unseen,
> My house being now all stilled.
>
> In darkness, and secure,
> By the secret ladder, disguised,
> -Ah, the sheer grace! –
> In darkness and concealment,
> My house being now all stilled. (DN. 1–2: 358)

In the commentary on the aforementioned stanzas from *Dark Night*, Book Two, chapters 4–24 (DN II, 4, 1–24, 4: 400–456), John of the Cross explains how the soul is secure when it walks in darkness, that is, when all the faculties are silenced and darkened. The darkness of soul means appeasement of all faculties. John of the Cross says that 'the darkness of the soul mentioned here relates to the sensory, the interior, and the spiritual appetites and faculties. … It puts the sensory and spiritual appetites to sleep, deadens them, and deprives them of the ability to find pleasure in anything' (DN II, 16, 1: 430). In this stage there is no conceptual and mental activity. Such activities are arrested, because they are a hindrance to divine communion.

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[18] John of the Cross speaks of the intellect, will and memory as 'the deep caverns of feeling' (LFL 3, 17: 680). 'Through them and in them soul deeply experiences and enjoys the grandeur of God's wisdom and excellence' (LFL 3, 69: 702). However, 'in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Books II and III, John describes what we can do to set our spiritual faculties on the right path. He refers to this moment as the Active Night of the Spirit. During this active night these faculties are emptied of all that would lead the *old self* away from God. In the emptiness of each faculty arises a deep thirst for God. Each of the three spiritual faculties of the *old self* must be emptied in a particular way in order to be prepared to receive God' (Perrin 1997: 46).

This darkness will stop all imagination, discursive thought and rational mapping of God.

> It binds imagination, and impedes it from doing any good discursive work. It makes the memory cease, the intellect becomes dark and unable to understand anything, and hence, it causes the will also to become arid and constrained, and all faculties empty and useless. (DN II, 16, 1: 430)

Thus, the three faculties darken themselves, and finally they approach God in darkness. And in this darkness, there is the beneficial 'union' with God, the sole aim of the negative way in John of the Cross.

4.4 *Nada* and the Unknowing in John of the Cross

John of the Cross's negative way is the 'knowledge in unknowing', and 'understanding of not understanding' (SEC 6: 54). Knowing God is the goal, and it is possible only in unknowing. It does not consist in objective propositions resulting from rational processes and rules of logic, but it is an experiential mystical union with God. The negative way in John of the Cross informs us, first and foremost, what God is not. God is not subject to the changeable, created contingent order. And no one can reduce or amplify his goodness. The denials and negations about God affirm God is perfect goodness, and no change can alter that (Weinandy 2000: 110).

John of the Cross does not have a language in which he can describe his realization (or the transformation of his soul), that is, 'the limits of language itself and then breaks up into the darkness of unknowing' (Turner 1998: 245). John of the Cross expresses it in the following stanzas:

> This knowledge in unknowing
> Is so overwhelming
> That wise men disputing
> Can never overthrow it,
> For their knowledge does not reach
> To the understanding of not understanding,
> *Transcending all knowledge*.
>
> And this supreme knowledge
> Is so exalted
> That no power of man or learning
> Can grasp it;
> He who masters himself
> Will, with knowledge in unknowing,
> *Always transcending*. (SEC 6 & 7: 54)

The term 'unknowing' which John of the Cross employs in his writings has a special import. His emphasis on the 'knowledge in unknowing' would imply that there is an ineffable knowledge claim. 'Unknowing is a state of understanding all but thinking about no specific item of knowledge; perceiving all but conceiving of nothing in particular. It is necessary to empty the faculties of all particular apprehensions' (Green 1986: 32). The darkness of unknowing is a conviction and a realisation

which is a 'nothing' and 'nowhere', which could be seen as 'silence'. This is the highest wisdom, which is 'tranquil, solitary, peaceful, mild' and 'without knowing' 'where and how' (LFL 3, 38: 688–689). And again this wisdom is beyond the grasp of the senses and faculties as John of the Cross would say, 'serene, peaceful, solitary, and far from the senses and what is imaginable' (LFL 3, 43: 690). Further, 'it is impossible for the highest wisdom and language of God', says John of the Cross, 'to be received in anything less than a spirit that is silent and detached from discursive knowledge and gratification' (LFL 3, 37: 688). 'To know nothing, then, as St John says, is to know all, i.e., to empty oneself of all particular ideas and images is to apprehend all things seen in their true light, through that principle which is their ground or basis' (Green 1986: 32). In this unknowing, John of the Cross says, he 'understood great things' but he does not want to say what he experienced. The first verse of SEC goes like this:

> I entered into unknowing,
> Yet when I saw myself there,
> Without knowing where I was,
> I understood great things;
> I will not say what I felt
> For I remained in unknowing
> Transcending all knowledge. (SEC 1: 53)

In the negative way of John of the Cross, that is, the 'knowledge in unknowing', human faculties are not at play. Even the knowing intellect withdraws from itself and from its knowledge, and God is reached 'more by not understanding than by understanding.' John of the Cross explains it:

> God transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to it. Hence while the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from him. It must withdraw from itself and from its knowledge so as to journey to God in faith, by believing not understanding. …it reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding. (LFL 3, 48: 692)

The way to the summit of the mount of perfection 'is a path called *nada*' (Kavanaugh 1991: 102). This path of *nada* (nothingness) is by emptying the faculties. 'John presents a method to empty and purify the faculties of all that is not God' (Kavanaugh 1991: 106). God always transcends any image, idea or feeling (even of God). 'Since the intellect cannot understand the nature of God, it must journey in surrender to him rather than by understanding, and thus it advances by not understanding' (LFL 3, 48: 693).

According to John of the Cross, the emptiness of the natural operations of the faculties is the secure way to reach God. 'In the measure that the soul walks in darkness and emptiness in its natural operations, it walks securely' (DN II, 16, 3: 431). The knowledge of God in contemplation is dark to intellect. John of the Cross says 'This knowledge is general and dark to the intellect because it is contemplative knowledge, which is a ray of darkness for the intellect, as St. Dionysius teaches' (LFL 3, 49: 693). Besides that, John of the Cross would clarify that 'since God is unintelligible in this life, knowledge of him is dark' (LFL 3, 49: 693). The emptiness of intellect, will and memory will realise that *knowledge in unknowing*. Giving his commentary to SC stanza 16, John of the Cross says:

She (soul) says: 'And let no one appear on the hill,' that is, let no image of any object belonging to any of these faculties or senses we have mentioned appear before the soul and the Bridegroom. This is like saying: Let there be no particular knowledge or affection or other consideration in any of the spiritual faculties (memory, intellect and will); and let there be no other digressions, forms, images, or figures of objects, or other natural operations in any of the bodily senses and faculties, either interior or exterior (the imaginative power and phantasy, and so on, sight and hearing, and so on). (SC 16, 10: 541)

The unknowing is possible only when all the senses are suspended (DN 7: 51), as 'God cannot be grasped by the senses' (LFL 3, 73: 704) which are the operating and cognizing instruments of the creaturely humans. The high state of perfection, in that which there is a union of the soul with God, the 'human science cannot understand' adequately and not 'able to describe' (AMC, prologue 1: 115) it. That is why it is said that 'to reach union with the wisdom of God a person must advance by unknowing rather than by knowing' (AMC I, 4, 5: 126). Further, 'the soul, too, when it advances, walks in darkness and unknowing' (DN II, 16, 8: 433). The experience of God is intense and its intensity is 'indescribable' and the soul 'calls it an "I-don't-know-what"' (SC 7, 1: 500). In this way the *unknowing* that John of the Cross speaks of informs us that 'one comes to know clearly that God cannot be completely understood or experienced' (SC 7, 9: 502). Soul experiences a 'void of God, of very heavy darkness' (SC 13, 1: 519).

It must also be mentioned here that the negative way that we find in the doctrine of unknowing in John of the Cross is not a philosophical approach. It is not a doctrine against physical science. It is not even the theological approach of the *via negativa*. Thomas Merton fathomed the nuances that John of Cross wanted to drive home and Merton explains it in this way:[19]

Remember, therefore, that Saint John of the Cross does not offer us his doctrine of unknowing as a philosophical approach to the universe. It is in no sense a substitute for cosmology. It is not a prescription of annihilation of physical science, or a technique of entering into a quasimagical relation with cosmic forces so as to gain control over what seems to be world.

Saint John's 'Night' of unknowing concerns only the knowledge of God. Now, even speculative theology can become absorbed in apophatism, considering the names of God in so far as they tell us rather what He is not than what he is. This is not the approach of Saint John of the Cross. His is not a speculative theology. He is concerned with practical problems of mysticism and of experience. (Merton 1991: 65)

The negative way of John of the Cross cannot be called the negative theology as Thomas Merton opines. In this regard, John of the Cross says that 'a person should behave in a purely negative way… by means of that emptiness, darkness, and nakedness regarding all things' (AMC II, 24, 8: 243) to know God, 'the knowledge of all' (AMC I, 13, 11: 150). John of the Cross explains this negative way further and says 'All things are nothing… God alone is its all' (LFL 1, 32: 655). The dark night is the negative way which is very narrow. John of the Cross writes 'Appropriately, this constricted road is called a dark night' (DN, Prologue: 360),[20] and 'this dark night

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[19] For a detailed exposition of knowing by unknowing in Thomas Merton's explanation, see Merton 1991: 37–180, especially 55–66.

[20] John of the Cross writes in his prologue just before the beginning of book one of DN: 'Before embarking on an explanation of these stanzas, we should remember that … Recognizing the nar-

signifies here purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this nega-tion of self and of all things' (DN I, 1: 360).[21] The purgative contemplation which John of the Cross mentions here is the divine ray of contemplation that empties the faculties *in toto*. John of the Cross writes:

> This is precisely the divine ray of contemplation does. In striking the soul with its divine light, it surpasses the natural light and thereby darkens and deprives a soul of all the natural affections and apprehensions it perceived by means of its natural light. It leaves a person's spiritual and natural faculties not only in darkness, but in emptiness too. (DN II, 8: 4: 411)

In this contemplation God keeps the soul in darkness, emptying all the three facul-ties of their abilities: intellect is placed in darkness, will in barrenness and memory in emptiness. John of the Cross says:

> He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme afflictions, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction previously obtained from spiritual blessings. (DN II, 3, 3: 399)

In this process 'the soul experiences all emptiness and poverty in regard to three classes of goods (temporal, natural, and spiritual)' (DN II, 6, 4: 405). There is a total darkness and lack 'emptiness and poverty of both the sensory and the spiritual sub-stance of the soul' (DN II, 6, 5: 405). In such an emptying, 'the more it darkens and empties and annihilates it in its particular apprehensions and affections concerning both earthly and heavenly things; and also the less simply and purely it shines, the less it deprives and darkens the soul' (DN II, 8: 2: 410).

The importance of unknowing is seen in all the writings of John of the Cross. John of the Cross insists that one should even undertake 'the journey to God by unknowing' (AMC II, 26, 8: 252). 'Although it (unknowing) does not stand at the centre, this is a major idea in the writings of the Mystical Doctor. It recurs in soft tones throughout the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night*' (Tavard 1988: 68). Tavard explains the import of the knowledge in unknowing in this way:

> The two terms, knowing and unknowing, are not interchangeable in the equation that has been established and interpreted by John of the Cross in the light of his experience. Knowing is the subject, not the predicate. In other words the subject is God, inaccessible knowledge, incomprehensible science, unknowable knowing, hidden wisdom; but this subject gives itself a predicate that is, precisely, the unknowing, the ignorance that belongs to creaturely being. Not on the basis of human ignorance does the Christian mystic reach the experience of God through spiritual sight, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. Rather is it on the basis of divine knowing beyond all human capacity that God gives himself to be known without knowledge, in love. (Tavard 1988: 73)

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rowness of the path and the fact that so very few tread it – … – the souls' song in this first stanza is one of happiness in having advanced along it to this perfection of love. Appropriately, this con-stricted road is called a dark night, as we shall explain in later verses of this stanza' (DN, prologue before stanza 1: 360).

[21] This is taken from the first article after stanza 1 in book one of DN. After the explanation in two articles, John of the Cross begins the chapter 1 of book one (DN: 360–361).

The doctrine of the unknowing is, thus, not an absence of knowledge,[22] but it is an ineffable knowledge. This knowledge in unknowing is 'I-don't-know-what' (SC 7, 8: 502). This knowledge in unknowing is 'certain' that 'one feels is yet to be said, something unknown still to be spoken' (SC 7, 9: 502). This knowledge is 'a sublime trace of God as yet uninvestigated but revealed to the soul, a lofty understanding of God that cannot be put into words' (SC 7, 9: 502). Further, 'it enables one to posit jointly affirmation and negation, knowing and unknowing' (Tavard 1988: 75).[23] This is nothing but the ineffable nothingness, the *nada* of John of the Cross.

4.5 *Nada* and Silence

The negative way, *nada*, of John of the Cross ends in silence. John of the Cross writes 'Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God with the appetite and with the tongue, for the only language he hears is the silent language of love' (L 8: 742). In his writings there is a clear suggestion of the 'sublime silence' in the words like 'solitude', 'alone', 'stillness', 'lonely', 'silent' and 'tranquil' which John of the Cross employs in all his writings. Two stanzas from SC go like this:

> My Beloved, the mountains,
> And lonely wooded valleys,
> Strange islands,
> And resounding rivers.
> The whistling of love-stirring
> Breezes,

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[22] John of the Cross writes 'All the knowledge of God is possible in this life, however extensive it may be, is inadequate, for it is only partial knowledge and very remote. Essential knowledge of him is the real knowledge for which the soul asks here, unsatisfied by these other communications' (SC 7, 5: 498).

[23] In his work, Tavard further speaks of a complementarity of affirmation and negation in the works of John of the Cross. It goes like this: 'If there exists a domain in which opposites coincide, where contradictions are reabsorbed in some higher synthesis, one is far from the doctrine of John of the Cross. For him there is no higher unity transcending the opposition of *todo* and *nada*. Each excludes the other. In an infinitely more radical way than for all ancient and modern gnosticisms, one must, in order to reach all, seek nothing. But to seek nothing is not to look for something that would be, precisely, no-thing; it means, literally, to seek nothing, that is, not to seek. Between all and nothing there cannot be a "complementarity of mutual affirmation." There is mutual exclusion, or rather, since nothing is real entity, but only the concept of non-entity, there is no relation between all and nothing. In reality, all is enough. The merely imaginative negation of it is called nothing. When John of the Cross speaks of nothing that opposes the all, he does not have in mind something that is, but what which is not, nothingness, nil' (Tavard 1988: 78–79). Tavard continues '"Two contraries cannot enter into one subject."' At face value this looks like a variation on the principle of non-contradiction pertains to the philosophy of being and finds its domain in the area of metaphysics and ontology, the formula of the John of the Cross touches on the practical aspect of existence that could be expressed in popular language: one cannot run after two hares at once! As applied to the requirements of the inner life, this becomes: the soul cannot be filled with concern for God and with its contrary' (Tavard 1988: 79–80).

The tranquil night
At the time of the rising dawn,
Silent music,
Sounding solitude,
The supper that refreshes and
Deepens love. (SC-CA 13 & 14: 46)

Here John of the Cross uses the paradox of 'silent music' and 'sounding solitude' in stanza 14. Why John of the Cross uses these paradoxes? Nicky Losseff noticeably explains this in this way:

After all, music is normally sonorous, and solitude, silent. In theological terms, St John uses an inherent paradox to communicate a sense of the numinous and the ineffable: 'silent music' can only be a *conceptual* audition, perceived not through fleshly senses but directly through the soul's inner ear, and as concept it serves to demonstrate religious truth in a way that cannot be grasped at all – and yet cannot be grasped in any other way. (Losseff 2007: 206)

John of the Cross values *silence* and *solitude* more than anything else. He says, 'Since the immense blessings of God can only enter and fit into an empty and solitary heart, the Lord wants you to be alone' (L 15: 750).

The simple, spontaneous, unrestricted nature of silence where the faculties of intellect, will and memory are quietened, where mental, verbal constructions and imaginations cease, that state of silence is what John of the Cross is aspiring. Laird writes of this silence as an 'unchartable nature of silence':

John of the Cross, one of the greatest cartographers of the spiritual life, indicates this at the beginning of his own attempt to map this silence in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Before the work begins John gives us a line of drawing of what his book is to be about. He sketches Mount Carmel as a spiritual mountain, a symbol of the soul. Not too far up the base of the mountain he has written, 'Here there is no longer any way because for the just man there is no law, he is a law unto himself.' John is not advocating any sort of lawless, just-do-as-you-like life style. Rather he is indicating the intrinsically unchartable nature of silence. (Laird 2006: 2)

The silence of the John of the Cross gets expression in the term 'solitude' that he uses in his works. The *solitude* that John of the Cross speaks of is the negative way as far as the faculties of intellect, will and memory are concerned. It is an emptying and darkening of the senses to the extent that the senses are concerned. In SC-CA we see:

She lived in solitude
And now in solitude has built her nest;
And in solitude he guides her,
He alone, who also bears
In solitude the wound of love. (SC-CA 34: 49)

The soul that seeks and longs for God in solitude will be guided by him: 'in solitude he guides her'. That is what we learn from the above stanza. Again, this solitude helps the soul to be away from 'every satisfaction, comfort, and support of creatures in order to reach companionship and union with her Beloved' and the soul is able 'to discover the possession of peaceful solitude in her Beloved, in whom she rests, alone and isolated from all these disturbances' (SC 35, 2: 607–608). The soul

experiences the love, as John of the Cross says in the above stanza 'the wound of love', in its utmost intensity only in 'solitude'.

There is a perfect knowledge that dawns upon the soul in 'unknowing'. And when it comes to the perfect knowledge in *unknowing*, this *silence* is of peace and holiness, of secret and solitude. We read John of the Cross saying in SEC:

> That perfect knowledge
> Was of peace and holiness
> Held at no remove
> In profound solitude;
> It was something so secret
> That I was left stammering,
> Transcending all knowledge. (SEC 2: 53)

We see in the above stanza, the words 'peace', 'solitude' and 'secret' have been used to bring home John of the Cross's import of 'silence'. Peace, solitude and secret refer to a state of 'aloneness' where one can pursue one's desired way. They also indicate some kind of understanding and wisdom. The term *secret* in the writings of John of the Cross has a distinct implication. It is used to imply the 'secret wisdom' (DN II, 17, 2: 436). Another word which we find used often in John of the Cross in this context is 'dark' or 'dark night'. John of the Cross explains the 'dark night' as 'This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual' (DN II, 4, 1: 401). Human intellect and other faculties like memory and will are not able to cognise this secret wisdom. 'This communication is secret and dark to the work of the intellect and the other faculties' (DN II, 17, 2: 436). This secret wisdom is ineffable, as 'one's inability to understand' and also 'does not know how to describe it' (DN II, 17, 3: 436). John of the Cross would say:

> Even then it is so secret that it is ineffable. Not only does a person feel unwilling to give expression to this wisdom, but one finds no adequate means or simile to signify so sublime an understanding and delicate a spiritual feeling. Even if the soul should desire to convey this experience in words and think up many similes the wisdom would always remain secret and still to be expressed. (DN II, 17, 3: 436)

This wisdom is achieved through neither intellect nor other faculties but in silence and solitude. This is an interior wisdom achieved in peace and silence:

> Since this interior wisdom is simple, general, and spiritual that its entering the intellect is not clothed in any sensory species or images, the imaginative faculty cannot form an idea or picture of it in order to speak of it. This wisdom did not enter through the faculties, nor did they behold any of its apparel or colour. Yet the soul is clearly aware that it understands and tastes that delightful and ponderous wisdom. … And if people find it so difficult to describe what they perceive through the senses, how much more difficult is it to express what does not enter through the senses. The language of God has this trait: Since it is very spiritual and intimate to the soul, transcending everything sensory, it immediately silences the entire ability. (DN II, 17, 3: 436)

John of the Cross calls this wisdom as the 'language of God' and the ineffability of inherent in the language (DN II, 17, 3–4: 436–437). All the faculties and senses fail 'to perceive it. Consequently this wisdom is secret to the senses; they have neither the knowledge nor the ability to speak of it, nor do they even desire to do so because

it is beyond words' (DN II, 17, 4: 437). Those who realise this secret wisdom will take recourse to the ineffability of it. 'All they can manage to say is they are satisfied, quiet and content, and aware of God, and in their opinion all goes well. But the experience is ineffable.... is indescribable, as we said, and this account called ''secret'' ' (DN II, 17, 5: 437). Another symbolic term for the advancement to this 'secret wisdom' John of the Cross uses is *ladder*.[24] There is still another term which John of the Cross uses for this advancement in silence, secret and solitude, where the faculties are silenced and that is the term *disguised*.[25]

The silence in John of the Cross is also referring to the inability of human conceptual elaboration to map and fathom the nature of God. One has to silence all the conceptual constructions of the intellect, will and memory to reach God. John of the Cross advises us that 'a person who wants to arrive at union with the Supreme Repose and Good in this life must climb all the steps, which are considerations, forms, and concepts, and leave them behind, since they are dissimilar and unproportioned to the goal toward which they lead' (AMC II, 12, 5: 187). Even he is asking us to discontinue the discursive meditation as he remarks that 'one ought to discontinue discursive meditation (work through images, forms and figures)' (AMC II, 13, 1: 189). This is because God has no form or figure: 'God cannot be encompassed by any image, form, or particular knowledge' and we 'should not be limited by any particular form or knowledge' (AMC II, 16, 7: 201). Images, forms and even discursive thought are incapable of understating God. Thus, we see in John of the Cross form, figures, meditation and visions and all are to be negated and silenced (AMC II, 17, 9: 209; II, 18, 1–9: 210–213). Even the mystical expressions are human limitations for John of the Cross. In this regard Payne's opinion is worth mentioning here: '…many of the extraordinary phenomena associated with mysticism in popular imagination are, in John's view, merely its accidental accompaniments, the product of human limitations' (Payne 1990: 19). The explanation of the mystical

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[24] This is the ladder to the 'treasures of heaven' (DN, II, 1: 439). This is the ladder 'used for ascent and descent', to ascent to the highest wisdom, and thereby realising the nothingness of oneself, one humbles himself (DN II, 18, 2–4: 439–440). Here are ten steps of the ladder (DN II, 19, 1 – II, 20,6: 440–445), and on the last step, there is 'clear vision at the top', 'where God rests', and 'nothing is no longer hidden' and perfect wisdom is attained by 'total assimilation' and realisation (DN II, 20, 6: 445).

[25] The term disguised has a signification to silence the three faculties with the three virtues mentioned in the text. The advance is possible in the form of the three theological virtues: *faith*, *hope* and *charity*. Faith 'blinds the sight of every intellect' (DN II, 21, 4: 446). Hope gives constant courage in the advance (DN II, 21, 6: 447), and 'it covers all the senses of a person's head so they do not become absorbed in any worldly thing' (DN II, 21, 7: 447) and 'by which one always gazes on God, looks at nothing else' (DN II, 21, 8: 447) 'so empty of all possessions' (DN II, 21, 9: 448). Charity takes one to God, as there is a genuine self denial: 'For where there is true love of God, love of self and of one's own things find no entry' (DN II, 21, 10: 448). 'Faith darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding and thereby prepares it for union with the divine wisdom. Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions… Charity also empties and annihilates the affections and appetites of the will of whatever is not God and centres them on him alone' (DN II, 21, 11: 449). Thus, 'the knowledge by unknowing' is achieved through faith, hope and charity which are markedly important for a seeker of the highest 'secret wisdom' of God.

experience and the language therein are both imperfect and they are to be termed as 'nothing'.

