NĀGĀRJUNA'S CONCEPT OF EMPTINESS IN COMPARISON WITH SCHOPENHAUER AND ARISTOTLE

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ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult and controversial concepts in Buddhism is the concept of emptiness or *śūnyatā*. It often attracts the attention of Western thinkers, who expend much effort either to embrace or reject it. Hence, this concept had led to many contradictory interpretations and endless discussions. Emptiness, or *śūnyatā*, has been so often misunderstood, not only in the West, but also in India itself, even during Nāgārjuna's own time. Out of this bed of conflicting interpretations lies the motivation for this article to assist in the understanding of the concept of *śūnyatā*. I will focus on the concept as taught by the Indian monk *Nāgārjuna* of the Mādhyamika school. In pursuing this approach, I will show a corresponding interpretation of another Mādhyamika monk, Śāntideva, and will reveal parallels to the 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In order to demonstrate an opposing theory, I will contrast Nāgārjuna's concept to the theory of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Introducing Nāgārjuna

The tradition is that Nāgārjuna founded together with his disciple Āryadeva the Mādhyamika school, a *darśana*, which is famous for its systematic approach to help seeing things the way they really are. Mādhyamika is an important school in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. Its name derives from its middle position between the realism of the Sarvāstivāda, the doctrine that all is real and the idealism of the Yogācāra, or that all is only mind. Hence, Paul Williams translates Mādhyamika as the 'Middling' or the 'Middle Way'.[1] The school's clarification of the concept *śūnyatā* is regarded as an intellectual and spiritual achievement of the highest order. This led to the recognition of Nāgārjuna as a patriarch by several later Buddhist schools.

There have been many hagiographies written of Nāgārjuna; some even refer to him as the "second Buddha".[2] Various sources describe Nāgārjuna in glamorous ways. The Encyclopædia Britannica article tries to sift fact from fiction:

> "The fact that various texts ascribe different religious qualities to Nāgārjuna and give dates for his life that range over 500 years suggests that the references available may pertain to several persons and may include some imaginary accounts. Nonetheless, some historical materials support various elements of Nāgārjuna's biographies. Present scholarship indicates that Nāgārjuna could have lived as early as AD 50 and as late as AD 280. A common consensus gives his dates as AD 150–250."[3]

Similarly vague are many accounts of his whereabouts during his lifetime. Nevertheless, one hypothesis suggests that he had lived in South India. Some archaeological evidence supports this assumption.[4]

Nāgārjuna's principal philosophical works which have remained available in Sanskrit are the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the 'fundamental' or 'root' (*mūla*) 'concise statements in verses' (*kārikā*) on the 'Middle

Way' (*Madhyamaka*); and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, the 'quarrel' (*vigraha*) in terms of a 'debate' with the means of 'averting' (*vyāvartana*[5]) the opponent's argument. This gives the literal English translation of *Vigrahavyāvartanī* as 'She who is Averting Quarrel'. Erich Frauwallner translated it beautifully into German as "*Die Streitabwehrerin*".[6] Both works are critical analyses of views about the origin of existence, the means of knowledge, and the nature of reality. These two texts are highly praised as Nāgārjuna's best works – as Frauwallner commented on the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*: "*Es ist eines seiner besten Werke und zeigt ihn in seiner ganzen Eigenart, vor allem in seiner unbeirrbaren Folgerichtigkeit*".[7]

Consequently, this article focuses on Nāgārjuna's discursive texts, which are available to us, with the emphasis on emptiness of all things, rather than on the legends and myths about his life, which will lead to a further examination of the concept of emptiness by the Mādhyamika school.

