



Resolving the Lifespan Personality Trait Stability–Plasticity Paradox through the Lens of Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamaka Philosophy

Dr. Biswajit Satpathy, Professor (Retd.)
Department of Business Administration
Sambalpur University

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Abstract

This paper examines the longstanding tension in personality psychology between the apparent stability of personality traits and the demonstrable capacity for personality development across the lifespan. Classical trait approaches, particularly Costa and McCrae’s Five-Factor Model, have emphasized relatively enduring, biologically anchored basic tendencies, while life-span, social-investment, situational, clinical, and volitional approaches demonstrate meaningful personality change. The apparent contradiction becomes more complex when personality is considered in relation to socioeconomic conditions, institutional power, behavioral epigenetics, cross-cultural measurement, language, and evolutionary dynamics.

The paper brings these empirical perspectives into dialogue with Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamaka philosophy, particularly Śūnyavāda, Pratītyasamutpāda, and Satya-dvaya. Rather than treating personality traits as intrinsically existing entities, the Mādhyamaka interpretation understands them as dependently co-arisen patterns that are empty of svabhāva, or independent and unchanging essence. The Big Five can therefore remain useful at the conventional level as prajñapti—functional conceptual

designations—without being solidified as permanent psychological substances. High rank-order stability can be understood as continuity in the biological, social, environmental, and cognitive conditions that repeatedly reproduce similar behavioral patterns, while change occurs when those sustaining conditions change.

The paper further distinguishes this philosophical position from Western dynamic personality theories. Both reject rigid personality essentialism, but they differ in ontology, causality, epistemology, the interpretation of self, and ultimate purpose. Western dynamic approaches generally retain a real psychological system that changes over time, whereas Mādhyamaka uses dependent origination and emptiness to question the independent existence of the system itself. The resulting synthesis proposes that personality is best understood as a dynamic process stream conventionally measurable and practically useful, yet ultimately non-essential and open to transformation. In this interpretation, śūnyatā is not nihilism but the condition that makes development, adaptation, therapeutic change, and lifelong growth possible.

Keywords: Śūnyavāda (Emptiness); Pratītyasamutpāda (Dependent Origination); Satya-dvaya (Two Truths); Svabhāva (Intrinsic Essence); Prajñapti (Conventional Designation); Personality Stability; Personality Plasticity; Mādhyamaka; Lifespan Development.

1. Introduction

The scientific study of personality has developed around two apparently competing ideas. One emphasizes enduring individual differences where people tend to display recognizable patterns of thought, emotion, motivation, and behavior across time and situations. The other emphasizes adaptation where people change as they encounter new



roles, relationships, institutions, cultures, environments, life events, therapeutic interventions, and deliberate efforts at self-development. The central problem is therefore not simply whether personality is stable or changeable, but how both stability and change can be true without assuming either an immutable inner essence or complete behavioral randomness.

Modern trait psychology emerged from the lexical tradition associated with Allport and Odbert and was subsequently shaped by factor-analytic approaches. Cattell reduced the large lexical inventory into a more manageable structure, while Eysenck proposed a parsimonious biologically oriented model. The empirical convergence of these approaches ultimately contributed to the Five-Factor Model or Big Five: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. The framework has demonstrated considerable usefulness in predicting educational, occupational, interpersonal, and health-related outcomes. (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Cattell, 1943; Goldberg, 1993)

At the same time, longitudinal research has shown that mean levels of personality traits change across the life course. Social roles, major life transitions, environmental pressures, clinical interventions, and intentional behavioral change can all modify trait expression. Personality also appears relative to socioeconomic position, cultural context, language, biological susceptibility, and population-level dynamics. Consequently, the question of what a personality trait actually is becomes as important as the question of how stable it is.

This paper addresses that ontological question through a dialogue between empirical personality psychology and Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka philosophy. The purpose is not to replace psychological measurement with philosophy, nor to claim that ancient philosophical concepts constitute empirical psychological findings. Rather, the aim is to use Mādhyamaka concepts as an interpretive framework for understanding why measurable personality patterns can be relatively stable while remaining capable of transformation.