In the silence of the negative way, *nada*, the seeking soul's intellect is sick, will suffers and memory dies. John of the Cross explains it in this manner: 'With respect to intellect, she says she is sick because she does not see God', and 'with respect to will, she declares she suffers because she does not possess God', and, again, 'with respect to memory, she says she dies because she suffers a distress that resembles death on remembering that she lacks all the goods of the intellect (the vision of God) and the delights of the will (the possession of God)' (SC 2, 6: 488). In such a *silence* of the soul, God *empties* the soul of all that is in the soul. John of the Cross writes 'He does this by darkening the interior faculties and emptying them of all these objects, and by restraining and drying up the sensory and spiritual affections, and by weakening and refining the natural forces of the soul with respect to these things' (DN II, 13, 11: 428). Such a soul that is in *silence* annihilates all particular knowledge, but is open to greater things. John of the Cross says:

> And this is characteristics of the spirit purged and annihilated of all particular knowledge and affection: Not finding satisfaction in anything, or understanding anything in particular, and remaining in its emptiness and darkness, it embraces all things with great preparedness. (DN II, 8, 5: 412)[26]

Stillness and pacification of all the three faculties of the soul make the soul to be receptive of divine union, for the faculties are empty. It is an effect of the active purification we had mentioned above. The soul can say now in perfect silence of *nada* that 'my house being now all stilled':

> Having calmed the four passions (joy, sorrow, hope and fear) through constant mortification, and lulled to sleep the natural sensory appetites, and having achieved harmony in the interior sense by discontinuing discursive operations (all of which pertains to the household or dwelling of the lower part of the soul, here referred to as its house), the soul says: 'My house being now all stilled'. (DN I, 13, 15: 392)

What follows the silence is tranquillity. SC speaks of 'tranquil night' (SC 14&15, 21: 534), it is the 'spiritual sleep' (SC 14&15, 22: 534) and it gives an explanation of this silence. It is said 'tranquil night is equivalent to a dark night' (SC 14&15, 23: 534). SC explains this tranquillity in this way: 'In that nocturnal tranquillity and silence and in knowledge of the divine light the soul becomes aware of Wisdom's wonderful harmony and sequence in the variety of her creatures and works' (SC 14&15, 25: 535), and 'this is almost identical with silent music' (SC 14&15, 26: 536). The faculties are quietened and darkened; the soul will be able to receive the spiritual music of God. John of the Cross explains further: 'When these spiritual faculties are alone and empty of all natural forms and apprehensions, they can receive in a most sonorous way the spiritual sound of the excellence of God, in himself and in his creatures' (SC 14&15, 26: 536). This *silent music* is possible in solitude only: 'Since the soul does not receive this sonorous music without solitude and estrangement from all exterior things, she calls it ''silent music'' and ''sounding

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[26] The same could be seen in DN, II, 9,1: 412; DN II, 9, 2: 413; and DN II, 9, 4: 413.

solitude'' (SC 14&15, 27: 536). In this silent music, the soul attains the peace of God, 'surpasses all understanding, all understanding will be inadequate and mute when it comes explaining this peace' (SC 21, 15: 558), and the soul 'may sleep in deeper peace' (SC 21, 18: 559). Thus, in the silence of *nada*, John of the Cross would say, go beyond the active and passive nights of the senses as well as the active night of the spirit. The soul, then, 'reaches a state of vacuum, emptiness, nakedness, or nothingness (*nada*). In this state, which is called the ''passive night of the spirit,'' the soul no longer works. Nothing from the outside or inside world is perceived' (Nieto 1979: 59), and there is 'tranquil night', 'silent music' and 'profound solitude'.

In summing up the chapter, let us hark back again that in *nada* and the negative way therein, John of the Cross deals with the knowledge of God. 'The entire *corpus* of his works, in fact, may be considered as dealing with knowledge' (Wilhelmsen 1993: 3), though he may not present a fully developed theory of knowledge. John of the Cross, for the most part, is concerned with the knowledge of God which is 'immediate, intuitive, experiential, and non-discursive' and for him 'it is neither impossible nor unreasonable to acquire the knowledge of God' (Wilhelmsen 1993: 4). Commentators on John of the Cross are of the opinion that there are three modes of human knowledge that are seen in the writings of John of the Cross, namely, *via affirmationis*, *via negationis* and *via eminentiae*,[27] and as we stated at the outset, our take in this study is his *via negativa*. The *via negativa* is the negative way of the nothingness, *nada*, in John of the Cross.

There is yet another facet of John of the Cross's negative way; it does not extol faith over reason or vice versa. John of the Cross holds on to both *fides et ratio* – faith and reason. In order to have the knowledge of God, humans need to labour in faith and reason. John of the Cross says that 'human reason and judgement' are 'sufficient' and 'in so far as possible people take advantage of their own reasoning powers', and 'all matters must be regulated by reason save those of faith, which though not contrary to reason transcend it' (AMC II, 22, 13: 235). He says that human faculties like intellect, memory and will on their own power extend only to natural cognition and 'natural operations' (AMC III, 2, 8: 270), but in the perfection

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[27] Elizabeth Wilhelmsen writes 'In the thought of John of the Cross there appear three modes of human knowledge or consciousness. The first is a knowledge through creatures, that is, by means of human cognitive, discursive or imaginative powers, and in terms of creatures. It may be compared to the *via affirmationis*. The second is a knowledge through faith, a knowledge in darkness, and may be considered a type of *via negationis*. The third, attained only at the highest stages of mystical experience and in the beatific vision, is knowledge through God's own act of intellection, and may be called in its own way a *via eminentiae*. These three modes of cognition bear some relation to the stages comprising the mystical ascent, the purgative, illuminative and unitive, without being identical to them' (Wilhelmsen 1993: 35–36). John of the Cross deals with the first form of knowledge in books 1 and 2 of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Spiritual Canticle*. There are two channels through which the intellect receives knowledge: *natural* and *supernatural* channels. By natural channels the intellect understands by the means of senses and by intellect itself, and by supernatural channel, the knowledge is given to the intellect from above and beyond its natural capacity and ability to get that knowledge (AMC II, 10, 2: 178).

of 'union', they pass from the 'natural boundaries to those of God, which are super-natural' (AMC III, 2, 8: 270). The limits of human faculties are clearly stated in the writings of John of the Cross as the 'corporeal perceptions bear no proportion to what is spiritual' (AMC II, 11, 3: 180).[28] Though there are limits of the faculties, John of the Cross does not support the suppression of natural human cognitive powers.[29]

The negative way of John of the Cross is *nada* and it is the unknowing. It is 'knowledge in unknowing', where one perceives the limits of the faculties and goes beyond them in an emptying and darkening 'way' of the 'night' which gives an idea that 'no adequate report of its contents can be given in words' (James 1985: 380), and it is ineffable. In the paradigm of John of the Cross, *nada* means only that there is 'nothing' to say or to be done on the subject but to keep silence. Those who affirm ineffability do not fall into an empty void, but it gives them a precise and eminently positive meaning (Lubec 1996: 117–143). It is not a sceptical pessimism or agnosticism but a positive certitude of God's inexpressible love. God is here intelligible, but he is above and beyond everything that can be said or predicated of him. It is only a negation in appearance,[30] and it is neither negation nor affirmation in

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[28] AMC II Chapter 10 and 11 deal with knowledge (AMC II, 10, 1–11, 1: 13: 178–184). There is a limit to human faculties, for the sensory part of man has no capacity for that which is beyond the world of appearance, and 'the bodily sense' is 'ignorant of' the real nature of God (AMC II, 11, 2: 180). The 'ordinary concepts and language are dependent upon the *sentido*, the activity of the sensible part of man. For this reason, to express something concerning these acts of cognition they must be compared to ordinary noetic acts following perception' (Wilhelmsen 1993: 40).

[29] Payne writes 'John does not advocate an inhuman suppression of our natural cognitive powers, nor the pursuit of ignorance or amnesia. His point is rather that during the period of intense mystical union itself, mystics, ''cannot actually advert to any other thing'' (*The Spiritual Canticle* 26: xvii – Payne's translation), because their intellects are being informed by God and are therefore not receptive to being actually informed by the species of creatures' (Payne 1990: 31). Further, 'John does not require the annihilation of reason, but only the recognition that what the mystic receives in contemplation cannot be attained by our unaided rational powers' (Payne 1990: 32).

[30] Henri de Lubac writes 'In the dialectic of the three ways, which gives us access to a human knowledge of God *(affirmation, seu position; negation, seu remotio; eminentia, seu transcendentia)*, the *via eminentiae* does not, in the last analysis, follow on the *via negationis*; it demands, inspires, and guides it. Although it comes last, the *via eminentiae* is covertly the first – superior and anterior to the *via affirmationis* itself. Although it never assumes a definite form in the eyes of the intelligence, it is always the light and the norm, a cloud of light which shows us the path in the desert of our terrestrial pilgrimage, a hidden power which excites us to pursue objective knowledge and compels us to rectify it. …. That is why we can enter the *via negationis* and remain in it without fear, once the necessary preliminary affirmations have been left behind. Understood in this way, the *via negationis* is only negative in appearance or negative of appearances. It other words – and more exactly perhaps – although it is negative and remains negative, it is the very opposite of *negation*. Negativity is not negation. A ''negative theology,'' a theology which heaps up negations, is, nevertheless, not a theology of *negation*. … The affirmation, consequently, remains to triumph in its highest form. It triumphs by negation, which it utilizes as the only means of correcting its own inadequacy' (Lubec 1996: 122).

common parlance, but John of the Cross calls it *nada* or the negative way. The negative way of John of the Cross, implied in his conception *nada*, inspires and guides the soul not to get deceived by images, forms and visions that amount to idols but to triumph by negation of those idols to arrive at the ineffable union with God. John of the Cross declares this ineffability as 'nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the mountain nothing'.[31]

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Abbreviations of Original Sources

AMC: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel.* John of the Cross, Saint. (1991). *The collected works of Saint John of the Cross* (Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, Trans., pp. 101–349). Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

BWB: *A Romance on the Psalm 'By the Waters of Babylon' (Ps. 137).* John of the Cross, Saint. (1991). *The collected works of Saint John of the Cross* (Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, Trans., pp. 68–70). Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications.

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[31] *Nada nada nada y aun en la montana nada*' (nothing, nothing, nothing and even on the mountain nothing (The sketch of the mount in the *The Ascent to Mount Carmel* has four parts, and the second is the middle path in which the word 'nada' (nothing) is repeated seven times. See John of the Cross, 1991: 110–112, and Nicolas 1996: 60–61).

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Chapter 5
Śūnyatā and *Nada*: Similarities and Dissimilarities

> *In similarity there is no dissimilarity, A thing is not similar with itself; But if there is dissimilarity, Then how could there be similarity?*
>
> (Nāgārjuna, MK 6, 4).

Abstract I deem this chpater as the most important of the study where an attempt has been made to dwell on the similarity and dissimilarity between Nāgārjuna's and John of the Cross's negative way. When we say similarities in their negative way, we mean only the negative approach they employ in their thought, and it does not have anything to do with the metaphysical-ontological reality of God, which Nāgārjuna does not speak of, and that John of the Cross believes and affirms in his works. The negative way of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna is not specific in articulating actually what it is all about, thus, amounting to a sort of indifference to specifications. The negative way of Nāgārjuna does not subscribe to any *ātma-nairātmya* polarities and conceivable distinctions, and we call it as an *enlightened-indifference*. It is the realisation of *niḥsvabhāvatā*, essencelessness, with the propitious cessation of all hypostatisation. This we term as *philosophical epiphany* in the Mādhyamika. But when it comes to John of the Cross, in his negative way, there is room for positive and creative facets. John of the Cross, like any other Christian thinker, places God at the centre of his experience and does not wallow in any arid abstraction. This we term as *theological epiphany* in John of the Cross. Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist Mādhyamika and God does not mean anything to his philosophical-religious scheme. John of the Cross is a theist Christian and God does mean everything to him. There is similarity in their approaches of negative way, but there is a marked dissimilarity in their goal.

Keywords Buddhism • Christianity • John of the Cross • Mādhyamika • *Nada* • Nāgārjuna • Philosophical epiphany • Similarity • *Śūnyatā* • Theological epiphany • The negative way • *Via negativa*

The conceptions of *Śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna and *nada* in John of the Cross have a number of similarities, and at the same time, they have striking dissimilarities. The employment of *śūnyatā* and *nada* is the negative way we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. Though these two concepts operate at different levels, they are

employed as a device by the great thinkers like Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross to bring home their philosophical and religious thought. We have dealt with the negative way that we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, *śūnyatā* and *nada*, respectively, in the preceding chapters, particularly in Chaps. 3 and 4. Now we are in a position to compare and contrast these two concepts and thereby appraise the similarities and dissimilarities found in them.

Let us hark back to the notion of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna that it operates within the limits of *saṃvṛti* in the doctrine of two truths, while the *nada* of John of the Cross operates in emptying faculties enunciated in the works of John of the Cross. Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist Mādhyamika and God *does not mean anything* to his philosophical-religious scheme. John of the Cross is a theist Christian and God *does mean everything* to him. When we speak about the similarities in their negative way, we mean only the negative approach they employ in their thought, and it does not have anything to do with the metaphysical-ontological reality of God, which Nāgārjuna does not speak of, and that John of the Cross believes and affirms in his works.

In this chapter, we first look at the similarities of the negative way commonly shared by Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. They may look similar in their philosophical enterprise, but their contents do not seem to be the same in many respects. In the second part of the chapter, we focus on the dissimilarities, which is, in fact, the main contribution of the chapter and the work as a whole. This is so because the main purpose of this study is not to trace out the trendy commonalities but to assess both the similarities and dissimilarities in the *negative way* found in these two great past masters hailing from two different traditions.

5.1 Similarities

The study of the negative way found in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross is very enthralling as we have come across remarkable similarities in their operational enterprise as well as thought paradigms. Two major thinkers from two different traditions, one a Buddhist and the other a Christian, with their dissimilar religious and philosophical convictions, make use of the negative way to unravel their viewpoints. It must be said that both the thinkers succeed in their attempts, though it might look unconvincing for someone who looks at it independently by not being part of these respective traditions. We can enumerate a number of similarities in the negative way we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, but we consider only those ones that we take as the most representative of them all. Let us look at the similarities.

5.1.1 The Limits of the Faculties and the Conventional Truth

There are the limits of human faculties and the conventional facts that Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross highlight in their writings. This does not imply that they had a disregard for the human faculties, but they were of the opinion that human

faculties operate in the phenomenal level which Nāgārjuna calls *saṁvṛti* or the conventional truth, while John of the Cross calls the realm of our creatureliness.

The notion of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna, as we have seen in Chap. 3, speaks of the limits of *saṁvṛti* or the conventional facts. The conventional would mean, as we have stated earlier in Chap. 3, that the 'truth of the world as it appears to ordinary consciousness and as it is constituted by our conventions and practices, including prominently our linguistic and cognitive practices' (Garfield 2002: 171). According to Nāgārjuna, as opined by Garfield, *saṁvṛti* has a possibility to limit and conceal the truth as it is 'glossed in tradition' (Garfield 2002: 91). The conventional truth has a different import in Candrakīrti, the most prominent commentator of Nāgārjuna, as we have mentioned in Chap. 3, and *saṁvṛti* has propensity to conceal or hide.[1] The conventional can even distort the truth, and, thus, there are chances for the limits of *saṁvṛti* (this we have explained under headings 3.2 and 3.3 in the third chapter). Thus, understanding the conventional as conventional with all its limits and perceiving the essencelessness of things is the ultimate truth that Nāgārjuna is speaking of.

The notion of *nada* that we find in the thought of John of the Cross also speaks of the limits of human faculties. We have elaborated upon the notion of *nada*, the negative way, as we find in the works of John of the Cross, in the fourth chapter. John of the Cross affirms that there are limits to the human faculties, namely, intellect, will and memory, to realise God, which is truth for him. Further, John of the Cross says: 'Everything the intellect can understand, the will enjoy, and the imagination picture is most unlike and disproportioned to God' (AMC II, 8, 5: 175). John of the Cross states that whatever we try to spell out about God in our creaturely language would be inadequate or false, because 'it is the intellect that forms the statements of its own power, as we stated. Consequently the statements are often false, or only apparent, or defective' (AMC II, 29, 3: 256–257). John of the Cross explains why there are the limits of faculties in this manner: 'Since created things, as has been said, have no proportion to God's being, all imaginings fashioned from the likeness of creatures are incapable of serving as proximate means toward union with God' (AMC II, 12, 4: 186). The limits of human faculties are due to their operational status in our natural human realms, and the nature of God, in fact, is beyond human domain of grasping and measuring that we do in finite terms. We referred to John of the Cross's own words in Chap. 4 that 'no creature, none of its actions and abilities, can reach or encompass God's nature' (AMC II, 5, 4: 163). Human faculties are limited, and according to John of the Cross, they can never

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[1]We have referred to this passage from Siderits and Katsura in Chap. 3 about the interpretation of *saṁvṛti* by Candrakīrti. They write: 'On one etymology, the root meaning is that of "concealing," so conventional truth would be all those ways of thinking and speaking that conceal the real state of affairs from ordinary people (*loka*). The second explains the term to mean "mutual dependency." On the third etymology, the term refers to conventions involved in customary practices of the world, the customs governing daily conduct of the ordinary people (*loka*). He (Candrakīrti) adds that this *saṁvṛti* is of the nature of (the relation between) term and referent, cognition and the cognized, and the like. So on this understanding, conventional truth is a set of beliefs that ordinary people (*loka*) use in their daily conduct, and it is conventional (*saṁvṛti*) because of its reliance on conventions concerning semantic and cognitive relations' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 272).

claim to reach God as they have their limitations in the finitude of the humans. The human faculties and their abilities are incapable of knowing God, for they are created and finite in their nature (SC 1, 5: 480; SC 1, 12: 482).

Thus, Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross speak of the limits of human cognitive abilities and linguistic apparatus. Nāgārjuna would speak of the *saṁvṛti* distinctions and the essencelessness of the things to affirm their real nature. John of the Cross would speak of inadequacy of human faculties and their inability to know God as he is. Though both the thinkers speak of different things and operate in different levels of thought, there is a striking similarity in their take on the limits of *saṁvṛti* (the conventional) and the limits of human faculties. This is the first similarity we find in both the thinkers.

5.1.2   Ineffability

The notion of ineffability is another similarity we come across in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. There is an apparent affinity for ineffable language in both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, though they might not have spelt it out in clear terms. A discerning reader of both the thinkers can find out that the theme of ineffable language looms large in their works. There is a strange combination of meaningfulness and ineffability that characterises the reality and human experience in the works of John of the Cross. Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross have a formalising approach in their works to 'delineate the ineffable, the inexpressible, from one side of an impenetrable boundary' (Berger 2011: 23). There is an unspecifiable and unspeakable mark of reality, which is 'ineffable' and 'untellable' at the same time.[2] As there are sayables, so there are unsayables too, resulting in ineffability which is an *aporia*,[3] an inadequacy of language.

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[2] Vladimir Jankelevitch writes that there is a difference between the untellable and the ineffable. The one 'what cannot be spoken of,' the 'untellable' is different from 'the ineffable'. 'Death, the black night, is untellable because it is impenetrable shadow and debars us from its mystery: unable to be spoken of, then, because there is absolutely nothing to say, rendering us mute, overwhelming reason, transfixing human discourse on the point of its Medusa stare. And the ineffable, in complete contrast, cannot be explained because there are infinite and interminable things to be said of it: such is the mystery of God, whose depths cannot be sounded, the inexhaustible mystery of love, both Eros and Caritas, the poetic mystery par excellence' (Jankelevitch 2003: 72). He further says: 'If the untellable, petrifying, all-poetic impulse induces something similar to a hypnotic trance, then the ineffable, thanks to its properties of fecundity and inspiration, acts like a form of enchantment: it differs from the untellable as much as enchantment differs from bewilderment. Ineffability provokes bewilderment, which, like Socrates's quandary, is a fertile aporia' (Jankelevitch 2003: 72).

[3] Thometz writes about aporia: '…the *aporia* serves to convey truth while pointing to the inadequacy of language to capture it. By this view, one must grapple hermeneutically with the *aporia* of ineffability before or, at least, in the midst of interpreting claims made about religious truth. How, then, can the imperfect medium of language, which limits as it defines, adequately *capture* a referent that is either ontologically indeterminate or transcendent? Obviously, this question prompts

There is an ineffable facet that Nāgārjuna communicates in his negative way. According to Schardfstein, 'the surest, the most combative, the most logically adroit philosophical guide to the Buddhist devaluation of words is the philosopher Nāgārjuna' (Schardfstein 1992: 91). Schardfstein opines that according to Nāgārjuna there is no possibility to give a 'coherent account of causation, of time, of motion, or even of Nirvāṇa' as 'nothing can be shown to have an essential nature' (Schardfstein 1992: 91) or *svabhāva*. Everything is *śūnya*, and no one can speak of an inherent nature or essence of anything. The ineffability or indescribability of things, of Tathāgata (MK 22, 4–7: 190), etc., might not imply an ultimate nature of reality.[4] However, what we find in Nāgārjuna is that there is an import of ineffability (Matilal 1978: 56). We also find ineffable purport in the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*), the device which Nāgārjuna employs in his writings (as, e.g. MK 22, 11: 192–194) that conveys a sense of ineffability (Matilal 2004: 127–131; Proudfoot 1987: 135; Jacobson 2010: 64). The negative way of *śūnyatā* that we find in Nāgārjuna suggests in clear terms ineffability.[5]

Let us look at the ineffability that John of the Cross expresses in his writings. We have dealt with the notion of ineffability at length in the preceding chapter under heading 4.2 '*Nada* and John of the Cross's Paradox of Language'. The *I-don't-know-what* (GSM: 72)[6] aspect of God is a special trait in John of the Cross's thought

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[4] Let us take MK 22, 5. Siderits and Katsura give this explanation: 'For this hypothesis to work, it must be the case that this indescribable Tathāgata exists prior to being conceived in dependence on the skandhas. For it is only if he exists independently of this relation that he came come into the relation of being named ad conceptualized in dependence on the skandhas' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 244).

two clarifications. First, what is meant by "capture"? Denotation and description differ, as do identification and explication. Second, confusions attending the term "transcendence" will need further explication. For many Buddhists, the ontologizing of the term amounts to a categorical error in the interpretation of *paramārthasatya* of śūnyatā. Nāgārjuna makes this point at MMK 24:11 when he likens the reification of emptiness to grasping a snake at the wrong end. As a starting point, surely the danger associated with committing categorical errors, especially those resulting in ontological impositions, might be circumvented if one restricts usage of the term to the limits of language' (Thometz 2006: 127).

[5] Valez de Cea cautions us with regard to taking *śūnyatā* as ineffable. He writes: 'Because Nāgārjuna equates dependent arising and emptiness in MMK 24: 18, the eight negations can be interpreted as referring to some extent to the ultimate truth of emptiness. However, extrapolating the eight negations to the ultimate truth of emptiness and subsequently understanding emptiness as some kind of ineffable and transcendent ultimate reality would do violence to Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit works. Emptiness is never described as an absolute reality to which the eight negations are attributed. Similarly, emptiness does not appear in Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit works as some ineffable realm beyond the conventional realm of dependently arisen and linguistic designated things. Such apophatic interpretation of emptiness as qualified by the eight negations is therefore problematic, however possible given Nāgārjuna's equation of dependent arising and emptiness as well as his understanding of conventional and ultimate truths as inseparable (MMK 24: 8)' (Valez de Cea 2006: 146). Kalupahana opines that if an interpretation of ineffability is attributed to *śūnyatā* or *pratītyasamutpāda*, then it would render that 'any philosophical enterprise' is 'meaningless' and 'would undermine Nāgārjuna's assertion at (MK) XXIV. 10' (Kalupahana 1986: 340).

