

The Philosophy of Nagarjuna Onsunyata

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Abstract: *The present essay is an attempt at the philosophy of Nagarjuna on Sunyata. Nagarjuna is indeed well known, in India and abroad, as philosophers of the highest rank. Karl Jaspers, the famous existentialist philosopher, has placed him among the great thinkers of the world, "whom all agree in terming philosophers" [The Great Philosophers by Karl Jaspers, translated by Ralph Manheim, p.7] All classical philosophers of India present Nagarjuna's philosophy as the doctrine of pure Void. Nagarjuna, they hold, considers the entire world with all its contents to be altogether illusory, and does not accept anything real even as the basis of this illusion. The illusory appearance of the world is, like an embroidery on the Void, absolutely empty, unsubstantial or vacuous at the core; and this Vacuity or Void (Sunyati) itself is, in his view, the ultimate Truth (Tattva) of the universe. Nagarjuna's denial of the reality of the world of individual things, they think, constitutes only the negative aspect of his philosophy. He rejects the reality of the objects of the world on the ground of their essentially relative nature and calls them sunya or devoid of essence. But behind this empty show, Nagarjuna also accepts, so they think, an absolute Reality (Tattva) which, like the Brahman of Advaita-Vedahta, is free from all conceptual determinations and, therefore, appears to be Void or Sunya from the empirical stand-point. Hence Sunyata as the ultimate Truth (Tattva), in the view of these scholars, stands not for a bare Void but for a "Plenum-Void" [Buddhism, by Christmas Humphreys, p.13], i.e., for an absolute Reality which is completely indeterminate and indescribable in nature.*

Keywords: Nagarjuna, Sunyata, Space and Time

1. Introduction

Nagarjuna's philosophy which is known as Sunya-vada or the 'Doctrine of Void' is based on the Buddhist theory of 'dependent origination' (pratitya-samutpada).

This doctrine states that whatever exists, exists as being dependent on its causes and conditions. Phenomenon 'A' exists only as being dependent on its cause 'B', the latter again depends on its prior condition 'C' and so on. Each phenomenon, be it 'A' or 'B' or 'C', thus enjoys only a sort of relative or conditioned existence. There is nothing which exists by itself without support from some other thing.

2. The Meaning of Sunyata on Nagarjuna's Philosophy

Nagarjuna maintains that this dependent existence or relativity of the objects of the world proves their unsubstantiality or essential vacuity. If a thing depends for its existence on something else, it cannot be said to have an essence of its own. He says that by essence or svabhava we are to understand intrinsic reality, i.e. reality which a thing is supposed to possess by its own right and on its own account. Essence must be integral and self-contained, neither borrowed nor derived from anything external. Hence if a thing is to have any essence (svabhava), this essence or being must be a necessary part and parcel of it, and, as such, cannot be dependent on other things (paraniraneksa) or artificial (akrtrima); consequently, about a truly real thing it would not be correct to say that having no existence before, it comes into being (abhutva-bhavah). Nothing in this world has an essence or svabhava in this sense, because nothing exists in its own right and by the strength of its own intrinsic nature without being dependent on its causes and conditions. Each phenomenon is tagged on to its preceding one, its cause, and as such cannot be conceived to

have an intrinsic existence which a real, by its very definition, must possess.

It should be observed, however, the though Nagarjuna says that 'dependent origination' it is which means Sunyata. the word 'means' in this connection, is not equivalent to 'is synonymous with'. When we say, 'unity means strength', the words 'unity' and 'strength' are not synonymous. Unity means strength only in the sense that it gives indication of strength. Similarly, when it is said that relativity means Sunyata. The former should not be taken exactly as a synonym for the latter.

3. The Space and Time on Nagarjuna's Philosophy

Nagarjuna makes a searching analysis of the physical as well as the spiritual world and shows that each fact of the universe is as essenceless, hollow or unsubstantial (sunya) as a 'barren woman's son' or a 'flower in the sky'.

The physical world consists of material things, Space and Time. None of these can be said to have an essence or existence of its own. Ordinarily we think that a thing has an essential core in it which is called the thinghood of the thing. What changes in a thing is a particular aspect or quality of it while this essence remains the same and persists through all change, through all motion, through all time. Yet by rational analysis, it is impossible to find out in what this essence or substance or thinghood of a thing really consists. Is it something different from, i.e., over and above, its qualities? If so, it could exist apart from its qualities. A table is different from a chair and hence can exist apart from the chair. But the essence or thinghood of a thing is never experienced apart from its qualities. The thinghood or essence of a thing, therefore, is not anything over and above its qualities.