Mādhyamika's View on Emptiness

According to Nāgārjuna, the whole world is characterized by being empty. At first glance, this seems quite a complex philosophical position. The idea is that things as we perceive them are ultimately nothing other than projections of our own mind through a process of conceptualization. Hence, things in the perceptual world do not possess any inherent characteristics. This implies that individual objects depend for their being on what they are to be taken as through other, external factors. Therefore, it is not the case that they possess any features on their own that make them what they are. All *dharmas* ('things') are being seen as *śūnya* ('empty'). Hence, all things are empty of any inherent or intrinsic existence, and they solely depend on their causes and conditions (*pratītyasamutpāda*) – and that is what is called *śūnyatā* ('emptiness').[8]

Nāgārjuna describes this in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in chapter XXIV in verse 18:

"We declare that whatever is relational origination is *śūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the middle path."[9]

Nāgārjuna further strengthens his argument by nullifying the opposite in verse 19:

"Any factor of experience which does not participate in relational origination cannot exist. Therefore, any factor of experience not in the nature of *śūnya* cannot exist."[10] (ibid.)

To summarize this in my own words: Things as they appear to us do not possess any existence on their own. Therefore they are seen as empty, as unsubstantial, and it is this emptiness, which is their absolute truth.

Nāgārjuna's thought was in the same way expressed half a millennium later by Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. It is the 'entry' (*avatāra*) into the 'practice' (*caryā*) for 'awakening' (*bodhi*). Its popularity came about due to being on the one hand an inspirational poem and at the same time a profound teaching. In chapter IX, verse 2 in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* Śāntideva exemplifies:

"This pair of truths we suppose:
the conventional truth and the ultimate truth.
Reality is not a field of intellection;
intellection is called conventional truth."[11]

In other words: *saṃvṛtisatya* is the conventional or relative truth, i.e., as things appear to worldly beings. Things are seen by ordinary people and at the same time perceived as being real. Whereas *paramārthasatya* is the ultimate or absolute truth, i.e., the ultimate nature of appearing things, which declares *saṃvṛtisatya* as a perceiving illusion. Therefore, the conventional truth is deceiving, and from the perspective of the absolute truth seen as a pure illusion of ordinary people.

One might understand this point better if Nāgārjuna's view here is contrasted with that of Aristotle and the Theory of Essentialism.

The Opposing Argument of Aristotle and the Theory of Essentialism

In contrast to Nāgārjuna, for Aristotle, individual objects possess some kind of 'essence' that makes them what they really are. This 'essence' of an individual thing is peculiar to it and is not common to anything else, and in a sense it is identical with the thing itself. Aristotle calls this 'essence' the 'what-it-is-to-be-that-thing'.[12] "… [I]t is evident that each particular itself, and the essence, not according to accident are one and the same thing, and that to have a scientific knowledge, at any rate, of anything is to know scientifically the very nature or essence of that thing.".[13]

The essence being one and the same thing with the particular thing, thus, the 'what-it-is-to-be-that-thing' X is just the thing that makes X an X rather than a Y. For example, to answer the question "What is it that is a 'table'?". It would not be enough to define it by material, i.e., "It is wood." Neither to define it by form: "It is a study table where you can read books." Nor does the material of this thing alone have no individual character nor does form alone tell us what this individual thing really is. Things are what they can be said to be. What exists is always 'this here thing', 'this here study table'.[14]

This is similar to the theory of Essentialism. It is the philosophical viewpoint that for any specific entity there are a set kind of characteristics or properties, that any entity of that kind must possess. The members of a specific kind of entity may possess other characteristics that are neither needed to establish its membership nor exclude its membership. Essences cannot just reflect the ways of grouping objects; they must result in properties of the object. An essence characterizes a substance or a form; it is permanent, unalterable, eternal, and present in every possible way. In simple terms, essentialism is a generalization stating that certain properties possessed by a group (e.g. people, things, ideas) are universal, and not dependent on context.[15] For example, the essential properties of a tiger are

those without which it is no longer a tiger, i.e. regardless of whether it is striped, or albino, or has lost a leg. Properties, such as stripes or number of legs, are considered inessential.[16]

Nāgārjuna's Response to Assumptions about 'Essences'

In Chapter XV, verses 1 and 2 of his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* he tells us:

> "The rise of self-nature [*svabhāva*] by relational and causal conditions is not justifiable. For, such a self-nature will have a character of being made or manipulated."

