A Middle Way Way of Emptying Dualism in Social Theory

Abstract

A variety of theories in the social science, as profound as they may seem, cannot break away from “either-or” dualism. In which, many of them assume dualistic substantialisms in terms of the dichotomies like: methodological individualism vs. methodological collectivism; positivistic sociology vs. interpretivist sociology; agency vs. structure, and so on. In addition to that, there is also another kind of dualistic dichotomy, that is, universalism vs. relativism, or nihilism. Many sociological theories are ensnared into one of these views and cling to it as the only right one. What I am trying to articulate in this paper is to submit an application of Buddhist middle way perspective to the critique of dualism, substantialism and nihilism in social theory. I try to articulate the core concepts in middle way, which are emptiness, dependent co-arising and nominal designation, as well as three related ways of thinking, non-dualty, relationality and processuality, and thereby their implications for social theory.
A variety of theories in the social science, as profound as they may seem, that cannot break away from “either-or” dualism. In which, many of them assume dualistic substantialisms in terms of the “either-or” dichotomies like: methodological individualism vs. methodological collectivism; positivistic sociology vs. interpretivist sociology; agency vs. structure, and so on. In addition to that, there is also another kind of dualistic dichotomy, that is, universalism vs. relativism, or nihilism. Many sociological theories are ensnared into one of these views and cling to it as the only right one. What I am trying to articulate in this paper is to submit an application of the Buddhist middle way perspective to the critique of such dualism in social theory.

Through the demolition of the two-extreme views, Buddhist Madhyamika (Middle way perspective) polemics are presented to unfold its own non-dualistic, non-substantialist and non-nihilistic view. According to the middle way perspective, based on the notion of emptiness, dependent co-arising and nominal designation, phenomena exist in a relative and nominal way, that is, they are empty of any kind of inherent and independent existence. In other words, phenomena are dependently arisen in relation to the dependent arising of other phenomena. Phenomena are regarded as dependent events existing relationally and processually rather than permanent things, which have their own entity. Besides, phenomena are non-substantial and nominally true. To be true in this sense is to be true in virtue of a particular linguistic convention. Thus, the extreme of substantialism should be refuted. By the same token, dependent co-arising is something more than just none, or non-existent. Because if a thing is non-existent, how could it have a condition? Without condition how can we talk about something like non-existent? Therefore, nihilism is unacceptable too. The insight of emptiness, dependent co-arising and nominality are therefore central to Madhyamika.

Inspired by Nagarjuna’s non-dualistic, non-substantialist and non-nihilistic middle way perspective, the attempt of this research is to form a critical response to the “either-or” dichotomization in sociological methodologies and theories, by subjecting various theories in social science to a critical scrutiny. Nagarjuna’s middle way perspective emerges as a relational-processual approach, based on the insight of emptiness, dependent co-arising and nominal designation, can transcend the dualism between methodological individualism and collectivism, positivistic and interpretist sociology, universalism and relativism or nihilism, and also the agency/structure dichotomization.

1.1 Problematizing Methodological Individualism

Social science today is obliged to overcome the fundamental delusion of assuming
the individual as an inherently and independently self-existent substance and affirming
individual on the assumption of “methodological individualism” that assert that social
phenomena can be adequately explained by showing that they are the outcome of
individual behaviors. The individual conceived by methodological individualism is often
seen as an absolutely rational, inherently disengaged subject, which assumes a Cartesian
maxim, “I think, therefore I am” (cogito, ergo sum).¹ This is seen as Descartes’
“Archimedian Fulcrum,” the single fixed point of certainty by which he believed he could
move out of his world of doubt. The self is perceived as a thinking interior—res
cogitans—without extension (such as its relatedness with others) or materiality (which
are the attributes of bodies). Descartes declares that he existed as a mind distinct from
any extended body—res extensa. And with this distinction—the infamous “Cartesian
mind-body dualism” and its derived subject-object dualism—the origination of sociology
was being mostly dualistic and substantialist and part of them become methodologically
individualistic that asserts a conscious self as an indubitable point of certainty concerning
the explanation of social phenomena.

Alternatively, some thinkers of methodological individualism propose the
assumption of homo oeconomicus² that postulates individual as a rational maximizer of
self-interest that attributes the causal precedence of all human actions. For example, most,
if not all, rational-choice theories are based on the model of the homo oeconomicus. Due
to its simple mathematical structure, this model is becoming increasingly popular in the
social sciences.

Moreover, some social theorists assume “homo psychologicus” as a bearer of
volitions, in which variables such as the perception or sensation of individual is
considered the primal cause of social phenomena. This approach implies the introduction
of a subjective (and, therefore, strictly psychological) component into sociology. Various
kinds of methodological individualism share at least one thing in common, namely, their
excessively voluntaristic view of human social life in terms of active decision-making
and strategizing by the individual with free will. According to the middle way perspective,
this view tends to substantialize the individual and its action and is thus unable to explain
the changing social conditions and consequences of the existence of the individual.
Unless we can move beyond the view of the substantiality of the individual and recognize
the emptiness of it we can hardly ever understand the dependent co-arising of the social

¹ Ayer, A. J., “I think, therefore I am” From Modern Studies in Philosophy –Descartes – A Collection of
² In my opinion, this is a kind of imperialism of economism, which asserts an atomized, individualized and
egoistical (self-interested) view of social actors.
1.2 Problematizing Methodological Collectivism

On the other hand, some social theories postulate so-called “methodological collectivism” by asserting “social facts” as things (or entities, essences, systems) in which there exists a reality *sui generis* that is completely external to and coercive of the individual and cannot be reduced to individual psychological attributes. According to this perspective, social phenomena can be explained by invoking the properties of social entities that are irreducible to the individual. Closely connected with the objectivism of the scientistic approach, methodological collectivism treats wholes like society, the economy or a particular institution as definitely given entities about which we can discern social logics by observing their structural operation as wholes. While the individualist approach of sociology starts from our knowledge of the inside of individual’s actions that is active to construct “the social,” methodological collectivism tries to view social phenomena from the outside. It treats social phenomena not as something of which the individual action is an active part, but as if they were entities solidly alleged by us as wholes.

For collectivists, entities like “the social,” “nations,” “classes” have, in some sense, a real existence over and above the lives and minds of the individuals. This substantialist view of “the social” tends to ultimately become anthropomorphism which assumes social entities with human characteristics and with a life of their own. As Durkheim stated: “If society is to be considered as the normal goal of moral conduct, then it must be possible to see in it something other than a sum of individuals; it must constitute a being *sui generis*, which has its own special character distinct from that of its members and its own individuality different from that of its constituent individuals. In a word, there must exist, in the full meaning of the word, a social being. On this condition only is society able to perform the moral function that the individual cannot.” In addition, methodological collectivism also refers to modern social theories –structuralism, structural-functionalism,

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3 Durkheim argued that “the social” was in fact an autonomous reality, called a “society”. This “society” was, argued Durkheim, an entity in its own right. It did not depend upon the intentions and motivations of individuals for its continued existence. “Society” is, argued Durkheim, a reality *sui generis*. Society is a thing-like entity which exists on its own terms. Thus “social” or society had a life and logic of its own. Sociology, for Durkheim, is a science of proving that there exists a social reality, as *sui generis*, which cannot be reduced to social or individual psychological foundations. Thus, it is society, as an entity, that creates individuals.

structuralist-Marxism, statistical “variable” analyses, and so forth – which give ontological status to structure or system and thus grants them an explanatory primacy. According to the middle way perspective, methodological collectivism is also flawed by its substantialized and fixated view of “the social.”

1.3 Problematizing Positivistic Sociology

Furthermore, positivistic sociology, using the method developed in natural science, engages an even more radicalized realist and objectivist sociology. Thus, the belief in the correspondence between sociology and social reality became ingrained deeply in the social imaginary of many sociologists. While quantified method and its application enthrall most of sociology, the practitioners believe that they are doing natural science of society. However, while natural science creates statistics from universes of millions of units, the social science develops with universes of symbolically mediated and meaning-embedded people. While the methods of statistical analysis become more and more sophisticated, and went from the descriptive to the inferential, the scientific quest for certainty or truth, proclaimed by positivistic sociology turned out to be self-contradictory, uncertain and arbitrary. The credibility of its truth-claim became lost, mutated, and shaky. Nevertheless, today, quantitative analysis is still rigorous in most sociology departments in spite of the huge amount of work it produces with the deplorable follow-through of a payoff. In other words, positivistic sociologists’ understanding of the social and of humanity has not improved “proportionally” to the output of their works. What happened is that, the processing of data on the human units from which this data stems is basically disengaged and disconnected from their social practice, which is supposed to be relational and processual, and hermeneutical.

The positivistic sociologists hold that the external social world is what it is, inherently real, independent of people’s consciousness, knowledge, judgment, beliefs, hopes, wishes, or fears – that social facts are facts. That nominal A is real A, that “the socials” are what they are. They suppose that the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by the senses is completely reliable and fully competent to know the facts of “the social.” Some even believe that since “what is” is true, it can be applied to the practical world and be the basis of value judgment, that is, “what ought to be.” In addition, just as scientific logic is the only guide to knowledge, so it is also the solitary cone-shaped tool to the logic of practice. According to the middle way perspective, so called “the absolutely inherent,” “independent” and “external” social reality is untenable and thereby unidentifiable by any means. There is no such thing as fixated fact that exists “out there” and can be perceived by our “transparent” sense faculties. Besides, our sense
faculties are not as transparent as positivists thought, we have horizons, traditions, social involvements, values, beliefs, desires and fears that always come prior to, in time with or subsequent to our sense experience. Therefore, positivistic sociology is problematic in this sense.