2. Trait Theory of Personality

Trait theory provides an empirical and structural approach to individual differences. It proposes that human behavior, emotion, and cognition can be understood partly through relatively enduring dispositions called traits. The tradition begins with the lexical hypothesis, according to which socially important individual differences become represented in natural language. Allport and Odbert identified more than four thousand descriptive terms, providing an extensive vocabulary from which later researchers constructed systematic personality taxonomies.

Cattell subsequently applied factor analysis to reduce this large vocabulary to sixteen primary personality factors. Eysenck pursued a more parsimonious structure based on Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Psychoticism. The psycholexical tradition later converged around the Five-Factor Model, especially through the work of Goldberg and Costa and McCrae. The resulting OCEAN structure consists of Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.

Openness to Experience captures intellectual curiosity, imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, and receptiveness to novelty. Conscientiousness concerns organization, diligence, goal-directed behavior, dependability, and impulse control. Extraversion encompasses sociability, assertiveness, energy, and positive emotionality. Agreeableness concerns interpersonal orientations such as trust, compassion, cooperation, and altruism, while Neuroticism reflects emotional instability, vulnerability to stress, and a tendency toward negative affect. (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1993)

The Big Five has substantial empirical value. Cross-cultural research has identified broadly replicable trait structures, although the extent and exact form of universality remain debated. Behavioral-genetic studies have estimated substantial heritable components in personality, while longitudinal research demonstrates considerable rank-order stability. At the same time, meta-analytic evidence indicates systematic mean-level changes, particularly increases in Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability across important portions of adulthood. Thus, the empirical record itself contains both continuity and transformation. (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Gurven et al., 2013; Henrich et al., 2010)

The applied importance of the Big Five is also significant. Conscientiousness has repeatedly been associated with job performance and academic achievement, while Extraversion and Agreeableness can be especially relevant to socially intensive work. Neuroticism has been associated with psychological distress and health risks, whereas



Conscientiousness is associated with healthier behavioral patterns and longevity. These findings establish the practical usefulness of trait constructs without, by themselves, settling their ultimate ontological status. (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Poropat, 2009; Lahey, 2009)

3. Personality Stability: The Essentialist Position

The stability position argues that personality dispositions become comparatively consolidated and remain relatively consistent during adulthood. William James's frequently cited formulation that personality becomes "set like plaster" by around age thirty became an influential expression of this view. Later, Costa and McCrae's Five-Factor Theory emphasized basic tendencies that are substantially endogenous and biologically anchored. High longitudinal rank-order correlations were interpreted as evidence for enduring personality architecture. (James, 1890; Costa & McCrae, 1994)

Behavioral-genetic findings provide an additional basis for emphasizing biological continuity. Twin and adoption studies have reported substantial heritability for major personality dimensions. From an essentialist interpretation, relatively stable genetic architecture and persistent neurobiological characteristics provide anchors that help explain why individuals retain characteristic behavioral tendencies even when circumstances change. (Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001; Jang et al., 1996)

Longitudinal studies have also found considerable rank-order stability over long periods. Terracciano, Costa, and McCrae reported substantial persistence in personality profiles, while Conley documented long-term consistency in adult personality. The essentialist interpretation therefore distinguishes between temporary states and deeper traits: situations may alter immediate behavior, but an underlying trait architecture is presumed to remain comparatively stable. (Conley, 1985; Terracciano et al., 2006)

This position has explanatory strength because it recognizes genuine regularities in human behavior. However, rank-order stability does not logically establish that traits possess an independent, unchanging essence. A person can remain relatively higher or lower than others on a trait while the person's absolute level changes, and similar behavior can be reproduced by stable environmental and social conditions. The distinction between statistical stability and metaphysical permanence is therefore crucial.

