MEDWIN PUBLISHERS
Committed to Create Value for Researchers

Philosophy International Journal
ISSN: 2641-9130

Metamodernism and the Recovery of Metaphysics

Alias MS*

Philosophy and Civilization Section, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

***Corresponding author:** Mohd Syahmir Alias, Philosophy and Civilization Section, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Opinion

Volume 9 Issue 3

Received Date: August 27, 2026

Published Date: September 10, 2026

DOI: 10.23880/phij-16000375

Introduction

Metaphysics occupies a strange position in modern philosophy. On one hand, it was a central pillar that shaped early modern thought. On the other hand, the development of modernity eventually produced deep skepticism regarding human capacity to achieve metaphysical certainty. Metaphysics subsequently faced a more radical challenge from postmodernism, which questioned the stability of meaning, the foundations of knowledge, language, and universal truth claims [1].

Yet, metaphysical questions have never truly died or been silenced. Inquiries into what exists, the nature of reality, the essence of change, the place of humanity, and the meaning of existence continue to emerge in various new forms. Therefore, the most relevant question today is not whether metaphysics has disappeared, but how metaphysics can be recovered after passing through the modern experience and the postmodern critique.

This short essay attempts to use the discourse of metamodernism to reflect on these questions. In cultural theory, metamodernism is articulated by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as oscillating "between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity [2]."

This oscillatory nature shows that metamodernism is not a reckless attempt to revive modern optimism, nor does it treat postmodern skepticism or despair as the end of thought. Instead, through this continuous oscillation, metamodernism maintains an awareness of human limitations while reopening space to discuss meaning, truth, hope, and progress.

This discussion was systematically expanded by Hanzi Freinacht, who views metamodernism not merely as an aesthetic inclination, but as a historical phase, a cultural code, and a new stage of psychological development that succeeds postmodernity. For Freinacht, metamodernism is essentially: "the pragmatic synthesis of modern ambition and postmodern critique. It is the ability to hold both the modern desire for progress, meaning, and grand narratives and the postmodern awareness of irony, skepticism, and fallibility [3]."

Through this developmental framework, metamodernism functions as a stage of cognitive and emotional maturity that can absorb the lessons of postmodern deconstruction while consciously deciding to reconstruct more functional structures of meaning and existence. Thus, an important question arises: can metaphysics be recovered in a metamodern climate? If so, what form of metaphysics fits this new awareness?

From the Construction of Metaphysics to its Limitation

The relationship between modern thought and metaphysics is complex. Early modern philosophy was not a movement that rejected metaphysics. On the contrary, figures like René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza built vast metaphysical systems to explain God, the soul, humanity, and the universe using rational reason [4,5]. Metaphysics was not outside the modern project; it was the primary terrain used by modern philosophy to reshape the understanding of reality after Europe's intellectual transformations.

A shift in attitude toward metaphysics occurred gradually within the modern tradition itself. Immanuel Kant was a crucial figure in this transition. Kant did not reject metaphysics carelessly but sought to determine the limits of human reason [6]. The focus of metaphysics shifted

CC BY

from questions about the nature of reality to questions about the conditions and boundaries of human knowledge. Consequently, speculative metaphysics could no longer be accepted passively as a path to absolute knowledge.

Subsequent developments pushed these limits further. A strict emphasis on empirical experience and the scientific method led to growing skepticism toward metaphysical claims that could not be physically verified. This culminated in early 20th-century logical positivism, which dismissed metaphysical statements as meaningless, lacking cognitive significance [7]. Therefore, describing modern history as an initial rejection of metaphysics is inaccurate. It is better understood as an evolution: starting with system-building, moving to examining the limits of knowledge, and ending with the rejection of certain abstract speculations.

Postmodern thought brought this critique to a more radical phase. Attention was no longer focused solely on the limits of reason or empirical verification, but shifted to the roles of language, history, culture, and power structures [8]. This approach made questions about reality difficult to separate from the ways in which reality is interpreted. However, recognizing that our understanding is influenced by language and culture does not mean that reality itself is merely a construction of the mind. Rejecting absolute certainty does not mean denying the existence of truth. Distinguishing between "the limits of knowledge about reality" and "the denial of reality" is the key if metaphysics is to be reconsidered.

This is where metamodernism opens a new space. If early modernity constructed metaphysics through confidence in reason, later limited it through epistemological critique, and postmodernism questioned its linguistic foundations, then it is time to ask again about reality without returning to the old forms of dogmatic certainty. Recovering metaphysics in a metamodern context is not an effort to erase modern and postmodern critiques, nor is it a return to dogmas of any past era; it is an effort to rethink metaphysics "after" taking all those critiques seriously.

What Form Does this Recovery Take?