1.4 Problematizing Interpretist Sociology

In order to overcome the fallacy of positivistic sociology, some sociologists turn to emphasize the importance of the subjective consciousness for the understanding of social phenomena. Interpretist sociology presumably rejects any notion of positivistic approach to human enquiry. It holds that interpretive understanding (or verstehen) is the only proper means to “grasp” the subjective meaning of individual’s action, which is taken by interpretists to be the only “real” cause of social phenomena. Whether it is an interpretation of historical event, text and contemporary social occurrence, interpretists reply upon empathetic understanding and intuitive grasping of the meaning of actions, beliefs, and epochs which come from a total immersion, in an attempt to “re-present” the original intentions of the individuals. Sociological interpretism does have a significant contribution in understanding social phenomena. For example, Schutzian phenomenology, inspired by Weberian insight, tries to reinterpret Weber’s ideal type methodology in order to make a more objective analysis of meaning of commonsensical social world. He utilizes the concept of “typification” to describe the true type of meaning of people’s actions. The interpretism of Schutzian’s, however, still obsessed with an objectifying attitude that still assumes that there is something certain to be grasped. In order to capture a more objective outer meaning, Schutzian phenomenology attempts to offer theoretical techniques and methods (typification) for better illuminating the human meanings of social life with a detached “objectifying” attitude to the context in question. This is pretty much similar to the externalist point of view proposed by positivists. According to the middle way perspective, this ambiguous combination of subjectivism and objectivism is still obsessed by its substantialist assumption of the social world and human experience. It still imagines a graspable “thing” in the social world and human experience. However, both social world and human experience are empty of any graspable essence. They arise co-dependently, thus, their existences are relational and processual and thereby ungraspable.

1.5 Problematizing Relativism and Nihilism

Overall, methodological individualism, methodological collectivism, positivistic sociology and interpretist sociology are substantialist in different respects. They all assume something existing inherently and independently and as a result can be captured
by the right method from the correct epistemological position. By contrast, in opposition to the substantialist view of the self and “the social,” a relativist or nihilistic trend emerges by abandoning the possibility of unity of the self and the validity of socially constructed reality. In relativist tone, all points of view are equally valid, this means all values are equally right and all beliefs and worldviews are equally true. According to the middle way perspective, this view is incoherent because it will destroys its own claim by accepting the other’s claim: “that relativism is wrong.” Besides, relativism also abandons the possibility of dynamic mutual influence and mutual understanding between relatively different views. It also undermines people’s learning capacity and their trying to learn and embrace the other’s views and traditions.

Relativism, in common with substantialism, ignores the possibility of social change that involves interchange and interdependency between different social conditions. In other words, relativism is still dualistic, non-relational and non-processual. Moreover, nihilistic tendency in social sciences attempts to claim the death of subjectivity as well as “the end of the social.” Indeed, by criticizing the power effect of substantialist theories, some thinkers leap to a totally opposite propaganda, that is, the nihilistic view of the world, which falsifies any perspective that affirms a foundation or a structural property of society or individual. Baudrillard, one of the post-modernists, for example, in his 1978 text “In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities,”5 proclaimed “the end of the social” by saying that ‘the energy of the social is reversed, its specificity is lost, its historical quality and its ideality vanish in favor of a configuration where not only the political becomes volatilised, but where the social itself no longer has any name.’ (1978:18-19) Others, such as Bauman (1989), provide examples of sociological approach without subject, and try to drain the subjectivity of any possible meaning, content or responsibility.6 However, despite their anti-substantialist views, such nihilistic approach, whether at the social or the individual level, is still unacceptable for their total refusal of the conventionally and practically meaningful social construction of reality, the co-arising and co-ceasing of all kinds of social relations and structures, and the formation of disposition (habitus) of individuals. The nihilistic break with solidified substantialism seems to be an insightful moment of de-reified thinking. But it also abandons the belief in the existence of ultimate truth, as well as the conventional truth. It proclaims non-existence. This move is even more problematic simply because nihilism is still trapped negatively in the reified and fixated view of reality, by seeing the world as non-existent, as completely void, which ignores the dynamic becoming of the phenomenal world. But they fail to carry out a


second and more difficult break away from their own rigidified nihilism. Sociologically speaking, just like substantialism, the nihilistic discourse also becomes part of social reality, or power/knowledge complex, which inevitably incurs power effect, another (anti-) theory intervention of the social world, so to speak. That is why Habermas accounts some postmodernists as young or neo-conservativists, who can barely be constructive but destructive. Thus, I strongly believe, sociology, as a self-reflexive discipline, should include a reflexive sociology that examines the intellectual construction of the socially constructed reality in which it contributes to the construction, or destruction, of this world. Sociologists, including relativists and nihilists, therefore should be aware of their possible detriment to social life in terms of their knowledge production.

1.1.6 Overcoming Dualism

In order to overcome the essentialized dualism between methodological collectivism and individualism, positivism and interpretism, and transcend the extreme polarization between substantialism and nihilism, social theories should find a middle path beyond two extremes and propose a non-substantialist and non-nihilistic approach, or a relational-processual perspective, so to speak. Presupposing the right method and the correct epistemological position in order to quest for certainty, or, by contrast, presupposing the non-existence of any right method and correct epistemological position, are symptoms of what Richard Berstein calls “Cartesian Anxiety.” “Cartesian Anxiety” is based on a dualistic way of thinking, which assumes that only two options are available for those who inquire into matters of knowledge and action:

Either some ultimate ground of knowledge and action exists, some objective and ahistorical foundation against which claims to know can be measured and the utility of actions ascertained, or we are beset by relativistic skepticism and are unable to speak of knowledge or “justified” action in any meaningful sense. We are enveloped, in the latter case, by moral and intellectual chaos that form an ever-expanding plurality of positions. This opposition, states Bernstein, includes a ‘variety of other contrasts that indicate the same underlying anxiety: rational versus irrationality, objective versus subjective, realism versus antirealism.’

From the middle way perspective, these approaches and their methodological and epistemological presuppositions are problematic in some way due to their dualistic, non-relational and non-processual way of thinking. The dualistic way of thinking of either extreme asserts the absoluteness of its view and simultaneously excludes the other

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extreme. Actually, dualism must presuppose duality, or relativity, and any extreme therefore arises dependently and relatively in relation to the other, even if no one consciously acknowledges that. In this sense, absolutism of each end is self-contradictory. Besides, the absolutist attitude of relativism and nihilism in antagonism to the absolutist attitude of absolutism is itself self-contradictory too. Relativism and nihilism should not be absolute. Therefore, every view, taken as exclusively irreplaceable, ultimately turns into self-contradiction. Clinging to the afore-mentioned two-extremes, one is necessarily led to contradictions and dead ends. If sociology accepts such a dichotomous division, then we either swing from one extreme (say, substantialism) to another extreme (nihilism), or reject the validity of the whole enterprise of thought altogether, or subjecting ourselves to self-exile in an intellectual wasteland. According to the middle way perspective, this is unacceptable. Thus, in order to transcend this “either-or” situation, we must deconstruct the symptomatic assumption of both extremes for their fallacy of thinking dualistically, non-relationally and non-processually. It is therefore important for us to gain knowledge of the insight of the Buddhist middle way philosophy in order to better contemplate a more inclusive sociological way of seeing the social reality.

2. The Implication of Middle Way Perspective for Social Theory

_Madhyamika_ (Middle Way) is one of the philosophical schools of Mahayana Buddhism, founded by Nagarjuna, in the second century C.E., who came from Southern India to the Buddhist university of Nalanda, where he engaged in a fundamental debate with other schools in Indian philosophy. Nagarjuna accepted neither the belief in eternal existence (either the self or Brahman), nor the attachment to the view of non-existence. In order to transcend these two extremist viewpoints asserted by different schools of Indian thought, inspired by Buddha's teaching that everything is impermanent and devoid of self-nature and his doctrine of dependent co-arising, Nagarjuna proposed his _Madhyamika_, the middle way perspective. The emergence of the _Madhyamika_ was a far-reaching turning point in the progression of Buddhist thought in terms of which the untenability of substantialism of early Buddhism is established. Henceforth, _Madhyamika_ Buddhism gave a new direction to Indian philosophy as such.

