

Theory of Causation and Principle of Irreduction: Nāgārjuna, Spinoza and Latour

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Abstract This article challenges the persistent East–West dichotomy in comparative philosophy by examining how Nāgārjuna (ancient India), Spinoza (early modern Europe), and Latour (contemporary France) each develop relational critiques of substantialist ontology. Despite distinct vocabularies and historical settings, all three reject the idea of self-subsistent substances and affirm causality as constitutive rather than external. Nāgārjuna negates the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of entities through the logic of *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*) and dependent origination. Spinoza reconceptualises substance and mode in a monist ontology, asserting that all finite things exist *in and through* others. Latour’s principle of *irreduction* similarly denies ontological autonomy, showing that entities emerge through networks of translation. Using Latour’s irreduction as a heuristic lens, the article identifies structural isomorphisms in these relational ontologies that transcend essentialist cultural divisions. This convergence not only enriches global philosophy but also offers resources for rethinking ecological and political crises. By undermining the substantialist and essentialist metaphysics of possession and identity, relational ontology opens possibilities for post-identitarian ethics grounded in mutual constitution and interdependence.

Keywords Nāgārjuna, Spinoza; Bruno Latour; anti-substantialist ontology; relational causality; comparative philosophy; global philosophy

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Introduction

Comparative philosophy has long been plagued by essentialist dichotomies that artificially separate “Western” and “Eastern” (or “Asian”) philosophical traditions. This problematic binary categorization often reduces rich, complex philosophical traditions to monolithic entities, characterized by stereotypical traits: Western philosophy as rationalist, individualistic, and substance-oriented; Asian philosophy as holistic, relational, and process-oriented.¹ Such essentialist framings persist in academic databases, where categorizations like “Eastern thought” and “Western metaphysics” remain common organizing principles despite decades of scholarly critique.²

This paper contests such reductive categorizations by examining three philosophers from vastly different spatiotemporal contexts who articulate strikingly parallel critiques of substantialist thinking: Nāgārjuna from ancient India (c. 150 CE), Baruch Spinoza from early modern Europe (1632-1677), and Bruno Latour from contemporary France (1947-2022). I adopt a comparative methodology that neither assumes essential similarities between the thinkers nor treats their concepts as entirely incommensurable. Instead, it focuses on a shared philosophical problem—namely, the critique of substance-based metaphysics and the articulation of causality in non-substantialist terms—as the basis for comparison. I treat Latour’s principle of irreduction as a heuristic lens to illuminate resonances among their critiques of ontological autonomy and intrinsic essence of discrete substances. The aim is not to claim doctrinal equivalence, but to identify structural isomorphisms in their relational ontologies. By attending to these isomorphisms through the concept of causality, this paper attempts to construct a philosophical dialogue across temporal and cultural boundaries without collapsing historical and conceptual differences.

The persistence of anti-substantialist thinking across these diverse contexts demonstrates that wherever substantialist, essentialist, and individualistic frameworks have dominated philosophical discourse, equally vigorous critiques have emerged in response. This pattern suggests not a simple “East-West” divide, but

1 See Van Norden, Bryan W. *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017; and Angle, Stephen C. *Growing Moral: A Confucian Guide to Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021.

2 See Chakrabarti, Arindam, and Ralph Weber. *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016; and Garfield, Jay L., and William Edelglass, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.

rather a dynamic tension within global philosophical thought between substantialist ontologies and their relational alternatives. As Moeller and D'Ambrosio argue, the very notion of culturally distinct philosophical “worlds” (Eastern vs. Western) is itself a product of substantialist thinking that reifies dynamic traditions into fixed, self-contained entities.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I elaborate Latour’s principle of irreduction as a theoretical framework that will guide our comparative analysis. Then, I examine Spinoza’s concept of relational causality, showing how his critique of Cartesian substance theory leads to a thoroughly relational metaphysics. Next, I explore Nāgārjuna’s theory of causation through his fourfold negation and concept of emptiness (*sūnyatā*). Throughout, I emphasize that their convergent critiques of substantialism suggest that this philosophical move transcends cultural boundaries—not by ignoring historical or cultural differences, but by revealing how distinct traditions independently challenge metaphysical frameworks that isolate entities from their relations. In this sense, “cultural boundaries” refer to the conventional divisions between so-called “Western” and “Eastern” philosophical worlds, which these thinkers resist by advancing relational ontologies. Ultimately, this convergence not only offers a more interconnected and non-essentialist vision of global philosophy, but also provides conceptual resources for addressing contemporary crises—especially those rooted in metaphysical assumptions of autonomy, mastery, and ecological separation.