[6] But there beyond all beauty,
And what is and what will be and was,
He tastes I-don't-know-what
Which is so gladly found (GSM: 72).

that we find his works. John of the Cross would succinctly inform us that 'since it has no name, the soul calls it "what." The "what" is in point of fact the vision of God, but that which the vision of God is to the soul has no other name than "what"' (SC 38, 6: 620). The God experience is ineffable for John of the Cross,[7] and he says: 'Since it is not understandable, it is indescribable, although, as I say, one may know what the experience of it is' (SC 7, 10: 502). Dombrowski suggests that the repeated use of the term 'stammer' or 'stammering' in John of the Cross refers to this ineffability aspect that John of the Cross tries to bring home (Dombrowski 1992: 162). The seventh stanza of *The Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross has 'ah, I-don't-know-what behind their stammering' as the last line (SC-CA: 45), and it expresses the ineffability of that experience. John of the Cross himself explains the 'behind their stammering' as 'the feeling and knowledge of the divinity sometimes unveiled in what she (soul) hears about God' (SC 7, 5: 501). John of the Cross says that it is difficult for anyone who has not had an experience to understand what is that ineffability he is speaking of (SC 7, 10: 502).[8] The God experience is 'indescribable', human 'intellect' cannot 'in any way grasp it' and it is utterly 'unspeakable' (SC 39, 3: 623). Thus, we find John of the Cross providing a 'conceptual space for ineffable knowledge' (Kukla 2005: 78)[9] in his writings, and he 'recognized the existence of the ineffable and the impossibility of capturing in words certain feelings and movements of the soul' (Gullon 2008: 213). For John of the Cross would tell us that God is not a thing nor a substance; and God does not have a selfness, neither God is the

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[7] Explaining the verse seven of *The Spiritual Canticle*, especially the last line 'ah, I do not know what' behind their stammering John of the Cross says in SC 7, 9: '…there is a certain "I-don't-know-what" that one feels is yet to be said, sometimes unknown still to be spoken, and a sublime trace of God as yet uninvestigated but revealed to the soul, a loft understanding of God that cannot be put into words. Hence she calls this something "I-don't-know-what." … One of the understanding favours God grants briefly in this life is an understanding and experience of himself so lucid and lofty that one comes to know clearly that God cannot be completely understood or experienced' (SC 7, 9: 502).

[8] John of the Cross explains in his SC: 'I do not think anyone who has not had such experience will understand it well. But, since the soul experiencing this is aware that what she has so sublimely experienced remains beyond her understanding, she calls it "I-don't-know-what." Since it is not understandable, it is indescribable, although I say, one may know what the experience of it is. As a result, she says the creatures are stammering, for they do not make it completely known. "Stammering," a trait we notice in children's speech, means that one is unsuccessful in saying and explaining what one has to say' (SC 7, 10: 502).

[9] It is interesting to know what Andre Kukla writes with regard to the take on ineffability in John of the Cross: '…St. John espouses an empiricist semantic theory: if "the senses and imagination are not employed," then we can give no account of the matter. Hume combines the same semantic theory with empiricist *psychological* theory that all our ideas comes from sensation. In contrast, St. John adverts to knowledge which is "clothed in none of the kinds of images, in none of the sensible representations, which our mind makes use of in other circumstances." St. John's empiricism thus imposes a constraint on the hypotheses that can be entertained. This is how he provides conceptual space for ineffable knowledge. In the present context, the important point is that he justifies his belief in the ineffability of his own sensory intuition by means of philosophical argument. Thus his ineffability claim is of judgmental variety' (Kukla 2005: 78).

other.[10] John of the Cross asserts over and over again in his writings the ineffability of God experience. It is simply ineffable. But, at the same time, he does his best to communicate the same through his writings.[11] It must also be mentioned here that John of the Cross has attributed the indescribability to certain other things and not only of God or God experience.[12] Thus, ineffability has a special place in the scheme of thought in John of the Cross.

Thus, if we take the negative way we are considering in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross the ineffability is the second point that we could take as another similarity found in these two thinkers. But let us remind ourselves that the ineffability that they speak of does not propose or hint at the same content or object. The ineffability claims are there in both the thinkers, but the notion ineffability operates in different levels.

5.1.3 No Outright Rejection of Rationality

In the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, there is no any outright rejection of rationality. Both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross employ human reason and faculties in order to make their audience aware of the pertinent point in *śūnyatā* and *nada*. Logic, reason, intellect, memory and will are at play in communicating their viewpoints, though Nāgārjuna might say that he has no position of his own to present (*nāsti ca mama pratijñā* – VV, 29: 14). There is no disregard for human rationality in the works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, as both of them employ very systematically their rational mind in bringing out their thought.

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[10] Panikkar beautifully puts it in this way: 'God is not a "thing," not even the sublimest of things. God neither is not has substance. … In final analysis, God has no "selfness" to defend or to support. God is not the "other"; but neither is God the "same": hence God cannot be in any way the object of human thinking and willing. No reifying thought, no intellectual activity, will ever succeed in deciphering the mystery of this *of* all other relationships. This *of* is ineffable' (Panikkar 1989: 135).

[11] Here it is worth quoting what Elizabeth Wilhelmsen says in her studied opinion: 'The mystic who has so communed with God must resign himself or herself to the ultimate ineffability of this encounter. Whereas ordinary human cognition is linked to the phantasm, and human language to the material sign, the mystic's communion with God is wholly spiritual. There is no proportion between the one and the other form of knowing. John of the Cross was conscious that any translation onto ordinary language would be at best a faint image of the original mystical communion. He was further conscious that any resultant understanding of God or mystical union would be cognition in terms of creatures, as human beings ordinarily know things. Indeed, numerous mystics have preferred to withdraw in silence rather than attempt to articulate their ineffable experience. San Juan de la Cruz, however, was excellently prepared for any task of human communication. He had a natural gift for poetic composition and was highly trained in the humanistic disciplines. Being so equipped, he endeavoured for the same of others to give the optimum expression to the mysteries of his communion with God' (Wilhelmsen 1993: 254).

[12] Payne says: 'Throughout his writings, John characterizes many things as "indescribable," including the harm caused by inordinate appetites (A I, 9, iv), and the sufferings of the passive night of the spirit (N II, 6, ii; 7, ii)…' (Payne 1990: 30).

Nāgārjuna does not reject the use of human reason. The rationality of everyday life is necessary for arriving at the truth *per se* or *paramārtha*. In other words, one has to depend upon *saṁvṛti* to reach *paramārtha* (MK 24, 10: 216). Though 'the Mādhyamika seems to be claiming that philosophical rationality is impotent', nevertheless, 'it is precisely philosophical rationality which the Mādhyamika employs' (Siderits 1989: 235). The rationality which Nāgārjuna uses 'is a mode of critical evaluation of one's conceptual scheme' by the means of which 'one "steps back" to a more objective view' (Ganeri 2001: 47) which eradicates the false presuppositions[13] and presumptions. There is a rigorous analysis employed in the thought of Nāgārjuna. His rational approach in philosophy is 'captured best by "analysis," rather than examination or investigation' (Fenner 1990: 103). The employment of and the special status given to reason in the philosophical enterprise of Nāgārjuna is conceded by all the commentators of Nāgārjuna. As, for example, the great Tibetan Buddhist commentator and philosopher Tsong Khapa (early fifteenth century AD) tilted his commentary of Nāgārjuna's MK as *Ocean of Reasoning* (Tsong Khapa 2006). Nāgārjuna is not 'antirational' (Potter 1991: 238), but he upholds and employs reason in his philosophical enterprise.

John of the Cross has never had a disregard for human rational faculties. The human faculties of intellect, will and memory on which the soul depends are not discarded in the scheme of thought of John of the Cross. We have discussed about the three faculties in the preceding chapter under the heading 4.3. '*Nada* and the Doctrine of Three Faculties.' In John of the Cross, 'these faculties are not totally divorced from the sensory part of the soul since they do depend upon sense data' (Chong-Beng Gan 2015: 153). In SC, stanza seven, John of the Cross calls the three faculties as 'roses' (SC-CB 7: 76); and he explains that 'the rose bushes are the faculties (memory, intellect, and will) that bear and nurture in themselves the flowers of divine concepts, acts of love and these same virtues' (SC 18, 5: 547–548). It is on/to these faculties the divine Spirit 'spreads its perfume' (SC-CB 7: 76). And John of the Cross writes: 'The divine amber spreading its perfume among the flowers and rose bushes is a reference to the overflow and communication of the Spirit in the faculties and virtues of the soul' (SC 18, 6: 548). We find in LFL that John of the Cross is explaining about the three faculties as the 'caverns', and he says: 'The soul here calls these three faculties (memory, intellect, and will) 'the deep caverns of feeling' because through them and in them it deeply experiences and enjoys the grandeurs of God's wisdom and excellence' (LFL 3, 69: 702). Intellect, will and memory have their vital roles to play in the scheme of the negative way in John of the Cross, though ultimately they will get darkened to get the complete knowledge of God. In his scheme of thought, 'memory' is even considered the 'sensitive and rational part' of the soul, and the three faculties cooperate in their activities.[14]

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[13] Ganeri further writes: 'This levering-up-from-within requires a new way of reasoning: Nāgārjuna's celebrated *prasanga*-type rationality. It is self-critical rationality which exposes as false the existential presuppositions on which one's present conceptions are based' (Ganeri 2001: 47).

[14] A study on John of the Cross states: 'Throughout the discussion of the active purgation of memory in Book III of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St John of the Cross seems to think of memory as a power both of sensitive and rational part of the soul. The will is in dynamic connection with

Thus, as we have seen, there is no outright rejection of rationality and human faculties in the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. This is the third point of similarity we come across in the philosophical enterprise of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

5.1.4   Importance of the Worldly Life and Its Exercise

The world of ours, with our life here and now, is highly regarded in the thought of both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. There is no disregard for this worldly life in the thought of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. Nāgārjuna advises that without depending on and living the everyday life (*vyavahāra*), we cannot achieve that which is ultimately real (*paramārtha*) (MK 24, 10: 216). Though Nāgārjuna does not speak about ethical aspects in his MK, he does articulate the value of ethics and importance of *śīla* (moral life) in his *Suhṛllekha* (Sebastian 2012: 339–355). John of the Cross too has underlined the value of this worldly life, particularly in terms of an ethics of charity and social wellbeing.

Nāgārjuna values the world and the worldly enterprise which he calls as *saṃsāra* and *saṃvṛti*. Though, *saṃsāra* is taken for the 'suffering world of cyclic existence'[15] (Dunne 2011: 206), we consider it, as seen in MK, the phenomenal world that we encounter every day of *saṃvṛti* or *vyavahāra* level.[16] This is a philosophical view that 'the end of suffering still permits participation in the world – a view whereby the constituents of mind, body and world are not, in their very nature, the products of ignorance' (Dunne 2011: 207). The value of the everydayness of our life could be seen in the term *saṃsāra* in MK. Nāgārjuna asserts in MK 25, 19 that there is not even a slight difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (MK 25, 19: 234). The world

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intellect and memory. The memory depends on the intellect, and has a capacity to represent an object to intellect. In this turn, the will, with the appetites has an influence on the memory. The memory and will have reciprocal influence on each other. The will exercises its power on the object of the memory, and in its turn, influences on the will. Compared to the intellect, the memory has only a minor connection with the will' (Eushma 2007:97).

[15] *Saṃsāra* is the cycle of birth and rebirth in Indian religious thought, and it is the same in Buddhism as well. The same meaning is seen in MK Chap. 11 (MK 11, 1–8: 95–99) and Chap. 16 (MK 16, 1–10: 123–131).

[16] *Vyavahāra* and *saṃvṛti* are the same in the Nāgārjuna. By taking recourse to MK 25, 19–20, I would add here *saṃsāra* too. Yu-Kwan explains clearly the meaning of *vyavahāra* and *saṃvṛti* in this way: 'Nāgārjuna speaks here of the worldly Truth in terms of *vyavahāra*, which means actions or ordinary practices undertaken in our ordinary daily life. These practices certainly include such items as educating children and looking after the sick. Piṅgala focuses on the operation of speech or language, stressing its worldliness and conventionality. Kajiyama points out that in Mādhyamika philosophy, *vyavahāra* is synonymous with *saṃvṛti*. *Saṃvṛti*, as noted above, may mean language. Language is undoubtedly an important element in rendering ordinary practices possible; it is itself a practice prevailing in our daily life. It therefore seems possible to take *vyavahāra* as signifying ordinary practices, with an emphasis on language and its behavior' (Yu-Kwan 1993:160). Venkata Ramanan says that 'convention', *vyavahāra*, *prajñapti* and *prapañca* are synonyms in the Mādhyamika thought (Ramanan 2002: 349–350).

has its value and 'a person does not have to flee the world in order to attain nirvāṇa' (Olson 2005: 169). It means that nirvāṇa 'is not something to be sharply distinguished from life-process (*saṃsāra*)' (Gunaratne 2001: 40). Though the conventional world we conceptualise is our own making, which does not have any *svabhāva* of its own, it does not imply that our world is absolutely unreal (MK 25, 20: 235). For Nāgārjuna the world is nirvāṇa itself, if viewed correctly (Duara 2015: 135). 'The real world remains the very real despite (and because of) Emptiness. This matter is better stated and easier to explain *via* the other formula "Nirvāṇa is Saṃsāra; Saṃsāra is Nirvāṇa." (Lai 2009: 339). Nāgārjuna, following the pragmatic teaching of the Buddha, does not separate *paramārtha* from *saṃvṛti*. 'Thus, for Nāgārjuna, ultimate good is not one that transcends ordinary notions of good, but merely an extension of the so-called goodness recognized in everyday life (*vyavahāra*)' (Kalupahana 1986: 89). Nāgārjuna would exhort us that without being in the everydayness, or everyday common practices, one cannot express the really real that which one is aspiring for in one's Buddhist life (MK 24, 10: 216).

John of the Cross appreciated the everyday life and all that life brings to us. He was not a recluse who ran away from worldly life. He appreciated the practical abilities and he composed poems and commentaries on them to express his thought. John of the Cross emphasises a life in this world with its meaningful purpose. Though many may identify his writings with denials and negations,[17] his is a life of human growth and personal fulfilment. This sort of fulfilment is only possible in this worldly life. This given world is for perfection of our human nature as far as John of the Cross is concerned. In this world, John of the Cross considers life in this world as a journey of transformation from old self (*el hombre viejo*) to the new self (*el hombre nuevo*). 'There is no other world, other than this one, in which to live, grow, and explore one's relationship with God, others, self, and indeed the entire cosmos. John knows that it is in this world that the journey of transformation takes place' (Perrin 1997: 2). John of the Cross's interest in a virtuous life and his emphasis on hope and joy make him an ethical thinker of this worldly life (AMC III, 16, 1–45, 5: 291–349). He explains it in this way: 'Because virtues in themselves merit love and esteem from a human viewpoint, and because of their nature and the good they humanly and temporally effect, a person can well rejoice in the practice and possession of them' (AMC III, 27, 3: 316). Material things of the world are also needed in this life. 'John of the Cross encourages material poverty only to the extent that it is conducive to a healthy spiritual poverty' (Dombrowski 1992: 60). He spoke

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[17] Perrin opines that there is an incomplete reading of John of the Cross, and this makes one think that John of the Cross has a disregard for the world and all that in it. Perrin writes: 'Unfortunately, an incomplete reading of the works of John of the Cross has often been used to support a negative evaluation of the physical world. John is commonly known as "the Doctor of the dark night"' (Perrin 1997: 2). Perrin adds further: 'Little read, even today, are John's other major works which speak of the other parts of the journey: *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*. The other part of the journey described in these works, like the journey recounted in *The Dark Night* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, take place with God on this earth, in our world, the world of God and humanity living together. It is the world of incarnation that most concerns John of the Cross' (Perrin 1997: 4).

of human action, and the importance of acts of charity, in his writings, as faith needs to be substantiated and supported with actions of goodness and charity. 'Through charity works done in faith are living works and have high value, without it they are worth nothing' (AMC III, 16, 1: 292). One should have concern for the other whom John of the Cross calls 'neighbour', and 'for as love of neighbour increases so does the love of God, and as the love of God increases so does the love of neighbour' (AMC III, 23, 1: 308). John of the Cross upheld the altruistic actions 'without any other motive' (AMC III 27, 4: 317), and 'these works are of greater excellence' as there was no 'self-interest' in such actions (AMC III, 27, 5: 318).

The value of the world and this worldly exercise, as we have seen, are given great significance in the thought of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. One does not run away from the world but becomes part of it. As we have stated above, for Nāgārjuna one has to depend on these worldly activities to realise the ultimate. And for John of the Cross, this world is good and beautiful with all its values and colours. One is asked to be virtuous in one's life here and now. Thus, the importance of worldly life with its meaningful exercise is the fourth point of similarity we encounter in the writings of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

5.1.5 Negative Way and Silence

In the preceding chapters, we have seen the negative way culminating in silence, as we understand it, in both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. We have dealt with it in the preceding chapters under the headings '3.5. *Śūnyatā* and Silence' and '4.5. *Nada* and Silence'. The use of the term 'silence' or some *other terms* with an import of silence could be seen in the writings of both the thinkers. And the interpretations of that 'silence' vary in these two different traditions and authors.[18] Some state that the 'silence' of the Buddha and the use of the term 'silence' in Nāgārjuna could be some sort of 'ontic silence',[19] while others refute such an 'ontic' claim of silence. We do not take any position to say whether the silence is *ontic* or not, but we do say that there is an unambiguous reference to the golden 'silence' of the Buddha and the

[18] Panikkar speaks of two categories of silence. 'The first might be styled a silence of departure; the other would be that of arrival. Silence as point of departure is religious. Through, and in, this silence human beings find and live God. Silence as a point of arrival, on the other hand, is the ripened fruit of a whole process of approach to the essential, is the final goal to be attained in the effort on the part of the *logos* to strip itself of all that is superfluous. The silence of arrival is a silence reached after a long discourse: one knows that the moment has come "to enter *once more* into silence." Therefore, unlike its counterpart, the silence of arrival makes use of the word, a word that must need to draw its points of reference from life and daily experience in order to be intelligible' (Panikkar 1989: 135).

[19] Silence of the Buddha was ontic silence, says Panikkar. His silence 'is not for any subjective reason – neither his own, nor that of his hearer, nor that of human nature – but in virtue of an exigency of reality itself. His is not a methodological or a pedagogical silence, but an ontic silence. His silence not only clothes the reply, it invades the question. He is not only silent, he reduces to silence' (Panikkar 1989: 14).

use of the term 'silence' in Nāgārjuna as well. Similarly, we find a careful use of the term 'silence' and its synonyms in the writings of John of the Cross.

The negative way of Nāgārjuna has an important element of 'silence', for *śūnyatā* is the propitious quietening of the conventional (*prapañcopaśamaṁ śivaṁ*) (MK 1, 2b: 4). We have stated earlier that the silence of the Buddha has been subjected to varied interpretations. When it comes to the silence in Nāgārjuna, Garfield would say that 'Mādhyamika silence reflects the impossibility of expressing the truth about the conventional world' (Garfield 2002: 183). It does not have anything to do with a transcendental reality that is imagined to be beyond speech and thought, as some scholars have interpreted (Murti 1998: 48). Some scholars see an element of mysticism in the silence of Mādhyamika, and Brainard is one among them (Brainard 2000: 69–126). There are others who would not take any mystical constituent in the 'silence' that Nāgārjuna speaks of. Garfield says: 'Mādhyamika provides a non-mystical, immanent characterization of the nature of reality, of limits of thought and language, and of the nature of our knowledge of Two *Truths* about *one reality*' (Garfield 2002: 182). Seyfort Ruegg calls the silence of the Mādhyamika as 'semi-oticized silence' and only that 'could adequately correspond to reality' (Ruegg 1981: 35). The connotation of 'silence' in the thought of Nāgārjuna could be subjected to varied interpretations, but it is verity.

However, the silence in John of the Cross is indisputably a mystic silence. John of the Cross explains elaborately in DN how the silence is mystical (DN I, 10, 1–14, 6: 381–394; DN II, 11: 1–25, 4: 419–457). In this silence of John of the Cross, there is ignorance and uncertainty, and this is the mystical path where 'God' guides the soul as 'the master and guide' (DN II, 16, 8: 433; LFL 3, 29: 684).[20] The silence is a transformation where the 'appetites of sensible affection were changed from the sensory life to the spiritual life, which implies dryness and cessation of all appetites we are speaking of' (DN I, 11, 1: 383). In this silence, the soul has 'arid night solitude for God' (DN I, 13, 13: 392); there is 'dryness and nakedness' (DN I, 13, 13: 392) for the soul. That is why it is said: 'my house being now all stilled' (DN I, 13, 15: 392). It is in this silence, 'the soul walks in darkness and emptiness in its natural operations, it walks securely' (DN II, 16, 3: 431). This silence is 'secret' and 'disguised' and acts like a 'ladder' (DN II, 17, 1: 435). It is 'secret' because it is 'ineffable' (DN II, 17, 1–8: 435–438) and 'it immediately silences the entire ability' (DN II, 17, 3: 436). This silence leads to God making the soul to 'soar to God in an unknown way along the road of solitude' (DN II, 24, 4: 457).[21] Thus, silence is golden in John of the Cross.

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[20] John of the Cross writes: 'Since God, as we said, is the master and guide of the soul, this blind one can truly rejoice now that it has come to understand as it has here, and say: in darkness, and secure' (DN II, 16, 8: 433). Further, 'The soul, then, should advert that God is the principal agent in this matter. He acts as guide of the blind, leading it by the hand to the place it knows not how to reach (to supernatural things of which neither its intellect nor will nor memory can know the nature)' (LFL 3, 29: 684).

[21] There is a good exposition of these aspects in McCann's *The Doctrine of the Void in St John of the Cross* (McCann 1955). But McCann looks at John of the Cross from a Thomist perspective in this work, which needs to be taken care of, as John is not completely a Hellenistic Thomist, but he

Therefore, significance given to silence is the fifth point of similarity that we encounter in the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. Let us remind ourselves again that the implications of silence are different in both these thinkers. Though there is the similarity of the term, there is dissimilarity in the import of silence in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

5.1.6 The Negation of Self

The negation of self is another facet of the negative way in both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. But the import of the self is different in both the thinkers. Nāgārjuna's notion of 'self' that he repudiates is the enduring eternal self which is called *ātman*, whereas the self in John of the Cross stands for the ego of an individual and not the soul. The notion of self-abnegation is found in both the thinkers which have some similarities and dissimilarities in their purport.

Nāgārjuna in the eighteenth chapter of his MK (MK 18, 1–12: 145–162) examines the self, after examining the bondage and liberation in the sixteenth chapter (MK 16, 1–10: 123–131) and action and its fruits in the seventeenth chapter (MK 17, 1–33: 132–144). In these three chapters, Nāgārjuna deals specifically with the *self* and all that is associated with it, like identity, selfishness, pride and ego. Nāgārjuna refutes rebirth and liberation of the psychophysical elements or person, etc., in the sixteenth chapter of MK, while in the seventeenth chapter of MK he takes up the fruit bearing actions. Nāgārjuna says that the actions are without any *svabhāva* of their own, and he concludes that action, fruit, agent and enjoyer are illusory like an imagined city of the Gandharvas in the sky, mirage and dream (MK 17, 33: 144). The eighteenth chapter is all about self and non-self and the emptiness of these two views (MK 18, 6: 152–154).[22] Nāgārjuna refutes the doctrine of a permanent self in Chap. 18 of his MK (18, 1–5: 145–152) and thereby establishes the thesis of non-self. But he goes on to argue that even the view of non-self is to be taken as empty (Duerlinger 2013: 21–24). The self is analysed further in the

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is more of Biblical, that is, the God of John of the Cross is the God of the Bible (for I make a distinction between the notion of Thomist God, the Unmoved Mover, and the notion of God that we find in the Biblical literature. The conception of God that John of the Cross brings into light in his works is akin to the Biblical notion of God, not like the first cause of Greek philosophy).