The perspective of the middle way rejects both extremes of substantialism and nihilism, and espouses the middle way as the true attitude of practice and contemplation, which implies a balanced view and approach to life. However, while the word “middle” denotes balance, the middle way should not be confused with passivity, nihility or a kind

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8 The Sanskrit word "Madhyamika" means "one who holds to the middle," it is thus translated as the "Middle Way" in English.
of middle-of-the-road compromise. Indeed, the "middleness" of the middle way, does not propose a mere compromise of a middle point between two extremes, as the Aristotelian notion of *to meson* might suggest. Rather, the middle way overcomes through the two extremes by transcending the dualistic standpoint as such, and engages an ongoing practice of non-attachment to any kind of “either-or” dualistic thinking.\(^9\)

Nagarjuna’s middle way perspective is an approach that based on the insight of emptiness (*sunyata*), dependent co-arising (*pratitya-samutpada*) and nominal-verbal designation (*praj-napti*). The middle way perspective shows us a path whereby we can go beyond the ignorance (*avidya*) of both substantialism and nihilism of various kinds. In short, the middle way perspective should say of the dependent co-arising of things that: neither is nor is not, nor both is and is not, and nor nothing without any condition. In other words, the purpose of this line of thought is spelled out: “those who take the middle way attitude will gain detachment from the views of own-being (*svabhava*), self-nature (*atman*), other-nature and nihility.” In this research, I claim that the ancient perspective of Nagarjuna provides a fundamental insight into the resolution of the substantialistic/nihilistic, individualist/collectivist and positivist/interpretist dilemma in sociology.

The following exposition of the middle way perspective will try to focus only on the few most crucial themes of the *karika* and avoid unnecessary prolixity. Let me start with the verse 18 of Chapter XXV of the *karika*:

> Whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way. (pp. 69, 93, 304)

According to Garfield’s interpretation that emptiness, as dependently co-arisen, is termed a nominal designation. In other words, Nagarjuna asserts three fundamental characteristics in this passage, which are in harmony with one another and thereby inseparable: (1) emptiness, or the ultimate truth; (2) the dependently originated, that is, the phenomenal world; and (3) verbal convention, or dependent designation. (Pp. 93-94) Therefore, whatever is dependently co-arisen is nominally established and is empty. Nagarjuna explains emptiness as something that arises dependently. Emptiness lacks (and

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\(^9\) The notion is somewhat similar to what Max Weber used to express in order to repudiate the *na ve* idea, which holds that simply because policy positions differ from one another, a 'mid-point' synthesis that steers a line among them is somehow more objective and less partisan. In the realm of cognitive judgments, for instance, this kind of middleness would entail a bizarre idea that the statements like “This box weighs 10 kilos” and “This box weighs 20 kilos” could be “synthesized” into the statement “This box weighs 15 kilos”. According to the middle way perspective, this procedure has no place in relation to either normative judgments or factual judgments.
is empty of) essence, or independent existence. And emptiness itself is also assumed to be a dependent designation and is thereby asserted to be merely nominal. Something that is empty depends upon verbal reference, or conventional characterization, for its existence. (Garfield, 1995: 305) Emptiness and the conventional world are, Nagarjuna suggests, two different interpretations of the same things; something from the conventional standpoint, and it is empty from the ultimate view. When we characterize a thing we give it conventional existence with verbal designation, but it retains its fundamental emptiness. Let me articulate these three characteristics of Madhyamika in a more systematic way, as follows.

2.1 Sunyata (Emptiness)

The Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism propounded by Nagarjuna is also known as Sunyavada (theory of emptiness). The whole philosophy, in fact, can be construed as different aspects of sunyata. One of the central themes of karika is therefore sunyata (emptiness)—the Buddhist technical term for the lack of independent existence, inherent existence, or essence in things. Sunyata, as emptiness, means that the conventional world, the socially constructed reality for instance, is not, as some stubbornly think, composed of substance inherently and independently existent; in Madhyamika, these entities are devoid of inherent existence—they are empty. Sunyata is the skillful means (upaya), which unravels oneself from unsatisfactory attachment and clinging. In other words, emptiness discloses the non-substantiality of phenomena and hence frees oneself from fundamental unsatisfactoriness (dukkha).

Sunyata is a refutation of the possibility that any phenomenal object can have own-being (svabhava) and independent of its conditions and consequences, and isolate from our nominal imputation with which it is named and conceptualized. Sunyavada is contrary to the common substantialist view that regards all phenomena as having individual separate identities. To the Madhyamika nothing exists “inherently” or “from its own side.” All phenomena are radically empty of any defining essence. Consequently all have no fixed entity and are in a state of impermanence—change and flux—constantly arising and ceasing. Not only are all things constantly processing, if we examine any phenomenon with subtle observation we can hardly find anything identifiable and thereby definable by our also unfixed and non-substantial mind.

What Madhyamika view of emptiness does for our critical thinking is that our intellectual concept of phenomena does not encapsulate any underlying essence, and each social fact in substantialist sense is found to be without basis. In addition, emptiness implies at once the condition of the possibility of existents. Qualities such as freedom,
action, interaction, creativity, social movement, institutionalization and social change are realizable only because of the empty nature in which substantial elements are lashed out, and negated in the on-going process.

However, one, on the other hand, should never take the understanding of the emptiness of things as itself absolute, this again would be an act of clinging: clinging to sunyata. As Nagarjuna argues in XXII of karika:

Empty should not be asserted. Nonempty should not be asserted. Neither both nor neither should be asserted. They are only used nominally.

It is therefore important not to confuse emptiness with total nothingness because everything is sunya is the potential openness for change and transformation. In fact, a major portion of the chapter on “The Examination of the Noble Truths” (Aryasatyaparik) is devoted to a refutation of the view that “emptiness” is “nothingness” or “nihilism” (nastitva). Sunyata does not imply a dead void, it must in turn empty itself and so cannot itself be an object of attachment, dynamic sunyata therefore empties itself out as just the things-in-themselves. Emptiness shouldn’t detriment the foundation of dependent arising, only nihilism does. Thus, the self-emptying of sunyata can also be stated as the sunyata of sunyata, or the emptiness of emptiness, that is, in the ultimate sense even sunyata is empty of absoluteness, or nihilistic quietism. Instead, sunyata is the foundation of all things, and it is the basic principle of all phenomena. In other words, if the world was neither empty nor impermanent, then all resulting phenomena could not have arisen or ceased due to the substantial existence of various essences. The nature of emptiness, from this perspective, is of positive significance. Thus emptiness implies the negation of unchanged, fixed substance, and thereby the possibility for relational existence and change. This insight is important to the observation and contemplation of social phenomena.

2.2 The Sociological Implication of Emptiness

Buddhist middle way regards the persistent delusion of “inherent existence” as a major obstacle to awakening, and the root of many other consequential delusions. One of these delusions is the realist belief in an objective reality existing independently of human experience. For instance, by asserting that the social reality exists inherently as brute facts external to and coercive of actors, it denies that human experience has any relevance to or influence on the social reality, or even any existence at all.10 The delusion

10 Durkheim, in 1895/1964:xliii (The Rules of Sociological Method. New York: Free Press), argues that social facts are to be treated as things, which “cannot be conceived by purely mental activity”; they require
of inherent existence is deeply ingrained in our intellectual world and daily practices. It has also been embedded in the dominant stream of the social sciences since their beginning.

Sociologically speaking, it is important to point out that what Madhyamika negates is not the socially constructed reality but our clinging to it as substantially real. Thus, it is not the views or practices of social conventions as such which are refuted by sunyata but rather our attachment to them, our misconceptions with respect to them. Sunyata does not denounce the conditioned, relative social world; it only denies our mistaking of it as absolute. All social phenomena do not exist as things in themselves or cease as annihilation in itself due to their ultimately empty of inherent existence and non-existence. All social phenomena arise and cease relationally in dependence on other phenomena, which are themselves empty of essence and dependently related to other phenomena and so on. Therefore, as in social research, no matter how thorough or empirical we search and observe, no phenomenon can ever be found which is substantial as a “thing-in-itself.”

From this perspective, we can say that social phenomena are empty of self-essence and do not exist independently, and thereby are interdependent and interweaving. And unless we can recognize the ongoing arising and ceasing of all social phenomena, manifestly or latently, we can never truly understand the reality of the self, the social and their historical change. Apparently, this viewpoint implies another important notion in Madhyamika, which is known as Pratitya-samutpada (Dependent co-arising), conditioned relations and process so to speak.

2.3 Pratitya-samutpada (Dependent co-arising)

Something that is not dependently arisen, such a thing does not exist. Therefore a nonempty thing does not exist. (XXIV. 19)

Those who see dependent arising will see the dharma; those who see the dharma will see dependent arising.11

The root i means motion; the preposition prati means the arrival or attainment. But the addition of a preposition alters the meaning of the root. So, in this case, the word pratitya, as gerund, means the “attained” in the sense of relying, depending and meeting conditionally or relatively. The verbal root pad (to go) is preceded by the preposition samut (out of) means arising or becoming manifest. Hence, the full meaning of the

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pratitya-samutpada is that which arises, or becomes manifest in reliance upon conditions, in dependence upon conditions, meeting through the force of causal conditions (pratyayas). Pratitya-samutpada has been translated in such various ways as, “causal chain,” “chain of causation,” “causal genesis,” “dependent origination,” “theory of twelve causes,” “relational origination,” “conditioned origination,” “dependently-coordinated-origination,” and “dependent co-arising” etc. In this research I choose the last translation for our use.