> "How is it possible for the self-nature to take on the character of being made? For, indeed, the self-nature refers to something which cannot be made and has no mutual correspondence with something else."[17]

For Nāgārjuna one cannot find anything that corresponds to the Aristotelian 'what-it-is-to-be-that-thing', because what it is to be anything cannot be found in that thing itself. What is to be an X for Nāgārjuna depends crucially, but not solely, on the conceptual apparatus of the perceiver and cognizer, such that the thing is perceived to be an X. It also depends on other external factors. Thus a table is a table only because it fits with a conceptual category of 'being a table' in someone's mind. Ultimately speaking, the table is not what it appears at all, for when one breaks it down, no components remain that can be identified as 'the table'. Even when the components, such as the table's legs, the top of the table, and so on, are put together in a certain way, the form in which these components are put together itself does not constitute the essential feature of the table because they do not exist 'inside' the table, so to speak, and exist as a form in the mind of the perceiver. Thus the relation between the object and the perceiver or the subject is crucial. That does not imply the negation of the table as such, but the table is nothing more than an impermanent appearance relative to its causes and conditions.[18]

According to Nāgārjuna, the opponent (in our case Aristotle), is confused about the negation. To negate an entity X, one must first suppose that X exists. It is exactly this particular point where Aristotle's argument is entangled in difficulties.

> "… [F]or if x does exist, then it cannot truly be said of x that it is not existent. Therefore, it is the opponent's position that is absurd…. Furthermore, the opponent cannot take the line that emptiness does *not* exist without abandoning the principle that negation is only of an existent, for the opponent wishes to *negate* the doctrine of emptiness, and yet he does not want to say that emptiness exists, either. … [T]he negation of a non-existent entity does not *establish* the non-existence of that entity, but simply makes its non-existence known …".[19]

Nāgārjuna points this out through an example about the negation of a mirage in his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, verse 66:

> "If that perception were by its own nature, it would not be dependently originated. That perception, however, which comes into existence dependently is voidness indeed.
>
> If that perception of a mirage as water were by its own nature, it would not be dependently originated. Since, however, it comes into existence in dependence upon the mirage, the wrong sight and the distracted attention, it is dependently originated. And since it is dependently originated, it is indeed void by its own nature – as previously stated."[20]

In this way Nāgārjuna shows that an approach like that of Aristotle, is mistaken because it is based on the assumption that one can only negate something that is real – but a mirage is unreal. It can only exist dependently.

"… and to say that an entity x exists dependently is equivalent to the claim that it cannot be found within the totality of causes and conditions. According to fundamental Buddhist principles, this means that the mirage does not exist."[21]

Similarities Between Schopenhauer's and Nāgārjuna's Viewpoints

Arthur Schopenhauer was born in Danzig in 1788 and studied philosophy at the universities of Göttingen and Berlin. His main philosophical work was published in 1819 as *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Representation*).[22]

Schopenhauer picked up Immanuel Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself as an act of the self-positing subject. Whereby Kant maintained that the thing-in-itself, the correlative of the phenomenon, is unknowable; for Schopenhauer the correlative of the phenomenon is the Will. Schopenhauer arrived at this conviction by looking inwards within oneself. "For in inner consciousness or inwardly directed perception lies 'the single narrow door to the truth'.". It is the Will that become idea or presentation. The whole world is nothing but objectified Will, Will as a presentation to consciousness.

Schopenhauer combined his enthusiasm for the Hindu philosophy of Maya with a great admiration for the Buddha. This Buddhist viewpoint can be found in Schopenhauer's work if we relate it to Nāgārjuna's insight that the relation between the object and the perceiver or the subject is crucial. For Nāgārjuna, an object such as a table is 'empty of its inherent character' precisely because there is no thing in the object itself that qualifies to be the object without being related to any other outside factors. Thus to be an object requires a subject, and this is also Schopenhauer's point. Nāgārjuna's view that objects are empty, however, should not be interpreted as saying that ultimately speaking there are no such things as tables, chairs or the like, because for a thing to be 'empty of its inherent character' does not mean that it does not exist. Tables and chairs do really exist in the world, but their ontological status is not an independent one.