[22] Explaining the verse MK 18, 6 Siderits and Katsura write: 'This orthodox understanding of the Buddha's teachings seems to suggest that nonself is the accepted view for all Buddhists. But this verse goes to suggest otherwise. It suggests that when the Buddha taught nonself, he was likewise employing his pedagogical skill, so that this too is not to be taken as the ultimately correct account of reality. Candrakīrti explains that to so take the teaching of nonself is to overlook the Buddha's insistence that his is a "middle path." According to Candrakīrti, "self" and "nonself" are counterpoised theses, each of which is required to give the other meaning. So if the doctrine of self does not accurately represent the nature of reality, then the doctrine of nonself likewise cannot. There is then a third teaching to the effect that there is neither self nor nonself. One might take this for Madhyamaka's final teaching on the self, what it takes to represent the ultimate truth on the matter' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 199).

twenty-seventh chapter of MK (MK 27, 1–30: 248–259), and the views on its permanence and impermanence *per se* are critiqued in this chapter (Tsong Khapa 2006: 543–561). Thus, the cessation of the *self* and *non-self* views that we find in Nāgārjuna is his linguistic stratagem that he employs to liberate us from the fixations and viewpoints.[23]

We could see importance given to the negation of self in the works of John of the Cross. The 'dark night' metaphor is used and it is also a method for self-negation in John of the Cross.[24] John of the Cross says in DN that 'this dark night signifies here purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this negation of the self and of all things' (DN I, 1: 360).[25] The first night is the denial of the self in the matters of the world, while the second night is the denial of the self in the matters of the spirit. There is a total self-denial, a total annihilation, emphasised in John of the Cross (Stewart 1999: 25; Borys 2006: 181–184). The soul gives up all its ability and reaches a state of 'nakedness and poverty of spirit' where it feels 'poor, abandoned, and unsupported by any of the apprehensions' in the 'darkness' of intellect, 'distress' of will and 'affliction and aguish' of memory (DN II, 4, 1: 400). In this self-denial, there is 'bitterness' and it is not at all sweet (DN I, 6, 7: 373). There is deep 'humility' of the soul, a feeling of nothingness in itself; and there is not an iota

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[23] Stephen Batchelor writes: "Rather than regarding concepts such as "self" and "no-self" as the basis of the doctrinal position, which can be upheld or refuted, Nāgārjuna treats them as terms within a strategic discourse of freedom, which are employed therapeutically to address the needs of specific situations. Throughout the text, he recognizes that the same is true of any such pair of polarized terms: "same" and "different," "real" and "unreal," "empty" and "not empty," "eternal" and "ephemeral." To say that "emptiness stops fixations" does not mean that an understanding of something called "emptiness" will suddenly bring to a halt something else called "fixations." Rather than denoting discrete states of mind, the terms "emptiness" and "fixation" suggest strategies for living. As strategies they are irreducible to simple definitions" (Batchelor 2001: 67).

[24] John of the Cross writes: 'In the first stanza, the soul speaks of the way it followed in its departure from love of both self and all things. Through a method of true mortification, it died to all things and to itself. It did so as to reach the sweet and delightful life of love with God. And it declares that this departure was dark night. As we will explain later, this dark night signifies here purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this negation of self and of all things' (DN I, 1: 360).

[25] Though there is the negation of the self and all, Turner says that the asceticism one practises in the spiritual journey builds up an ego. He writes: 'What the passive nights deconstruct is precisely the goals and the best results of our active ascetical efforts. For the active nights, the practices of a self-motivated active asceticism, are "therapeutic" strategies aimed at the construction of a more adequate sense of selfhood and agency, a more autonomous and self-controlled condition of selfhood. As such, therefore, John treats the active ascetical path of the devout, well-intentioned beginner with some degree of ambivalence. For this active asceticism is the process whereby we build up precisely that self-hood which the passive nights demolish. But it needs to be built up before it can be demolished, for the condition of the person who has not yet even begun to practice the active asceticism of the senses is not such that we can ascribe to him any sort of selfhood at all. … The asceticism can never catch the egoism, for the ascetical "I" must always reaffirm the egoism it seeks to deny precisely in the acts of its denial. … And so for John there is an "ascetical self." It is the product of our best efforts, supported by everything there is in us by way of generosity and goodwill, indeed of love of God. But it is a poor, precarious and self-contradictory structure built up out of the combination of quasi-moral forces, more or less "possessive" desires and wishes, bound together by the countervailing force of an ascetically imposed will' (Turner 1998: 237–238).

of pride in the soul (DN I, 2, 6–8: 364–365). In this process of self-abnegation, the soul gets freed of pride (DN I, 2, 1–8: 362–365), spiritual avarice (DN I, 3, 1–3: 365–367), lust (DNI, 4, 1–8: 367–370), anger (DN I, 5, 1–3: 370–371), spiritual gluttony (DN I, 6, 1–8: 371–373), spiritual envy and sloth (DN I, 7, 1–5: 374–375). The soul 'considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfaction in self because it is aware of itself, it neither does nor can do anything' (DN I, 12, 2: 386). The self-abnegation in John of the Cross is 'the total abandonment of self in order to conform to the divine image' (Freze 1989: 109).

Thus, the negation of the self is the *leitmotif* that one finds in the entire corpus of Nāgārjuna and also in John of the Cross. As we said at the outset of this section that though the term 'negation of the self' is used in both the thinkers, the purport the negation of the self varies in each system. The negation rendered to self in Nāgārjuna would imply the giving up of the view of the *ātman* as an enduring reality in terms of eternalism and also the discarding of the view of *anātman* in a complete annihilation of *ātman*. Both extremes are negated and they are *śūnya* in Nāgārjuna. The negation of the self that we find in John of the Cross has the meaning of self-emptying of the soul, divesting it of all the egoistic possessions, and it is nothing but a *kenosis*. The negation of the self, though it is entirely dissimilar in its import in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, is the sixth point that we find in similarities.

To sum up this section on similarities, let us state once again that the similarities we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross are only apparent ones and not essential. Prima facie they look similar, but they are not similar in many respects. What we would like to bring home is that though they look similar, there are fundamental dissimilarities in them. Now let us look at the unconcealed dissimilarities that we come across in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

5.2 Dissimilarities

We have seen the apparent similarities in the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. We also find unconcealed dissimilarities in the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross which make them stand apart in their thought and purpose. As some have opined that the nuances of the negative way could be seen in cross-cultural thought, but they are manifestly different. Daniel C. Matt writes in this connection that there could be some similarity in:

> Eckhart's Nichts, John of the Cross's nada, the Taoist wu, and the Buddhist Śūnyatā. Despite appearances, these terms do not express an identical meaning since each mystic names the nameless from within a realm of discourse shaped by his own training, outlook, and language. (Matt 1990: 121)

The report of a thinker from any particular tradition, culture or religious conviction will be 'culturally bound' as 'they use the available symbols of their cultural-religious milieu' which could be 'phenomenologically as well as philosophically suspect' (Katz 1978: 22–25) for any one from some other (different) traditions. Nāgārjuna had a Buddhist learning, training, background and conviction, and he lived among his fellow Buddhists. John of the Cross's exposure to classical and the

then contemporary works of literature, philosophy and theology gave him a good foundation for his philosophising and literary genre. At the University of Salamanca, John of the Cross received 'the best instruction[26] available in the sixteenth century in the fields of philosophy and theology' (Wilhelmsen 1993: 2). So both the thinkers were the products of their times and learnings. Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross had different religious convictions and cultural surroundings. They employed the *negative way* in their search, but they had different goals in their quest. Let us examine the dissimilarities that we find in the thought of the Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

5.2.1 Absolute Difference in Goal and Apparent Similarity in Approach

The negative way we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross may look similar in its approach, but each has, in fact, different goals to achieve. Even the similarity of approach between them could be contestable as their goals are different. And I believe that the approach is also different, if we take into account the goals that Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross have had.

Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist and his entire philosophical *cum* religious enterprise is centred on Buddhist thought and conviction. He takes recourse to the *Buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha, and interprets the Buddhist thought to his fellow Buddhists to eradicate, as he understands, what is not in conformity with the Buddha's genuine teaching. It might not be proper to view Nāgārjuna only as a philosopher, as some do, distancing him from his Buddhist conviction and lineage. We see him as a Buddhist philosopher who was a monk, and the Buddhist life was of paramount importance to him. So his teaching should have a religious motive as well. We would submit that the goal of Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist religious one and a Buddhist spiritual one and not just some sort of hair-splitting analysis of things in

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[26]Wilhelmsen writes in this regard: "When speaking of the intellectual pluralism which reigned in that environment, however, one should qualify this consideration. At a certain period, there was in Salamanca a movement towards a predominance of Thomas Aquinas' thought over other schools of philosophy and speculative theology. When Juan de la Cruz enrolled in the university in January of 1565, this movement toward a more unified understanding represented "the newest orientation of Salamanca." Melequiades Anndrés points out that we may distinguish three "theological generations" throughout the sixteenth century in Spanish universities. The first was the "humanista," a period when no particular school of thought was emphasized above the others, but also a time of limited intellectual interaction. The second, the "vitoriana," named after Francisco de Vitoria, was a period in which there flowered "a serene Thomism which exclusively sought the truth and fearlessly wished to embrace it, regardless of the person who professed it." The last was a period of "an exaggerated, rigid Thomism" in which there took place "a rebirth of medieval spirit of the schools, which became more and more unyielding, and caused the former intellectual openness to disappear from the theological milieu…" Juan de la Cruz was fortunate in that he received his formation during the second and clearly the healthiest period, a time of growth toward a cohesive understanding within a framework of intellectual openness" (Wilhelmsen 1993: 2).

arid abstraction. And it would be erroneous to consider Nāgārjuna's thought divorced from his Buddhist religious conviction. Let us not forget that he had spiritual and intellectual soteriology. He is, in fact, a philosopher *par excellence*, but that does not take away his religious conviction and purpose of life as a Buddhist spiritual practitioner.

John of the Cross, on the other hand, is a Christian and mystic. His is nothing but a religious thought, a theistic conviction. His search is for God, and he is in search of the path for a mystical union with that Supreme Being, that is, the Trinitarian God for him. His religious conviction is Christ-centric and the Bible is the word of God for him (AMC II, 19, 1–22, 19: 213–238).[27] In this connection, Elizabeth Wilhelmsen writes:

> The scriptural basis is the most important element in the thought of Juan of the Cross. It is divine revelation that allows his mystical theology and lived experience to be, in pure Johannine and Pauline fashion, Christocentric, incarnational, sacramental and Trinitarian. (Wilhelmsen 1993: 23)

Like Nāgārjuna who was a monk in the Buddhist monastic tradition, John of the Cross too was a monk in Christian Carmelite monastic tradition. John of the Cross's audience was his fellow Carmelites, both the nuns and monks.[28] His primary concern was the spiritual life of his fellow Carmelites and also his own mystical and deep contemplative experience which get reflected in his writings. John of the Cross expressed his love and union with God in 'deep love'. In the *negative way* of John of the Cross, one can find a passionate language of love and not only the negative expressions. 'One of the striking characteristics of the mystical poetry of St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila is its use of a passionate language of love, charged with desire, drawn largely from the courtly love tradition' (O'Reilly 1992: 53). Further, for John of the Cross, experience was of greater importance.[29] 'The mystery of God is not some kind of theorem to be proved; it is rather an experience to be lived' (Lane 1981: 2). This experience is in the nature of a 'silent music' in 'the tranquil night' (SC-CB 15: 76).[30] It is a 'tranquil and quiet knowledge' of God (SC

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[27] In AMC II, 19, 1–22, 19, we find a unique way of Christ-centric approach of John of the Cross. 'In this section John gives a Christocentric interpretation of the history of the Old Testament which he sees as moving towards Christ. It is in Christ that Bible finds its unity. History as seen in the history of Israel is the saving-history which God directs towards its full expression in the person of Jesus Christ' (Nieto, 1979: 47–48).

[28] John of the Cross mentions the purpose of AMC in his Prologue to AMC: 'My main intention is not to address everyone, but only some of persons of our holy order of the primitive observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns, who God favours by putting on the path leading up this mount' (AMC, *Prologue*, 9: 118).

[29] Nieto says that 'experience and knowledge, for John, are of a different nature than what they are in Christian doctrine. In his view they are so transcendent that nothing can be said about them. Experience and knowledge are irreducible to Christian content and ideas' (Nieto 1979: 117).

[30] This is a 'silent music, for even though that music is silent to the natural senses and faculties, it is sounding solitude for the spiritual faculties. When these spiritual faculties are alone and empty of all natural forms and apprehensions, they can receive in a most sonorous way the spiritual sound of the excellence of God, in himself and in his creatures' (SC 14–15, 26: 536).

14–15, 25: 536). In this connection Tavard says:

> When he considers God as night of the soul, the Mystical Doctor affirms above all that dissimilarity separates them ineluctably. Experience reveals God as the Unknown who, blinding the soul as he comes to it, plunges into night. Yet as he also speaks of union with God, John needs to show that a union of radically dissimilar realities is nonetheless possible. (Tavard 1989: 111–112)

Thus, we see an unambiguous difference in the goal of the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, even if an apparent similarity we come across. This is the first dissimilarity, if our reading of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross is correct, we come across in the negative way paradigms of these two great luminaries of the two traditions.

5.2.2   The Negative Way and Its Goal: Divergences in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

The theme that we consider here under this heading follows what we have just stated above under the heading 5.2.1. The goal of the negative way in Nāgārjuna is for the cessation of all views (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇaya* – MK 27, 30: 258–259; and *śūnyatāsarvadṛṣṭīnām* – MK 13, 8: 108–109), and thereby, one can attain the right view. This is nothing but *śūnyatā* where there is a realisation that things lack an intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*) due to their dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda* – MK 24, 18: 219–220). Nāgārjuna does not speak of a mystical union with an ultimate reality as the goal of the negative way he proposed. The cessation of all false views is liberation for him. Thus, *śūnyatā* is liberating.

The negative way in John of the Cross has a specific goal, a union with God where the finality of Christ is ascertained. The end of all revelations and visions is in Christ (SC 37, 2–4: 614–616). John of the Cross writes in his AMC asking his audience to focus on or to fix the 'eyes entirely on Christ' (AMC II, 22, 5: 230):

> God could answer as follows: If I have already told you all things in my Word, my Son, and if I have no other word, what answer or revelation can I now make that would surpass this? Fasten your eyes on him alone because in him I have spoken and revealed all and in him you will discover even more than you ask for and desire. You are making an appeal for locutions and revelations that are incomplete. For he is my entire locution and response, vision and revelation, which I have already spoken, answered, manifested, revealed to you by giving him to you as a brother, companion, master, ransom, and reward. .... Hear him because I have no more faith to reveal or truths to manifest. If I spoke before, it was to promise Christ. … You will not find anything to ask or desire of me through revelations and visions. Behold him well, for in him you will uncover all of these already made and given, and many more. (AMC II, 22, 5: 230–231)

Besides that the knowledge in the 'unknowing' which John of the Cross speaks of is based on faith (*fides*).[31] According to John of the Cross, the faith in God takes one

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[31] George H. Tavard says that there is more importance given to faith that is love and hope in John of the Cross unlike the Scholastic thinkers. The SC of John of the Cross is an illustration of this fact. Tavard writes: 'Faith is, therefore, ultimately, more love than knowing. It is a direct, "substantial"

ahead in the path of negation, and it is faith that does the purgation of the intellect (Wojtyla 1981). The faith will make one to fix her eyes on Christ:

> …fix your eyes only on him and you will discern hidden in him the most secret mysteries, and wisdom, and wonders of God, as my Apostle proclaims: *In quo sunt omnes thesauri sapitentiae et scientiae Dei absconditi* (In the Son of God are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God) [Col 2:3]. These treasures of wisdom and knowledge will be for you far more sublime, delightful, and advantageous that what you want to know. (AMC II, 22, 6: 231)

We must mention here that the facet of faith that we see in the negative way of John of the Cross must have been an influence of the mystics of the Middle Ages, and it is not an influence of Hellenism or the Scholastic thinkers.[32]

Thus, what we would like to submit here is that there is an obvious dissimilarity in the goal of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross as both the thinkers are not aiming at the same objective. Nāgārjuna is not a theistic philosopher, whereas John of the Cross is a theistic mystic. This fundamental difference in religious conviction of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross accounts for the divergence in their philosophical persuasions.

5.2.3 The Negative Way: An Enlightened-Indifference in Nāgārjuna and a Positive and Creative Assertion in John of the Cross

The negative way, brilliantly presented in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, is again different. In the scheme of Nāgārjuna, there is absolutely no interest in stating things affirmatively. He is more interested in negative expressions, but at the end of the day, even the *via negativa* is discarded, as the *via negativa* itself is another position

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experience that, both in the ordinary language of common sense and in that, more technical or speculative theology, pertains to the register of charity than to that of assent. One should avoid reading John of the Cross's passages concerning faith as though they were scholastic discourses. In them, faith is quite other than in the tractate of theologians. It includes hope and love. The whole person lives in it and is transformed by it. … Undoubtedly, John of the Cross distinguishes functionally between intellect, memory, and will, in which he locates respectively faith, hope and love. But such a distinction applies only to the acts that originate in man. An act that proceeds from God to be passively received in man, who thereby becomes faithful, affects and commits the whole soul. At this level faith and love are two names for one reality, which is lived totally as both obscure knowledge and union of love. … Whereas speculative theology places each of the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) within one of the faculties of the soul, experience shows them so closely tied together that they cannot be truly distinct. Faith is love and hope, and conversely what is said of one applies to the others because they are neither two nor three, but one: one substantial attitude of voiding before God' (Tavard 1989: 105–106).

[32] Let me quote Tavard again: 'The antecedents of John of the Cross's doctrine on faith are to be found among the ancient and medieval mystics rather than in the theologians. Faith-darkness, faith-love, love-intellection are well attested, if not frequent, themes of the mystical doctrine of the Middle Ages. Denys and Bonaventure for the night, Gregory the Great and Williams of St. Thierry for the knowing of love, may be sources of the Mystical Doctor's thought rather than Thomas Aquinas' (Tavard 1989: 114).

as bad as its opposite, the positive one. But when it comes to John of the Cross, in his negative way there is room for positive and creative facets, and it ends in an affirmation and assertion.

The negative way of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna is not specific in articulating actually what it is all about, thus, amounting to some sort of indifference to specifications. The negative way of Nāgārjuna does not subscribe to any *ātma-nairātmya* polarities and conceivable distinctions, and we call it as an *enlightened-indifference*. It does not pinpoint to any position or reach to any entity. By this enlightened-indifference, we do not mean 'indifference' in common parlance, as it is not indifference at all. In this enlightened-indifference, there is knowledge of non-substantiality and the liberation from hypostatisation, where *śūnyatā* itself is considered *śūnya*. It is 'an antidote for excessive linguistic conceptualism' (Bilimoria [2012]: 528). The negative way of Nāgārjuna is neither negative nor positive, neither affirmation nor negation and neither assertion nor denial, that is, there is neither a positive nor negative content to it. Let us recall the tetralemmas (*catuṣkoṭi*) which we find in MK 22, 11 (MK 22, 11: 192–194), the four possible views on *śūnyatā*, which Nāgārjuna rejects finally. Thus, Nāgārjuna is too brilliant and beyond blame of any position in his negative way paradigm.

The negative way in John of the Cross is not purely negative. It has a positive element.[33] He is like any other Christian thinker, because God is the centre of his experience, and not any abstraction in his philosophical enterprise. Thomas Merton writes that the negative way of John of the Cross 'is not purely negative – any more than is the theology of any other Christian saint. It has strongly a positive element. Light and darkness succeed one another and they work together' (Merton [1991]: 66). John of the Cross's negative way will seek for a self-abnegation and emptiness, but the end result is all positive affirmation of God. There is a positive finality in the negative way of John of the Cross. The world, the creation of God, into which the Son comes, is good and charming as in *Romances* of John of the Cross (R 1–9: 60–68). The negative way beautifully expressed in the writings of John of the Cross has nothing to do with negation of the ultimate either. It has to do with only a stripping away of the created world where the 'dark night' helps to be one with God, the sole goal of the negative way. John of the Cross's 'emotions of *via negativa* are entirely positive, and of a spiritual kind, whereas his negative emotions derive only from the struggle to attain to the "divine darkness"' (King [2007]: 202). The negative way in John of the Cross is creative also as it is for the 'divine union' (Barnhart [1999]: 15). It is transcendence as it starts from something real in life and goes to

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[33] Gawronski points out that the negative way implied in the emptiness of John of the Cross is a positive emptiness. He writes: 'If John is like Evagrius in his thoroughgoing negation, he differs from him on the positive side, where he transcends Evagrius in a personally experienced night of believing contemplation. For John the "night of faith" … is an ascent, and in so far as it is negative, it is like that of Evagrius; but it is empathically not philosophical ascent but rather – and this it has in common with moderns – it is one of personal experience. Although Dionysius brought this scheme of ascent into Thomas (and John is favourably associated with Dionysius for Balthasar), John is superior, for he totally loses the philosophical framework which the Neo-Platonists had imprinted on Christian mystical theology' (Gawronski 1995: 70).

something real, an unspeakable union with God. It is not just distrustful negation. It is not pessimism either, as some would think. David B. Perrin would say that 'despite the positive evaluation of the world reflected in the *Romances*, *The Living Flame of Love*, and *The Spiritual Canticle*, John is still best known for his seemingly pessimistic attitude toward the world as reflected in the commentaries *The Dark Night* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*' (Perrin 1997: 5). But even in DN and AMC that Perrin mentions here as pessimistic, it is not a pessimism that John of the Cross breathes but an ardent longing and an interminable hope for something sublime. The corpus of writings of John of the Cross, if taken comprehensively, the negative way he proposes, as a point of fact, is positive and creative.

5.2.4   Philosophical Epiphany *in Nāgārjuna and* Theological Epiphany *in John of the Cross*

The negative way ends in two different levels in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, and we call them *philosophical epiphany* and *theological epiphany*, respectively. As we know the Greek term ἐπιφάνεια (epiphaneia), 'epiphany', if taken literally, would mean a sudden, intuitive perception of the real nature of things. This could be termed as the *paśyati* (seeing) of *prajñā* or highest wisdom in Buddhist parlance. This is an insight of the highest wisdom (*prajñā*). This is a striking manifestation or realisation like that of enlightenment (*bodhi*) in which one understands even the subtle nuances in deeper perspective. In this epiphany there is a clarity which makes us understand things in their true nature. 'Such epiphanies are like bolts of lightning on a dark night that brilliantly illuminate everything in a single, instantaneous flash. There are many different kinds of epiphanies. They can be religious, philosophical, romantic, aesthetic or some other type' (Pawelski 2007: 135–136). Epiphany is manifestation; it is a revealing.[34] And in Nāgārjuna, the epiphany is philosophical.

The *negative way* in Nāgārjuna ultimately brings home the real nature of reality as *niḥsvabhāvatā*, essencelessness, with the propitious cessation of all hypostatisation (MK 1, 1: 4; MK 27, 30: 248–249). This is more philosophical in nature. Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* is a philosophical epiphany where one, being in the conventional (*saṁvṛti*), understands the real nature of the conventional (*saṁvṛti*), which is called the ultimate (*paramārtha*), and this is *śūnyatā*. In this philosophical epiphany, there is no description as John Russon would opine, though he writes in different context, but much of what Russon says, as I understand, is in agreement with the philosophical epiphany in Nāgārjuna. Russon says:

> Philosophy, too, is such a witness to witnessing. Philosophy is description and metaphysics, but description and metaphysics are artistic, ethical action. Philosophy is description in that to learn can only be to learn about reality as it is revealed to us. Reality is epiphanic in form.

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[34] A good exposition on epiphany (both literary and philosophical) could be seen in the first chapter of Sharon Kim's *Literary Epiphany in the Novel, 1850–1950: Constellations of the Soul* (Kim 2012: 31–48).