Theoretical Framework: Latour’s Principle of Irreduction

Let me begin with Bruno Latour’s principle of irreduction, which will serve as our theoretical framework. What is “irreduction”? Latour introduced this concept in his book *The Pasteurization of France*, in its intriguing second part, titled “Irreductions,” which appears to be quite independent from the first part’s historical analysis of pasteurization.

The principle begins with this fundamental statement: “1.1.1 Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else” (Latour, *Pasteurization* 158). This double negation appears repeatedly throughout the text: “Nothing is, by itself, the same as or different from anything else” (162), “There are neither wholes nor parts” (163). Through these double negations, Latour articulates a crucial insight about existence and determination, which he explicitly states: “Nothing is by itself ordered or disordered, unique or multiple, homogeneous or heterogeneous, fluid or inert, human or inhuman, useful or useless. Never by itself, but always by others” (160, emphasis mine).

From this perspective, Latour places ideas, humans, and inanimate objects on the same ontological plane. Nothing is more real than anything else based on essence or substance. There is no privileged position in reality, no hierarchical layers of being that would indicate greater or lesser degrees of reality. This means there is no unchanging core or essence at the bottom of being that would grant identity to each thing—which has been variously called “substance,” “substrate,” or “form.”

Latour provides a scathing critique of various forms of reduction:

A Christian loves a God who is capable of reducing the world to himself because he created it. [...] A philosopher hopes to find the radical foundation which makes all the rest epiphenomenal. A Hegelian wishes to squeeze from events something already inherent in them. A Kantian reduces things to grains of dust and then reassembles them with synthetic a priori judgments that are as fecund as a mule. [...] A Westerner never tires of shrinking the evolution of species and empires to Cleopatra’s nose, Achilles’ heel, and Nelson’s blind eye. A writer tries to recreate daily life and imitate nature. A painter is obsessed by the desire to render feelings into colors. [...] A man likes to use the term ‘he’ in place of humanity. (Latour, *Pasteurization* 162-163)

The most common form of reduction we do daily is “naming”—the reduction of complex causal networks into noun-substances. When we say “this ‘water bottle’ is on the ‘desk,’” are we really capturing the reality of what’s happening? Like when “I” drove my “car” here today and sat on this “chair.” Can these situations really be expressed as connections between such noun-substances?

This skepticism toward substantialization connects to the concept of “black box”. Developed most famously in *Pandora’s Hope*, Latour’s concept of the blackboxing describes how scientific facts or technological devices, once stabilized through complex networks of practices, are treated as self-evident and no longer interrogated. A black box, in this sense, is not merely a physical container but a conceptual one: it renders invisible the heterogeneous processes—social, technical, historical—that made it possible. As Latour explains, “when a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity” (Latour, *Pandora* 304). The more successful a scientific fact or artifact becomes, the more opaque its inner workings appear. Latour extends this insight to include not just machines and scientific models, but also everyday objects, persons, and even philosophical concepts, suggesting that much of reality is composed of such black-boxed entities.

From an ontological perspective, black boxing functions as a form of abstraction that hides the dense relational networks through which an entity acquires identity and stability. In this light, even the most mundane expressions—“this water bottle is on the desk”—already involve black-boxed assumptions about what “bottle,” “desk,” and “on” mean. Such expressions gloss over the relational processes, material conditions, and historical networks that sustain the intelligibility of these objects. Latour’s principle of irreduction invites us to reopen these black boxes, to trace the chains of associations that were hidden for the sake of stability. Doing so reveals that no object—no “thing”—exists in isolation or possesses an essential identity apart from its networks of relations and translations.