For Schopenhauer as well, objects such as tables and chairs do not exist on their own. "The world of experience is the phenomenal world: it is object for a subject. And as such it is the world of our mental presentations (*Vorstellungen*)."[23] They are projections or manifestations of the Will, and this is where Schopenhauer and Nāgārjuna agree. Another similar point is that for Schopenhauer and Nāgārjuna there is no duality between the things as they appear and the ultimate reality which they really are. Thus objective things and the Will or emptiness are essentially expressing one and the same thing. For Nāgārjuna this is because emptiness itself is nothing but the fact that all things are interdependent.[24]

In terms of Schopenhauer's thinking, it does not make sense to say that individual objects are separate from the Will, because the whole metaphysical system relies on the idea that there is, essentially speaking, only one entity, namely the Will. So for Schopenhauer, the Will, being the only one entity there is, appears as many things as perceived by an individual subject because the latter is endowed with the Principle of Individuation, which enables the subject to perceive the world as it appears. "If … the world exists only as object for a subject, it is also true that the percipient subject is correlative with the object."[25] The world is one's idea. This also corresponds to Nāgārjuna's view that it is conceptual imputation that results in our perception of things as being manifold, as being separated one from another. For Schopenhauer matter and intelligence have been "… inseparable correlates, existing only for one another, and therefore only relatively … the two together constitute *the world as idea* …".[26] Hence, the world is one's own idea, and as such a projection comprises both perceiver and perceived.

Differences Between Emptiness and the Will

Although the Will and emptiness are similar in several ways, there are clear differences. The Will is a blind driving force, which is manifested concretely through our conscious, individual will and bodily action. Emptiness, on the other hand, can't be so described at all and has no individual characteristics whatsoever. In fact, this is consistent with

Nāgārjuna's claim that emptiness itself is empty: *śūnyatā* is *śūnyatā*. Which means that emptiness itself is not different from any other individual object because emptiness also lacks any inherent characteristics. What this means is that emptiness itself is also a result of conceptual imputation. It is we, human beings, who use the term 'emptiness' to call it and to qualify it in such a way that it 'lacks inherent characteristics'. This emptiness itself is empty. One cannot ascribe any substantive qualification or property to emptiness. This is in contrast to the Will, which for Schopenhauer has a number of its own characteristics, which it does not share with other objects.

This is a key difference, and it stems from the two philosophers' differences with regard to how their conceptions of ultimate reality come about. Nāgārjuna arrived at the conception of emptiness through analysis of the concept of a thing. For example, a thing has to have a boundary beyond which it is not that thing. It is inconceivable for a thing to have no limit at all, for that would mean no words can describe it. But if there is a limit then it is that very limit that defines the thing in question. And since the limit, or the boundary of a thing, cannot be one and the same as the thing itself, the thing is essentially dependent upon another thing, which it is not.

> "All things prevail for the one for whom this emptiness prevails. Nothing prevails for the one for whom emptiness does not prevail." (own translation of verse 70 of *Vigrahavyāvartanī*)[27]

This is not the same as Schopenhauer, who models the conception of the Will on bodily conscious acts. "… Schopenhauer does not wish to base his philosophy on a privileged and exceptional intuition of ultimate reality, but rather on our intuitive perception of our own volition."[28]

Nāgārjuna's and Schopenhauer's Way of Salvation

According to Nāgārjuna, it is in the world that one transcends the world and thus transfigures it. There is not the slightest difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Verses 19 and 20 in chapter XXV of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* state:

> "*Saṃsāra* (i.e., the empirical life-death cycle) is nothing essentially different from *nirvāṇa*. *Nirvāṇa* is nothing essentially different from *saṃsāra*.
>
> The limits (i.e., realm) of *nirvāṇa* are the limits of *saṃsāra*. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever."[29]