> Reality educates us by showing itself, and it exceeds in preconditions. It thus cannot be deduced – only described. Philosophy is metaphysics in that it is motivated by the effort of witnessing to the very nature of this epiphanic form. Philosophy is a critical discipline inasmuch as its careful attention to description of epiphanic form reveals the inadequacy of various presumptions about the nature of things. (Russon 2009: 69)

The *philosophical epiphany* in Nāgārjuna that we speak of, as Russon says in the above quote, also 'reveals the inadequacy of various presumptions about the nature of things' that we conceptualise and verbalise. This inadequacy and the limits of our conceptualisation and the subsequent verbalisation are implied in the *śūnyatā* of Nāgārjuna which we call the negative way. Thus, the entire enterprise of *śūnyatā* that we find in Nāgārjuna, we would submit, could be called a *philosophical epiphany*.

The *negative way* that we find in John of the Cross is intended to take us to a different realm, a 'union' of the soul with God, which we call a *theological epiphany*. By theological epiphany we mean a divine manifestation and experience that John of the Cross presents in his writings, at the end of the dark night. After the active and passive purgation, at the end of the dark night, the soul comes to know and experience God. This *theological epiphany* that John of the Cross highlights is the knowing by the unknowing. In this theological epiphany, the soul says:

> I entered into unknowing,
> Yet when I saw myself there,
> Without knowing where I was,
> I understood great things;
> I will not say what I felt
> For I remained in unknowing
> *Transcending all knowledge*.
>
> That perfect knowledge
> Was of peace and holiness
> Held at no remove
> In profound solitude;
> It was something so secret
> That I was left stammering,
> *Transcending all knowledge*.
>
> I was so'whelmed,
> So absorbed and withdrawn,
> That my senses were left
> Deprived of all their sensing,
> And my spirit was given
> An understanding while not understanding,
> *Transcending all knowledge.* (SEC 1–3: 53)

John of the Cross accepts the doctrine of divine intransience in his *theological epiphany*. God is immutable. But it is not so when determining the phenomenological legitimacy in mystical experience. 'John's mysticism generates a phenomenology of felt experience; it readily translates into a psychologistic reading in terms of equivalent, secular experience' (Turner 1998: 178). In the *theological epiphany*, the soul finds God who cares for the soul. The soul 'is settled in God, and God in her with so much delight that she has no need of other masters or means to direct her to

him, for now God is her guide and her light' (SC 35, 1: 607). There is a trust in and surrender to God, the guide, as the soul is sure of its destiny in the safe hands of God. And it leads to 'the union of soul with God in spiritual marriage: God works in and communicates himself to her through himself alone' (SC 35, 6: 609). This is an experience which the soul has in this divine union of spiritual marriage. There is 'now that the perfect union of love between God and the soul', and the soul says, first, 'let us rejoice, Beloved', second, 'let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty' and third, 'and further, deep in into the thicket' (SC 36, 3: 611), which would mean, a passage deep into the mysteries of God. 'God's wisdom and knowledge is so deep and immense that no matter how much the soul knows, she can always enter it further, it is vast and its riches incomprehensible' (SC 36, 10: 613). This is the *theological epiphany* that we find in John of the Cross.

The philosophical epiphany of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna and the theological epiphany of *nada* in John of the Cross are similar for a discerning mind, but at the same time, they are unreservedly dissimilar. This dissimilarity is thanks to the different religious philosophies and convictions that Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross are convinced of and they conscientiously follow.

5.2.5   Difference in Content and Objective: A Possibility for Dialogue

This section follows what we have just stated above. As the negative way in Nāgārjuna paves way for a *philosophical epiphany*, so the negative way in John of the Cross unravels a *theological epiphany*. Though *śūnyatā* and *nada* are negative ways in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross respectively, there is a striking dissimilarity in the content and objective. Nāgārjuna's philosophical epiphany brings home an *enlightened-indifference*, whereas the theological epiphany in John of the Cross ushers in a union of the soul with God which is a spiritual marriage and experience where heart and the faculties of intellect, will and memory meet. The content of these two end results are different, and the objectives too are dissimilar. There is no commonality between them and they operate in dissimilar planes.

We do not find any content in the philosophical epiphany that we encounter in Nāgārjuna, as it is contentless *śūnyatā. Śūnyatā* itself is *śūnya*. But when it comes to the theological epiphany that we find in John of the Cross, there is a content of that epiphany which operates in experiential level. There is a union of the soul with God. In this union there is a 'transformation of the soul so thorough that she can scarcely recognize herself anymore. The caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly' (Stein 2002: 172). In this there is 'the consummation of *spiritual betrothal*' that 'takes place in ecstasy' (Stein 2002: 172). The soul knows it, the soul feels it and the soul wills it. Thus, the three faculties of the soul – faculty of knowing, faculty of feeling and faculty of willing – are darkened and emptied, but the soul experiences the union *in toto*. This experience is not contentless, but it has a content, though in ultimate analysis it is ineffable.

There is a striking dissimilarity in these two claims, and, we would say, this dissimilarity, with a lack of their common ground, paves way for a dialogue between these two negative ways in two dissimilar traditions and thought, philosophically and theologically. This dissimilarity we have mentioned paves way for an accomplishment of some sort of cross-cultural encounter, cross-cultural hermeneutics and cross-cultural philosophy. Two traditions could be in dialogue as they are dissimilar, and they can have a meaningful conversation, without a 'hermeneutics of suppression' or 'a hermeneutics of suspicion or contestation' (Prabhu 2013: 134).

5.2.6 Why Dissimilarity?

There are dissimilarities, as we have seen so far, in the negative way paradigms of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. There is difference in their goals. Though both the thinkers are monks in their respective religions, Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist, speaking from a Buddhist standpoint, whereas John of the Cross is a Christian mystic speaking from a Judeo-Christian belief and worldview. Both the thinkers are employing the negative way as a device to unravel their philosophical and religious convictions. The methodology in the stratagem of communicating their views to the world, rather to their audience in their own monastic communities, has some similarity that we cannot ignore. The dissimilarities we come across in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, we would submit, are mainly thanks to their religious faith and conviction: Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist philosopher and John of the Cross is a Christian mystic and poet. For a philosopher what is most fascinating would be the philosophical epiphany which brings the enlightened-indifference, while for a mystical thinker who loves the deepfelt poetics it would be a theological epiphany and the absorption therein which he calls 'union' with God. Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross are dissimilar, but they have many things in common as far as their intellectual enterprise is concerned.

The present study has not been aimed at having the fashionable search for sameness in the thought of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, or even in their philosophical *cum* religious traditions and convictions, but it seeks to know the distinctiveness in the thoughts of these two great past masters. We may not fully agree with Valez de Cea's statement that a 'comparisons between Nāgārjuna's emptiness and the apophatic path to God are in my view textually unjustifiable, at least with Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit works' (Valez de Cea 2006: 146),[35] as we believe that comparison and contrast between the systems of thought have always been there in the history of ideas. Such attempts of comparison and contrast in cross-cultural philosophical tra-

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[35]Valez de Cea writes: 'Comparisons between Nāgārjuna's emptiness and the apophatic path to God are in my view textually unjustifiable, at least with Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit works. Someone may try to justify apophatic readings of Nāgārjuna's emptiness with a Chinese work spuriously attributed to Nāgārjuna, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā śāstra*, or as it is known in Chinese, the *Ta-chih-tu-lun*' (Valez de Cea 2006:146).

ditions will 'open a "new" way of doing comparative philosophy where concepts developed in different philosophical traditions "illuminate" each other and help us in understanding them better' (Krishna 2006: xvii). Further, it is a verity that 'all comparative studies simultaneously imply an identity and a difference, a situation that is replete with intellectual difficulties that give rise to interminable disputes regarding whether we are talking about the same thing or different things' (Krishna 2011: 59). And I believe that this sort of comparative study is fascinating and intellectually stimulating to those who find meaning in this kind of philosophical exercise. And I am one among them.

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Chapter 6
Of Nothingness: Apophasis and Metaphor

> *Empty and tired of praying, of thinking, or working, Exhausted and ready to bid farewell to it all.*
>
> (Bonhoeffer 2002: 145).

Abstract This chapter represents the conclusion to this study which runs into six chapters. In this chapter we look at the 'idea of nothingness' in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, in apophasis and metaphor paradigm. We look at the metaphors that are employed by Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross for apophasis. An account of a select number of representative metaphors that we encounter in the works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross is illustrated at length. Subsequently, the use of metonymy and the import of semiotics in relation to apophasis have been dealt with. Finally we conclude that *śūnyatā* of Nāgārjuna and *nada* of John of the Cross are metaphors meant for an apophasis, the negative way.

Keywords Apophasis • John of the Cross • Metaphor • Metonymy • *Nada* • Nāgārjuna • Nothingness • Semiotics • *Śūnyatā* • *Via negativa*

The elegance of the notion of 'nothingness' that we have been exploring in *śūnyatā* of Nāgārjuna and *nada* of John of the Cross could be seen in its apophasis and metaphor paradigm. Undoubtedly there is an apophasis in the 'nothingness'. Could Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* and John of the Cross's (*la*) *nada* be considered as metaphors in the works and thought of these two great past masters? One could posit it without any hesitation. A deeper analysis of the tenets of the 'concept' of *nothingness* in these 'two traditions'[1] would fend off, if one takes the intent and implication of the two terms, any qualm in this regard. Nāgārjuna's notion of *śūnyatā* acts as a metaphoric tool to deconstruct the prejudiced viewpoints one holds. The sole import of Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* would be to the effect of the rejection of all views (MK 13, 8: 108–109; MK 27, 30: 248–249) whereby a 'standpoint of no-standpoint' is arrived at. In this regard, J. P. Williams opines that this is the apophasis one finds in Nāgārjuna: 'While none of his vocabulary may be literally translated as "apophasis,"

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[1] For more details, see the second chapter of this book titled *Two Traditions and a Concept*.

nevertheless in passages…the apophatic import is clear' (Williams 2000: 46). Seemingly the same goes with the notion of (*la*) *nada* in the writings of John of the Cross, for the end result of the *ascent* is ineffable. There is an unambiguous apophasis and metaphoric tenacity in the notion of nothingness in John of the Cross.

6.1 Apophasis, Metaphor and the Negative Way

Apophasis is in vogue today not only in theological but also in philosophical discourses. 'The situation of philosophy today makes it peculiarly receptive to a great variety of apophatic discourses' where 'the quest for foundations' is not the sole project as opposed to that of 'modern philosophy since Descartes' (Franke 2006: 62). Such an essentialist project 'has fallen into crisis and in many quarters today is given up for lost' (Franke 2006: 62), paving way for an apophasis. In the apophasis discourse, the *leitmotif* is 'the impossibility of articulating any rational foundation for thought and discourse' (Franke 2006: 62). It is a verity that it was the Buddha and his followers who discarded essentialism for the first time in the history of ideas. In the Western tradition, it was the Neoplatonists who could expose the predicament of 'foundations in the ancient philosophy that in crucial ways parallels that of modern and especially postmodern times' (Franke 2006: 62). This apophasis is nothing but the self-reflective and self-critical thinking that is suspicious of any formalism. Franke writes in this connection:

> …the hypertrophy of critical thinking that characterizes philosophical discourse today goes down the path once blazed by Neoplatonic thought. … It is philosophical thinking critical first and foremost of itself. In fact, every thought that can be thought and therefore expressed is viewed as *ipso facto* inadequate and subject to critique. All that can be thought or said, affirmations and negations alike, must be negated. … The situation of philosophy, especially of continental philosophy, today is likewise one that seems to know no alternative to unrestricted and endless criticism: every positive doctrine that can be formulated encounters objections immediately. If there is any consensus, it is about there being no given foundations or stable principles for philosophy to work from – though this view, too, as soon as it is formulated and stated in words, proves controversial and difficult, if not impossible, to defend. (Franke 2006: 64)

Apophasis in philosophy is critical and it employs a negating approach to that *closed* rationality that claims to be self-sufficient. It helps one open up to the ineffable experiences that cannot be brought under the domain of a discourse that is based purely on logic and reason. There is a charge that in apophasis there is a suspension of logic, particularly that of 'noncontradiction' (Huntington 1995: 283), which seems to be a verity.[2] An outlook based on apophasis will enable one to relook at

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[2] C. W. Huntington, Jr. explains: 'At the centre of apophatic discourse is the effort to speak about a subject that cannot be named. The suspension of the logic of non-contradiction necessary to accomplish this aim means, as Sells has shown, that apophasis has much more in common with poetry, narrative fiction, drama and other forms of non-discursive writing than it does with traditional philosophical and theological texts. This is not to say that apophasis is devoid of deductive argument; however the appearance of argument and grounds in apophatic writing has generated a

what is incomprehensible and unspeakable in definite terms. Let me quote Franke again:

> Not only does this critical, negative thinking guard against usurpations by false systems of closed, self-sufficient rationality; it can also help open us to the inarticulable experience of all that is or at least appears, all that tantalizingly escapes the grasp of discourse and reason. For it disabuses us of rational systems that would close off possibilities outside and beyond themselves. Cultivating an apophatic outlook can train us to look again and let happen what is truly incomprehensible to us. (Franke 2006: 66)

One could even say that apophasis is a linguistic strategy or 'linguistic protocol or a special "genre discourse" that polices our speech' and thought 'lest we misstep and utter the unutterable' (Stang 2012: 155). Here it does not mean that language is completely discarded. It shows through the medium of language that which is beyond language and thought. Apophasis 'gives priority to language as the site of negation – even in driving towards a surpassing of language. Apophasis, as unsaying or unsayability at the limits of language, nevertheless requires language and its failures in order to register at all' (Franke 2015: 103). One could say that the *śūnyatā* and *nada*, the two terms for the negative way, in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, respectively, have the import of apophasis which we will make clear in the following part of this chapter.

Now let us take up the 'metaphor' element in the negative way. The different types of figurative language seemed to be represented in the negative way of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. It is a unique facet of the negative way that we use comparative forms of figurative language like simple, metaphor, analogy and parable. Through these kinds of imageries, we proceed from the known to the unknown, unnameable or ever unutterable. A metaphor or imagery 'makes its meaning an innovation opened outward as a non-closure, more suggestiveness than a definitiveness' where there is 'a saying that is unsaying' (Reynolds 2014: 190) and a knowing that is unknowing.

Similes, analogies and metaphors, used in philosophical discourse, are for a different purpose. 'Poets and playwrights crafts similes and metaphors of great power and beauty to induce the overall sentiment of their poetry or story, while philosophical writers engage in a genre devoid of this underlying artistic ideal' (Kragh 2010: 479–480). This does not mean that philosophers lack poetic sense. But the analogies they use will be to drive home some profound ideas and not for an aesthetic sense. Thus, even bodily metaphors and imageries are avoided in philosophical discourses. 'In most imaginative philosophical expositions, bodily metaphors are not meant to be a resting place for the reader but to be kicked away like a ladder ascended' (Brann 1991: 156). Like all expressions, the language of philosophical discourse is also imbued with metaphors. 'Metaphors have several distinctive roles in philosophy', and 'the phenomena associated with metaphors have great significance for what must be called "the semantics of philosophy"' (Cohen 2004: 141). Through the

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great deal of confusion among philosophers, theologians and critics who fail to appreciate that even the most rigorous logical form can be exploited for a variety of literary and rhetoric effects' (Huntington 1995: 283).

metaphors and analogies, the philosopher communicates the import of the idea she wants to put across. She even uses metonymies which we will take up towards the end of this chapter. We should also mention here the semiotics and the symbolisms therein when we speak of metaphors and analogies, which will be also dealt with later on in this chapter.

Metaphors play a significant role in our everyday life. In their much discussed work, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson highlight the verity that our everyday life is an expression of varied metaphors. Not only our language but also our very conceptual system and actions are minimally a symbiosis of metaphors. They write succinctly in this regard:

> We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 3)

Thus, it is interesting to note that our everyday life – our thought construction, manner of thinking, speaking and communicating and every facet of our living – is an interplay of metaphors. There are metaphors that our culture provides, and we conform ourselves to those cultural metaphors.

Now let us come to a metaphoric exemption. We would hold that *metaphoric exemption* is central to functioning of the negative way. Metaphorical exemption and experiential confession are 'counter-balancing correctives in theological construction' (Schneider 2008: 153). It must be mentioned here that it is not only applied in theological construction but other philosophical discourses where apophasis has a role to play. In the theological discourse by means of *via negativa*, as Laurel C. Schneider would say, the metaphoric way signifies the limits of thought and utterances we make when it comes to speak of God. Schneider makes it clear in this way:

> It is good to remember that thought alone cannot encompass the divine reality, just as how-to manuals cannot, in the end, achieve alone the ends that they illustrate. This is the metaphoric exemption: everything we think or say, teach or proclaim, believe or catechize, is not God, not the Deep, not multiplicity, no enough. Everything, 'Ground of Being,' 'Tehom,' 'God,' 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,' 'Logos,' 'One,' 'Divine Multiplicity,' misses the mark in some way. All are incomplete; each is a metaphor. (Schneider 2008: 153)

Schneider might be taking her cue to formulate the notion of 'metaphoric exemption' 'by drawing strategies from Barth and Tillich' (Daggers 2013: 115)[3]; however, her take on the metaphoric exemption catches the intent and imagination of the negative way. Though this metaphoric exemption is used in combination with

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[3] Daggers opines about Schneider's 'metaphoric exemption' which has been influenced by Barth and Tillich. She writes in this way: 'From Barth she takes the radical exemption theology as the Word of God from human constructions. From Tillich she takes metaphoric inclusion, whereby cultural symbols are capable of theophany' (Daggers 2013: 115).

via negativa in theology, one can find a good spell of it in the discourses of contemporary continental philosophy.

We have stated above that the apophasis is a linguistic strategy, so also one could posit metaphor as a part of linguistic strategy. We could take Meister Eckhart as an example who used metaphor as a linguistic strategy. Meister Eckhart used metaphors to speak of the divine. 'Eckhart's use of paradox and metaphor is his talk of the divine, rather than being a description of God, is instead a part of a deliberate linguistic strategy' (Murphy 1996: 458). John of the Cross also uses metaphors in his writings as a linguistic strategy which we will discuss later. It must also be mentioned that through the metaphors, one does not make any 'attempt to provide a metaphysical classification' (Murphy 1996: 458) but try to show the unspeakable and the ineffable. That is, 'what language *does* is more important than what it says' (Berkson 1996: 110). Here the apophasis and metaphor go hand in hand. This will be made clear as we go on.

6.2   Apophasis and Metaphor in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

As we have stated in the third chapter, we come across many terms and terminologies, particularly in the writings of the Mādhyamika system, which have unusual intent and import of the negative way in its scheme of thought. The terms like *śūnyatā*, *niḥsvabhāvatā*, *prapañca*, *prajñapti*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, *paramārtha*, *saṁvṛti* and so on are found frequently in the philosophical metaphoric idioms of the Mādhyamika. These terms have clear-cut functions to drive home the desired intent of the thinker when she deals with the emptiness of everything. We find in the writings of Nāgārjuna that he employs his own terminological metaphors and idioms, and they really serve the purpose in unravelling his intent of apophasis. Nāgārjuna, one would submit, even uses the term *śūnyatā* in a metaphorical intent to drive home his apophasis. This aspect will be clearer when we deal with the metaphorical illustrations that Nāgārjuna makes in his writings.

In the works of John of the Cross, the negative way is too metaphoric and it is meant to bring home his intent of apophasis. We have stated in the fourth chapter that, in his works, John of the Cross makes use of various terms to illustrate his notion of *nothingness*. The metaphoric terms that John of the Cross brings into play are nothingness, emptiness, darkness, night, dark night, unknowing, solitude, silent, tranquil, peace, secret, void, *nada* and so on. These are the metaphoric terms John of the Cross uses in his writings as indicators to nothingness. The intent of *nothingness* that John of the Cross has is a *self-emptying nothingness* – in thinking, feeling and willing. It must also be mentioned that John of the Cross is really generous with the use of analogies, metaphors and metonymies in his writings. Unlike Nāgārjuna, who is very scanty in the use of metaphors, John of the Cross has a special flavour for all these linguistic devices to unravel the import of his apophasis.

6.2.1 Apophasis and Metaphor in Nāgārjuna

Nāgārjuna is very sparse with metaphors, though his apophasis is well known. Parallels of apophasis we encounter in philosophy today, particularly in continental philosophy,[4] could easily be seen in the works of Nāgārjuna. His apophasis is an unyielding deconstruction[5] of any sort of concept or position which has an essentialist underpinning. William Franke, in one of his most recent works, highlights it in this way:

> The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* of Nāgārjuna (*circa* 150–250), for example, the fundamental text of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is a relentless deconstruction of any sort of concept of stable or self-subsistent identity. It works like the logic of exception[6] to dismantle all apparently self-standing essence and to show their dependence on what they nominally exclude. (Franke 2015: 118)

In the texts of the Mādhyamika tradition in general, and Nāgārjuna in particular, 'apophasis has been identified as the characteristic' (Huntington 1995: 283) trait, though that apophasis does not have anything to do with apophasis in theology. In MK 18: 8, Nāgārjuna says: everything is real, or everything is unreal, everything is both real and unreal; everything is neither real nor unreal. This is the solemn instruction of the Buddha (MK 18, 8: 157–158). This verse is the tetralemma in positive and negative terms, which is 'both in its positive and negative moods often an indispensable analytic tool' (Garfield 1995: 251) in the apophasis of Nāgārjuna. 'So it may seem as if Nāgārjuna is here asserting one or more contradictions' (Siderits and

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[4] It is interesting to note that how apophasis has captured the imagination of continental philosophy. The apophasis looms large in the works of many a continental thinker. Arthur Bradley in his *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* writes with reference to Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: 'Bernauer's conclusion is that Foucault's work contains what he calls "worldly mysticism" but at the same time he is at pains to stress that the negative theological and archeological discourses do not share any intrinsic identity. The Archaeology of Knowledge may use the same linguistic and formal techniques as negative theology… John D. Caputo broadly supports Bernauer's position in his essay "On Not Knowing Who We Are: Madness, Hermeneutics and the Night of Truth in Foucault" (1993). Caputo suggests that Foucault's work constitutes a kind of immanent negative theology that struggles against any "kataphatic" discourse about the individual (which tries to say what the individual is or should be) in the name of an "apophatic" freedom (which preserves the right of the individual to be different): "Foucault wants to keep open the negative space of what the individual is *not*, of what we *cannot* say the individual is, to preserve the space of a certain negativity that refuses all positivity, all identification, that is always in the end a historical trap" [Caputo 1993: 251]' (Bradley 2004: 136–137).

[5] For a detailed exposition of 'deconstruction' in Derrida and Nāgārjuna, see the work of David Loy (1992: 227–254).

[6] Here William Franke speaks of the notion of 'logic of exception' that one finds in the work of Giorgio Agamben titled *Homo Sacer*. The logic of the state of exception 'involves the same seeming paradox of both belonging to a set of phenomena and being, as its representative, independent from it. Just as the example is at once a part and independent of that of which it is exemplary, so too is sovereign a part and independent from the rule of the law' (de la Durantaye 2009: 212).

Katsura 2013: 201).[7] It must also be added here that apophasis or 'the apophatic strain' is very much a part of 'Mādhyamika thought' with 'its emphasis on *śūnyatā*' (van der Braak 2011: 117). C. W. Huntington, Jr. proposes to interpret the apophasis in the Mādhyamika after the model of poetry and narrative (Huntington 1995: 284),[8] which may have a special take on the metaphoric import. One has one's own reservations on what Huntington holds with such an interpretation and wonders whether such take would stand when we really look at the logical and argumentative tenacity of Nāgārjuna to shed light on his type of apophasis.

