

## Does Nāgārjuna's Philosophy make the moral dimension of our life irrelevant?

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[**Abstract:** The realist philosophers, both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, raise an objection against Madhyamaka philosophy. They argue that by denying the intrinsic nature of things Nāgārjuna obliterates the intrinsic distinction between good and bad and thus makes our moral life literally meaningless. Sthaviravādī Buddhists went a step forward to call Nāgārjuna a *pāpī bhikṣu*, a sinner monk who makes the demand of morality irrelevant. My purpose in this paper is to examine the question: Should Nāgārjuna be accused of this charge?]

**Key words:** *niḥsvabhāvatā*, *śūnyatā*, *buddhavacana*, immorality, ill-definability, contextualizing, *Vacovinyāsa*.

It is indeed true that from our common-sense point of view we assign the moral qualities to things as well as to our actions. We very often say, — “This is good”, — “that is bad” etc. But we cannot say like this if we admit that ‘everything is emptied of self-nature’. In other words, the philosophy of emptiness makes our moral life irrelevant and invites chaos instead of order or discipline. This is, in fact, the fourth objection summed up in *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*, 7 (henceforth, VV). “People conversant with the state of things (*dharmāvasthāvido janāḥ*) think that the good things have a good intrinsic nature (*kuśalāṃ dharmāṇāṃ manyante kuśalāṃ svabhāvam*). The same distinction (*vinīyoga*) is made with regard to the rest [of the things] too (the bad things, and so on)” (Bhattacharya, 1978:100). Here the opponents (*pūrvapakṣa*-s) are both the Sthaviravādins and the Nyāya philosophers. The former blame Nāgārjuna by saying that he has violated *Buddhavacana* (teachings of Buddha) and thus committed a ‘sin’. If merits and demerits are devoid of intrinsic nature then all the moral and spiritual paths comprising of different prohibitions and obligations *śramāṇya-phala*, *brahmacarya* etc. would turn out to be unimportant and ultimately meaningless.

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In VV 52-56 Nāgārjuna examines this objection from logical point of view and refutes the charge raised against him. But the charge has its origin in misunderstanding of proper import of the word *empty* (*śūnya*). Nāgārjuna never proposes a philosophy that makes our moral life irrelevant. The root of this misconception that works as the source of this charge lies in misunderstanding the meaning of *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*). It is a philosophy which denies any essence of thing. Nāgārjuna's philosophy of non-essentialism has come down to us more through *misunderstanding and exaggerations* than through a proper understanding and appreciation of its foundational tenets. Because of *misreading* of the texts, especially by his philosophical opponents, sometimes perhaps because of the technicality involved in his way of philosophizing and sometimes intentional distortion of the meaning of the words used by Nāgārjuna, it was much *blamed but little understood*. It is our duty today to reinterpret, reconstruct and re-evaluate Nāgārjuna's philosophy to meet the demand of contextualizing it. This is more or less true about all classical philosophies. *Vacovinyāsa*, a *lā* Jayantabhaṭṭa, that is, contextualizing the text is a necessity in philosophizing ((Chowkhamba, 1936 : verse no 1.8)).<sup>1</sup> Human beings are to recreate the past with a sense of *distancing nearness* (a *lā* Heidegger) and avoid *orthodoxy*. The latter allows no change and modification. Here Nāgārjuna would say that understanding of the past by the orthodox way is deadly for the human race. He seems to have done this *vacovinyāsa* in the context of Buddhist philosophy. Nāgārjuna is certainly not contradicting the *Buddha-vacana*, the teaching of the Buddha when he interprets it for contextualizing it. The very first verse of *Śūnyatāsaptati* states that from the point of view of common-sense Buddha gives many instructions but he also asks for its consideration from the point of view ultimate meaning and this can only be done if we contextualize it through interpretation.<sup>3</sup> So the difference between the *prima face* meaning and the ultimate meaning must be taken into consideration while reviewing the teachings of the Buddha.

A little reflection would tell us that without trying to enter into the spirit of technical use of the term '*śūnya*' it has been named *Śūnyavāda*, a philosophy that denies the reality of this world altogether. As we see in case of ontology, so in case of morality Nāgārjuna's view is misunderstood and misinterpreted. To say that everything is devoid of intrinsic nature, *śūnya*, is *not* to deny the foundation of moral teaching of Gautama Buddha.

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<sup>1</sup> *kutaḥ vā nūtanam vastu vāyamutprekṣitum śkamāḥ|  
vacovinyāsaivaicitramātrameva vicāryatām*

“Where from could we get the ability to introduce the completely new philosophical issues? So, our task is to interpret the old philosophical issues in new ways” (Eng. tr. author).

Because 'śūnya' does not mean 'stupendous zero'. It means conditional existence. In *Śūnyatāsaptati* (VV No 1) Nāgārjuna says that Buddha's teaching is to be understood in the light of the distinction between functional meaning of truth and the ultimate meaning of truth. Many sayings of Buddha should not be literally taken. Unless the context is considered, it is not possible say what is moral and what is not moral. In the light of karma doctrine moral progress and moral regress is to be understood. It is not right to make use of morality in any absolute sense. What we want to say is that Nāgārjuna has given meaning to Buddha's teachings and his interpretation does not contradict the original teachings of Buddha.