4. Dynamism and Lifespan Plasticity in Personality

Contemporary lifespan research provides strong evidence that personality is not frozen in early adulthood. Life-span developmental perspectives and Social Investment Theory propose that social roles create new expectations and behavioral demands. Entering employment, forming committed relationships, becoming a parent, and assuming other adult responsibilities can encourage greater emotional stability, self-regulation, dependability, and social consideration. (Roberts et al., 2005, 2006; Bleidorn et al., 2018)

Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer's meta-analysis of longitudinal studies identified systematic mean-level changes across the life course. Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability generally increase from young adulthood toward middle age. Some facets of Extraversion and Openness also show developmental trajectories, with increases during young adulthood followed by stabilization or modest decline later in life. These patterns demonstrate that personality development is not restricted to childhood or adolescence. (Roberts et al., 2006)

Personality change is not limited to normative aging. Significant life events—including career transitions, marital changes, retirement, and major health experiences—can alter personality trajectories. Intervention research has also reported meaningful changes following psychological and clinical interventions. Volitional-change research further suggests that individuals can deliberately pursue changes in their trait-related patterns through sustained behavioral goals and implementation plans. (Bleidorn et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2017; Hudson & Fraley, 2015)

The evidence therefore supports a more dynamic conception of personality. Relative rank-order stability can coexist with mean-level change, and neither stability nor change needs to be treated as an absolute condition. Personality may be sufficiently stable to support prediction while sufficiently plastic to permit development. The conceptual challenge is to explain the coexistence of these properties.



5. The Relativity and Contextuality of Personality

Personality expression is influenced by more than immediate situational demands. Socioeconomic structures, institutional power, biological susceptibility, cultural practices, language, measurement conventions, and evolutionary pressures all contribute to the conditions under which behavioral patterns arise and are interpreted.

5.1 Socioeconomic Status, Power, and Habitus

Bourdieu's concept of habitus highlights how social position becomes embodied in dispositions, preferences, expectations, and styles of action. The same behavioral pattern may be interpreted differently depending on the actor's social position. Assertiveness in a socially powerful person may be described as leadership, whereas similar behavior in a less powerful person may be judged as insubordination. Economic scarcity can also impose cognitive constraints that encourage reactive decision-making. Such behavior may be incorrectly interpreted as an enduring personal deficiency when it is partly an adaptation to material conditions. (Bourdieu, 1984)

5.2 Behavioral Epigenetics and Differential Susceptibility

Neuroplasticity and behavioral epigenetics provide mechanisms through which environmental experience can influence biological functioning. Differential susceptibility perspectives further suggest that some individuals are more responsive than others to environmental conditions. The same biological susceptibility can be associated with adverse outcomes under chronic stress and more adaptive outcomes in supportive environments. This does not eliminate biological influence; rather, it demonstrates that biological predispositions operate within environmental relationships. (Zhang & Meaney, 2010; Belsky & Pluess, 2009)

5.3 Cross-Cultural and Psychometric Relativity

Questions of universality also arise from the cultural composition of personality research. Much psychological research has historically relied heavily on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations. Research in small-scale and non-Western societies has raised questions about whether the same five-factor structure captures all culturally meaningful dimensions of personality. Consequently, a construct may have empirical utility without being culturally neutral or metaphysically universal. (Gurven et al., 2013; Henrich et al., 2010)

5.4 Language and the Construction of Personality

From a post-structuralist perspective, categories such as "introvert," "ambitious," or "leader" are not merely neutral descriptions; they are linguistic and social classifications that influence how people understand and perform identity. Research on bilingualism and cultural frame switching suggests that personality self-reports can vary with language and cultural frame. Language therefore participates in the production, interpretation, and stabilization of personality descriptions. (Butler, 1990)

5.5 Evolutionary Relativity

Evolutionary approaches further indicate that behavioral strategies cannot always be classified as inherently optimal or defective. Their adaptive value depends on ecological and social conditions, population frequencies, and resource availability. Cooperation, competition, risk-taking, and exploitation can have different consequences under different conditions. Personality variation therefore remains connected to changing environments and population dynamics. (Mealey, 1995; Penke et al., 2007)

6. Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka and Śūnyavāda

Before applying Nāgārjuna's philosophy to personality theory, it is necessary to clarify what Śūnyavāda means. Nāgārjuna, traditionally associated with the Mādhyamaka or Middle Way school, developed a philosophical critique of claims that phenomena possess independent, permanent, self-sustaining existence. His central work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, develops this critique through rigorous analysis of causation, identity, change, and conceptual designation.