A metaphysics recovered within a metamodern context does not need to rebuild a dogmatic system claiming absolute explanations of the entire universe. Instead, it functions as an integrated framework bringing together three basic dimensions of philosophy: epistemologically through "realism without absoluteness," ontologically through "dynamism without nihilism," and axiologically through "interconnectedness without relativism." These three dimensions detail how metamodern metaphysics operates conceptually:

- Epistemologically (realism without absoluteness): This explains how human beings know reality. The existence of a world outside the mind is still recognized as real, but human beings do not claim that their understanding of this reality is final or free from limitations.
- Ontologically (dynamism without nihilism): This explains the basic nature of existence itself. Reality is understood as an ongoing process of movement and transformation; however, change and instability do not erase the structure or meaning of existence.
- Axiologically (interconnectedness without relativism): This explains how human values and actions are formed. Human beings and moral values exist through relationships and actual conditions, without reducing truth to nothing more than the perception of a value-free subject.

This structured mapping changes the original purpose of metaphysics. If metaphysics is understood merely as an abstract theoretical construct about the ultimate structure of reality, it becomes detached from life. Questions such as "What exists?" (ontology), "What can be known?" (epistemology), and "How should one act and assign value?" (axiology) are not mere speculations. They are closely linked to how humans understand themselves, navigate change, and seek meaning. Therefore, metamodern recovery of metaphysics does not discard conceptual analysis, but connects directly with intellectual and spiritual human experience.

In this sense, the dimension of existential experience becomes vital. Metaphysical questions are no longer just "What exists?", but also "What does it mean to exist?" and "How is existence experienced?" Knowing theoretically that everything changes is not the same as experiencing oneself as a being constantly in the process of becoming. Understanding that humans are relational is not the same as feeling our connection with nature and history. Metaphysics is not just knowledge about existence; it is a reflection born from within the experience of existence itself.

Perspectives to Rethinking Metaphysics

The possibility of rethinking existence can be seen through philosophical traditions outside the main Western narrative. These traditions offer alternative frameworks that never became trapped in a rigid "substance ontology," the Western tendency to view reality as a collection of static, isolated objects.

In this essay, I would like to bring together the perspectives of three philosophers from three different Eastern traditions: Nāgārjuna from the Indian Buddhist tradition, Guō Xiàng from the Chinese Neo-Daoist tradition, and Mullā Ṣadrā from the Islamic Transcendentalist tradition.

 Copyright© Alias MS.

However, these philosophers should not be regarded as metamodern thinkers ahead of their time, nor should their ideas be forcibly combined into a single system. Rather, their distinct backgrounds prove that there are various ways to understand reality without getting trapped in a binary choice between static existence or absolute non-existence.

Nāgārjuna, the primary figure of the Madhyamaka school in Buddhist philosophy, offers a radical way to challenge the view that things have an isolated existence. Through the concept of śūnyatā (emptiness of intrinsic nature), he rejects the assumption that an object possesses an independent, permanent internal essence (svabhāva). This idea is closely linked to pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), the principle that the existence of anything relies on specific conditions and relationships. Emptiness does not mean nothing exists. On the contrary, things exist precisely because they are interconnected [9]. For metamodern metaphysics, Nāgārjuna's thought proves that we can question rigid entities without denying the reality of the world. At the same time, it adds an existential dimension: if the self does not exist in isolation, our self-understanding must account for the web of relationships shaping our lives.

Guō Xiàng, the chief commentator on the Daoist text Zhuāngzǐ, offers a different path by dismantling the need for a rigid metaphysical center. His thought emphasizes zìrán, the spontaneous natural process that unfolds according to its own nature through the doctrine of uncaused existence. In this framework, reality does not require a transcendental foundation outside the universe to explain its changes; reality is a continuous process of transformation occurring from within. Although he questions the stability of language and rejects claims to universal truth, this critique does not lead to the conclusion that existence has lost its meaning [10,11]. Instead, this perspective allows metamodern metaphysics to understand a constantly changing world without falling into nihilism. Human beings are not observers standing outside the stage, but part of the process of transformation that is directly experienced through the body, time, and daily life.

Mullā Ṣadrā, a Persian Islamic philosopher, provides an approach that emphasizes wujūd (being or existence) as the foundation of reality [12]. In his metaphysics, existence is not something static. It has different degrees or intensities, a concept known as tashkīk al-wujūd (gradation of being). He also introduced al-ḥarakah al-jawhariyyah (substantial motion), the view that change takes place within the very nature of substance itself, rather than merely in its external properties. Nevertheless, Mullā Ṣadrā's system remains grounded in the idea that absolute existence is One in waḥdat al-wujūd (unity of being), namely God, the Most High [13,14]. Within this framework, humans are not a finished product that simply "is," but are constantly in the process of "becoming." Human existence carries a dynamic motion and development toward the realization of perfect existence.