One might not find, in fact, many metaphors in the works of Nāgārjuna. But, as we have mentioned above, the term *śūnyatā* could be taken as a metaphor. It is true that Nāgārjuna's use of the notion of *śūnyatā*, with the logic and reason employed therein, is not a conventional manner. As Brainard suggests:

> It is important to notice here that Nāgārjuna's use of logic and reason is unconventional; … If his use of logic and reason had been conventional, his reductio ad absurdum arguments would have made him a skeptic and a nihilist. There would be no paramārtha satya, only a conventional obliteration of all truths. There would be no nirvāṇa, only a senseless saṁsāra. The 'saṁsāra is nirvāṇa' equation would be meaningless and teach nothing of value at all. (Brainard 2000: 117)

The unconventional paradigm that Nāgārjuna makes use of is metaphoric to drive home his apophasis in philosophy, which is a self-reflective and self-critical thinking that is suspicious of any formalism. In fact, Nāgārjuna seems to be unconventional in his use of logic and reason, but he has his own logic to drive home his intent. As Gimello writes: 'emptiness is not an ascriptive view… Rather it is an expression of the resolute refusal to predicate or to ascribe, indeed, of the impossibility of such operations. Emptiness, in other words, is the very principle of denial of determinacy' (Gimello 1977: 120). There is no claim of formalism that is defined and determined in the negative way of Nāgārjuna. Thus, Nāgārjuna's apophasis and the logic employed therein are against the prevailing standard version of substantialism and foundationism. Nāgārjuna cannot use the logic that the essentialists are

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[7] Siderits and Katsura explain it in this way: 'This verse appears to affirm at least one of the four possibilities that arise with respect to this thesis. But it does not rule out the possibility that all four might be true. And the third and fourth possibilities themselves seem to be contradictory. Moreover, commentaries explain that all four possibilities may be affirmed. So it may seem as if Nāgārjuna is here asserting one or more contradictions' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 201).

[8] C. W. Huntington writes: 'If the Madhyamaka's arguments are not to be evaluated as "genuine" arguments, but rather as a species of apophasis, then we require some other coherent interpretive model, some other way of understanding that would allow us to make sense of these texts as either philosophical or religious discourse. The model I shall propose here takes seriously the similarities traced be Sells and other between apophatic writing, poetry and narrative' (Huntington 1995: 284). Here the reference to Sells that Huntington makes is that of Michael A. Sells where he says '… the reader of mystical apophasis will need to participate in the meaning event in order to understand the text in its own distinctive literary mode. The meaning event is just beneath the semantic surface and within the dualistic narrative and expository frame work. It is a secret or mystery that the reader continually uncovers in the act of reading. … Like poetry, apophasis is not a discourse that everyone will appreciate immediately. … Yet what has been commonly accepted for poetic discourse – a resistance to semantic reduction – is frequently viewed as a form of mystification in apophasis' (Sells 1994: 215–216). See also the footnote number 2 above.

using, and if he uses so, his would become another type of essentialism. He is aware of this predicament, and hence, he invents his own logical techniques which are unconventional. Hence, one has utmost admiration for the ingenuity that Nāgārjuna is having as an original philosopher[9] who does not want to carry the baggage of others as far as philosophising is concerned.

6.2.1.1   Metaphorical Illustrations and Apophasis in Nāgārjuna

Nāgārjuna does not make use of many metaphors in his MK. However, a few of them he uses are to demonstrate the unreality of the things that we take for granted as real in our common parlance. As stated above, through these metaphors Nāgārjuna expresses his position against holding on to any sort of substantialist position. Shohei Ichimura opines that 'metaphorical examples that Nāgārjuna uses in his dialectical treatises seem to bear similar functions as that of logical examples (*dṛṣṭānta*)'[10] (Ichimura 2001: 198), and all these examples are meant to corroborate the insight of *śūnyatā*. Ichimura goes on to say:

> In his (Nāgārjuna's) voluminous commentary *Mahāprajñā pāramitotpādaśāstra*, especially in the 6th fascicle, he enumerates as many as ten metaphorical examples as adequate comparisons for corroborating the insight of *śūnyatā* or *niḥsvabhāva*. What is common in the use of these metaphorical examples is to disclose the *dual natured reference*, such that whatever is experienced bears formal appearance, and yet it is simultaneously devoid of substantial existence, i. e., apparent existence and real non-existence. (Ichimura 2001: 198–199)

The metaphorical illustrations that Nāgārjuna uses, as stated above, are meant to educate his audience of his import of *śūnyatā*. In his VV, 57, Nāgārjuna says that since there is no intrinsic nature of anything, and the existence of the name does not imply that there is an intrinsic nature, everything is *śūnya* (VV, 57: 23, 128–129).[11]

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[9] Jay L. Garfield writes: 'Nāgārjuna is a master dialectician, who often responds to an opponent who levels a reductio argument against Nāgārjuna that not only is he himself cot committed to the absurd conclusion the opponent foist on him, but that the opponent himself is committed to that very conclusion, thus turning the a reductio aimed at his own position into one aimed at his opponent' (Garfield 2009: 28).

[10] Ichimura says that Nāgārjuna's use of metaphors parallels with his logical demonstration (*dṛṣṭānta*). He writes: 'Whether did Nāgārjuna think of a theoretical basis for his use of metaphorical example as parallel with that of logical demonstration (*dṛṣṭānta*)? This question, I think, is relevant, because, being an adept logician and dialectician, he must have examined the efficacy and the validity of metaphorical examples applied in his treatises in parallel with those of logical examples' (Ichimura 2001: 199).

[11] It goes like this: 'He who says that the name (*nāman*) is existent (*sadbhūta*), deserves indeed the answer from you: "There is an intrinsic nature." We, however, do not say that (*brūmaś ca na vayaṁ tat*)'. Its auto-commentary goes like this: 'He who says that the name is existent, deserves the answer from you: "There is an intrinsic nature." That intrinsic nature, which is designated by the existent name, must be, for that reason, existent (*yasya sadbhūtaṁ nāma sadbhāvasya tasmāt tenāpi svabhāvena sadbhūtena bhavitavyam*). For a non-existent intrinsic nature cannot have an existent name (*na hy asadbhūtasya svabhāvasya sadbhūtaṁ nāma bhavati*). We however, do not say that the name is existent. Since the things have no intrinsic nature, that name also is devoid of

In the *śūnyatā* notion of Nāgārjuna, there is a dualism, a dualism that is 'between language and silence', that is, 'between delusion (of which language is the vehicle) and enlightenment (to which silence is believed to point)' (Loy 2009: 37). This dualism is evident from the metaphoric expressions of Nāgārjuna.

One of the classic illustrations of metaphors is MK 7, 34. It goes like this: as an illusion (*māyā*), a dream (*svapna*) and a mythical city of the Gandharvas in the sky (*gandharva-nagara*), so also is the notion of origination (*utpāda*), duration (*sthāna*) and cessation (*bhaṅga*) illustrated (MK 7, 34: 73–74). In MK 23, 8, also one finds the reference to the mythical city of the Gandharvas in the sky, mirage (*marīci*) and dream (*svapna*) (MK 23, 8: 199–200).[12] Nāgārjuna skilfully uses these metaphors which do not have real existence, but they are very much in the imagination of the audience. This is so, in order to illustrate the idea that everything is empty of inherent nature (*svabhāva*) or existence of its own. Jay L. Garfield explains expertly this verse, MK 23, 8, in this way:

> Having demonstrated the emptiness of conditions and their relations to their effects, change, and impermanence, the elements, the aggregates, and characteristics and their bases – in short, of all fundamental Buddhist categories of analysis and explanation – Nāgārjuna has now considered the totality they determine – dependent arising itself and the entire dependently arisen phenomenal world – arguing that dependent arising and what is dependently arisen are themselves empty of intrinsic existence. This is a deep result. It again presages the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness that is made explicit in Chapter XXIV, and it develops further the theme explored in Chapter I, namely that when from the Mādhyamika perspective one asserts that a thing is empty or that it is dependently arisen, one is not contrasting their status with the status of some other things that are inherently existent. Nor is one asserting that they are *merely* dependent on some more fundamental independent thing. Nor is one asserting that instead of having an independent essence things have as their essence dependence or emptiness, either or both of which exist in some other way. Rather, as far as one analyzes, one finds only dependence, relativity, and emptiness, and their dependence, relativity, and emptiness. (Garfield 1995: 176–177)

Thus, the selection of metaphors by Nāgārjuna has a special import: to make clear his own type of apophasis. As we have stated above, we do not claim that his type of apophasis is that of negative theology but akin to that of the discourse in contemporary continental thought. Even then it is different from the apophasis of continental philosophy. Ichimura says about this sort of metaphors that Nāgārjuna picks and uses as having a special import: 'The use of metaphorical examples, such as *māyā*,

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an intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*). For that reason, it is void (*śūnya*), and, being void, it is non-existent (*asadbhūta*). – In these circumstances, your statement that because of the existence of the name (*nāmasadbhāvāt*) the intrinsic nature is existent (*sadbhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ*), is not valid' (VV, 57: 128–129).

[12] The translation of MK 23, 8 by Garfield goes like: 'Form, sound, taste, touch, smell, and concepts of things: These six should be seen as only like a city of Gandharvas, and like a mirage and a dream' (Garfield 1995: 287). Kalupahana explains this: 'The smiles of "dream" (*svapna*) and the "city of the gandharvas" (*gandharva-nagara*) have already been employed, along with "illusion" (*māyā*) to refute the substantialist explanation of the dispositionally conditioned phenomena (*saṃskṛta*) (see VII.34). The six objects of experience referred in XXII.7 are indeed dispositionally conditioned. They are not objects that are found in themselves (*svabhāvataḥ*). Nor are they absolutely non-existent' (Kalupahana 2006: 316).

is obviously meant to corroborate the insight of *śūnyatā*' (Ichimura 2001: 204). Ichimura furthers his view in this way:

> While *śūnyatā* is obviously different from ordinary negation, what is essential to the linkage of moments, spaces, cognitions, and sentences ought to the dual natured reference a 'simultaneously existent and non-existent,' or 'identical and different.' It must be an intermediary object of reference brought forth by the dialectical context and exemplified by a magical apparition. (Ichimura 2001: 204)

Another example is that of fire (*agni*) and fuel/wood (*indhana*) in MK 10 (MK 10, 1–16: 86–94). Though the example of fire-fuel/wood is an analogy, it has its metaphorical import. MK 10, 14 says: Fire is not fuel/wood, and fire is not something else than fuel/wood.[13] Fire does not hold fuel/wood. Fuel/wood is not fire, and fire is not in fuel/wood (MK 10, 14: 91). The implication of fire-fuel/wood analogy is explained by Nāgārjuna in MK 10, 15: 'Through the discussion of fire and fuel, the self and the aggregates, the pot and cloth, all together without reminder have been explained' (Garfield 1995: 195). Siderits and Katsura in their introduction to MK 10 explain the fire-fuel analogy: 'As Chandrakīrti explains the example, fire is dependent on fuel (since there is no fire without fuel), but fire is ultimately real (since it has intrinsic nature of heat). Yet fuel, while also being real in its own right, is composed of the four elements and so depends on the fire element' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 109). Thus, through the fire-fuel/wood analogy, Nāgārjuna exposes 'the metaphysical interpretation of "self" (*ātman*) and "grasping" (*upādāna*)' (Kalupahana 2006: 205) in order to show the non-metaphysical explanation of self. 'This analysis is not confined to the metaphor of "fire and fuel" alone'. It applies to all other metaphors used during this period of speculation, such as 'clay and pot' and 'thread and cloth'. (Kalupahana 2004: 205). Then Nāgārjuna concludes the chapter by a clear and unequivocal declaration that there is no *substantial existence* of self (*ātmanaśca satattvaṁ*) (MK 10, 16: 92–94).[14]

Still another metaphoric expression is MK 24, 11. Here Nāgārjuna states that it is disastrous for the person who perceives *śūnyatā* wrongly, as it would be like snake wrongly caught (on the head) or like spell wrongly performed (MK 24, 11: 216). Siderits and Katsura in their explanation to this verse say: 'As novice snake-

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[13] Jay L. Garfield neatly explains MK 10: 4 in this way: 'Nāgārjuna now sets up a destructive dilemma: Either the process of burning is identical to the fuel or different. In X: 4, he considers the possibility that they are identical. If so, he suggests, we have a problem in explaining how fuel is consumed. The ordinary explanation of that is the presence of fire. But by identifying the burning process with the fuel, we have left the fire out of the picture. This analysis hence provides no explanation of combustion. After all, fuel by itself does not burn. It must be ignited, that is, fire must be introduced. If, as Nāgārjuna argues in X: 5, they are completely different, there won't be any fire at all. For then the burning would be dissociated from and independent of the fuel, and the unburned fuel would not be consumed by the burning. We could make no sense of transition from unburned to burned fuel. The general moral is that we cannot make sense of interactive processes such as combustion without attending to the mutual dependence of the interacting phenomena that constitute those processes' (Garfield 1995: 191).

[14] Inada translates MK 10, 16 as: 'Insofar as I am concerned, those who speak of reality of entities and who assign them distinct existences cannot be considered truly knowledgeable of the (Buddha's) teachings' (Inada 1993: 84).

handlers and apprentice sorcerers can attest, serpents and magic spells are danger-
ous instruments in the hands of those who lack requisite knowledge. … The same is
said to be true of emptiness' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 274). It is because the
notion of *śūnyatā* that Nāgārjuna speaks of could be easily misunderstood.[15]
Nāgārjuna in this verse take the analogy of snake wrongly caught to liken the
wrongly conceived idea of *śūnyatā*. Just as extending one's hand to catch hold of a
poisonous snake on its head can destroy (*vināśayati*) one (due to snake bite), so also
is a misperceiving of *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna will go on to say later in MK 24, 14 that
everything is in conformity for whom *śūnyatā* is in conformity; and nothing is in
conformity for whom *śūnyatā* is not in conformity (MK 24, 14: 218).

Nāgārjuna uses sky (*ākāśa*) as 'the root metaphor for *śūnyatā*' (McCagney 1997:
35).[16] One can find an exposition of *śūnyatā* in the work of McCagney (McCagney
1997: 34–44) where the metaphoric sense is explored. The *śūnyatā* metaphor ushers
in new prospects and possibilities to understand the real import of Buddhist position
of non-substantiality. Gordon Wallace would say with regard to *śūnyatā*:

> This concept of a sense of emptiness that is paradoxically pregnant presents an image of
> unbound potentials and possibilities which as yet have not been realized, or continue the
> *śūnyatā* metaphor, born. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, *śūnyatā* creates wisdom, or at least pos-
> sibility of wisdom. It allows for a cessation of the 'projections of mind's ego patterns'.
> (Wallace 2009: 149)

Śūnyatā is a metaphor for undoing all that is conceptually built upon as it points
to the essencelessness of reality. Mark Epstein would say that *śūnyatā* 'has the
meaning of a pregnant womb, not an empty void' (Epstein 2007: 215) but 'a preg-
nant void' with possibilities.

Śūnyatā could be considered in terms of symbolism and metaphor as well. Cliff
Edwards while dealing on symbolism (Edwards 1989: 117–154) gives a neat treat-

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[15] Jay L. Garfield explains this verse MK 24, 11 in this way: 'The Mādhyamika doctrine of empti-
ness is subtle and is easily misinterpreted. In particular, it is often misinterpreted as a thoroughgo-
ing nihilism about phenomena. This is so not only among classical Indian critics of Mādhyamika,
in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical schools, but also among Western critics who
have sometimes regarded it as completely negative. In this respect, Mādhyamika philosophy has
suffered from the same fate as much Western skeptical philosophy, including that of the Pyrrhonians
and of Hume and Wittgenstein, all of whom were at considerable pains to warn the readers against
interpreting them as denying existence of ordinary entities, but all of whom have been repeatedly
read as doing so. Nāgārjuna is here charging the opponent represented in the opening verses with
interpreting the assertion that a phenomenon is empty as the assertion that it is nonexistent.
Nothing, Nāgārjuna will argue, could be further from the truth' (Garfield 1995: 300).

[16] 'Nāgārjuna is thus in accord with the *śūnyatā* tradition of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā,*
namely, that it is a term that is not properly understood if reified. Even *śūnyatā* is *śūnya,* (even
openness is open). For the purpose of our discussion, the main difference between Nāgārjuna's
works and the *Aṣṭa* is that the former claims that space both exists and does not exist whereas
Nāgārjuna argues that it neither exists not does not exist. Both, however, take space as the root
metaphor for *śūnyatā*. … Further, Nāgārjuna's indebtedness to the *Aṣṭa* lends support to the notion
that his usage of the term "*śūnyatā*" may be closer to the Aṣṭa than to other works, especially non
Buddhist works, in which the term has a decidedly negative ring' (McCagney 1997: 34–35).

ment of *śūnyatā*, taking recourse to the notion of *śūnyatā* in the thought of Nishitani. Edwards writes:

> This absolute emptiness moves beyond the relative emptiness of nihility that threatens the Western perspective, and opens a context without limitations, a field of *śūnyatā* that includes both nothingness, a field where the illusory or the impermanent nature of all things is recognized, yet where the center of all things is everywhere and all things interpenetrate. (Edwards 1989: 136)

Still further, another view is of Catherine Keller where she brings the notion of *kenosis* with *śūnyatā*. Catherine Keller treats skilfully the notion of emptiness in a '*śūnyatā*-kenosis focus' (Keller 2005: 102–115). *Śūnyatā* could be seen as a 'metaphor for kenosis' (Keller 2005: 104). In kenosis there is a self-emptying. In *śūnyatā*, if rightly understood, it is also an emptying of all that is based on a foundationism. If in *śūnyatā* a non-substantiality is what Nāgārjuna is speaking of, then the kenosis could also be taken to have such an import. 'The hermeneutic of *Śūnyatā* can refresh and radicalize the metaphor of the kenotic' (Keller 2005: 111). Nevertheless, we shall keep in mind that kenosis and *śūnyatā* operate on different levels, but we could liken the metaphoric sense.

Having delineated the apophatic and metaphoric facets of Nāgārjuna's scheme of thought, the point we would like to make is that 'nothingness' we speak of in Nāgārjuna with his notion of *śūnyatā* is metaphoric with an import of apophasis. Nāgārjuna has very few metaphors in his works. He 'may seem to be preoccupied with splitting conceptual hairs', and he deconstructs dualities (Loy 2009: 32) which is mainly evident in the second chapter of MK. Once again let us state that in this study we do not make a claim that the type of apophasis that Nāgārjuna employs is similar to that of apophatic theology, as his apophasis has nothing to do with the '*via negativa* in order to approach the ineffable "being" of an absolutely transcendent God' (Davis 2016: 205). Nevertheless, his is a different type of apophasis 'a similar dialectic to remove our ideas concerning reality. He did not describe reality, because reality is what it is and cannot be described' (Thich Nhat Hanh 2008: 106). And that reality is empty. Nothing in the phenomena exists independently. 'To exist dependently is, importantly, is to be empty of essence' (Garfield 2009: 27).[17]

Nāgārjuna's apophasis will hold that *śūnyatā* is central to his negative way, for it is only by that *śūnyatā* things are possible. The apophasis of *śūnyatā* allows one to let off the concepts and linguistic constructions, even the very 'conception' of

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[17] Jay L. Garfield explains this further: 'For a Mādhyamika, like Nāgārjuna, this emptiness of essence is the final mode of existence of any phenomenon, in its ultimate truth. For to have an essence is to exist independently, to have one's identity and to exist not in virtue of extrinsic relations, but simply in virtue of intrinsic properties. Because all phenomena are interdependent, all are empty in this sense. Just as the conventional truth about phenomena is made up by their interdependence, their ultimate truth is their emptiness. These are the two truths that Nāgārjuna adumbrates throughout his corpus. It follows immediately that the emptiness of all phenomena that Nāgārjuna defends is not *nonexistence*: to be empty of essence is not to be empty of existence. Instead, to exist is to be empty' (Garfield 2009: 17).

śūnyatā (MK 13, 7–8: 107–109).[18] Nāgārjuna's metaphoric use of language is meant to undo the language itself, which is *prapañca*. According to Nāgārjuna, the language 'is capable of bringing about its own demise. What is there to stop it? Every use of language is but another expression of that deathly transition from the essential to the fictional and the conventional. Hence, prapañca can be stilled. Its operation as prapañca is precisely its stillness' (Biderman 2008: 324). In Nāgārjuna's apophasis there is the *śūnyatā* of the *speaking subject* as well as the *spoken object*, sans any sort of substantiality. There is more of negativity, in effect, in the entire enterprise of Nāgārjuna's nothingness than positivity. This is the apophasis of nothingness.

6.2.2   Apophasis and Metaphor in John of the Cross

Apophasis and metaphors are plentiful in the writings of John of the Cross. 'Apophasis is, paradoxically, a rich genre of theological discourse that articulates the utter inefficacy of the Logos to name ultimate reality' (Bernier 2014: 15). The negative way in the Christian tradition that John of the Cross takes recourse to 'will insist that many metaphors and models are necessary, that a piling up of images is essential, both to avoid idolatry and to attempt to express the richness and variety of the divine-human relationship' (McFague 1982: 20). John of the Cross is 'not so much concerned with justifying the notions of the transcendent deity, but rather that his "apophasis," if we can call it such, is part of the tradition of *theologia mystica* inherited from Osuna, Gerson and the Persian schools' (Tyler 2010: 128).

John of the Cross uses similes and metaphors to point the height of mystical state, as such states are ineffable (AMC II, 32: 3: 265; DN II, 13,1: 424; DN II, 17, 3: 436). He has 'certain sympathy with the "metaphor theory"' (Payne 1990: 102). There is ineffability of God experience and that experience can only be expressed through similes and metaphors. John of the Cross writes:

> It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding, like these stanzas, are fully explainable. The Spirit of the Lord, who abides in us and aids our weakness, as St. Paul says (Rom. 8:26), pleads for us with unspeakable groaning in order to manifest what we can neither fully understand nor comprehend. Who can describe in writing the understanding he gives to loving souls in whom he dwells? And who can express with words the experience he imparts to them? Who, finally, can explain the desires he gives them? Certainly no one can! Not even they who receive these communications. As a result these persons let something of their experience overflow in figures, comparisons, similitudes, and from the abundance of their spirit pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations. (SC, Prologue 1: 469)

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[18] Our reference here is to MK 13, 7–8. The translation of the same by Siderits and Katsura goes like this: 'If something that is non-empty existed, then something that is empty might also exist. Nothing whatsoever exists that is non-empty; then how will the empty come to exist? Emptiness is taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get rid of all [metaphysical views]. But those for whom emptiness is a [metaphysical] view have been called incurable' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 144–145).

Thus, John of the Cross says that God experience a soul gets can only be expressed through metaphors. However, John of the Cross refuses to speak of that experience even through metaphors, and everything is passed on in silence. He says 'I understood great things; I will not say what I felt' (SEC 1: 53). Silence is the language in one sense, and the semiotic of that silence is cognisable to a discerning reader.

There are two facets of apophasis, unknowableness and unutterableness, and John of the Cross's apophasis is not so much an 'apophasis of unsaying' but an 'apophasis of unknowing'.[19] The negative way in John of the Cross is the 'knowledge in unknowing' and 'understanding of not understanding' (SEC 6: 54). Knowing God is the goal, and it is possible only in unknowing. John of the Cross writes:

> This knowledge in unknowing
> Is so overwhelming
> That wise men disputing
> Can never overthrow it,
> For their knowledge does not reach
> To the understanding of not understanding,
> *Transcending all knowledge*.
>
> And this supreme knowledge
> Is so exalted
> That no power of man or learning
> Can grasp it;
> He who masters himself
> Will, with knowledge in unknowing,
> *Always transcending*. (SEC 6 & 7: 54)

The 'apophasis of unknowing' is distinct from the 'apophasis of unsaying'. Here it is not the unsayability or the unspeakability of *via negativa* that John of Cross brings to light but something much more and deeper than that. Deirdre Green explains it elegantly in this way: 'Unknowing is a state of understanding all but thinking about no specific item of knowledge; perceiving all but conceiving of nothing in particular. It is necessary to empty the faculties of all particular apprehensions' (Green 1986: 32).