Śūnyatā, commonly translated as emptiness, should not be understood as simple non-existence or nihilism. It refers to the absence of *svabhāva*—an independent, intrinsic, self-sustaining nature. A phenomenon is empty because it arises



in dependence upon causes, conditions, relations, and conceptual designation. This makes Śūnyatā inseparable from Pratītyasamutpāda, or Dependent Origination. (Kalupahana, 1986; Nagarjuna, 1995)

Nāgārjuna's well-known formulation in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā identifies dependent origination with emptiness and the Middle Way. The implication is that a phenomenon is neither an independently existing substance nor an absolute nothing. It exists conventionally through dependent relations. A flame, for example, cannot exist independently of fuel and other conditions. Its existence is relational rather than self-grounded. (Nagarjuna, 1995; Garfield, 1995)

6.1 Svabhāva and Śūnyatā

Svabhāva means own-being, self-nature, or inherent essence. An entity possessing svabhāva would have to exist independently, without dependence upon changing conditions, and would not be subject to alteration in its essential identity. Nāgārjuna's critique demonstrates why such an independent essence cannot adequately explain phenomena that arise through conditions and change through conditions. (Kalupahana, 1986; Westerhoff, 2009)

6.2 Pratītyasamutpāda: Dependent Origination

Dependent Origination provides the positive relational dimension of the critique. Phenomena arise through networks of mutually conditioning factors. In this framework, causation cannot be reduced to a completely independent internal cause acting upon a completely separate external effect. The relation itself is constitutive. This becomes especially relevant when personality is examined as an interaction among biological predispositions, cognition, social roles, cultural norms, environmental feedback, and personal history. (Nagarjuna, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013)

6.3 Satya-dvaya: The Two Truths

Nāgārjuna's Two Truths distinguish Conventional Truth (Samvṛti-satya) from Ultimate Truth (Paramārtha-satya). Conventional truth concerns the practical world of names, persons, relationships, measurements, institutions, and causal transactions. Such designations are useful and functionally real. Ultimate analysis, however, reveals that these conventional entities do not possess independent intrinsic essence. (Siderits & Katsura, 2013; Westerhoff, 2009)

This distinction is particularly useful for personality psychology. A trait such as Conscientiousness can be measured, compared, and used to predict outcomes at the conventional level. Yet such a measurement does not establish the existence of a permanent psychological substance called "Conscientiousness" inside a person. The trait can therefore be both conventionally useful and ultimately empty of independent essence.

6.4 Prasaṅga and Catuṣkoṭi

Nāgārjuna's dialectical method includes Prasaṅga, in which an opponent's assumptions are followed to their logical consequences, and the Catuṣkoṭi, or tetralemma, which examines four possible positions: that something exists, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor does not exist. The purpose is not to establish another fixed metaphysical doctrine, but to loosen attachment to reified conceptual positions. (Westerhoff, 2009; Siderits & Katsura, 2013)

7. A Mādhyamaka Reinterpretation of Personality

The central contribution of the Mādhyamaka interpretation is to distinguish the empirical reality of personality measurement from the metaphysical claim that measured traits possess independent existence. This distinction allows stability and change to be understood without choosing between rigid essentialism and complete fluidity. (Nagarjuna, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013)