The difference between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is in our way of looking at them. *Nirvāṇa* is *saṃsāra* without appearance and disappearance, without 'dependent origination'. As described in verse 9 in chapter XXV of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

> "The status of the birth-death cycle is due to existential grasping (of the *skandhas*) and relational condition (of the being). That which is non-grasping and non-relational is taught as *nirvāṇa*."[30]

To reach *nirvāṇa* one first has to overcome one's defilements. The method of Mādhyamika to overcome defilements is through holding to the impression of emptiness, which later on itself has to be discarded by realizing that the impression of existence is nothing at all. Ernst Steinkellner offers a splendid translation of this method by the Mādhyamika, described in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in chapter IX, verses 33 till 35:

> "*Wenn man sich der Tendenz zur Leerheit versichert, schwindet die Tendenz zum Sein, und später schwindet durch die Einübung der [Erkenntnis], dass nichts existiert, auch diese [Tendenz zur Leerheit].*

Wenn man auf kein Sein mehr stößt, von dem man annehmen könnte, dass es nicht existiere, wie könnte sich dann dem Geist ein anhaltsloses Nichtsein bieten?

Wenn sich dem Geist nicht Sein noch Nichtsein bieten, dann findet er, anhaltslos, die Ruhe, denn eine andere Möglichkeit gibt es nicht."[31] [32]

Our inclination towards existence has to be eliminated through the realization of emptiness. Then even the inclination towards emptiness will be eliminated through the realization that also emptiness itself has no substantial existence. Hence, the realization (*die Vergegenwärtigung/das Innewerden*) of emptiness is capable to break up the binary category of thinking and the dichotomizing category of speaking about 'existence' and 'non-existence'.[33]

Schopenhauer describes two ways of escaping the 'slavery of the Will'. Firstly, the way of aesthetic contemplation, which he describes as the way of art. In aesthetic contemplation one transcends the original subjection of knowledge to the Will, to desire. One becomes the pure will-less subject of knowledge, lost in fixed contemplation. In that state one is freed from the servitude of the Will. The mind enjoys a rest from being an instrument for the satisfaction of desire and adopts a purely objective and disinterested point of view. In summary: If the Will turns on itself and abolishes itself, nothing is left. This is probably one of the most striking similarities between Schopenhauer and the Mādhyamika's approach to even overcome emptiness at the end through realizing the emptiness of emptiness (compare with *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, chapter IX, verses 33 till 35 above). Or as Nāgārjuna put it: *śūnyatā* is *śūnyatā*.

The second way is the path of asceticism, which Schopenhauer calls the way of salvation. One "… must disown his own nature by extinguishing at the source all sensual desire and gratification, by the voluntary acceptance of poverty, by the mortification of the body which is the visible objectivity of the will."[34] In contrast to the first option, this approach of Schopenhauer might be taken as an alternative to the Buddhist

path towards enlightenment, which does not encourage the extremes of asceticism.

Closing Thought

After having portrayed the similarities between Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva and Schopenhauer, and contrasted their ideas with the standpoint of Aristotle, I hope I have contributed to the closer understanding of the concept of *śūnyatā*. Now, whether Nāgārjuna was referring with his expression 'the middle path' to the teaching of the Buddha or whether he tried to give a definition of his own position (Tauscher, 2009: 96), has finally to be left open. At the end Nāgārjuna neither denies the world nor affirms it. This view could be seen as 'the middle path' – and therefore the name of his philosophy as Mādhyamika. I personally gained the impression that Nāgārjuna did not aim to give a definition of *śūnyatā* of his own. I say so because, basically speaking, Nāgārjuna elaborates on the Buddha's teaching without adding any substantive ideas of his own. Knowing that this is a rather contentious point among Buddhist scholars, nevertheless, I think it is clear in any case that Nāgārjuna's intention in his work is not to propound his own view, but to clarify and systematize the Buddha's teaching so as to achieve the soteriological goal of Buddhism itself.