The Western Christianity fostered a 'weaker apophasis' (Cook 2013: 148) when we compare it with its Eastern counterpart. However, the apophasis one finds in John of the Cross stands out as an equivalent, even stronger, to the Eastern apophasis. John of the Cross's apophasis emphasised the 'knowing by unknowing', in which unknowing carried a higher import. Brendan Cook writes in this connection:

> Western Christianity has been more accepting of weaker apophasis than its Eastern counterpart. This has led a Christian way of life characterised more by the cataphatic or transcendent affirmations of the divine nature rather than one characterised by the ecstasy and joy of 'knowing by unknowing.' There are notable exceptions which include Nicholas of

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[19] Peter Tyler writes in this regard: 'I suggest, that we will not find in John the "apophasis of unsaying" analyzed by Sells, and more suggestive it would seem of the Sufi mechanisms of writers such as Ibn Arabi, but rather something more akin to the "unknowing" – the theologia mystica – of Osuna and Gerson. This, we have argued previously, has more affinity to the "affective Dionysianism" of the West than the severe and rather pure apophasis (or *fana*) of the Sufi tradition. Which is not to say that John does not use apophatic strategies, but rather they are strategies that are part of the affective Dionysianism of Gerson and Osuna rather than the *fana*-apophasis of the Sufi tradition. That is to say, the aim of John's apophasis is very different from that of Sufi tradition explained by Sells' (Taylor 2010: 128).

Cusa, the anonymous author of the Cloud of Unknowing, and John of the Cross. (Cook 2013: 148)

As we have stated in Chap. 4 in the negative way of John of the Cross, in the 'knowledge in unknowing', human faculties are not at play. The first verse of SEC goes like this:

> I entered into unknowing,
> Yet when I saw myself there,
> Without knowing where I was,
> I understood great things;
> I will not say what I felt
> For I remained in unknowing
> Transcending all knowledge. (SEC 1: 53)

Even the knowing intellect withdraws from itself and from its knowledge, and God is reached more by *not understanding* than by understanding. John of the Cross writes in his LFL:

> God transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to it. Hence while the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from him. It must withdraw from itself and from its knowledge so as to journey to God in faith, by believing not understanding. …it reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding. (LFL 3, 48: 692)

The apophasis of John of the Cross has this element of *unknowing* which is a unique feature in his writings. Thus, John of the Cross's apophasis, as Rowan Williams would say, 'is a prohibition against *any* thematising of divine presence, any ultimate return to an analogy of being between God and the subject' (Williams 1992: 72).

Now let us turn to the metaphoric usages that John of the Cross employs in his apophasis. Metaphors are used to educate the audience, and they 'in general are expressions that establish relationships of similarity among conventionally unrelated categories' (Fienup-Riordan 2000: 104). It must be mentioned here that most of the metaphors that John of the Cross employs are from the Christian tradition,[20] Neoplatonism and also Spanish poetry. John uses many splendid metaphors to illustrate his apophasis. The *knowing in unknowing* is possible only if one removes the impediments of 'the appetites[21] and satisfactions'. The impediments are used with the metaphor of 'cataract and cloud', and they can shroud 'the eye of judgement' (LFL 73: 704). John of the Cross writes:

> Since that cataract and cloud shrouds the eye of judgment, only the cataract is seen, sometimes of one colour, sometimes another, according to the way the cataract appears to the eye. People judge that the cataract is God because, as they say, they see only the cataract that covers the faculty, and God cannot be grasped by the sense. Consequently the appetite and sensory gratifications impede knowledge of high things. (LFL 73: 704)

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[20] See the discussion on the metaphors in John of the Cross by Peter Tyler against the opinion of Luce Lopez-Baralt that John of the Cross was heavily influenced by the Islamic Sufi tradition in his take of apophasis and the metaphors therein (Tyler 2010: 138–142).

[21] In John of the Cross's usage, the term 'appetite' refers to the longing, craving and desiring based on impulses that are not directed towards moral and spiritual good.

If the 'appetites and satisfactions' are not totally rejected, 'one will infallibly come to consider the things of God as not of God, and the things that not of God as of God' (LFL 73: 704). John of the Cross would speak about the stilling of the appetites in his AMC:

> 'My house being now all stilled' means that the house of all the appetites, the sensitive part of the soul, is now stilled, and the desires conquered and lulled to sleep. Until slumber comes to the appetites through the mortification of sensuality, and until this very sensuality is stilled in such a way that the appetites do not war against the spirit, the soul will not go out to genuine freedom, to the enjoyment of union with its Beloved. (AMC I, 15, 2: 153)

It must be mentioned here that metaphor is not an end itself but only the means to exemplify the apophasis. Let me make it clear with the help of Jennie S. Knight's elucidation on the metaphors in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius. It is interesting to note that Pseudo-Dionysius's use of images and metaphors for his negative way is the established one in the history of *via negativa*. But the apophatism loses its meaning if it is reduced to categories that are equated with metaphoric exemption. Jennie S. Knight would say:

> Pseudo-Dionysius's writings embody, in both form and content, a *via negativa* that is primarily a mystical, spiritual journey of relating with images and metaphors for the divine as paradoxes. His was a journey fuelled by the movement of divine love and yearning. It was not a philosophical exercise in deconstruction or social constructionism. The meaning of Negative Theology is largely lost when it is reduced to those categories by being equated with the metaphoric exemption. (Knight 2011: 89)

Hence, the intent of the metaphoric images needs to be discerned. The negative way of apophasis is much more than the metaphors themselves. As stated above metaphors are only a communication strategy to give you an idea about apophasis. We will explain it further in the following part where we give metaphoric examples from the works of John of the Cross.

6.2.2.1 Metaphorical Illustrations and Apophasis in John of the Cross

Metaphoric examples are many in the works of John of the Cross. It is through these metaphors that John of the Cross illustrates the implication of his type of apophasis. The use of metaphor is a communication strategy in the works of John of the Cross. John of the Cross's selection of imageries and metaphors is from a spontaneous ingenuity of his ability to communicate with the audience and not due to any psychological trait of his as some have argued in a recent study (Minnema 2012: 587–609).[22] John of the Cross is an outstanding communicator of his insights with the

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[22] In this paper the author is of the opinion that John of the Cross had 'depressive constitution' (Minnema 2012: 593, 595–597), and his mystical experiences and the metaphors he chose to communicate it are due to that psychological trait. One is not convinced of the arguments the author makes in the paper with a selective reading of some of the passages of John of the Cross, without a comprehensive reading of the entire *corpus* of John of the Cross's writings.

help of metaphors that he employs. Let us have a look at the metaphorical illustrations that John of the Cross employs to underline his apophasis.

Among the metaphors that John of the Cross uses, *first and foremost*, one could say, is the fabulous *mountain imagery*. Mountain is a metaphor as 'ladder to heaven' in mystical writings. Mountain ascents are metaphors for human deification in the writings of the Christian mystics. Veronica della Dora says:

> For the Byzantines, biblical peaks such as Sinai and Tabor were not only actual locations in which epiphanies physically took place. They were first of all archetypal topoi and 'maps' that guided the ascetic in his spiritual journey (and for this reason, they could also be transposed to the other parts of the empire). The Greek Fathers used the mountain ascents as metaphors for human deification through ascetic struggle…. (della Dora 2016: 165)

The mountain imagery is central to John of the Cross's *apophatic ascent*. John of the Cross's *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is a concrete example of this kind. It must be said here that the *landscape imagery* has been part of apophatic tradition from the early centuries. Taking recourse to the thesis of Belden C. Lane on the importance of mountain metaphor, let us elaborate the significance of mountain image in the works of John of the Cross. 'While criticising every image one might use to describe the unsayable mystery of God, apophatic writers have resorted again and again to the fierce metaphors of Sinai as a way of questioning and deconstructing all other images' (Lane 1998: 104). Following his Carmelite tradition, John of the Cross's mountain is Mount Carmel[23] and not Sinai or Tabor.

The *landscape metaphors* in the Eastern Christian tradition are meant to indicate the limit of language and also to express the emptiness and poverty of imagination to understand God. In this metaphor of the mountain, thus, there is an apophasis. Lane writes in this regard:

> Deeply sensitive… early apophatic writers adopted a twisted language of paradox and negation, using language against language. They employed lean, porous images, able to point to a mystery beyond themselves while at the same time warning of the danger of idolatry present in every image. The fathers of the Eastern Church utilized fierce landscape metaphors, rooted in their own spiritual experience of 'limit,' to provoke the emptiness and poverty-of-imagination out of which God- talk is properly begun. The stark metaphor of Sinai had a way of liming the imagination, emptying the mind of preconceived notions and stripping the self to enable one to encounter God beyond all one might anticipate. (Lane 1998: 104–105)

One encounters in the mountain 'the ineffable experience of "seeing" God', and this experience happens only 'with the weariness of poor wandering travellers who had passed that way, yearning for the solace of fierce landscapes', and there is an

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[23] The Carmelites accept the tradition that had been expressed in their oldest constitution of 1281 that from the time of Prophets Elijah and Elisha, the Mount Carmel has been the place of contemplation. That is why John of the Cross refers to Elijah as 'our Father Elijah' (AMC II, 8, 4: 175) who covered his face in front of God (1 Kings 19:11–13). John of the Cross also mentions the purpose of AMC in his prologue to AMC with reference to Mount Carmel: 'My main intention is not to address everyone, but only some of persons of our holy order of the primitive observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns, who God favours by putting on the path leading up this mount' (AMC, *Prologue*, 9: 118).

'ecstasy' in it (Lane 1998: 134). Lane explains the apophatic image of mountain by taking the two examples of Mount Sinai and Mount Tabor. Sinai represents the apophatic imagery while Tabor the kataphatic. He explains it like this:

> Sinai symbolizes the provocative, aniconic power of the apophatic tradition. Here God is discovered in a sparcity of images, in an absence of the clarity found at Tabor. Elijah meets Yahweh at the cave of Mount Horeb, not in the images of earthquake, wind, and fire, but in utter silence – beyond language and understanding. Moses asks to see the face of God but is shown only God's back. Divine accessibility is qualified by an equally zealous concern for divine freedom. The apophatic impulse of Sinai is to empty us of inadequate images, to destroy idolatries, to cut through all false conceptions of the holy. It boldly deconstructs every human attempt to capture and contain a God who dwells in thick darkness. (Lane 1998: 137)

In the above quote, the apophasis is so evident in the metaphor of Mount Sinai. In contrast to the apophatic imagery of Sinai, Tabor is all kataphatic. Lane explains it in this way:

> Tabor, by contrast, symbolizes the iconic, imaginative power of kataphatic tradition, given to artistic and intellectual expression. There, on the tree-covered slopes overlooking the plains of Galilee, God is found in a sharpness and lucidity of image. The mystery of incarnation is disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth, his clothes glistening and intensely white. There is no obscurity or confusion about what is seen. The disciples know themselves to have encountered the living God in human flesh. The kataphatic certainty of Tabor allows a brief contemplation of beauty and goodness made one. (Lane 1998: 137)

Lane would argue that the apophatic and kataphatic can never be separated when there is the God experience in the mystery of God. 'But these two ways of describing the mystery of God – the way of darkness and the way of light, the ambiguity of silence and the transparency of articulation – can never be separated' (Lane 1998: 137). In fact, in the writings of the John of the Cross, one can find such elements. At the end of the apophasis in John of the Cross, there is some unsayable sublime experience, which is passed on into silence. But that silence, again, could be taken as apophasis.

Let us take up the point that we ended in the last paragraph above – apophatism ends in kataphatism in the writings of John of the Cross. As we said it might look the same with John of the Cross. John of the Cross's negative way reaches in kataphatism. John of the Cross's negative way is positive. 'John shows no hesitation in speaking of contemplation or its object as "good," "divine," "satisfying," "loving," and so on; he does not argue that such terms are inapplicable, but only that they do not fully capture the reality encountered' (Payne 1990: 104). The negative way is only a means to reach that glorious splendour, and that is not the end in itself. In the scheme of John of the Cross, the end result is not an empty nihilism that does not affirm anything but a positive affirmation. It is in this connection we have to read what John of the Cross writes as the theme at the outset of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: 'They describe the way that leads to the summit of the mount – the high

state of perfection we here call union of soul with God' (AMC, *Theme*: 113).[24]
Again John of the Cross would mention the purpose of writing the book *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* in this way: 'The discrete reader must always keep in mind my intention and goal in this book: to guide the soul in purity of faith through all its natural and supernatural apprehensions, in freedom from deception and every obstacle, to divine union with God' (AMC II, 28, 1: 255). Thus, John of the Cross clearly mentions the goal of his negative way, the apophasis, is union with God, which is positive and affirmative.

Another metaphor in the writings of John of the Cross is that of the 'dark night'. What is it that is meant by 'dark night'? John of the Cross says: 'this dark night signifies here purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this negation of self and of all things' (DN I, 1, 1: 360). John will further explain what is *purgative contemplation* or *contemplative purgation* in DN II, 4, 1–2:

> One dark night,
> Fired with love's urgent longings
> -Ah, the sheer grace –
> I went out unseen,
> My house being now stilled. (DN I, 4, 1: 400)

After this stanza, John of the Cross explains the import this stanza, and it goes like this:

> Understanding this stanza now to refer to contemplative purgation or nakedness and poverty of spirit (which are all about the same), we can thus explain it, as though the soul says: Poor, abandoned, and unsupported by any of the apprehensions of my soul (in the darkness of my intellect, the distress of my will, and the affliction and anguish of my memory), left to darkness in pure faith, which is a dark night for these natural faculties, and with my will touched only by sorrows, afflictions, and longing of love of God, I went out from myself. That is, I departed from my own manner of understanding, and my feeble way of loving, and my poor and limited method of finding satisfaction in God. I did this unhindered by either flesh or the devil. This was great happiness and sheer grace for me, … I went out from my human operation and way of acting to God's operation and way of acting. … And finally, all the strength and affections of the soul, by means of this night and purgation of the old self, are renewed with divine qualities and delights. (DN I, 4, 1–2: 400–401)

In order to take the purgation facet we have mentioned above, let us consider the following. As we have mentioned in Chap. 4, in his two most prominent works,[25]

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[24] John of the Cross writes also in his *Prologue* to AMC: 'Our goal will be to explain, with God's help, all these points so that those who read this book will some way discover the road they are walking along, and the one they ought to follow if they want to reach the summit of this mount' (AMC, *Prologue*, 7: 117).

[25] *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night* are the most significant treatises of John of the Cross. 'Nowhere else does the genius of St. John of the Cross for infusing philosophy into his mystical dissertations find such an out as here. Nowhere else, again, is he quite so appealingly human; for, though he is human even in his loftiest and sublimest passages, this intermingling of philosophy with mystical theology makes him seem particularly so. These treatises are a wonderful illustration of the theological truth of grace, far from destroying nature, ennobles and dignifies it, and of the agreement always found between the natural and the supernatural – between the principles of sound reason and sublimest manifestation of Divine grace' (Peers 1959: 12).

first in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* John of the Cross explains the *active purifica-tions*, and then in his *The Dark Night* he explains the *passive purifications*.[26] John of the Cross mentions of two nights in his AMC. He writes:

> The first night or purgation, to which this stanza refers and which will be discussed in the first section of this book, concerns sensory part of the soul. The second night, to which the second stanza refers, concerns the spiritual part. We will deal with this second night, insofar as it is active, in the second and third section of the book. In the fourth section we will discuss the night insofar as it is passive. (AMC I, 1, 2: 119)

In the above quote the 'fourth section' of the book is mentioned, and it is about *The Dark Night*, and the first three sections that John mentions are with reference to his *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. God plays a dominant role in the *passive purification*, and the soul remains passive. There is an 'active' night of the senses and a 'passive' night of the soul. The 'active' nights are those moments when the individual is to 'make decisions' and 'passive' nights are those moments 'when God is more active' in an individual's life (Perrin 1997: 56). John of the Cross explicates further:

> Yet until soul is placed by God in the passive purgation of that dark night, which we will soon explain, it cannot purify itself completely of these imperfections or others. But people should insofar as possible strive to do their part in purifying and perfecting themselves and thereby merit God's divine cure. In this cure God will heal them of what through their own efforts they were unable to remedy. No matter how much individuals do through their own efforts, they cannot actively purify themselves enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love. God must take over and purge them in that fire that is dark for them. (DN I, 3, 3: 366–367)

Let us recall what we have stated in Chap. 4 that the *active nights* are four and *pas-sive nights* are three in John of the Cross's spiritual development model. The *passive nights* are passive night of the senses, active night of the spirit and finally the passive night of the spirit. 'It is the Passive Night of the Spirit which is commonly known as the "Dark Night of the Soul"' (Perrin 1997: 57), where the soul is utterly passive and God takes care of the soul (DN I, 3, 3: 366–367). When the soul surrenders to the divine will, the divine takes possession of the soul. The second stanza of DN is all about God's possession of the soul:

> In darkness, and secure,
> By the secret ladder, disguised,
> -Ah, the sheer grace! –
> In darkness and concealment,
> My house being now all stilled. (DN, 2: 358)

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[26] We have given an outline of the works of John of the Cross in relation to the metaphor of 'the dark night'. We are recapitulating the same here: The three books of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* are dedicated to the active night, while the two of the *Dark Night of the Soul* deal with the passive night. *The Spiritual Canticle* also treats these two nights in a broad way. Each one of the spheres undergoes an active and a passive purification. Thus, it is that the dark night is divided into four stages: active night of the sense (*Ascent*, book 1), active night of the spirit (*Ascent*, book 2 and 3), passive night of the sense (*Dark Night*, book 1) and passive night of the spirit (*Dark Night*, book 2) (Wilhelmsen 1993: 63).

The first line of the stanza says in 'darkness and secure' which means the soul is passive and is under the 'secure' care of God. 'The soul, too, when it advances, walks in darkness and unknowing. Since God, as we said, is the master and guide of the soul, this blind one can truly rejoice now that it has come to understand as it has here, and say: in darkness and secure' (DN II, 16, 8: 433). There is the darkness, for there is the self-abnegation of the soul, an apophasis. It is 'secure' for God takes care of it.[27]

The metaphor of 'dark night' stands for an apophasis. The apophasis is that of a 'negation of self and of all things' (DN I, 1, 1: 360). From the standpoint of an individual soul, everything is negated in the passive night. There is a negation of all 'natural faculties' (DN I, 4, 1: 400). When there is a negation of all faculties and all that an individual soul is, and then going to become something new, a *transformation* takes place. John of the Cross would put it in this way: 'by means of this night and purgation of the old self, are renewed with divine qualities and delights' (DN I, 4, 1–2: 400–401). This *transformation* is an apophasis; Lanzetta would explain it in this manner:

> …apophasis reflects the transformation of a person's core identity; performing in language the task that mystic performs in the dark night or great death experience, when a person's false identity is finally given away. The corollary to the negation concepts is the unsaying, undoing, and unwilling of the 'lower self' – that entity defined by the world of attraction, ego demand, and economy – to find the one thing necessary, the 'true self'. (Lanzetta 2005: 15)

Further, the apophasis is of the soul that 'walks in darkness and unknowing' (DN II, 16, 8: 433), and there is a self-abnegation of the soul in this journey. The soul undertakes 'dark contemplation' (DN II, 17, 1: 436) as there is an 'ineffability of divine language' (DN II, 17, 4: 436). The apophasis in 'dark contemplation' of the dark night, John of the Cross would explain in this way:

> Since the wisdom of this contemplation is the language of God to the soul, of Pure Spirit to pure spirit, all that is less than spirit, such as the sensory, fails to perceive it. Consequently this wisdom is secret to the senses; they have neither the knowledge nor the ability to speak of it, nor do they even desire to do so because it is beyond words. (DN II, 17, 4: 437)

The experience that the soul has and the wisdom it gets in the 'dark contemplation' are ineffable. John of the Cross would instruct us that the soul has no knowledge of it, has no ability to communicate to others and has no desire to tell others of it and the content of that contemplation is incommunicable.

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[27] John of the Cross in DN II, 16, 9–10 explains further why the soul is secure: 'There is another reason the soul walks securely in these darkness: It advances by suffering. Suffering is a surer and even more advantageous road than that of joy and action. First, in suffering, strength is given to the soul by God. In its doing and enjoying, the soul exercises its own weakness and imperfections. Second, in suffering, virtues are practiced and acquired, and the soul is purified and made wiser and more cautious. Another more basic reason the soul walks securely in darkness is that this light, or obscure wisdom, so absorbs and engulfs the soul in the dark night of contemplation and brings it so near God that it is protected and freed from all that is not God. Since the soul, as it were, is undergoing a cure to regain its health, which is God himself' (DN II, 16, 9–10: 433).

The apophasis of the metaphor of the *dark night*, in fact, would imply a self-abnegation of the soul which will end in transformation. All that the soul is, the affirmation facet, will be led to 'emptiness' in 'dark contemplation', the negation facet. 'This transition from affirmation to negation leads into dark night of the soul' (McManus 2010, 119), the apophasis of the dark night. In that transformation of the soul, there is positive and glorious content which is incommunicable, as there is an 'unspeakable majesty and grandeur' (SC 38, 8: 621) of God that the soul gets into. 'Contemplation is called "secret" not only because of one's inability to understand but also because of the effects it produces in the soul' (DN II, 17, 3: 436).

There are other metaphors in the writings of John of the Cross that bring home his apophasis. Among them the metaphor of *ascent* is a prominent one. It is well known that 'ascent' is also a metaphor in the mystical writings. 'Ascents of holy mountain peaks were often used to illustrate saints' powers, or spiritual progress' (della Dora 2016: 168) in the Christian writings. A classic example of 'ascent' imagery is found in John Climacus (525–606 AD), a mystic who had lived in a cave for 40 years. He took the metaphor further and wrote his famous *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Climacus 1982), 'a handbook of spiritual life destined to become the most popular text of the Orthodox Church after the Bible and service books' (della Dora 2016; 165). John of the Cross uses this *metaphor of ascent* very prominently in his writings, even naming his *magnum opus* as 'ascent' (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*).

The *ascent* to the summit is nothing but a 'spiritual ascent', where all that is of the mundane is relegated and negated. John of the Cross writes:

> The meaning is that those who ascend this mount of perfection to converse with God must not only renounce all things by leaving them at the bottom, but also restrict their appetites (the beasts) from pasturing on the mountainside, on things that are not purely God. For in God, or in the state of perfection, all appetites cease. (AMC I, 5, 6: 129)[28]

The end of that ascent is God. The soul ascends the summit of spiritual union with God. John of the Cross explains it:

> The reason is that since the state of perfection, which consists in perfect love of God and contempt for self, cannot exist without knowledge of God and of self, the soul necessarily must first be exercised in both. It is now given the one, in which it finds satisfaction and exaltation, and now made to experience the other, humbled until the ascent and descent cease through acquiring of the perfect habits. For the soul will then have reached God and united itself with him. He is at the end of the ladder and it is in him that ladder rests. (DN II, 18, 4: 439)

The apophasis in this *metaphor of ascent* is the *annihilation of self*[29] as John of the Cross puts it: 'the losing and annihilation of self' (DN II, 18, 4: 440). The self-denial is 'similar to a temporal, natural, and spiritual death in all things; that is with

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[28] John of the Cross would say further that: 'The road and ascent to God, then, necessarily demands a habitual effort to renounce and mortify the appetites; the sooner this mortification is achieved, the sooner the soul reaches to the top' (AMC I, 5, 6: 129).

[29] This abnegation of the self is the theme of the eighth stanza of The Dark Night. It goes like this:
I abandoned and forget myself,

Laying my face on my beloved;

regard to the esteem the will has for them' (AMC II, 7, 6: 170). There is a 'death to one's natural self through denudation and annihilation' (AMC II, 7, 7: 171). In this ascent, 'there is room only for self-denial' (AMC II, 7, 7: 171). Then, once the self-denial is fully achieved, the soul reaches the summit, the union with God.