7.1 Deconstructing Trait Essentialism

If Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, or Extraversion possessed svabhāva in the strict Mādhyamaka sense, the trait would have to be independent, unconditioned, and intrinsically unalterable. Yet empirical research demonstrates that trait levels can shift across the lifespan and in response to social roles, life events, therapy, and intentional change. The observed plasticity is therefore inconsistent with the claim that traits are independent, immutable essences. (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Bleidorn et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2017)



This does not require rejecting biological influence. Genes, neurobiology, and temperament remain important conditions. The Mādhyamaka argument is more precise: biological conditions are among the conditions through which personality patterns arise; they do not constitute an isolated essence that exists independently of all other conditions. (Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001; Jang et al., 1996)

7.2 Personality as Dependent Origination

Personality can consequently be conceptualized as a dependently co-arisen pattern. Genetic potentials interact with neurobiology; neurobiology interacts with experience; experience occurs within social roles and institutions; institutions are embedded in cultures and material conditions; and all of these interact with cognition, emotion, learning, and behavior. Personality is therefore not merely “inside” the person and not merely “outside” the person. It arises relationally. (Roberts et al., 2005; Bleidorn et al., 2018; Nagarjuna, 1995)

Social Investment Theory illustrates this relationality. When a person enters a career or committed relationship, new expectations and responsibilities alter behavioral demands. Repeated adaptation to these demands can produce systematic changes in personality traits. Similarly, when therapeutic conditions, cognitive habits, social support, or behavioral goals change, trait-related patterns may change. The trait changes because the conditions sustaining the pattern have changed. (Roberts et al., 2005)

7.3 Stability without Intrinsic Essence

The Mādhyamaka interpretation explains personality stability without requiring a permanent inner core. High rank-order stability can reflect continuity in the conditions that repeatedly reproduce similar patterns. Stable family environments, recurring social roles, biological baselines, habitual cognitive strategies, and enduring institutional contexts can all sustain a recognizable behavioral configuration. Thus, continuity does not prove metaphysical permanence. (Conley, 1985; Terracciano et al., 2006; Nagarjuna, 1995)

When those conditions change, the pattern can change. Aging, brain development, altered social roles, major life events, therapy, and intentional self-regulation can modify the conditions that sustain a personality pattern. Stability and change are therefore not contradictory properties of an immutable object; they are features of a process whose conditions may persist or transform. (Roberts et al., 2006; Bleidorn et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2017)

7.4 The Person as Samtāna: A Process Stream

The concept of samtāna, or a continuing process stream, helps address the identity problem created by personality change. A person at seventy is not simply identical in every respect to the person at twenty, but neither are the two completely unrelated entities. There is causal continuity linking earlier experiences, choices, relationships, and conditions with later psychological patterns.

This avoids two extremes: absolute identity and absolute difference. Personality is neither a static object moving through time nor a series of disconnected states. It is a continuing stream of dependently arising configurations. Psychometric labels can capture recurring patterns within that stream, but the labels should not be mistaken for the stream itself.

8. Resolving the Stability–Plasticity Paradox through Satya-dvaya

The Two Truths framework provides the clearest bridge between empirical personality science and Mādhyamaka analysis. At the conventional level, personality traits are measurable constructs with predictive value. At the ultimate level, no trait exists as a permanent, self-sustaining entity. The two claims are not mutually exclusive because they answer different questions. (Siderits & Katsura, 2013; Westerhoff, 2009)

Level	Psychological Observation	Mādhyamaka Interpretation
Conventional Truth (Samvṛti-satya)	Traits can be measured, compared, and used to predict outcomes; rank-order stability can be substantial.	Trait names are prajñapti—useful conventional designations that function within empirical and social practice.
Ultimate Truth (Paramārtha-satya)	No measurement reveals a permanent inner substance corresponding to a trait label.	Personality is empty of svabhāva and exists as a dependently co-arisen process stream (samtāna).



Stability	Similar trait patterns can persist across decades.	Persistence can reflect continuity of sustaining conditions (pratyaya), not an immutable essence.
Change	Trait levels can change with age, roles, events, interventions, and volition.	Change occurs because the conditions producing the pattern change.

