Zarathustra’s Lucid Dream, Zhuangzi’s Supreme Swindle, and Nāgārjuna’s Emptiness of Emptiness: Some Resonances between Nietzsche’s Written and Painted Thoughts and Asian Philosophy

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Abstract:
One way of describing Nietzsche’s “philosophers of the future” is that, rather than thinking of themselves as awakening from the dreamworld—as philosophers since Plato have understood themselves, they will have awoken to the fact that they’re dreaming. Another way of describing these lucid dreamers is that they will have understood that they are artists. If for Plato philosophers have the serious task of waking from the dreamworld and discovering the truth while artists are lost in the dreamworld playing with fictions, Nietzsche’s response is that philosophers have always been artists whether they have realized it or not. The philosophers of the future will recognize that they are artists and thus they will have awakened to the lucid dream that is philosophy. In recent years some interesting comparisons have been drawn between Nietzsche and both Zhuangzi and Nāgārjuna in Asian philosophy. The Daoist Zhuangzi criticizes both the Confucians and the Mohists in their dispute concerning the dao for foolishly believing that they are awake when they are both dreaming. Zhuangzi goes on to say “when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming, too” and then admits that “words like these will be labeled the Supreme Swindle.” Nietzsche’s philosophy of the future, crossing the boundaries between philosophy and art, has often been considered the opening move of postmodern thought, which traditional philosophers regard as something of a supreme swindle, leading further into and not out of nihilism. The Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of śūnyatā similarly engendered much controversy and charges of nihilism. Nāgārjuna’s famous exposition of śūnyatā, with its emphasis on the emptiness of emptiness, has been both very influential and quite confounding. This paper takes up a reflection on Nietzsche’s conception of philosophy as lucid dreaming and some possible resonances between his “written and painted thoughts” and philosophy as understood by Zhuangzi and Nāgārjuna.