If emptiness is said to be the mode of subsistence of all phenomena, it is because of the working of dependent co-arising. Dependent co-arising is seen as the supporting condition for emptiness. In comparison with Sunyata, the notion of Pratitya-samutpada is a relatively more positive aspect in Madhyamika. If emptiness was the latent condition of possibility of phenomena, then dependent co-arising is the manifest descriptions of the condition. They are like the ontic as well as epistemic condition of universe, humankind, social formations and individuals. Therefore, dependent co-arising is without a doubt of supreme importance for Nagarjuna, no wonder he started his karika with a dedicatory verse that took dependent co-arising at the center of his homage of the Buddha. Nagarjuna explicitly equates “sunyata” and dependence in the form of pratityasamutpada not in order to argue that dependent things are non-existent and therefore empty, but to argue that emptiness expresses the dependent nature of all things. Thus, everything exists insofar as it is dependent. In other words, nothing is independently existent. The conditions and consequences of occurring things are sustained by their own interdependence.

2.4 The Sociological Implication of Dependent Co-arising

Sociologically speaking, both individual and society cannot have independent existence. Nor can society be a transcendental force external to and coercive of individuals, and vice versa. Society and individuals arise through relations and conditions, and as such are said not to exist from their own side in some separate way. Since no thing exists on its own, no thing is sufficient in itself. Also, society and individuals, as verbally imputed concepts by social sciences, find no correspondence between them (their concepts) and their assumed substantiality. Similarly, causal relationship between them

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13 Dedicatory Verses states: “I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha, the best of teachers, who taught that whatever is dependently arisen is unceasing, unborn, unannihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, without distinction, without identity, and free from conceptual construction.” Garfield, 1995:2.
(cause and effect in substantialist sense) starting from either directions are also illusory. They are, rather, depending on each other.

Some social theories are not immune from reifying and clinging to what is by nature empty of inherent and independent existence. Their theoretical assumptions are thereby flawed by substantialistic and metaphysical fallacies. The perspective of dependent co-arising can therefore help to overcome all metaphysical fallacies in the social sciences, particularly the problem concerning causality. For example Marx deterministically reduces social phenomena into the general causal law of material production: “religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law.” (1867)\textsuperscript{14} Marx’s quest for the “ultimate” cause presupposes the materialistic stance: “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their beings, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” (1978, 4)\textsuperscript{15}

However, if we try to detect substantially what a causal relation really is, we will be perplexed. Nagarjuna contends that it is impossible to explain the relationship between a cause and an effect and to relate entities. A view of causation leads to certain inconsistencies and absurdities. Historically speaking, according to the principle of pratitya-samutpada the pursuit of the origins or telos is substantialist and thereby perplexed. Foucault also expresses this insight while articulating his genealogy through the elaboration of why Nietzsche challenges the pursuit of origin (Ursprung). For Foucault the quest for the historical origin is essentialist:

“because it is an attempt to capture the exact, and pure, [transhistorical, immanent] essence of things,” it assumes a world of forms preexisting the world of accident and succession i.e., history… “But he who listens to history finds that things have no pre-existing essence, or an essence fabricated piecemeal from alien forms.” (78)\textsuperscript{16}

In actuality, not the “inviolable identity of their origin” but the emptiness and the dependent co-arising of beginninglessness of things that counts. The middle way perspective would agree with Foucault’s criticism of the pursuit of origin. As he stated:

The ‘origin’ makes possible a field of knowledge whose end is to recover the origin, but as a thing lost, fleetingly to be glimpsed, and creating a sense that truth and truthful discourse can coincide. But history reveals ‘origins’ in a proliferation of errors. What

\textsuperscript{14} 1867. Capital.
\textsuperscript{15} 1978. The Marx-Engels Reader.
truth is “is the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it has hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history.” (79)

A middle way perspective, like genealogy of Foucault’s, will never confuse itself with a quest for historical origins or telos but will cultivate the understanding of contingencies and openness that accompany every moment of dependent co-arising. In contrast to the essentialist concern with detecting prime causes against which effects could be arbitrarily anticipated, \textit{pratitya-samutpada} stresses recognition of circuits of contingency.

Does it mean that we can never conduct any kind of causal explanation? Isn’t this methodologically too nihilistic? In actuality, one of sociology’s main trusts, in addition to interpretative understanding and critical reflection, is the causal explanation of the conditions and consequences of social events. I would argue that sociological causal explanation is possible only if we take into account the \textit{pratitya-samutpada} of things. Generally speaking, \textit{pratityasamutpada} is not a strict causality principle or a simple causation theory. It is not a universal law or a formula that govern the order or the structure of the world or the individual. In actuality, it only depicts the multifaceted dependent or relational arising of ordinary experiential process, that is, how events come and go or arise and subside. Nagarjuna’s \textit{madhyamika} is useful to remind social scientists that all propositions regarding a subject or object in the substantialistic sense are not essentially real. The supposed persistent existence of things depends not on some property of substantiality, but entirely on the social contingency of reality. They are dependently real and related to numerous conditions and consequences in continual flux.

\textbf{2.5 Praj-napti (Nominal Designation)}

As quoted above: “Empty should not be asserted. Nonempty should not be asserted. Neither both nor neither should be asserted. They are only used nominally.” Indeed, according to the middle way perspective, \textit{sunyata} is used nominally as \textit{praj-napti}. If we investigate the “core” of all things, we will realize that everything is conditioned and has empirical names. Those empirical names are provisional concepts as our thought constructs for describing the dependent arising of reality. Actually, the word “reality” is derived from the roots “thing” (\textit{res}) and “think” (\textit{revi}). “Reality” means whatever you can think about, and thereby assign a name to. This is not “that-which-is.” No thought-construct can capture “reality” in the sense of “that-which-is.” Things have no permanent identity and are empty of inherent and independent existence, and are dependently arisen in relation to our culturally effected knowing and naming. Unless we notice them and identify them perceptually or conceptually out of our cognitive
continuum we cannot get to know the existence of things. In other words, the condition of possibility of the existence of things is dependent on this noticing in the first place and naming accordingly. The concept of verbal designation (praj-napti) provides a way of handling cognitive abstracts without concretizing them, or assigning substantial value to them. This understanding of the process of nominal abstraction is perhaps the greatest achievement of the middle way perspective. It transcends the substantialist belief that all the parts of a true statement must be true knowledge corresponding to existent objects.

The principle of sunyata and pratityasamutpada does not limit to the observation of objective phenomena, it must at once also fall back on verbal designation. The constituents of discourse, no different than other phenomena, are brought into manifestation in the same way—they have neither ontological nor empirical independence, but can only arise and be defined in relation to other constituents. If all concepts or words are dependently arisen, then they are not arisen independently, on their own. If not arisen on their own, then they cannot be asserted to exist on their own. They must rather arise in a relational-processual context, through which the conceptual binary opposites are related and interdependent. If any one of them becomes independently existent without relative context, they will immediately become unrealizable by our cognition anymore and thereby become non-existent at once. The paradox is unsolvable unless we abandon the possibility of both extremes (existence and non-existence) immediately and accept the relatedness and conditionality of concepts and words.

2.6 The Sociological Implication of Nominal Designation

Immanuel Kant in the Western context introduced the idea that what we experience as reality is actually conditioned by our concepts and categories. However Kant’s notion of these conceptions and categories is understood as stable and transcendent. From the middle way perspective, there are no such grounding kind of conceptions, or categories that Kant held to be a priori. Nagarjuna’s idea of Praj-napti (Verbal designation), or mental conception and category, is changeable and empty of any transcendental fixation, and driven by the conditions of dependent co-arising.

Likewise, the conceptualization and categorization of social phenomena by social scientists are in actuality shaped and driven by conditions of which we are embedded with and within, conditions of which we feel significant and meaningful. In other words, our conceptualization and categorization are socially constructed and full of context-bound value relevance. As Weber contends with regard to the formation of meaningful knowledge: “Without the investigator's value-ideas, there would be no principle of selection of subject-matter and no meaningful knowledge of the concrete
reality.” (1949:82) The conceptualization of social facts is influenced by researcher’s value-laden background. Every conception has been mentally imputed and symbolically designated according to researcher’s contextual value-orientation. The assumption of social facts as such existing independently is therefore self-deception: “If the notion that those standpoints [cultural values] can be derived from the facts themselves continually recurs, it is due to the naïve self-deception of the specialist who is unaware that it is due to the value-ideas.” (1949:82)

The existence of social facts is actually a conceptualization, and the nature of that conceptualization changes through temporal process. This would seem to say that there is no reality, which serves as a variable holding the name of some object to be. What it really means is that if social scientists try to find and grasp something substantial, they will work in vain. There is no substance that can be found in the basis of nominal designation, none outside of the basis of nominal designation.

It is not the “actual” interconnections of “things” but the conceptual interconnections of problems which define the scope of the various sciences. A new “science” emerges where new problems are pursued with new methods and truths are thereby discovered which open up significant new points of view.

For Weber, the social world of human beings is divided into analytical slices: economic, political, or religious motivations or ideals in general are equally detectable in the behavior of individuals, while the disciplinary question is no more than a strategic tool useful to scientific activity and empty of any claim to ontological or substantial precedence. Every conceptual interconnection of problems and analytical slices cannot escape from its nominal presumption. Even a simple extract from of a historical documentary reflects the presumption of the document’s writer. There is thus no description without presumption. As Weber pointed out that it is unacceptable to assume that “the knowledge of historical reality can or should be a presuppositionless copy of objective facts.” (1949: 92) “All knowledge of cultural reality, as may be seen, is always knowledge from particular points of view.” (1949:81) This view tackles the self-deception of the advocates of objectivism who “unconsciously approaches his subject matter, that he has selected from an absolute infinity a tiny portion with the study of which he concerns himself.” (Weber, 1949:82) Yet the objectivist insists that the

18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
existence of objects does not depend on human knowledge. Ontology is thus utterly non-contingent on social epistemology in objectivism. In fact, this presumption strains our ability to practice interpretative understanding. According to the notion of sunyata there is no such existence that is absolutely non-contingent.