These three perspectives should not be treated as identical. They clearly rest on different metaphysical assumptions. Nāgārjuna does not construct a God-centered metaphysics of being like Mullā Ṣadrā, while Guō Xiàng cannot be forced into either a Buddhist or Islamic framework because his thought is rooted in Daoist tradition and his commentary on the Zhuāngzǐ. Nevertheless, their value for this discussion lies in a deeper lesson: metaphysics does not necessarily have to be trapped in the search for a rigid and static essence. Reality can instead be understood and experienced through relationships, processes, and continuous movement.

This approach has certain similarities with the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, particularly in its rejection of a purely static picture of reality and its emphasis on relationships and processes [15]. However, the restoration of metamodern metaphysics does not need to depend on a single tradition, much less on claims that Eastern thought is merely a "sub-category" or an early echo of Western thought. Rather, the ideas of Nāgārjuna, Guō Xiàng, and Mullā Ṣadrā show that questions about relationships, change, and existence have a long history across different philosophical traditions. Eastern traditions offer a more radical existential dimension and awareness of human limitations through spiritual practices, meditation, and surrender, which do not exist in the same form as Whitehead's purely logical theoretical approach.

Recovery, Not Return

On this basis, the term "recovery" needs to be clearly distinguished from "return." We do not need to return metaphysics to its dogmatic form before modern and postmodern critiques. Nor can we ignore the valuable lessons concerning the dangers of absolute foundations, excessive certainty, and the tendency to regard one's own perspective as universal. What needs to be restored is not an arrogant certainty, but the courage to ask metaphysical questions again.

Metaphysics can return without becoming dogmatic. It can acknowledge reality without claiming final answers. It can accept change without falling into nihilism. It can understand interconnectedness without viewing everything as entirely relative. Furthermore, it can bridge ontological questions with human existential and spiritual experiences. In this way, metaphysics ceases to be a search for absolute answers that close off discussion; it becomes an open inquiry that continually reminds humans of the limits of their own knowledge.

 Copyright© Alias MS.

Conclusion

Metamodernism may not yet have a fully developed philosophical form, but it provides a fresh space for reflecting on the relationship between certainty and doubt. It does not force us to choose absolutely between modern optimism and postmodern skepticism. Instead, it allows us to take both seriously: the awareness that our understanding is always limited, as well as the fundamental human drive towards truth and meaning. This transcendent quality is expressed well by Brendan Graham Dempsey: "The metamodern worldview is different. It moves beyond the cultural logic of postmodernity, passing through it in order to find something ambitious, hopeful, and meaningful on the other side... It calls for a renewed sense of progress, direction, and purpose, while doing so without premodern dogma or modern totalitarianism [16]."

The same applies to metaphysics. Through this framework, recovering metaphysics is not an attempt to revive old systems or deny contemporary critiques. It means reopening questions about reality with far greater humility. Realism without absoluteness, dynamism without nihilism, and interconnectedness without relativism serve as the primary compass for this journey. The thought of Nāgārjuna, Guō Xiàng, and Mullā Ṣadrā opens space for us to ask about reality once more after learning to doubt our own certainty. Ultimately, the most fundamental question returns to its peak: what does it mean for something to exist, and what does it mean for humans to experience that existence?

References

1. Schrag CO (2015) Postmodernism as a problem for metaphysics. Russ J Commun 7(1): 68-76.
2. Vermeulen T, van den Akker R (2010) Notes on metamodernism. J Aesthet Cult 2(1): 1-14.
3. Freinacht H (2017) The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One. Metamoderna.
4. Descartes R (2008) Meditations on first philosophy: With selections from the objections and replies. Oxford University Press, USA.
5. Spinoza B de (1960) The ethics. In: Elwes RHM (Trans.) The rationalists. Anchor Books, pp: 178–406.
6. Kant I (1929) Critique of pure reason. Macmillan and Co.
7. Carnap R (1959) The elimination of metaphysics through logical analysis of language. In: Ayer AJ (Ed.) Logical positivism. The Free Press, pp. 60-81.
8. Lyotard JF (1984) The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge. University of Minnesota Press.
9. Garfield JL (Trans.) (1995) The fundamental wisdom of the middle way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. Oxford University Press.
10. Guo Xiang (2022) Zhuangzi: A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang. Columbia University Press, USA.
11. Ziporyn B (2003) The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang. State University of New York Press.
12. Nasr SH (1989) Existence (wujūd) and quiddity (māhiyyah) in Islamic philosophy. Int Philos Q 29(4): 409-428.
13. al-Shīrāzī Ṣ al-D (1990) al-Ḥikmah al-muta'āliyah fī al-asfār al-'aqliyyah al-arba'ah. Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī.
14. Mulla Sadra (1981) The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra. Princeton University Press.
15. Whitehead AN (1978) Process and reality: An essay in cosmology. The Free Press.
16. Dempsey BG (2023) Metamodernism: Or, the cultural logic of cultural logics. 2nd(Edn.), Arc Press.

Copyright© Alias MS.