Yet there are heretics of irreductionism. Graham Harman and other proponents of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) adopt only the first half of Latour’s principle: that “nothing is reducible to anything else.” They ignore the second and equally vital clause: “nothing is, by itself, irreducible to anything else”. In doing so, OOO ends up reinstating the very metaphysical isolation that Latour’s relational ontology aimed to overcome. Harman’s metaphysics grants each object a withdrawn, inaccessible core—an irreducible essence that exists independently of all relations. This position leads to a “flat ontology” in which all entities, from electrons to novels, are said to be equally real and equally withdrawn (Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* 55–58). I would rather call this move an ‘ontological identity politics’—a metaphysical stance that treats each object as a self-subsistent entity deserving respect on account of its uniqueness and opacity. What emerges is a peculiar inversion of possessive individualism of the Western liberalism: not liberal subjects claiming autonomy, but objects claiming ontological sovereignty.

In its rejection of relationality, OOO undermines the very conditions for interaction and transformation. Harman’s notion of “vicarious causation” attempts to salvage causality by suggesting that objects relate only indirectly through translation, yet offers no account of how change can occur without positing some transcendent or spontaneous principle. As such, the framework risks slipping back into a kind of neo-occasionalism or covert creationism—an issue Harman himself anxiously acknowledges but does not resolve. In contrast, Latour’s irreduction affirms that all entities emerge in and through relations, that translation is not deferral but composition. “Nothing is, by itself, the same as or different from anything else. That is, there are no equivalents, only translations (In other words, everything happens only once, and at one place)” (Latour, *Pasteurization* 162). There is nothing beyond translation. Everything is relational. OOO’s selective reading of the principle irreduction thus exemplifies how anti-humanist metaphysics

can relapse into essentialist ontologies under a different guise.

Through this relationalism, Latour rejects two opposing views of causality: 1) the view that sees everything as “necessary” and 2) the views that attempt to introduce contingent elements in various ways to counter such deterministic thinking. For these are merely two extremes debating within the principle of reduction to substances or relationships between substances, not the principle of irreduction. In other words, Latour rejects both the perspective that posits mechanistic causal relationships between self-subsistent atoms or objects (as in Newtonian physics) and the view that contingent moments intervene in these causal relationships:

‘Everything is necessary’ and ‘everything is contingent’ mean the same thing—that is nothing. The words ‘necessary’ or ‘contingent’ gain meaning only when they are used in the heat of the moment to describe gradients of resistance—that is, reality. The length of Cleopatra’s nose is neither significant nor insignificant. Circumstances determine, for a time, the relative importance of whatever it is that makes them up. Chance and necessity can not be allocated their roles in advance. (Latour 161)

In other words, in a world where everything happens only once and is neither difference nor identity, causality must be simultaneous and interdependent (or, to adapt Karen Barad’s terminology, intra-dependent).

In his final masterpiece *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Latour contrasts being-as-being with being-as-other: “from being-as-being we can deduce only one type of being about which we might speak in several ways, whereas we are going to try to define [from being-as-other] how many other forms of alterities a being is capable of traversing in order to continue to exist” (Latour, *Inquiry* 163). Therefore, this “water bottle” and “desk” are not water-bottle-as-water-bottle or desk-as-desk. These are things that are constantly passing through causal relations, that is, translating and being translated, and have never once been simply a “water bottle” or a “desk.”

Spinoza’s Relational Causality

Turning our attention to the 17th century, we can explore how Spinoza’s conception of causality harmonizes with Latour’s principle of irreduction. Spinoza developed his relational metaphysics through a critical engagement with Cartesian substantialism, which itself had incorporated and transformed

elements of Aristotelian substance theory. His philosophical framework constitutes a fundamental challenge to Descartes' positions, specifically rejecting both the methodological skepticism culminating in the thinking self ("cogito ergo sum") and the pluralistic view that reality comprises numerous mental and material substances that we perceive as distinctly separate entities.

In the Aristotelian tradition, 'substance' functioned primarily as the grammatical subject in propositional statements. Throughout his *Categories*, Aristotle characterizes substance as "that which, [...] most strictly, primarily, and most of all, [...] is neither said of a subject nor in a subject," illustrating this with examples like "the individual man or the individual horse" (2a11). Within this framework, all non-substantial entities exist only in relation to substance—either as qualities inherent 'in a substance' or as predicates 'said of a substance.' This leads Aristotle to conclude that "if primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist" (2a34). The resulting ontological system presupposes subjects as fundamental entities to which attributes or modes are ascribed as predicates.