ENDNOTES

[1] Ibid, p. 63

[2] Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism,* 63

[3] Encyclopædia Britannica, "Nāgārjuna"

[4] The archaeological evidence is based on "... a letter (*Suhṛllekha*, "Friendly Letter") credited to him, written to a king of the Sātavāhana dynasty, possibly Yajñaśrī (c. 173–202); and perhaps by his name, which includes the name of the Nāgā people, who lived in South India." (Encyclopædia Britannica, "Nāgārjuna").

[5] *vyāvartanī* has the feminine ending *-ī* to the participle *vyāvartana* (averting, removing).

[6] Frauwallner, Erich. 1969. *Die Philosophie des Buddhismus, p.* 199

[7] 'It is one of his best works and shows him in all his idiosyncrasy, especially in his undeviating congruity'.

[8] Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism,* p. 68-69)

[9] Inada, *Nāgārjuna,* 148. The verse reads:

> *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmah |*
> *sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā ||*

[10] Inada, *Nāgārjuna,* 148. The verse reads:

> *apratītya samutpanno dharmaḥ kaścinna vidyate |*
> *yasmāttasmādaśūnyo hi dharmaḥ kaścinna vidyate ||*

[11] Inada, *Nāgārjuna,* 148. The verse reads:

> *saṃvṛtiḥ paramārthaśca satyadvayamidaṃ mataṃ |*
> *buddheragocarastattvaṃ buddhiḥ saṃvṛtirucyate ||*

[12] Randall, *Aristotle,* 118-119

[13] M'Mahon, *The Metaphysics of Aristotle,* 178

[14] Randall, *Aristotle,* 117-118

[15] Barrett, "On the Functional Origins of Essentialism," 3-5

[16] Hirschfeld, "Natural Assumptions: Race, Essence, and Taxonomies of Human Kinds," 337

[17] Inada, *Nāgārjuna,* 97-98

[18] Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism,* 69

[19] Wood, *Nāgārjunian Disputations,* 114

[20] Bhattacharya, *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna,* 133.

[21] Wood, *Nāgārjunian Disputations,* 114

[22] Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 25-26

[23] Ibid., 28

[24] Cf. verse 18 in chapter XXIV of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* on page 4 of this article

[25] Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 32-33

[26] Ibid., 33

[27] *prabhavati ca śūnyateyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvārthāḥ | prabhavati na tasya kiṃcinna prabhavati śūnyatā yasya ||*

[28] Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, p. 41

[29] Inada, *Nāgārjuna,* 158

[30] Inada, *Nāgārjuna,* 156

[31] Inada, *Nāgārjuna,* 148. The verse reads:

> *śūnyatāvāsanādhānāddhīyate bhāvavāsanā |*
> *kiṃcinnāstīti cābhyāsāt sāpi paścāt prahīyate ||*
> *yadā na labhyate bhāvo yo nāstīti prakalpyate |*
> *tadā nirāśrayo'bhāvaḥ kathaṃ tiṣṭhenmateḥ puraḥ ||*
> *yadā na bhāvo nābhāvo mateḥ saṃtiṣṭhate puraḥ |*
> *tadānyagatyabhāvena nirālambā praśāmyate ||*

[32] Steinkellner, *Shantideva* p. 131.These above quoted German verses are equivalent to verses 32-34 in the English translation by Crosby & Skilton:

> "The influence of phenomena is removed by employing the influence of emptiness, and even that is later eradicated by inculcating the realization, 'nothing really exists'.
> [Cittamātra] If it is concluded that the entity which does not really exist cannot be perceived, then how does a non-entity which is without basis remain before the mind?
> [Mādhyamika] When neither entity nor non-entity remains before the mind, since there is no other mode of operation, grasping no objects, it becomes tranquil." (Crosby & Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*: p. 156)

[33] Ruegg, *Bodhi(sattva)caryāvatāra als Lehrschrift und Vorhaben,* 124.

[34] Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer,* 131.

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