9. Mādhyaṃaka and Western Dynamic Personality Theories

Mādhyaṃaka has important similarities with dynamic personality theories, but the similarities should not be overstated. Lewin's Field Theory, Mischel and Shoda's Cognitive-Affective Processing System, and dynamic systems approaches reject a simplistic conception of fixed traits and emphasize interactions between person and situation. Mādhyaṃaka likewise emphasizes relationality and change. The deeper philosophical premises, however, remain different. (Lewin, 1935; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Westerhoff, 2009)

Dimension	Western Dynamic Psychology	Nāgārjuna's Śūnyavāda
Ontology	Personality is treated as a real biological-cognitive system capable of changing states.	Personality is conventionally designated but ultimately empty of independent svabhāva.
Causality	Behavior is explained through interactions among internal processes, situational inputs, and feedback loops.	Phenomena co-arise dependently; no isolated internal trait or external cause is independently sufficient.
Self-concept	A coherent narrative identity can serve adaptive and regulatory functions.	Reification of identity can become conceptual superimposition (samāropa) and proliferation (prapañca).
Epistemology	Psychological reality is investigated through measurement, observation, self-report, and contextual analysis.	Conventional analysis is accepted for practical purposes, while ultimate analysis examines the absence of intrinsic essence.
Goal	Adaptation, regulation, resilience, self-development, and self-actualization.	Liberation (nirvāṇa) through release from attachment to reified identities and conceptual constructions.

Thus, Western dynamic psychology generally asks how a real psychological system changes, whereas Mādhyaṃaka asks whether the system can ultimately be said to possess independent existence at all. This is a fundamental difference in ontology rather than a minor difference in terminology. (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Westerhoff, 2009)

10. Illustrative Cases: The Same Personality Pattern Viewed through Two Frameworks

10.1 Anita: Changing Leadership Style

Anita is known as impatient, sharp-tongued, and controlling. After several years of executive coaching and emotional-intelligence training, she becomes more empathetic, self-regulated, and willing to delegate. A Western dynamic interpretation describes a real biological-cognitive system that has moved from one state to another through learning, feedback, and behavioral restructuring.

The Mādhyaṃaka interpretation asks a different question: was there ever an independent "impatient Anita" essence? Her impatience arose through conditions such as organizational pressure, fatigue, insecurities, expectations, and learned habits. When those conditions changed, the behavioral pattern changed. "Impatient manager" and "empathetic leader" are useful conventional descriptions, but neither represents a permanent inner substance.

10.2 Rahul: Anxiety in the Presence of Authority

Rahul becomes anxious and stammers when speaking to senior executives but speaks fluently with friends and junior colleagues. A Cognitive-Affective Processing System interpretation can describe conditional if-then relationships between authority cues, threat appraisal, internal processing, and behavior.



Mādhyaṃaka analysis emphasizes the mutual dependence of the situation and the response. The “intimidating executive” and the “anxious speaker” are relationally constituted within a particular interaction. The anxiety cannot be located as an independent object inside Rahul, nor can the executive’s intimidating character be treated as independent of the relational context. The pattern arises through conditions.

10.3 Priya: The “Extroverted Leader” Identity

Priya receives a personality assessment identifying her as an “Extroverted Leader” and builds a strong career identity around the label. After bereavement and burnout, she prefers solitude and introspection. Western psychology may encourage her to integrate the change into a coherent narrative identity, treating the new phase as an adaptive development of self-understanding.

Mādhyaṃaka analysis warns against treating the label as an ultimate identity. The problem is not the conventional use of “extrovert” or “leader”; the problem arises when the designation is reified into a permanent self. Attachment to the label can create conflict when experience changes. Recognizing its conventional status allows the person to use the category without becoming imprisoned by it.

10.4 Vikram: Different Behaviors across Contexts

Vikram is polite and subdued at work, aggressive during sports, and nurturing with his children. Psychological assessment can integrate these observations into a dimensional profile and identify situational moderators. The result remains useful for conventional purposes such as counselling, organizational decisions, and interpersonal understanding.