If we go through Nāgārjuna's *Suhrillekha* (*Letters to King Gautamiputra*) we find that the aforesaid charge of obliterating the *distinction between good and bad* is unfounded. As a Buddhist he used to follow the moral precepts and virtues taught by the Buddha. In verses 40 and 41, he clearly states, "Always meditate rightly on loving-kindness, compassion, empathy & equanimity; even if the supreme state is not attained in this way, still happiness of the world of Brahma will be attained."... "having given up the pleasures, joys and sufferings of the realm of desire by means of the four concentrations, the fortunate levels of gods" (Jamspal, et.al., 1978 : 23-24). In Sanskrit it is called *brahma-vihāra-bhāvanā*. Here the term *brahma* stands for 'greater than which nothing can be' and *vihāra* means 'roaming' (Visuddhimaggo, *Tin*, 1971: 340-375).

But to say that morality is an intrinsic property is to deny the fact of moral progress or regress and to admit essentialism. If the meaning of the moral terms is fixed and determined and well-defined, then moral progress or regress as the consequence of good or bad *karma* becomes meaningless. It is claimed by *speculative* philosophy and *not by critical* philosophy that there is essence or intrinsic property of moral action. Moral quality like 'goodness or badness' arises depending on certain conditions and accordingly to regulate our life for moral uplift the eight-fold path for cessation of suffering is prescribed. The context-orientation factor of moral behaviours is excluded from the notion of essentialist interpretation of morality. So, according to Nāgārjuna, as nothing is having intrinsic nature in this world, it does not carry any sense to assign intrinsic moral quality to any object or being in this world. Flawlessly we cannot define what is good in categorical term. Moral terms like 'good' or 'bad' is categorically ill-definable and cannot be totally context-free. There arises a category mistake in all such definitions. "If the nature of the good things originates in dependence upon the 'cause-condition complex' (*hetu-pratyaya*), how can it, being born of an extrinsic nature, be the intrinsic nature of the good

things? The same holds true of the bad and other things”. In these circumstances, your statement that ‘good intrinsic nature of the good things has been explained, as well as the bad intrinsic nature of bad things, and so on’, is not valid” (Bhattacharya, 1978 : 125). This shows that the claim of intrinsic goodness or intrinsic badness of things is unfounded. This is what is meant by Nāgārjuna in his auto-commentary (*vr̥tti*) on *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, the verse no 56 as *tatra yaduktam kuśalādinām bhāvanām svabhāva-sadbhāvādaśūnyāḥ sarvabhāvā iti tanna* — and also in the *vr̥tti* on the verse no 53 he clearly argues that if you think that good intrinsic nature of the good things originates without depending on anything, and that the same is true of the bad intrinsic nature of the bad things and of the indeterminate (*avyākṛta*) intrinsic nature of indeterminate things, then there is no practice of religious life – because if this is so, one is to reject Dependent Origination. Now if Dependent Origination does not exist, there can be no question of its vision. If there is no vision of Dependent Origination, there is no vision of Dharma. For the Lord has said: “O monks, he who sees the Dependent Origination sees the Dharma. And if one does not see the Dharma, there is no practice of religious life (*dharmadarśanābhāvād brahmacaryavāsābhāvaḥ*” (Vaidya, 1961 :100). Again, rejecting the law of Dependent Origination, one rejects the origination of sorrow (*atha vā pratītyasamutpādapratyakhyānād duḥkhasamudayapratyakhyānam bhavati*). For the law of Dependent Origination is the origination of sorrow (*pratītyasamutpāda hi duḥkhasya samudayah*). By rejecting the origination of sorrow, one rejects sorrow (*duḥkhasamudayasya pratyakṣyanād duḥkhapratyakṣyam bhavati*). For if there is no origination, how will that sorrow originate (*asati hi samudaye tat kuto duḥkham samudeśyati*)? If sorrow and [its] origination are rejected, then the cessation (*nirodha*) of sorrow is rejected. For if there is no origination of sorrow, what will come to cease through abandonment (*kasya prahāṇān nirodho bhaviṣyati*)? And if the cessation of sorrow is rejected, the Way (*mārga*) is also rejected. For, if there is no cessation of sorrow, for obtaining what will there be a way leading to the cessation of sorrow (*kasya prāptaye mārgo bhaviṣyati duḥkhanirodhagāmī*)? Thus, the four Noble Truths will cease to exist; there is no result of monasticism (*śramaṇyaphala*). For it is through the vision of [those] Truths that the results of monasticism are attained (*satyadarśanāc-chrāmaṇyaphalāni hi samadhiḥ gamyante*) [and] if the results of monasticism do not exist, there is no practice of religious life (Bhattacharya, 1978 :128).