The pursuing of correctness or precision in social research is basically delusory. The dynamic spiral between social occurring (praxis) and knowledge formation (theory) must both be empty of inherent and independent existence and arise co-dependently. The conventional truth in terms of conceptual scheme must be fundamentally non-substantial. That is why any kind of own-being view or metaphysical presence is particularly hindering. We are thus in the position of making conventional knowledge always as a provision of the particular tradition, or horizon, in which reality is perceived.

In general, there is no unmediated knowledge of “reality.” Knowledge is a social-mental construction mediated by symbols. What we know are signs, which are empty of any inner or transcendental essence, which are dependently arisen. Therefore, there is neither the knowledge of essence, nor the essence of knowledge, but only of mentally imputed and symbolically mediated knowledge of reality. Even our knowing of our mental experience is empty and dependently arisen, and is thus mediated knowing. There is no “pure” knowledge of reality except, as Nagarjuna suggests, conventionally symbolized and mental designated knowledge of reality, which arises dependently upon our interrelated and processual world. It is therefore important to understand empirical sociological knowledge as theory ordering, that is as the conceptual construct of empirical reality. The theoretical ordering of social reality is only possible from certain evaluative frameworks, by which the researcher is motivated. However, they are not substantially real, for there is no substance within our mental functioning and behind empirical appearance. The social sciences’ treatment of, or viewpoint concerning any social facts or aspects of social reality shouldn’t be verbally definitive, or even metaphysical. Knowledge constitution in terms of verbal designation and nominal convention is, for Nagarjuna, the provisional means of conventional truth in order to understand the ultimate truth. Without relying upon convention, the ultimate truth is not understandable. Without understanding the ultimate truth, human freedom is not attained. Thus, the interdependency between conventional truth and ultimate truth makes our effort to the understanding of ultimate truth promising, and yet the fundamental truth of sunyata also highlights the openness and flexibility of our conventional knowledge that undermines any insistence on closure within a given conceptual scheme.

3. From Madhyamika Towards a Non-dualistic, Relational and Processual Way of Sociological Thinking
3.1 Non-dualistic Thinking

…Whatever is dependently arisen is unceasing, unborn, unannihilated, not permanent, nor coming, not going, without distinction, without identity…

Neither from itself nor from another, nor from both, nor without a cause, does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (I1, p.3)

… neither an existent nor a nonexistent thing is a condition appropriate. (I6, p.4)

Suzuki writes: "The power of dichotomizing has made us forgetful of the source in which it preserves its creative potentialities."²¹

The dualistic way of thinking has been misconstrued by many as the only right view since the early age of human civilization. In Plato’s thought there is an ultimate dualism of being and becoming, of ideas and matter. Aristotle criticized Plato’s attachment of the transcendence of ideas, but he was unable to surpass the dualism of form and matter, and in later metaphysics this dualism takes many forms. For example, in Immanuel Kant there is an epistemological dualism between the passivity of sensation and the spontaneity of the understanding and an ontological dualism between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. Therefore, we can define dualism as: “the use of two irreducible, heterogeneous principles (sometimes in conflict, sometimes complementary) to analyze the knowing process (epistemological dualism) or to explain all of reality or some broad aspect of it (ontological dualism).”

As analyzed previously, the middle way perspective is neither substantialist nor nihilistic, or holds up neither existent nor non-existent so to speak. Hence, the “neither-nor” double negation is the basic attitude espoused by the middle way perspective to deconstruct all essentialist, dualistic clinging. By and large, unreflective people tend to think in terms of “either-or” or “both-and” logic instead of “neither-nor.” Consequently, they see reality as “either existence or non-existence,” that is, “either this or that,” or “both this and that.” But this is delusory based on false dichotomization or amalgamation. The middle way perspective is ridding us of all kinds of essentialized binary opposition and its conflation. There are no absolute dualisms in the actual world of conditional relativity. The middle way perspective denies the essentialist assumption that the principle of binary opposition is substantial and universal prior to the dependent arising of the concrete, historical and contingent social world. If we stubbornly attach on such dichotomization, or its combination as substantially real, there is no end to the world

of wrong views. On the contrary, if we come to realize the truth of the middle way, then contradictions and confusion due to dualistic thinking are overcome.

However, the rejection of the dualistic logic may lead some logicians or theoreticians to think it one, especially when they are unable to rectify the dualistic flaw. They thereby incline to adopt monism by removing any possibilities of relatedness between the two realms whatsoever, by eliminating one end of them altogether, or by reducing one completely to the other. In appearance they seem to conduct a kind of non-dual thinking by attempting to transcend the tension within either-or dualism, by eliminating the dichotomy. Since the dichotomy is fundamentally eliminated there is no difference between things anymore, things are in turn identical to one another simultaneously. However, as Nagarjuna stressed: “If in identity there were simultaneity, then it could occur without association.” (VI 5, p.17) The difficulty of this alternative is that in identity, the plural word “things” is in contradiction because it implies non-identity. Besides, the relation and interaction between things is thereby sociologically untenable due to their being identical without any difference. Moreover, the notion simultaneity becomes unthinkable because it does not make sense to say that one thing exists simultaneously with oneself. Therefore, all explanations or analysis without regard to the relation and process of social phenomena will be impossible. In identity, there is no dependent co-arising. That which is associated does not arise together. That is, if identical, the “co” of “co-arising” is meaningless. Generally speaking, monism in opposition to dualism is not a true non-dual thinking. To assert the identity of things is still dualistic, for identity is an antinomy to distinction. It is still trapped in the one end of the dichotomy between two extremes, the essential monism and the essential dualism, that is, monism in relation to dualism. In other words, it remains a dualistic concept in the substantialist sense.

The middle way perspective is neither dualistic nor monistic. Instead of starting with dualism, or monism, epistemologically or ontologically, Nagarjuna wants us to have a non-dual thinking, which makes no attempt to dichotomize or conflate phenomena in a substantialist sense. As quoted above, the non-dualistic thinking of madhyamika asserts neither distinction nor identity, neither existence nor non-existence, it is thus non-substantial and non-nihilistic in any sense. This non-distinction of epistemological and ontological must couple with non-identity as the thrust of madhyamikan non-dual thinking. It is only after we can overcome all kinds of dualism, or monism, that we can then talk about the dependent co-arising of the duality of social phenomena non-dualistically.
Conventionally speaking, there must be some kind of provisional verbal distinction imputed to things for people to skillfully act, think, feel and appreciate in relation to other people or things. Otherwise, without distinction there would be no need for two or more words to describe the undistinguishable state. For some reason which cannot be exhaustively articulated, people still utilize the distinguishing mind and words in their practical life. Hence, the dependent arising of many schemes of distinction are designated in social world. But we must bear in mind that all socially constructed forms of distinction are empty of self-nature, that is, they do not have inherent and independent existence. They are artificial so to speak. Exactly because there is no essential difference among things, there is no substantially fixed social distinction at all, nor is there any annihilation of distinction in the nihilistic sense either. There is only the relative arising of distinctions dependently conditioned by people’s constant and dynamic involvement in the historically specific social background.

3.2 Emptying Sociological Dualism Again

Sociologically speaking, all social phenomena in the social world are neither essentially existent nor essentially non-existent, nor both, nor without a cause. According to the middle way perspective, all principles of our social existence are relationally situated and are contingent to the interplay of various conditions, mediated through the nominal conventions. All classificatory schemes and dualities in the social world are historical, contingent and relational rather than substantially established.

The problem with “either-or” way of thinking in the social world is that people tend to reify the provisional frameworks and ignore their socially constructed character. The belief behind these opposites is typically dichotomizing and polarizing: if it’s not one it must be the other. When people attach to either this or that, or both this and that, side of the opposites in their social practices, many kinds of illusion, conflict, domination and suffering may emerge. Since the ingrained thought is not only personal, but also collective in actuality, it is difficult to become radically aware of the dichotomized bias of our thinking.

The “neither-nor” thinking is inspiring to us for its not clinging to any essentialized distinction or identity in society. Similarly, social scientists should discard any metaphysical assertion that affirms either substantialist or nihilistic assumption of social theory. The theoretically constructed binary oppositions concerning social relations are just heuristic devices for conducting our understanding of the dependent co-arising of the social world. If we obstinately equalized those taxonomies and theoretical pairs to the social phenomena we analyzed, we would not only have perverted the view of society, but probably also do violence to the social world whenever the theory becomes the
dominant doctrine of social practices. It is therefore important to transcend dualistic assumptions in social theory in order to conduct a better understanding of society, or to awaken people from their attachment and derived discontents.