Is it, then, identical with the changing qualities? The Hinayana Buddhists hold that a thing is a mere bundle of presentations or changing states unrelated to any central core or essence. But Nagarjuna argues that these presentations or changing states or qualities cannot hang loose without being referred to a central core. Qualities or states, without a substance to which they belong as qualities or states, are impossible. Our very idea of a quality or a state is that it is a quality or a state of something. Hence, we cannot think of a quality or a state which does not belong to a substance. Besides, we all speak of the change of qualities or change of states. We can do so only because we make a distinction between a thing and its quality or state and believe that a thing remains the same although its quality or state changes. If there were only changing qualities or changing states, it would have been meaningless to speak of their changes. Change is intelligible only in the background of some identity. When we speak of change of qualities, we presuppose an unchanging essence or thinghood which a thing has. Apart from reference to this identical essence, change of states is not meaningful. The Hinayana Buddhists hold that a state is only a momentary particular which they call the svakaksana. But are we to suppose this momentary particular to be such that it comes into being as an altogether new creation which inherits nothing from its preceding event and passes away without leaving any legacy for its succeeding one? If so, though it may have origination and cessation, still it would be meaningless to say that it changes. If, however, it is held, as is admitted by the Hinayana Buddhists, that it comes into being out of its preceding event and immediately perishes leaving a legacy (in the form of traces or sanskaras) for its successor, i.e., if anything handed down by the preceding event to the succeeding one be admitted to continue from the past to the present, and from the present to the future, we can, no doubt, meaningfully speak of a change of states, but in that case some identity of being persisting in the preceding and succeeding states must be admitted. It is, therefore, impossible to grant that there can be change of states without granting at the same time an identical essence to which these changing states belong.

The essence of a thing, therefore, cannot be either a substance different from the changing states or just those states themselves. It appears to be an identity which runs through and holds together the different changing states, i.e., the essence of a thing appears to be an identity-in-difference. But Nagarjuna holds that the concept of identity-in-difference is a patent contradiction. He insists that a thing can never be different from itself, i.e., a thing can never be what it is not. The concept of identity-in-difference presupposes the absurd idea of a thing's being what it is not and hence it must be considered as false. The essence of a thing, therefore, cannot be rationally conceived in any way whatsoever neither as different from its qualities, nor as identical with them, nor as both identical with and different from them. A thing and its qualities are, Nagarjuna says, like fire and fuel which, no doubt, are perceived to exist together but nevertheless have no existence in themselves. Fire cannot exist without fuel; for fire is fire only when it is fed by fuel. Nor can fuel exist without fire; for fuel is fuel only in relation to fire. Neither fire nor

fuel, therefore, has an Essence or existence of its own. And when neither has any existence of its own, how can they exist together? Their relative existence which is perceived by us must, therefore, be illusory. Similarly, neither the pure thing divorced from its quality nor the pure quality divorced from the thing can be said to exist. And when neither has any existence of its own, it is impossible that they can exist together. Our perception of a qualified thing is, therefore, illusory?

The physical world consists of Space and Time, besides material things. But Space and Time, too, Nagarjuna says, are equally unsubstantial.

The concept of Space, Nagarjuna says, involves contradiction and therefore metaphysically it must be regarded as an invalid and empty concept. Our idea of Space is that of an all-pervasive something in which different physical objects exist. Ordinarily we think that some space is filled with objects and some space is empty. Now if different objects exist in Space and some space is filled and some empty, it must be admitted that Space has parts. Had Space been partless, a single object would occupy the whole of Space and not merely a part of it; in that case, other objects could not at all exist in Space; nor could there be any unoccupied part of Space but as a matter of fact we perceive that different objects occupy different parts of Space and there is unoccupied space as well. It must, therefore, be admitted that Space has parts. It is a whole of parts. Now, the whole cannot exist without the parts, nor can the parts exist without the whole. Space as a whole of parts is, therefore, as essenceless as any other physical object which involves an identity of substance along with a diversity of changing qualities

Time, too, is a whole of parts. The different moments of Time are its different parts. The same difficulty of relating the whole with its parts proves that Time, too, like Space, is an essenceless appearance. That every moment of Time is intrinsically essenceless, can be proved from its completely relative nature. A moment of Time is called future or present. But relative to what is it future or present? A moment of Time can be called present or future only in relation to some other moment which is called past. But the present or future, in order to be related with the past, must be simultaneous with it. This means the abolition of the division of Time into past, present and future. But this division is vital to the conception of Time. Time thus is shown to be a mere appearance without a substantial nature of its own. Therefore, all physical objects (material things, Space and Time) are essenceless appearance.

4. Conclusion

As a result of this study, however, the word Sunyayin Nagarjuna's philosophy stands only for an absolute Void. The modern scholars refuse to understand Sunyavada as the doctrine of pure Void, because such a doctrine, they think, is altogether absurd and a genuine philosopher like Nagarjuna could not possibly maintain such a patent absurdity.

Consequently, they have tried to interpret the Midhyamika doctrine in a different light. In the history of philosophical thought, both in the East and the West, it is not unusual to find that many improbable and sometimes even apparently meaningless views have been upheld by eminent philosophers — views, which, however, in the light of the considerations which these philosophers place before us, would appear to have enough sense in them and to give us some extraordinary insight into the nature of the world.

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