Descartes articulates a definition of substance in Part I of the *Principles of Philosophy* describing it as "a thing which exists in such a way that it needs no other thing in order to exist"—though he restricts this full meaning exclusively to God (Descartes 22). Beyond this absolute substance, he acknowledges created substances that require only divine "participation" to maintain their existence (23). Each substance manifests itself through characteristic attributes—thought for mental substances, extension for physical ones. Crucially, Descartes insists that distinct substances yield numerical distinction, but this creates a fundamental inconsistency in his system. Deleuze penetrates to the heart of this contradiction:

A second difficulty concerns real distinction considered alone. It is, no less than the other forms, a datum of representation. Two things are really distinct if one can conceive one of them clearly and distinctly while excluding everything belonging to the concept of the other. So that Descartes explains the criterion of real distinction to Arnauld as the completeness of the idea alone. [...] Real distinction does not contain within it the ground of things differing, but this ground is furnished by the external and transcendent divine causality that creates substances conformably to our manner of conceiving them as possible. Here [...] God as creator effects our passage from substances conceived as really distinct to really distinct substances. Real distinction, whether between substances with different attributes or those with the same attribute, brings with

it a division of things, that is, a corresponding numerical distinction. (Deleuze 30-31)

Deleuze's critique highlights a profound epistemological problem: What justifies our perception of everyday objects—such as a cup and desk—as ontologically distinct entities? When we examine the Cartesian position carefully, we find it rests upon two questionable foundations: the subjective certainty that we perceive them clearly as separate, and the theological assertion that divine truthfulness guarantees the accuracy of such perceptions. Beyond these contentious premises, the Cartesian framework provides no substantive basis for affirming the distinct substantiality of ordinary objects.

Spinoza's response to these difficulties involves a radical reconceptualization of substance. He rejects the Cartesian view that positions individual entities as substantially distinct from one another and frames the human mind as the privileged subject of knowledge. Instead, Spinoza advances a monistic ontology wherein only one self-causing substance exists—which he identifies as “God or Nature”—with all particular entities constituting mere modifications or modes of this singular substance. This relationship between unitary “substance” and its diverse “modes” is articulated through his concise formulations of “in itself” and “in another”:

By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed (E1Def3).¹

By mode I understand the modifications of substance, or that which is in another and is conceived through another. (E1Def5)

Spinoza's deceptively simple definitions thus launch a profound philosophical transformation, generating an anti-substantialist ontology that fundamentally

¹ For citations of Spinoza's works, I depart from the journal's standard citation format and instead adopt the conventional citation method used in Spinoza scholarship. Translations of Spinoza's text are from Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vols. 1 & 2. When necessary, I have directly amended Curley's text without specific mention, referring to the Latin text (Gebhardt, 1925). I have used the following method in referring to the *Ethics*: the first Arabic number following E (*Ethics*) identifies the part of the Book, the letters after that specify whether a proposition (P), definition (Def.), or axiom (Ax.) is intended. The number after these letters tells which proposition, definition, or axiom is referred to. If these numbers are followed by letters, then S means scholium and C corollary. For example, E2P8C refers to the corollary of the eighth proposition of the second part of the *Ethics*.

departs from preceding traditions. According to this perspective, substance exists not as an underlying substratum containing attributes and modes, but rather as the dynamic process of existing itself—expressing through infinite attributes like extension (manifested as motion and rest) and thought, and producing an infinity of modes (Gueroult 49). This ontological revolution dissolves the traditional hierarchy between substances and their modifications, eliminating the categorical distinction between what had previously been classified as qualities or movements (modes) and the supposedly independent entities (substances) to which they belonged. In Spinoza’s system, numerical distinctions between finite things no longer represent substantial or real distinctions. The differentiation between entities cannot be grounded in any intrinsic essence or form supposedly residing within each thing.

What form does causality take in this ontology where nature consists of modes instead of substances? Spinoza presents his understanding of causation at the very beginning of the *Ethics* as an axiom: “The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause” (E1Ax4). He employs this Axiom 4 to prove that “one substance cannot be produced by another substance” (E1P6C). Again, for Spinoza, similar to other substantialist traditions, “substance” is that which “exists in itself and is conceived through itself.” Therefore, if a substance could be produced by something else, it might have to, according to the axiom, depend on the concept of anything else—creating a contradiction. Here, Spinoza seems to align with Object-Oriented Ontology in arguing that causal relations cannot operate between substances. However, his solution takes an entirely opposite direction.