Under Satya-dvaya, Vikram exists conventionally and must be treated as a person with responsibilities, relationships, and ethical obligations. Yet ultimate analysis does not locate a single permanent “Vikram entity” behind all of these roles. The person is understood as a stream of bodily, perceptual, affective, cognitive, and conscious processes arising in dependence upon conditions.

10.5 Madan: Performance, Failure, and Liberation

Madan becomes highly frustrated and self-critical after losing athletic competitions. A sports psychologist may teach cognitive reframing, emotional regulation, and resilience so that he can perform more effectively and respond to defeat adaptively. The goal is improved functioning and self-regulation.

Śūnyavāda moves beyond optimization of the personality system. It asks Madan to examine attachment to the identities “winner,” “loser,” and “athlete.” From this perspective, liberation does not consist merely in constructing a stronger identity but in loosening attachment to identity itself. Nirvāṇa is therefore teleologically different from self-actualization.

11. Theoretical and Psychological Implications

The synthesis developed here yields several implications for personality theory. First, trait constructs should be treated as empirically useful abstractions rather than automatically as metaphysical entities. This does not diminish their scientific value. Instead, it clarifies the level at which their claims operate. (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Roberts et al., 2006; Nagarjuna, 1995)

Second, personality research should distinguish rank-order stability from absolute invariance. A stable relative position among individuals does not entail that the individual’s trait level never changes. Stability can emerge from the persistence of conditions that repeatedly reproduce a pattern. (Conley, 1985; Roberts et al., 2006)

Third, personality development should be studied as a relational process. Biological predispositions, cognitive-affective mechanisms, social roles, institutions, culture, language, material conditions, and personal agency should not be treated as isolated alternatives. They constitute interacting conditions in a dynamic process. (Roberts et al., 2005; Bleidorn et al., 2018)

Fourth, the Mādhyaṃaka interpretation has implications for psychological rigidity. When a person treats a conventional label as an unchangeable identity—“I am an anxious person,” “I am a failure,” “I am not a leader,” or “I



am an extrovert”—the label can constrain perceived possibilities for change. The distinction between a useful description and an ultimate identity may therefore support psychological flexibility.

Finally, Śūnyatā should not be presented as a claim that personality does not exist at all. Such an interpretation would turn emptiness into nihilism. The argument is more nuanced: personality exists conventionally, functions causally within ordinary life, can be measured, and has consequences, while lacking independent and permanent essence. (Nagarjuna, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013)

12. Integrated Conceptual Framework

The overall argument can be represented as a movement from empirical observation to ontological clarification and then to a relational understanding of personality.

- Empirical personality patterns → measurable and relatively stable trait constructs.
- Longitudinal evidence → mean-level change and individual development across the lifespan.
- Contextual evidence → personality expression depends on social, cultural, economic, linguistic, biological, and environmental conditions.
- Śūnyavāda → rejection of svabhāva or an independently existing permanent trait essence.
- Pratītyasamutpāda → personality patterns arise through mutually conditioning causes and conditions.
- Satya-dvaya → traits remain conventionally useful while lacking ultimate intrinsic existence.
- Samtāna → personal continuity is understood as causal process continuity rather than absolute identity.
- Psychological implication → openness to transformation without denying empirical continuity.
- Philosophical implication → stability and change are compatible because neither requires an immutable personality substance.

The resulting model may be described as a “dependently co-arisen personality process”: a dynamic stream of recurring patterns that can be sufficiently stable for scientific description and practical prediction, yet sufficiently empty of fixed essence to permit lifelong transformation.

Definition of Personality (Mādhyamaka Framework):

Personality is a dependently co-arisen (pratītyasamutpanna), dynamic continuum of psychophysical processes—empty (śūnya) of any unconditioned, autonomous, or fixed intrinsic essence (svabhāva)—that exhibits structural continuity across time as a conventional designation (prajñapti) sustained by a recurring matrix of biological, cognitive, social, and environmental conditions (pratyaya).