Dualism in the social sciences tends to assume that the society is made up of two elemental categories which are incommensurable. For instance, on the one hand, in a holistic approach, individuals are basically defined as being very much at the receiving end of the social system. According to this view, the individual’s position, characteristics, thought and behavior are all determined by the social structure at large. In other words, their social behaviors, relationships, and their very sense of personal identity as human beings are existent not from itself but from another (social structure). The process whereby they are socialized into the society’s norms, laws and values appropriate to the role they are to play in society is unidirectional. Social action is thus the mere product and derivative of social structure. The holistic approach regards the reproduction of social relations and practices as a mechanical outcome, rather than as an active co-creative process in the webs of interweaving subjects. On the other hand, in total opposition, the sociology of action conceptualizes social structure and system as the derivative of social action. A social world is deemed to be produced by its members, who are thus asserted as active, purposeful, self-generating beings. The consciousness, intention, belief, interest or preference of individuals are thereby taken as self-caused, spontaneous. Regardless of the contextual conditions whereby individuals are involved with, this approach substantializes the self-nature of the isolated self.

Both of these extremes of social theory is a form of dualism one could call it “epiphenomenalism,” which contends that there is only unidirectional causal connection between the realms. Either individual consciousness is just a byproduct of social structure or vice versa. Moreover, “parallelism” would be another kind of dualistic thinking in social sciences which contends that both realms are existent independently of each other. Thus having separate entities, they have no causal connection and have no interaction. Since each realm is self-subsistent the relation between them can never be established. Social structure can thus exist without individuals. In the mean time, individuals can also exist without social structure. The bifurcation between these two and the preservation of the existence of both at the same time are definitely a deviation from the sociological imagination, which stresses the mutuality between society and individuals as condition and consequence of one another.

Indeed, any system of sociological thinking that analyzes social phenomena in terms of two distinct and irreducible principles, such as methodological individualism and methodological holism, subjectivism and objectivism, action theory and structuralism,
mind and body, good and evil or universal and particular, can be defined as dualistic. Some people try to favor the one as determining cause, while downplaying the other one as merely a receiving effect. Some insist on the self-sufficiency of one substance (individual or structure) without taking into account the influence of other factors. Some attempt to establish both ends of the opposition, as two discrete elements, as essentially coexisting. A significant flaw that traps dualism is that it is incapable of resolving the rift created between the two opposing elements. Even though many social theorists try hard to build up theories in order to overcome the contradiction between these two realms, as long as they assert the dualistic assumption in the substantialist sense, the efforts of social research will be futile.

A universal framework of distinction across all time and space is therefore unconventional and thereby un-sociological. It is not acceptable in social research so to speak. Ironically, it is often perceived that, throughout a long term observation, when an essentialized conceptual distinction has been established, the pursuit of one extreme of the opposites will somehow eventually lead to its own negation, its conversed dependent co-arising of the need for its own opposite.

Moreover, despite their relatively specific cognitive interest and particular conceptual distinctions, the social sciences should not separate themselves dualistically from the observed social world and insist on the independent existence of their conceptual distinction. The dynamic circle of mutual involvement and influence between theoretical world and practical world requires social scientists to be reflexive and hermeneutical. To some extent, the theoretical world is in the practical world and thereby is constitutive of it. Likewise, the practical world is in the theoretical world and is also constitutive of it. There is no essential distinction between them, otherwise the mutual involvement and influence will not occur. In general, inspired by the middle way perspective, the sociological way of seeing the world must be non-dualistic. Anyone who holds the "either-or" way of thinking is being dualistic. The danger of this is, as Nagarjuna warned, that a wrong grasp of the doctrine of emptiness and dependent co-arising dualistically leads to suffering.22

3.3 Relational Thinking

If all dualism is to be denied, then what is the general characteristic and pervasive feature of existing things? According to the insight of dependent co-arising, this characteristic or feature is relationality, or relatedness. And there is no absolute way to

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22 *Moola*madhyamakaarikaa. XXIV.11.
portray a differentiating boundary around the world, or to demarcate its extent or to impose the referential point of our epistemic schemes. This suggests that both the ontological constitution of things and our epistemological schemes are just as relational as everything else.

The notion *pratityasamutpada* discussed above inspires us to think of social phenomena non-substantially, or relationally. It approaches human existence and social phenomena not as centered or essentialized upon subjective or objective presence, but as relational and interdependently arising. Human beings are considered as participating within particular social context whereby they are conditioned and in the mean time the constructors of social context. From the insight of *pratityasamutpada*, all individuals are located in, and can only be understood in relation to the interweaving social figurations. Therefore, we should observe social phenomena and human behaviors according to their interrelationship. With the caution of non-substantiality, we should observe the actual dependent co-arising of all social phenomena. Meanwhile, we should be horizontally aware of all kinds of interrelationships that make things conceivable. By observing phenomena via interrelationships, we can realize that nothing is independent of conditions and relations, and that everything is without self-nature. Selflessness implies the empty characteristics of all phenomena. As we have discussed above, *sunyata* is not different from selflessness and we can observe the profound significance of *sunyata* from the perspective of interdependent relationships. Based on this understanding we can thereby establish a theoretical foundation for using the relational principle of society as a general characteristic, not only of material social phenomena but also of mental experiences. This, the fundamental cognitive switch of theoretical vision from substance to relation, is the core of our argument. It is therefore important to investigate more reflexively the relatedness of the social world.

The middle way relational thinking seeks to overcome the dichotomous thinking, which, on the one hand, tends to conceive human beings in the self-sustaining and self-generative sense in which the individual is disconnected and isolated from the social background. On the other hand, it tends to interpret human beings as completely determined by the surrounding social structures, which are external to and coercive of the individual. Both approaches are non-relational, and cannot really explicate the dynamic changing relations of the social world as have discussed above. What kind of relation are we proposing? From the middle way perspective, *pratityasamutpada* implies that relatedness is not only extrinsic to human existence, as though we were individuals who are just structurally or strategically coping with others and the world. Rather, interrelationships should be understood as a constitutive, integral and primordial dimension of human beings. We exist and are present even to ourselves as we are always
already embedded in a social world that we share with certain relevant others. We are fundamentally relational internally and externally.

The relatedness of human existence is made possible only if things (such as history) are at once fundamentally empty of substance. The middle way theme of sunyata and pratitya-samutpada remind us that nothing in the phenomenal world is self-explanatory or self-contained. Therefore, based on this understanding, we should see that each relation in the social world carries the aspect of emptiness within. As we have stated, that which is empty is also open and thereby possible. Thus, to be empty is to open up, to dissolve those reified things (which we ourselves construct by attachment) which separate us from seeing or appreciating one another and our background world. In a way, emptiness implies the openness within ourselves which leads us to recognize and cherish the fundamental relatedness that binds us to one another and all that constitutes our world. This mutuality of one another reaches to the very foundation of who we are and draws us toward our background which is interdependent and inter-relational. Fundamentally speaking, we are interconnected and carry an aspect of one another within ourselves. Thus, this accounting points to the actuality that emptiness represents the extensive openness and dynamic relatedness within and without us as well as our societies. Nothing is left out nothing substantial is added on either.

3.4 The Relational-Social Theory

By observing the relatedness of the social world, we must first transcend the subject-object dualism in the substantialist sense, which interprets human beings in an attitude that cuts off the relational actuality in which we vividly perform ourselves within the social world as part of it, not apart from it. Individual action is embedded in a meaningful nexus of social relations. Far from being a problem, the social relatedness of human action is the major source of our knowledge about one another. Relational thinking realizes our fundamental openness to the historical-specific social relatedness, which embraces us, and out of which we act, think, feel and appreciate, and become who we are. In other words, we constantly empty ourselves of any ossifying immanence and engage with the already embedded dynamic world. We thus become who we are relationally out of our connecting with the world. The formation of our schemes of action, conception, perception and appreciation are in turn related to the background world we are thrown into. It is only within the historical-specific relational context of social activity that individuals will have access to the knowledge required to appraise alternative courses of action, thought, feeling and appreciation. Outside of that relatedness, the requisite knowledge won’t be able to exist. Without this shared meaningful background, social life would be continually chaotic. Relatedness as the ontological foundation of social
constitution indicates that human making must be dependently arisen. There is no essential line separating us from the world. There is, in short, relatedness that extends beyond the percipient as well as within the unnoticed process that makes up the percipient itself. In other words, the relational actuality of the social constitution and the self-making are working both externally and internally, or explicitly and implicitly.

In our daily practice we are embedded in the world, for that is where our social self takes shape and becomes manifest as we engage in the day to day concerns, whether mentally or physically, deal with the tasks at hands, orient to one another, and try to pursue what is often a significant personal identity. The relational background where our daily practices occur is the locus where we become ourselves for the most part. Thus, it evolves as a viable vantage point for understanding the social. This vantage point leads our social research to acknowledge that people’s involvement with one another and engagement within the social background is integral to what we are.

Actually, however far back in history we go, the fact of dynamic relatedness emerges as the most fundamental foot, for it is dependent co-arising of all other fundamentals. We are born into a family, granted a nationality, and received education, without our choosing any of them; and it is these conditions which in turn influence our more “voluntary” dispositions and action frames of reference in which we subsequently acquiesce. Undeniably, the family we grow up with, the nationality we are granted, the school we go to, the media we watch, the things we do, the work and careers we pursue, the interests we share with family and friends, the church we attend, the community we grew up in and so on, are not mere superfluities additional to our selfness as some quantitative social researches implicitly assumed. They are the very paths through which we become ourselves at all. They are also the working fields where we are within and in the mean time involved with and mutually influenced by one another. That is to say, we do not exist inherently and independently in a world of our own making, but in a world we make and provide for one another, a world that includes many fields which we tacitly count on continuously, though usually unable to articulate them discursively or analytically. The social consequences of which, is that we become mutually tied with one another in a social world of, at certain levels, shared interests, worldviews, fates, sufferings, etc.; we are at once mutually constructive and obstructive to one another.