Intriguingly, Spinoza applies this axiom to prove his famous “parallelism” in Part II of the *Ethics*, namely that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (E2P7). The proof of this proposition contains nothing but this axiom 4 (“The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause”). Following this parallelism, we might reverse-read the axiom of causality as “the effect depends on and involves its cause” (let’s call this Axiom 4-parallel). At this point, some might still feel relatively close to the everyday notion of causality, that is, causal relations between substances. However, when we then consider the contrapositive of Axiom 4, which must be equally true as it, we encounter the uniqueness of Spinoza’s theory of causation: “If the knowledge of an effect neither involves nor depends on the knowledge of its cause, then it is not knowledge of the effect.” Why is this striking? Because it makes it impossible to explain causal relations using names.

Let’s take an everyday example: “The cake became sweet because sugar was added.” Applying Axiom 4-parallel, “the sweetness of the cake” (or “the sweet

cake”) must depend on and involve “the adding of sugar” (or “the added sugar”). But look at this sentence again: the concept of “sweet cake” neither involves nor depends on the concept of “added sugar.” The sweet cake is simply conceptualized as a sweet cake, and the adding of sugar is simply conceptualized as adding sugar. When “sweet cake” and “adding sugar” are considered as such independent concepts—that is, when the concept of sweet cake neither depends on nor includes the concept of added sugar—these concepts can no longer represent a cause-effect relationship for Spinoza. And according to the parallelism (E2P7), “adding sugar” ceases to be the cause of “sweet cake.” The sweet cake is a substance called “the sweet cake,” and the sugar is a substance called “the sugar.” As mentioned earlier, “one substance cannot be produced by another” (E1P6C).

This is precisely why Spinoza rejects the world of Aristotle and Descartes, composed of innumerable finite substances. Insofar as substances are substances, they cannot be causes and effects of each other. Spinoza’s perspective demonstrates that the interdependency (or as mentioned earlier, “intra-dependency”) between cause and effect is essential not only for explaining the becomings in nature we live but also for understanding things’ individuality, identity, and difference. An effect cannot exist without its cause, and likewise, a cause loses its existence without its effect. This presents a view distinctly different from the common understanding of causality that sees it as causal relations between substances. Substances cannot have causal relations with each other. Therefore, there are no substances in the world. This is precisely the world composed only of what Spinoza calls modifications or “modes”—things that “exist in another and are conceived through another.” Even if we conveniently refer to things using nouns such as names, these things do not exist as substances outside those words. Ontologically, they can only appear as something under the causal relation of affecting/being affected. It is not difficult to recognize its resonance with Latour’s opening statement in “Irreductions”: “Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else” (Latour, *Pasteurization* 158).

All subsequent propositions in the *Ethics* and the discussions of individuality, body, mind, emotion, social contract, intuitive knowledge, and beatitude can only be adequately understood on the basis of this anti-substantialism. In particular, nothing could be more anti-Spinozistic than understanding Spinoza’s ethics as a substantialized “I” possessing “my conatus” and “my power,” aiming to “expand my power.” Moreover, readings that simply replace this “I” with “thing” and understand things’ power and conatus in a vitalist way (for example, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*) also misinterpret Spinoza.

Nāgārjuna's Theory of Causation (or Emptiness of Causation)

Let us now journey back to ancient India. Buddhism is generally known for its dedication to the principle of causation, most clearly expressed in the formula of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The most concise statement regarding dependent origination is formulated in early texts such as the *Nikāyas* as: “When this arises, that arises. When this is absent, that is absent.” In the general Buddhist worldview, every action (*karma*) necessarily brings about its consequences (*vipāka*), establishing the fundamental basis for understanding how suffering perpetuates itself through successive lives. However, Buddhist theories of causation never understand “this” and “that,” or “action” and “consequence,” in substantialist terms. Another doctrine universally accepted by all Buddhist schools is “*anatman*” (non-self)—the teaching that there is no unchanging substance or “self” (*ātman*). Nāgārjuna offers the most radical interpretation of these Buddhist positions by unifying the theory of causation and the doctrine of non-self into a single, integrated teaching through his concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). His *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* demonstrates an even more radical anti-substantialist position than Spinoza’s theory of causation. That is, one must negate the substantiality of the relational categories themselves—what we call “cause” and “effect”—in order to understand the Buddha’s teaching of dependent origination.