Yet there is another facet of the apophasis in John of the Cross – the *feminine apophasis*. In this feminine apophasis 'the role of intimacy becomes the central metaphor' (Lanzetta 2008: 228). The intimacy expressed could be of intense love or of intense suffering. The *feminine apophasis* gets reflected in the metaphor of the *absence* of the 'Beloved'. As for instance we have the stanzas explaining the communication between the soul and the bridegroom in *The Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross. The stanzas go like this:

> Where have you hidden,
> Beloved, and left me moaning?
> You fled like a stag
> After wounding me;
> I went out calling you, but you were gone.
>
> Shepherds, you who go
> Up through the sheepfolds to the hill,
> If by chance you see
> Him I love most,
> Tell him I am sick, I suffer, and I die. (SC-CB, 1–2: 73–74)

In these stanzas we encounter the feminine apophasis. In the first stanza, the soul 'records her longings of love and complains to him of his absence, especially since his love wounds her' (SC I, 2: 478). Another facet of this *feminine apophasis*, where intimacy is the hallmark, is that the soul expresses the grief through intermediaries, which we find in the second stanza. 'The soul in this stanza desires the advantage of intercessors and intermediaries with her Beloved by begging them to bring him word of her grief and pain' (SC 2, 1: 486).[30] There is a deep intimacy of love and an intimate suffering due to the absence of the beloved. John of the Cross explicates:

> … him I love most. That is, by him I love more than all things. She loves him more than all things when nothing intimidates her in doing and suffering for love of him whatever is for his service. And when she can also say truthfully what she proclaims in the following verse, it is a sign that she loves him above all things. The verse is: tell him I am sick, I suffer, and I die. (SC 2, 4–5: 488).

There are other metaphors in the writings of John of the Cross, like gardens, *wilderness*, caves, rivers, jackals, beloved, fire and so on. In the Christian apophatic tradition, *desert* and *wilderness* are metaphors for *emptiness* and *nothingness*, an

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All things ceased; I went out from myself,
Leaving my cares
Forgotten among the lilies. (DN, stanza 8: 359)

[30] John of the Cross explains it further: 'This is the trait of a lover: When she herself cannot converse with her loved one, she does so through the best means possible. The soul wants to take advantage of her desire, affections, and moaning as messengers that know so well how to manifest to the Beloved the secret of the lover's heart. She entreats them to go, crying' (SC 2, 1: 486–487).

apophasis in metaphor. It also was a symbol of a superior world. Veronica della Dora in her latest work explains it in this way:

> The desert conjured up a degree of separation from 'the world' superior to any other place, for it was perceived as a vast and remote frontier land, a sort of uninhabited 'Antarctic continent.' At the same time, and perhaps more significantly, in the early Christian geographical imagination the desert was a *topos* overlaid by a plethora of other *topoi*. Its supposed emptiness was in reality a dense palimpsest of scriptural geographical imageries to which Athanasius and his readers could easily relate and from which they could in turn spiritually benefit. In other words, the desert provided the necessary vocabulary to articulate a new type of Christianity based on the repetition of its very prototypes. (della Dora 2016: 126–127)

In the similar way, true to the Christian tradition that sees the wilderness as place for spiritual growth, John of the Cross says of the 'desert' in his LFL that it *lacks* the worldly glories: *an apophasis*. In that absence of worldly pomp and show, there is glory of God. God will call the soul to desert, from the land of Egypt, where the mundane prosperity was evident and at the same time the yoke of slavery was on (LFL3, 38: 688). John of the Cross illuminates us like this:

> O spiritual master, guide it to the land of promise flowing with milk and honey. Behold that for this holy liberty and idleness of the children of God, *God calls the soul to desert* (italics is added for emphasis), where it journeys festively clothed and adorned with gold and silver jewels, since it has now left Egypt and been despoiled of its riches, which is the sensory part. (LFL 3, 38: 688)

It is in this desert or wilderness that the souls get the mystical wisdom. The souls feel the vastness of the wilderness where ordinary mortals do not tread on. John of the Cross speaks of the souls in desert experience of God's wisdom in this manner:

> They accordingly feel that they have been led into a remarkably deep and vast *wilderness* (italics is added for emphasis) unattainable by any human creature, into an immense, unbound *desert* (italics is added for emphasis), the more delightful, savorous, and loving, the deeper, vaster, and more solitary it is. They are conscious of being so much more hidden, the more they are elevated above every temporal creature. (DN II, 17, 6: 437)

The experience of the soul in the desert, the deprived place in human terms, is of divine presence and divine providence. John of the Cross writes: 'Those of whom God begins to lead into these *deserts* (italics is added for emphasis) solitudes are like children of Israel. When God began giving them the heavenly food…' (DN 1, 9, 5: 378). Thus, desert imagery shows a negation and deprivation in human terms but a plentifulness and abundance in divine terms. God gives them food to eat like manna (DN i, 9, 5: 379). Thus, in the metaphor of desert, there is a deprivation, negation and absence that are 'dry and empty' (DN I, 9, 4: 378) in human terms, but there is plentifulness, protection and grace under the care of God.

Having delineated five of the most representative *metaphors of apophasis* in John of the Cross, namely, imagery of mountain, dark night, ascent, the feminine apophasis and desert, we are in a position to submit that there is a rich repository of metaphors in his writings that drive home the apophasis, the negative way, which is peculiar to him. Thus, metaphors are meant for an apophasis in the negative way of John of the Cross.

6.3   Metonymy and Metaphor in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

We have looked at the analogies in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross as models of metaphors. But there are metonymic functions of analogies or allusions used in both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross. It could be seen more in the writings of John of the Cross than that of Nāgārjuna. A closer look at some of the analogies that John of the Cross makes use of will make plain the fact that many of them are not metaphors but metonymies. Lakoff and Johnson use the term metonymy in their *Metaphors We Live By*, and they define metonymy as 'imputing human qualities to things that are not human' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 35). In metonymy the expressions are used for things and places as if they are used for actual person. There is difference between metaphor and metonymy.

> Metaphor and metonymy are different *kinds* of processes. Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another. But metonymy is not merely a referential device. It also serves the function of providing understanding. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 36)

Metonymy serves some of the same purposes that metaphor does, though there is difference in their function, that is, metonymy has 'primarily a referential function', where we make use of 'one entity to stand for another' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 36). Metonymy 'is not just a matter of language' but part of our thinking, talking and acting (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 37).

In Nāgārjuna's MK we do not find much of the metonymic expressions. In MK 15, 6 (MK 15, 6: 117), MK 18, 8 (MK 18, 8: 157–158) and MK 24, 9 (MK 24, 9: 215), we discover the terms *Buddha-śāsana* used signifying the 'teaching' of the Buddha. This expression could be treated in the sense of an entire class of the Word of the Buddha (*Buddha-vacana*). Joseph Walser writes: 'The metonymic function of allusion will be vital for the Mahāyānists. When a Mahāyāna text alludes to a text already considered to be "word of the Buddha," it evokes not only the specific words and ideas contained in the target text but also the genre of "word of Buddha" texts as a whole' (Walser 2008: 168). Likewise when Nāgārjuna uses the term 'teaching' of the Buddha in his texts, it does signify the entire *corpus* of Buddha's teaching. It does not simply designate the particular teaching, but it denotes the whole of his teaching as a *corpus*. Another set of metonymies we come across in MK is its second chapter. In MK Chap. 2, Nāgārjuna uses the terms motion, rest and causation to denote 'change' (MK 2, 1–25: 33–42). Thus, we could find metonymic uses in the works of Nāgārjuna.

John of the Cross uses many metonymies in his works, much more than Nāgārjuna. As, for example, we take the third stanza of his *The Spiritual Canticle*:

> Seeking my love
> I will head for the mountains
> And for watersides;
> I will not gather flowers,

> Not fear wild beast;
> I will go beyond strong men and frontiers. (SC-CB 3: 74)

In this stanza, the first line mentions of my 'love' and here love stands for the 'beloved' or the 'bridegroom'. Another example is in stanza 13 of *The Spiritual Canticle*:

> Withdraw then, Beloved,
> I am taking flight!
> *Bridegroom*
> -Return, dove,
> The wounded stag
> Is in sight on the hill,
> Cooled by the breeze of your flight. (SC-CB 1: 75–76)

In this stanza the terms 'dove' and 'stag' both stand for the 'bride'. Further one can see in *The Living Flame of Love* stanza 3:

> O lamps of fire!
> In whose spenders
> The deep caverns of feeling,
> Once obscure and blind,
> Now give forth so rarely, so exquisitely,
> Both warmth and light to their Beloved. (LFL 3: 640)

Here in the first line, 'lamps of fire' stand for individual 'soul'.[31] In his *A Romance on the Psalm By the Waters of Babylon*, John of the Cross uses yet another metonymy:

> By the rivers
> Of Babylon
> I sat down weeping,
> There on the ground.
> And remembering you,
> O Zion, whom I loved,
> In that sweet memory
> I wept even more.

In this stanza, the expression is used for Zion as if it were to be an actual person. Thus, one can find a number of metonymies in the works of John of the Cross. 'Metonymy functions actively in our culture' and 'not merely a matter of language' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 37). The apophasis element in metonymy might be insignificant. But it goes side by side with metaphors.

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[31] John of the Cross writes: 'It is noteworthy that the delight received by the soul in the rapture of love, communicated by fire of the light of these lamps, is wonderful and immense, for it is as abundant as it would be if it came from many lamps. Each lamp burns in love, and the warmth from each furthers the warmth of the other, and the flame of one, the flame of the other, just as the light of one sheds light on the other, because through each attribute the other is known. Thus all of them are one light and one fire, and each of them is one light and one fire' (LFL 3, 5: 674–675).

6.4   Semiotics, Apophasis and Metaphor in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

Semiotics and semiosis, although, are dealt within linguistics[32]in contemporary studies, we take the meaning of 'semiotics' in the sense that it is the study of signs and sign process where symbolism and signification play a major role in communication. There could be a subtle difference between semiosis and semiotics. 'Semiosis is the process or activity of sign production – the signing rather than the signs themselves, the indicating rather than the indications, the inscribing rather than the inscriptions' (Silverman 1998: 1). When it comes to semiotics, 'the key element to any semiotics or semiology is the signifier' (Silverman 1998: 1). Semiotics is the systematic study of signs. Semiotics also studies nonlinguistic sign apparatuses (Van den Braembussche 2009: 229–247). In recent times the discussion on semiotics has widened in its meaning and scope, and every cultural and religious phenomenon can be studied as communication[33] (Caesar 1999: 55).

The negative way that we encounter in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross could also be interpreted as some kind of semiotic paradigm. The apophasis and metaphors we have analysed above, both in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, make room for us to consider them as part of semiotics. Further, if we take into consideration the remarkable analysis of Susanne K. Langer (Langer 1957), the limits of language could not be the limits of meaningful experience; what we have been suggesting with regard to apophasis and metaphors in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross gets augmented. Langer would say: 'Language is symbolical, but in communication it does more than express conceptions; it describes, but it also points' (Langer 1957: 229). In this, there is a transformation of symbols or as she calls it a 'symbolic transformation' (Langer 1957: 21–41). The cue that we get from Susanne K. Langer's explication on symbolism and semiotics of music (Langer 1957: 179–184) informs us that feelings revealed in music are not just passions and longings but much more than all that. If we apply the same to the apophatic and metaphoric symbolisms of the negative way that we encountered in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, we could submit that it is an *emblematic symbol* in Nāgārjuna, whereas it is a *figurative symbol* in John of the Cross, which of conviction, faith, surrender and love in God.

Silence is a key concept in both Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross as a paradigm of their negative way of *śūnyatā* and *nada*. Louis Renou (Renou 1949: 11–18) argued that the silence, with intent of refraining from verbalisation and philosophically motivated negative way, is not just a mere absence of semiotics. It is indeed a

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[32]Let us make it clear: 'Semiotics is usually divided into three fields: Semantics, the study of meaning, syntactic, the study of (surface "grammatical" and also deep) structure, and pragmatics, which deals with the extra-linguistic purposes and effects of communications' (Lyon 2005: 864).

[33]This is the thesis of Umberto Eco (1976, 1979). Let us also mention here about the thinkers who have dealt with the theories in semiotics including Charles S. Peirce, Ferdinand Saussure and Umberto Eco (Caesar 1999; Berger 1998; Danesi 1994; Noeth 1990). We also take into account the works of Roland Barthes (Barthes 1990) (who had interest in and exploitation of Ferdinand Saussure's theory) on semiotics.

semiotic sign in its own right. Taking into consideration the silence, apophasis and metaphors that one encounters in the works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, one is of the strong opinion that the semiotic intent of apophasis and metaphors in both these thinkers is unmistakable. Silence stands for apophasis or it signifies apophasis.

The notion of silence in Nāgārjuna is not a mystical silence. Let us recall what we have quoted from Jay L. Garfield in the third chapter: 'Mādhyamika provides a non-mystical, immanent characterization of the nature of reality, of limits of thought and language, and of the nature of our knowledge of Two *Truths* about *one reality*' (Garfield 2002: 182). Again Graham Priest and Jay L. Garfield would argue that Nāgārjuna 'is committed to the cannon of rational argument and criticism. He is not a mystic. He believes that reasoned argument can lead to the abandonment of error and to knowledge' (Priest and Garfield 2002: 260). Nāgārjuna shows the untenability of intellectual enterprise and thereby guides us to get rid of such viewpoints (MK 13, 8: 108–109 and MK 27, 30: 258–259) which will lead one to nirvāṇa (MK 25, 3: 228–229). Nāgārjuna explains what is nirvāṇa in his MK 25, 3 (MK 25, 3: 228–229).[34] When Nāgārjuna says what is nirvāṇa in MK 25, 3: 'Nāgārjuna has something deeper in his mind' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 292). We cannot just ignore the silence of the Buddha if we analyse it in the light of Nāgārjuna's explication of *śūnyatā*, which stands for semiotics, apophasis and metaphor in Nāgārjuna's thought.

The silence in John of the Cross has a mystical overtone. John of the Cross says: 'Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God with the appetite and with the tongue, for the only language he hears is the silent language of love' (L 8: 742). As we have mentioned in Chap. 4, the silence in John of the Cross is also referring to the inability of human conceptual elaboration to map the nature of God. One has to silence all the conceptual constructions of the three faculties that John of the Cross explains in his AMC, namely, intellect, will and memory, to reach God. He says:

> All these sensory means and exercises of the faculties must consequently be left behind and in *silence* (italics added) so that God himself may effect divine union in the soul. As a result one has to follow this method of disencumbering, emptying, and depriving the faculties of their natural authority and operations to make room for the inflow and illumination of the supernatural. Those who do not turn their eyes from their natural capacity will not attain to so lofty communication; rather they will hinder it. (AMC III, 2, 2: 268)

Even silencing of the forms and images are needed in the negative way of John of the Cross. John of the Cross advises that 'a person who wants to arrive at union with the Supreme Repose and Good in this life must climb all the steps, which are

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[34] Inada's translation of MK 25, 3 goes like this: 'What is never cast off, seized, interrupted, constant, extinguished, and produced… this is called nirvana' (Inada 1993: 154). Siderits and Katsura's translation goes like this: 'Not abandoned, no acquired, not annihilated, not eternal, not ceased, not arisen, thus is nirvana said to be' (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 291). Garfield's translation is 'Unrelinquished, unattained, unannihilated, nor permanent, unarisen, unceased: this is how nirvana is described' (Garfield 1995: 323). Kalupahana's translation goes like this: 'Unrelinquished, not reached, unnihilated, non-eternal, non-ceased and non-arisen – this is freedom' (Kalupahana 2006: 557).

considerations, forms, and concepts, and leave them behind, since they are dissimilar and unproportioned to the goal toward which they lead' (AMC II, 12, 5: 187). Even he is asking his audience to discontinue the discursive meditation as he remarks that 'one ought to discontinue discursive meditation (work through images, forms and figures)' (AMC II, 13, 1: 189). This is because God has no form or figure: 'God cannot be encompassed by any image, form, or particular knowledge' and we 'should not be limited by any particular form or knowledge' (AMC II, 16, 7: 201). Thus, we encounter in John of the Cross form, figures, meditation, visions and all are to be negated and silenced (AMC II, 17, 9: 209; II, 18, 1–9: 210–213).

Thus, what we have been pointing out so far is the semiotics of the negative way that we find in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross with their scheme of apophasis and metaphors. Nāgārjuna's semiotics in his apophasis and metaphors is – as seen in his way of analysing, deconstructing and negating any sort of postulated substantiality of an entity with its self-nature or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) claim – to get rid of the constructed, fictitious, posited views and viewpoints. John of the Cross's semiotics in his apophasis and metaphors is – as seen in his paradigm of silencing of the faculties of intellect, will and memory and purging of desires and senses – for a self-abnegation of the individual soul to have the final essenceless union with God. Nāgārjuna's semiotics is not mystical, but philosophical, whereas John of the Cross's is mystical, philosophical and theological. Thus, there is a similarity in approach but difference in the goal in the scheme of their negative ways.

6.5   Conclusion: Of Nothingness

We have come to the conclusion of this work. As we find in one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Psalms echoed in his poetry: 'Empty and tired of praying, of thinking, or working; Exhausted and ready to bid farewell to it all' (Bonhoeffer 2002: 145), the nothingness we have been discussing is empty. It is empty in thought, speech and act (*śūnyatā* in *manasā*, *vācā* and *karmaṇā*). So Nāgārjuna says in MK's concluding verse to abandon all views (MK 27, 30: 258–259), for even emptiness of emptiness is empty.

The negative way is not nihilism in Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna is only against any sort of hypostatisation. Nāgārjuna says in MK 22, 15: 'All those who hypostatize (conceptualize) the Buddha, the one who is beyond all sorts of conceptualization (*prapañcātīta*), they all are misled by the very conceptualization and do not see the Buddha' (MK 22, 15: 195). Further he would say in MK 25, 24: 'The pacification (cessation) of cognizing everything as having an objective entity; and pacification (cessation) of hypostatization (conceptualization) is auspicious. At no time and in no place any noble teaching (of doctrine) was imparted (taught) by the Buddha' (MK 25, 24: 236–237). Nāgārjuna's method is critical, and 'criticism entails dialectical consciousness. Dialectic means, first, the awareness of the conflict in Reason, and secondly, an attempt to resolve it' (Chatterjee 1989: 193) with the help of same reason. It is not nihilism, positivism nor any theory, but it is *prajñā*, wisdom, itself.

Śūnyatā is not only the negation of all views, but it is *prajñā*, the highest wisdom which is an insight. 'This insight has no content – i.e., its content is void. It is non-sensuous and nonconceptual, although it is rational in the sense that it is developed through a rational procedure' (Potter 1991: 238).

The negative way is not pessimism, denial of life or sheer negation in John of the Cross. 'John of the Cross does not write an ode to dejection, but brags as lustily as chanticleer if only to wake us up' (Dombrowski 1992: 17). It is not at all a philosophy of negative attitude to life, as William James's prejudiced eyes saw (James 1929: 299)[35] but a philosophy that goes beyond the gloom of life. The insight through which one sees the real nature of the highest reality is called 'spiritual vision' in John of the Cross. John of the Cross says: 'The soul, even while in body, can see these objects by means of a certain supernatural light derived from God that bestows the powers of seeing all heavenly and earthly objects that are absent' (AMC II, 24, 1: 240). There is still a 'higher vision' to see the incorporeal things which John of the Cross calls as 'the light of glory.' He writes: 'The other visions, those of incorporeal substance, cannot be seen by means of this light derived from God, but by another, higher light, called the light of glory' (AMC II, 24, 2: 240). Furthermore, John of the Cross asserted that the experience in the negative way could only be experienced; and it can never be known or seen by the intellect, as he says that 'they can nonetheless be felt in the substance of the soul by the most delightful touches and conjunctions' (AMC II, 24, 4: 241). John of the Cross brings it under 'the category of spiritual feelings' (AMC II, 24, 4: 241).

Let me conclude with *silence* and *dark night* of John of the Cross, the apophasis and nothingness. The nothingness of John of the Cross could have an echo in the words of Bonhoeffer:

> Of course, all beginnings are difficult. One may undertake this and at the start find it quite empty. But it does not stay like that. Persist and before long the soul awakes and begins to gain strength. Then comes the eternal rest, which is found in the love of God. Then the troubles and distresses are silenced, the unrest and the hatred, the alarms and the cries, tears and anxieties – all are stilled in the presence of God: 'My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him.' It is the law of the world that it cannot give rest and peace. Only in God there is stillness and rest. Augustine, the great church father, found the right words from this: 'You have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you'. (Bonhoeffer 2002: 31)

In this nothingness we will be silent. And 'when we are wrapped in silence most profound, may we hear that song most fully raised' (Bonhoeffer 1998: 102). John of the Cross had full trust in the 'dark night' and it was that *dark night* gave him hope for the future. So night, dark night, is welcome.

> Night, quench the fire that burns,
> Send to me full forgetfulness,
> Be kind to me, night, and perform your gentle art,
> To you I entrust myself (Bonhoeffer 1998: 22).

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[35] John of the Cross, 'a Spanish mystic who flourished – or rather who existed, for there was little that suggested flourishing about him – in the sixteenth century…' (James 1929: 299).

> But the night is strong and wise,
> Stronger than the day and wiser than me.
> What no earthly power can do,
> Where thinking and feeling, defiance and tears must fail,
> The night showers its full riches upon me. (Bonhoeffer 1998: 23)

Day is not wiser, though our day seems to be wiser. Day is finite, and day can be known. It is better to trust night than day. Similarly, it is better to trust apophasis than kataphasis.

Let me have one more point stated to go over the main points in this work. Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist and his *Sitz im Leben* is also Buddhist. Among the Buddhists he is a Mādhyamika who follows the Buddha's middle way avoiding the extremes. He takes recourse to the *Buddha-vacana*, the word of the Buddha, and interprets the Buddhist thought to his fellow Buddhists to eradicate, as he is convinced, what is not in conformity with the Buddha's teaching (*Buddha-śāsana*). He is a philosopher *par excellence*, but it would be incorrect to label him merely as a philosopher distancing him from his Buddhist conviction and lineage as a monk. Nāgārjuna is Nāgārjunian, and he is not a Kantian, Vedāntin, Wittgensteinian or Derridean. He has his own *locus standi* in the realm of thought. The sole goal in his negative way of *śūnyatā* is an uncompromising Buddhist religious-*cum*-spiritual life and not just some sort of hair-splitting analysis of things in an arid abstraction. Similarly is John of the Cross, he is with a Christian philosophical-*cum*-theological anchorage, explicating to his fellow Carmelites the real import of *nada* that paves way for the ascent to have the sublime union with God accomplished.

The import of 'the negative way' we have discussed in this book is not exactly the *via negativa* of theological discourse, but it is much more than that. Perhaps, it might have much in common with the 'apophasis' used in contemporary philosophical discourse, particularly in continental thought and in postmodern/postsecular theology. Our philosophical project here is to find the shades of the negative way that we find in the notions of *śūnyatā* and *nada* in the works of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross, whom I deem as the most representative thinkers-*cum*-religious practitioners of the *negative way* from two of the great traditions, Buddhism and Christianity. And we conclude, as Rainer Maria Rilke said:

> I believe in all that have never yet been spoken
> I want to free what waits within me
> So that what no one has dared to wish for
> May for once spring clear
> Without my contriving. (Rilke 2005: 1.12: 65)

Having dealt with the notion of *śūnyatā* in Nāgārjuna and *nada* in John of the Cross, we have undone everything. Nietzsche's wise saying reflects what we have been doing: 'We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? … But no! with the real world we have abolished the apparent world!' (Nietzsche 2003: 51). What remains is only nothingness: *śūnyatā* and (*la*) *nada*. And 'this is the end – for me the beginning of life' (Bonhoeffer 2002: 155).

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