Despite certain degree of relative distinction, we are at least interconnected in a subtler sense. We take our bearings from one another more than we might acknowledge and there is little about us that does not dependently arise in some sense from our togetherness or mutual embeddedness, thus little does not include others as part of who we are. As Whitehead says that the “connectedness of things is nothing else than the
togetherness of things in occasions of experience."23 If we realize this fundamental connectedness we have within the world of togetherness, we might recognize that there are no self-contained or self-sustaining individuals. Rather, we are actually partaking a mostly unnoticed or unconscious intersubjective event of networking whereby we mutually condition one another and are contingent upon one another. The networking constitutes the social world from which each of us lives. Rare is the individual who has one and only one intersubjective network. The togetherness and mutuality among members of a dependently durable tradition, which emerges as social collectivity identified by members as a culture, holds up the tacit sense of intersubjectivity among members. So when encountering a social event or object, we tacitly will sense that there is a dynamic historicity behind it and within our intersubjectivity. Of course, such sense of history shouldn’t be substantialized, otherwise, our tradition will become simply a social determinant sui generis that creates us without being influenced by our intersubjective experience out of the dynamic involvement with the newly emergent world situation. This substantialized view of history is unrelational and thereby unacceptable.

Sociological knowledge is the knowledge of the relatedness of the social world. In actuality, it is also part of the relatedness of the social world. The mutuality and interdependency between conventional knowledge and sociological knowledge is therefore undeniable. To some extent, their relation might be asymmetrical but it does not necessarily mean that sociological knowledge always dominates the conventional knowledge. The possibility of their relatedness can be varied depending upon their historical-specific conditions. Nonetheless, there is one thing for sure that due to their intricate and dynamic relationships the sociological knowledge cannot capture the fixed essence of social reality. Because it presupposes a position without presupposition, that is, a vantage point which can detach from the relatedness of itself and the social world and perceive the independent existence of objective facts. Sunyata and pratitya-samutpada of human mental faculty cannot formulate an independent essence existing out there, but just dependently perceives the condition and effect and the intersubjective meaning of social reality. Sociological conceptualization constructs only relatively and intersubjectively adequate meaning and plausible interpretation of social phenomena, rather than objectively fixed facts or subjectively true interpretation. The advocates of objectivism assume that they perceive something which is independent of their inquiry, which has an existence in itself, and has pre-existing properties which are revealed by the inquiry. But this assumption is

untenable because at the relational-processual level what is inquired is a result of, or greatly influenced by, the dynamics of mental imputation, measurement, reciprocity between inquirer and inquired, dialogical process among inquirers. In other words, sociological knowledge is related to many significant conditions which are necessary to make the perception of reality possible. The problem with objectivism is its verification of this “reality”, with which scientific knowledge is supposed to accord, other than by some dynamic relations and processes of scientific venture. If social reality is what is known by means of social inquiry itself, then it is tautologous to say that sociological knowledge is in accordance with reality. This is actually a conspiracy between subjectivism and objectivism.

On the other hand, the campaigners of subjectivism espouse the conviction that an individual’s subjective consciousness creates his or her own reality. However, in the social scientific community meaning-adequate and plausible interpretation of social reality is not “reality” unless more than one person agrees regarding what conditions and effects it involves. Therefore, there is no such thing as “one’s own reality” without involving any relational conditions. Social reality is what is intersubjectively plausible at least among many researchers. Anyone, it is said, with the suitable textbook learning and academic training can shape his or her scheme of sociological cognition and thereby enabling him or her to interpret social occurrences sociologically. In this sense, his or her sociological knowledge must be relational. Of course, this relatedness of researcher’s knowledge does not mean that he or she cannot challenge a sociological orthodoxy, but this must occur in the relational context and to some extent be accepted by significant amount of researchers. Indeed, a constant challenge of dogma is also the condition that makes possible the knowledge in continual flux. The formation of sociological knowledge is thus not only relational but also processual. A non-relational monologue of a single researcher is therefore not sociologically conceivable.

3.5 The Processual Thinking

Those who place the primacy of the substance over that of the process must stick to an oversight that is accustomed to stress the visible or tangible nature of things. This is a substantialist view which always obstructs our processual imagination and thereby misguides our worldview. Nagarjuna’s interpretation of pratityasamutpada holds that all that can be said to have any reality is a co-creative process, not the fluctuating substances comprising the process. Those with the middle way perspective understand the conventional world by observing vertically the temporal relationships among preceding, current conditions, and future orientation, through which we can realize the fundamental impermanence of all social existence. The doctrine of anatman (non-self) precisely
indicates that there is no way in which a thing can ever be given a definitive (persistently fixed) status within the impermanent actuality of things. All things, be they material or mental, be they the objective world, or the subjective state of human beings, are subject to continuous change. It seems some social phenomena may have certain states of existences in which they remain unchanged or are in equilibrium on a temporary basis (for example a totally administered society). However, when we examine them with processual thinking, we will find that not only do they keep changing on a long-term basis, but also that this change occurs at every quick moment. Immediately after the current state of conditions have ceased to function, the newly co-arisen state starts operating. This is the process of the state of co-dependent arising and ceasing. The rising and ceasing of each short moment discloses that all phenomena are ever moving and ever changing. Some scientists do have some awareness of the changing dimension of social phenomena in terms of social change. However, they still cannot overcome the distortion of the substantialist view, they try to make sense of the changing process in terms of linear causal explanation. As we mentioned previously, the unidirectional explanation of social phenomena is not able to understand the deeper truth of all existences. All things appear, from the perspective of temporal process, to be ever changing, and never remain identical for the briefest moment. Impermanence negates the permanent entity and unidirectional development of phenomena. Only those with the insight of emptiness and dependent co-arising realize and understand that all forms of fixity are delusory.

Though translated as emptiness due to its etymological origin, sunyata actually also refers to the state of impermanence of phenomena, that is, giving the static, eternal flavor of things to the process. And in this sense, the underlying actuality of phenomena is not substance it is rather a set of processes in flux, which indicates the constantly changing nature of social reality. Sunyata makes tenable the fundamental processuality immanent in all phenomena, opening all things into various relations in which things are sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict. But irrespective of what kind of relation they are undergoing, things are changing. It is thus reasonable to say that the middle way perspective in Buddhism is a precursor of processual thinking despite the conspicuous lack of reference to its ideas and doctrines in today’s processual discourses in the human and social sciences. Nagarjuna’s madhyamika challenges the notion of persistence and permanence and espouses the idea of fundamental flux through his doctrine of pratitya-samutpada and sunyata. The middle way perspective posits that what we perceive as the world of eternity and stasis is actually the outcome of an incessant dependent arising processes. All entities that fall under the notice of our perception or conception are mentally imputed which are actually in a state of continual flux, even though the verbal designations often find it difficult to describe such movement.
3.6 The Processual-Social Theory

In the *Prasannapada*\(^{24}\), Candrakirti explains that the term *pratitya* is a gerund signifying the phenomenon of “reaching” or “extending over,” and the term *samutpada* means origination or manifestation of the momentary event. Thus, in conjunction, *pratitya-samutpada*, refers to the dynamics of momentary experiential events. When the notion of permanent entity is transcended, then, we can say that all that is observed is the flow of momentary becoming. The flow is fundamentally without fixed things, neither social whole nor individual elements. Whenever we perceive social reality we should always bear in mind that it is actually the social becoming that constitutes the so-called “social reality.” The becomingness of the social should be stressed on the foundation of all social constitutions as an extensive process of relational origination. The understanding of this relational-processual actuality is the key to realize the depth and breadth of social becoming, from the microscopic to the macroscopic realm of the social world.