The exact historical context in which Nāgārjuna (estimated to have lived around the 2nd century CE) developed his philosophy remains somewhat unclear. While we cannot definitively identify all the specific schools or philosophers he directly engaged with, we can discern the broad intellectual landscape against which his radical critique of substantialism emerged.

Nāgārjuna’s primary concern was challenging what he saw as substantialist tendencies within Buddhist traditions themselves. The Sarvāstivāda school—likely the most influential Buddhist philosophical system of his time—asserted the real existence of all dharmas (elements of existence) across past, present, and future, maintaining that while phenomena are momentary, their intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) endures. They reconciled this with the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence by distinguishing between a dharma’s existence and its causal efficacy, claiming only present dharmas have causal power. The Sautrāntika school, though emerging around Nāgārjuna’s time, opposed this strong substantialism, asserting only present dharmas exist, but still maintained certain substantialist elements through affirming the substantiality of momentarily existing dharmas.

Beyond Buddhist traditions, Nāgārjuna’s critique also implicitly addressed non-

Buddhist Indian philosophical systems. The Vaiśeṣika-Nyāya schools exemplified substantialist atomism, categorizing reality into substances, qualities, actions, universals, particulars, and inherence—all having objective existence independent of perception. Their theory of causation (*asatkāryavāda*) held that effects are newly produced by causes rather than pre-existing within them. The Sāṃkhya school presented a dualistic metaphysics dividing reality into consciousness (*puruṣa*) and primordial materiality (*prakṛti*), maintaining a causal theory (*satkāryavāda*) where effects pre-exist in their causes.

Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK, “Song of The Middle Way”) attacks the foundational concepts of these various substantialist positions—both Buddhist and non-Buddhist—by demonstrating the logical impossibilities that arise when entities are conceived as having self-existence (*svabhāva*). His radical interpretation of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as emptiness (*śūnyatā*) was aimed at purifying the Buddha’s teaching from substantialist distortions. This clarifies why his causal analysis begins with the systematic negation of all possible substantialist accounts of causation, establishing the foundation for his revolutionary philosophy of the Middle Way.

Nāgārjuna’s MMK defines the doctrine of dependent origination taught by the Buddha through a series of double negations reminiscent of Latour’s principle of irreduction: “[...] the doctrine of dependent origination, according to which there is neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor the eternal, neither singularity nor plurality, neither the coming nor the going [...]” (MMK Dedicatory Verse).¹ Moving to his treatment of causation specifically, in the first chapter of MMK, Nāgārjuna begins with a striking quadruple negation, which will be our focus:

Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause: Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen. (MMK 1.1)

This systematic negation of four possible types of causation sets the foundation for his critique of substantialist thinking about causation.

The first negation—“not from itself”—primarily targets the Sāṃkhya school’s theory of self-causation, which claims that effects pre-exist in their causes. If

¹ For citations of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), I have provided my own translations and follow the conventional citation method in Buddhist philosophical scholarship, indicating chapter and verse numbers after “MMK.” For example, “MMK 1.1” refers to Chapter 1, Verse 1 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

something could arise from itself, Nāgārjuna argues, this would lead to an infinite regress of the same thing perpetually reproducing itself. Moreover, if the effect already exists in the cause, what need is there for it to arise again? This critique reveals the logical impossibility of genuine self-causation. This critique could also be applied to the concept of form (*eidos*) or formal cause, which is central to Western substantialist philosophy after Aristotle.

The second negation—“not from another”—challenges the common-sense view that things arise from other, separate things. This seems to contradict our everyday experience, where we constantly observe things appearing to cause other things. However, Nāgārjuna’s point is subtle: if things had their own independent, intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), they could not interact causally with other things that also have their own independent nature. True otherness would preclude any causal relationship, much as Spinoza would later argue that “one substance cannot be produced by another substance” (E1P6C).

The third negation—“not from both”—dismisses the possibility that things could arise from a combination of self-causation and other-causation. This combination would simply combine the logical problems of both previous positions. More fundamentally, it would create an internal contradiction: how could something be simultaneously self-caused and caused by another?