13. Philosophical Synthesis

The debate between trait stability and personality plasticity can be reframed as a problem created partly by treating two different levels of analysis as if they were the same. Empirical psychology observes regular patterns and measures their persistence. Essentialist interpretation can then move from the observation of stability to the conclusion that a permanent inner trait exists. Developmental research, in turn, demonstrates change and may appear to challenge that permanence. Mādhyamaka avoids the dilemma by refusing to equate empirical regularity with intrinsic existence. (Costa & McCrae, 1994; Roberts et al., 2006; Nagarjuna, 1995)

The Big Five remains valuable as a conventional framework. Its constructs summarize patterns that have predictive and explanatory usefulness. Yet a statistical construct need not be an independently existing entity. “Conscientiousness” can describe a recurrent organization of behavior, cognition, motivation, and affect without requiring a discrete substance inside the individual. (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1997)

Similarly, recognizing emptiness does not make development arbitrary. On the contrary, the absence of an immutable essence explains why intervention and adaptation are possible. If a personality trait were intrinsically fixed, genuine transformation would be impossible. Because the trait is dependently constituted, changes in the conditions of its production can generate changes in its manifestation. (Nagarjuna, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013)



This interpretation also clarifies why personality can appear stable for decades. Stability is not an illusion in the sense of being meaningless. It is a real conventional regularity produced by continuity in sustaining conditions. When the conditions remain similar, similar patterns recur; when conditions change, the process can reorganize. The Middle Way therefore avoids both the claim of a permanent trait substance and the claim that personality is nothing but random moment-to-moment variation. (Conley, 1985; Terracciano et al., 2006; Nagarjuna, 1995)

14. Conclusion

The synthesis of Western empirical personality psychology with Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka philosophy offers a coherent way to understand the apparent paradox between personality stability and lifelong change. Trait psychology demonstrates that individuals exhibit recognizable and relatively stable patterns, while lifespan research shows that these patterns can shift through development, social investment, life events, therapeutic intervention, environmental conditions, and deliberate action. The empirical evidence therefore does not support a simple opposition between stability and plasticity. (Roberts et al., 2006; Bleidorn et al., 2018; Nagarjuna, 1995)

Nāgārjuna's concepts of Śūnyatā and Pratītyasamutpāda provide an ontological interpretation of this evidence. Personality traits need not be treated as independently existing entities with *svabhāva*. They can instead be understood as dependently co-arisen relational patterns. Their stability reflects the continuity of conditions that reproduce them, while their change reflects alterations in those conditions. (Nagarjuna, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013)

Satya-dvaya further resolves the apparent contradiction. At the level of Conventional Truth, Big Five traits and other personality descriptions remain useful, measurable, and practically significant. At the level of Ultimate Truth, no permanent trait or self-entity can be found as an independent substance underlying the changing process. The conventional usefulness of personality psychology is therefore preserved without reifying its constructs. (Siderits & Katsura, 2013; Westerhoff, 2009)

The concept of *samtāna* provides a further bridge between continuity and transformation. The person across the lifespan is neither absolutely identical at every moment nor completely disconnected from earlier states. Personality is a continuing causal stream. This allows developmental change to be understood without requiring a permanent core identity. (Kalupahana, 1986; Siderits & Katsura, 2013)

The broader implication is that *śūnyatā* should be understood not as negation but as openness. Because personality lacks a rigid intrinsic core, it remains capable of learning, adaptation, therapeutic recovery, maturation, and deliberate change. Mādhyamaka thus offers a philosophical resolution in which stability is real at the conventional level, change is real within the causal stream, and neither requires an immutable essence. Personality can therefore be understood as a dynamic, dependently co-arisen process—scientifically describable, practically meaningful, culturally situated, and ontologically non-essential. (Nagarjuna, 1995; Westerhoff, 2009)

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