Since all sensible entities are empty and in continual flux, then the scientific knowledge concerning the observation of them shouldn’t have any fixated proposition either. In other words, instead of insisting on building up a universal and persistent theory or category beyond the empirical world, social scientists should realize that the knowledge constitutions in the social sciences are also empty of essence and also in continual flux. Despite his stubborn insistence on logical empiricism and scientific realism, Karl Popper also espouses a view of opposing the idea of perceiving the world as permanent and knowledge of it as stable. Science, he reiterated, is being progressive only if it remains open-ended. And it is by and large open-ended because it is constantly deconstructing itself by what he called “falsification,” or “refutation.” After establishing a theory or formulating a hypothesis to describe the social phenomena, while some colleagues try hard to verify them, the next step to many reflexive thinkers is to try one’s best to transcend it. For Popper, the more we find we are wrong the better off we are, for that way our knowledge stands a better chance of advancing a bit. Although this kind of progressivism is problematic to some extent, we still can be inspired by his view of the process of “scientific discovery.” Interpreting it from the middle way perspective we can say that knowledge is in a state of flux. It has no fixed essence. Regarding disciplines like sociology, a certain degree of institutional stability and disciplinary normality is coveted and desired, and instability is avoided at all cost. This is certainly related to the practitioner’s extra scientific implication, let us say the will to power immanent in the will to knowledge constitution, or the pursuits of good jobs, prestige and authority. Apart

\(^{24}\) See *Prasannapadaa*, 5.1.
from those, the social scientists’ substantialist view of the social world also contributes to the stabilization of its knowledge and discipline. Yet, all pursuits of knowledge are related to many conditions, within and without the discipline, such as the dialogue among different members within the scientific community, the double identity of being a social scientist and lay person at once, the dynamic circle of mutual influences, etc. When conditions change, the knowledge changes too. Science in flux is the normal situation from a long-term perspective. This actually became a subject matter in the sociology of science over the past couple of decades. It is argued that in science there are no objective and absolute standards of rationality, method, technique, language and meanings of terms. Where the scientist stands within his/her community is a matter more of social commitment following the historically specific paradigmatic training than the independent quest for certainty in empirical evidence. In other words, it is Doxa (the socially related dialogue, opinion, convincement, conversion and debate), rather than epistemic certainty (objectivism, rationalism, universal law), dialogic process rather than isolated monologue. It is thus significant for social scientists to have a basic understanding that what was thought to be known concerning social facts is impermanent and that what is now known will not withstand the test of time, because all things are impermanent, knowledge is fluctuating as well.

Of course, in case we have a right understanding of the notion of flux, it is not necessary for social scientists to nihilistically deny that there are relatively and tentatively durable percept-objects and academically recognized consensus. Otherwise we will be at risk of being nihilistic. The conceptualization and classification of enduring objects is tenable and, to some extent, unavoidable as long as we do not forget the conditions of continuous radical change. Although we hold firmly on the idea of an ever-changing process of social reality, it doesn’t obstruct us from recognizing some degree of relative stability in the social world, such as the process of institutionalization, bureaucratization, normalization, legalization, specialization or standardization. This is important to not to deconstruct nihilistically the explicability of social sciences concerning the phenomena which involve a dependently durable social reality. However, the problem concerning the observation of the durability of social reality is that, a substantialist approaches this durability of social reality as the essential unit of social analysis. The social reality is seen as a real entity, which exists independently of the dynamic activities of ordinary individuals. Social entity consists of a number of underlying sub-sub-systems each serving a primary function of purpose, that is, each sub-system is adaptive in that it serves the needs of society. Thus, the appropriate focus of this kind of social research will be a careful analysis of the structures of sub-systems and the functions that are served by each. The tendency for any entity, in this view, is to be in a state of equilibrium. Stasis is the primal concern whereby process or change is considered secondary and is expected to
be gradual. Unwittingly, this approach often incorporates the dominant institutional values of mainstream society into its theoretical framework and thereby makes processual thinking and its critical impetus difficult. One of the consequences of this kind of substantialist social science is its being in service of the status-quo. In this one-sided emphasis on durability, the social practice of various individuals will be viewed as passive products of social structure. The implication is that its conceptualizations of the durable entities more like the nature of entities themselves, in terms of physical and structural boundaries, rather than as the dynamic structuring processes that condition the dependent emergence of social entities. Such a view misses the important influence that agents acting through collective actions (such as social movement) have had on social change. Most importantly, with this emphasis on the substantial properties and functioning of social entities and their subsequent adaptive nature of social change, substantialism of this kind creates a knowledge which focuses almost exclusively on problems of unity, order, stability, cohesion, harmony and equilibrium. It basically interrogates the social phenomenon in terms of a reified scientific approach geared to understanding the world in static senses. The actual dependent arising of dynamic process, movement, conflict, revolution or negotiation will become incomprehensible. The actuality of knowledge in flux will also be discounted.

4. Concluding Remarks

Hitherto, social science has thrived with all kinds of approaches, such as rational-choice theory, behaviorism, various atomized individualism\(^\text{25}\), norm-based models, holism and structuralisms\(^\text{26}\), statistical “variable” analyses\(^\text{27}\) and interpretism. Many of them, however, share the substantialist view in their basic theoretical or analytical units by affirming the idea that it is substances that preexist first and relations among them follow only subsequently. This view dominates strongly throughout much of the discipline. Unfortunately, substantialism distorts the dynamic, relational, continuous and processual world into a static, isolated, discontinuous and eternal world. Not only have these distorted “grand theories” and “empirical researches” misguided the epistemological and ontological assumption of social theory, but they also, ethically

\(^{25}\) Any theory that takes individual, whether in its idealistic or materialistic form, as an entity and analytical unit of starting point for causal explanation is problematic.

\(^{26}\) Including Structural-functionalism, system theory, structuralism and many other collectivist approaches.

\(^{27}\) Variable-centered researchers use a lot of quantitative methods to test their causal hypothesis, including multiple regression, factor analysis, and event history approaches. They take variables as measurable attributes that can explain the causal relation of phenomena. As Abbott (1992a, p.58) notes, “The realist metaphysics implicit in treating variables (universals) as agents was last taken seriously in the age of Aquinas…but in this [approach] the ‘best’ causal sentences are clearly realist ones in which variables act.”
speaking, have given rise to the knowledge-constitutive power-effect in their form of substantialist presupposition. For instance, orthodox Marxism’s historical materialism, Freudian sexual essentialism, Social Darwinism, Parsonian Structural-Functionalism, Skinnerian Behaviorism, to say only a few, all have one thing in common, that is, their theories on the paper have turned “the things of logic” into “the logic of things” and were imposed on lifeworld practices, causing tremendous ignorance (avidya) to numerous people. Indeed, historically speaking, sociology is also a constitutive part of social practices, which can acquire an altogether conventionally real constructive power, and can possibly lead to a kind of symbolically initiated violence caused by theorists, or intellectuals, intentionally or unintentionally. This is a solemn matter that requires social scientists to take into account seriously and reflexively.

Finally, I would like to contend, that our theoretical dualistic thinking about self-and-society has been marked by certain type of knowing and thinking which have barred us from embarking upon important subjects such as the co-creative relation and process, as Nagarjuna observes, of phenomena. Various dualistic, non-relational and non-processual thinking, such as self/society, activity/passivity, autonomy/conformity and freedom/constraint, have blocked our conceptualization of, and investigation into, the relational process of co-creativity. Generally speaking, the dichotomization between the individual and “the social,” favors the view of seeing the individual as creative and “the social” as orderly. This polarization literally has prevented us from thinking about the social and creativity together. The image of creativity in social sciences in turn tends to be individualistic, that is, most of the research on creativity and innovation has been on creative individuals. This is definitely unacceptable according to the principle of dependent co-arising.

In terms of the middle way perspective, creativity must be conducted relationally and processually rather than independently. By talking of relational-processual co-creativity, I mean, broadly speaking, any and all creative processes leading to creative effects that are depending upon the relatedness of two or more people in temporal process. In other words, the process of creativity is the process of mutual involvement. The musical performances (in fact, almost any performing art), the creative process in scientific laboratories, the working of a doctoral dissertation, the founding of a firm by an entrepreneur, the establishment of a monument, as mentioned above, are but a few examples of what we mean by relational-processual co-creativity. Such creative

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28 See Bourdieu’s In Other Words.
processes can never be confined to the workings of a single genius in an isolated situation, because nothing social can be creatively established without any form of interaction and mutual influence. Even if someone works in physical isolation, such as writing a research paper alone, isn’t he/she part of a larger relational process of discursive formation, constantly in dialogue with, and working with a reference community and tradition? Would the concept of a “genius,” “entrepreneurship” or “authorship” adequately exist without others?

If we presuppose an atomistic view of the individual in our theoretical understanding, then even creativity in groups or in dialogic settings will be attributed to an individual, rather than to a relational process. Atomism leads to methodological individualism, from which co-creativity is ignored. However, on the other hand, if we presume a holistic view of social determination, creativity is by definition societal, and the individual is just epiphenomenal, that is, the society as an entity *sui generis*, that is, self-creating without taking into account any particular individual and its action. This kind of methodological collectivism is without a doubt disagreeable. I will articulate the methodological dichotomization in next section.

Using an understanding of co-creative social becoming with a non-dualistic and relational-processual worldview may go some way toward enabling a deeper understanding of the sunyata and pratitya-samutpada characteristics of social structure and its implications for the study of practical and empirical process of institutionalization/de-institutionalization/re-institutionalization, structuring/de-structuring/re-structuring, organizing/de-organizing/re-organizing and grouping/de-grouping/re-grouping. According to the middle way perspective, the phenomenal world must undergo a dynamic process of arising, enduring, changing and ceasing. When existent, say, social realities, are observed one has no choice but to say that they are dependently arisen through these three processual characteristics and are empty of inherent and independent essence. Therefore, social analysis should place their notice on the co-creative relational process of the arising, enduring, changing and ceasing of particular social structures, or entities, which involve the mutual embeddedness of many conditions, specifically the relational interweaving of many acting agencies, and which also condition the arising of some subsequent social consequences. The researcher should be aware that his/her ideas about social phenomena might have to be changed during the research process. Certainly we do not start with a tabula rasa, nor can we ever be free of pre-understanding and never have to be. Ideas and concepts however should be open for change if conditions are incongruent with them.