Finally, “nor without cause” rejects the possibility of completely random or uncaused arising, which could be also called “contingency.” Like all Buddhist philosophers and most ancient Indian schools, Nāgārjuna here seems to agree with Spinoza’s statement that “From a given determinate cause an effect follows necessarily, and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow” (Spinoza, E1A3).

This completes Nāgārjuna’s systematic dismantling of all possible substantialist accounts of causation. The conclusion is not that causation doesn’t exist, as the fourth negation clearly shows, but rather that it cannot be understood in terms of substances with independent existence (or intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*). What Nāgārjuna is pointing to here is the nihilistic dead end we encounter when we cling to substantialist notions of causation: “For the intrinsic nature of existents does not exist in the conditions, [causes,] etc. The intrinsic nature not occurring, neither is extrinsic nature found” (MMK 1.2).

Instead, causation can only be understood in terms of radical interdependence (*pratīyasamutpāda*), where no entity possesses independent existence but arises in dependence upon conditions. The world consists of causes and effects. However, simultaneously, nothing can be substantialized as either “cause” and “effect,” or as

“something that is a cause” and “something that is an effect”—whether by itself or by another. This is because nothing exists outside of the mutual dependence, or more radically, intra-dependence of cause and effect. Nāgārjuna termed this non-substantialist theory of causation *śūnyatā* (emptiness). And as the *Heart Sutra* famously declares: “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form” (rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṃ; 色即是空 空即是色). Paradoxically, it is precisely because there are no substances in the world that thorough causal relations can operate.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Nāgārjuna, Spinoza, and Latour reveals a striking isomorphism in their critiques of substantialist ontology despite vast differences in historical context, cultural background, and philosophical vocabulary. Each thinker, in his own distinctive idiom, arrives at the fundamental insight that entities cannot be understood as self-subsistent substances but must be conceptualized through their causal interconnections. Nāgārjuna’s principle of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) articulates this through his doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), demonstrating that nothing possesses intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) precisely because everything arises in dependence upon conditions. Spinoza’s relational metaphysics reframes this through his reconceptualization of substance and mode, establishing that finite entities exist not *in themselves* but *in and through another* (*in alio*). Latour’s principle of irreduction affirms the same through his dialectical axiom that “nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else,” emphasising that entities emerge only through translation and negotiation within ever-shifting networks of relations.

What emerges from this dialogue is not merely a negative critique of substantialism, but a positive ontological orientation: reality as fundamentally relational, constituted not by isolated essences but by co-emergent patterns of causation. This relational ontology calls into question any philosophical framework grounded on possession, autonomy, or fixed identity—be it of subjects, cultures, or things. In this sense, the convergence of these three trajectories—spanning ancient India, early modern Europe, and contemporary thought—reveals a recurring thread in the history of philosophy: a sustained critique of the idea that beings exist independently and possess intrinsic essences. This critique arises in diverse traditions not because of shared cultural origins, but because they each confront the problems generated by metaphysical systems that isolate entities from their relations. Rather than relying on essentialist sameness, this comparison illuminates how distinct philosophical traditions have, in their own contexts, developed

relational ontologies that challenge the logic of separation and self-sufficiency. As such, this comparative study contributes not only to the philosophical understanding of relational ontology but also to the practice of global philosophy by unsettling the East–West dichotomy and offering a model for productive cross-cultural philosophising. Rather than reducing traditions to their presumed cultural essences, it foregrounds shared conceptual challenges and resonant solutions, thereby opening space for more generative and interconnected histories of thought.

The enduring resonance of these relational ontologies suggests that their insights are not confined to the past; rather, they offer vital resources for rethinking the crises of the present. By undermining the metaphysical foundations of possessive individualism and categorical difference, anti-substantialist ontology offers the ground for post-identitarian political imaginaries, where ethical and collective relations are not structured around fixed essences but around processes of mutual constitution. Such a relational understanding of causality and being opens new possibilities for addressing the ecological crisis—not merely as a scientific or policy problem, but as a symptom of deeper ontological assumptions about separation, mastery, and autonomy. The world imagined by Nāgārjuna, Spinoza, and Latour is one in which beings are never by themselves, but always in and through others. In that sense, their shared vision invites us to reconceive ecological entanglement not as a burden to be managed, but as the very condition of reality to be affirmed and lived through.

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