There are two more reasons that Nāgārjuna puts forward against the thesis of intrinsic goodness and badness of things. What exactly demarcates between the two cannot be determined in exclusive terms. Had it not been

so, we shall not be in a position to accept merits or demerits of things and as such the world of conventions will then have no existential value. Again, only a permanent thing can be called devoid of cause (*nirhetukā hi bhāvā nitya*). If this is accepted, then no practice of religious life would be possible (*sa eva cābrahmacaryavāsaḥ prasajyeta*). And in that case there would be a contradiction. Because, the basic teaching of the Buddha is that “all conditioned things are impermanent” and to recognize them as having intrinsic goodness or badness is to admit them as permanent. This is a clear case of contradiction with *Buddha-vacana*, the teachings of the Buddha. “There being no origination, no subsistence and no destruction, all that is conditioned turns out to be unconditioned, because of the absence of the specific characters of the conditioned. ... In these circumstances, your statement that ‘all things are non-void, because the good and other things have an intrinsic nature’ [*kuśalādiṇāṇi bhāvānām svabhāvasadbhāvād aśūnyāḥ sarvabhāvā iti*], is not valid” (Bhattacharya, 1978 :128).

According to Nāgārjuna, freedom from essentialist thought-construct will be achieved through the proper understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* and only through this understanding morality becomes relevant. If everything has intrinsic nature, that is to say, unchanging nature then we cannot meaningfully explain our mundane activities regarding *dharma* and *a-dharma* etc. and other moral disciplines. On the contrary, if we understand that everything is relative to its cause and conditions (*hetupratyaya*) and interdependent, that is to say, essence-less then only we can meaningfully talk about morality and spirituality. Now if we take the term *empty* in literal sense then it means a *stupendous zero* and this kind of understanding of the word *śūnya* leads to nihilistic interpretation. This is a superficial understanding of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy and is the foundation of the charge that his philosophy makes the moral discipline and spiritual life meaningless. This objection resembles a person’s “raising the dust and then complaining that he cannot see” (Nayak, 2001:48). If it had been so, that is, if Nāgārjuna had taken *śūnyatā* in the literal sense then he would not have spoken about *Mahākaruṇā* and of a *Bodhisattva* who is always ready to sacrifice his own *Nirvāṇa* (liberation / freedom) for the sake of eradicating the suffering of others. In the concluding verse of *Mūamadyamakakārikā* (MMK) Nāgārjuna says that out of *anukampā* (great compassion) Buddha has taught humanity the Law of Interdependent Existence (*pratītyasamutpāda*) which is also called *Śūnyatā*, *Mahākaruṇā*, *Saddharma* etc. in order to dispel all dogmatic thought-constructs. Nāgārjuna bows down to Gautama Buddha by saying, “*sarva drṣṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmamadeśayat, anukampāmupādāya taṁ namasyāmi Gautamam.*” (“I reverently bow to Gautama who, out of

compassion, has taught the true doctrine in order to relinquish all views” (Kalupahana, 1991:391).

What Buddha taught is not to be taken in metaphysical sense and that is the reason for which Nāgārjuna says that Buddha’s intention was *sarva dṛṣṭiprahāṇa*, relinquishing of all (speculative) views about the world based on mere dogmatic assumption. Since everything is interdependent you cannot define anything in exclusive terms as *good* or *bad*. There is always context-bound status of existence and if we can detect the cause of bad action we can eradicate it first to eradicate badness. So goodness and badness are *not* intrinsic property of things. This explanation keeps room for moral progress and moral regress. It is the inveterate ignorance (*avidyā*) that causes our knowing of something as intrinsically good or bad.

To know the world as being emptied of any intrinsic nature (*pratītyasamutpanna*) destroys our craving for it and the fact of this realization leads to the cessation of suffering and when there is no suffering, *nirvāṇa* is realized as an *empty concept*, as a *limiting concept* to guide man’s spiritual *therapeutic* direction. This leads to the realization of reality in the highest sense and this again is beyond thought-constructions, that is to say, it cannot be explained even as empty or non-empty, both or not both. The true import of *madhyamāpratipad* does not lie in any literal sense to be a *middle position* between two *antas* (extremes). The use of adjectives in negative epithets like ‘intangible, incomparable, incomprehensible’ as marks of *middle path* suggests that it cannot be ‘combined, caged and confined’ in the fourfold-netting of human understanding and knowability. Emptiness is the philosophical position of *rising above all views* (*catuṣkoṭīvinirmukta-sarva-svabhāvanutpatti-lakṣaṇa-śūnyatā*). In this way, Nāgārjuna advocates, the *philosophy of Middle Way*.

For the Mādhyamikas, the problem arises only when we are blindly attached to any particular view as absolute at the complete disregard for others. A proper understanding of *Madhyamāpratipad* thus involves *therapeutic* consideration. In ontology it means going *beyond* both the extremes of *absolute existence* and *absolute non-existence*. Psychologically it indicates a position *beyond absolute views of substantiality and non-substantiality*. Morally speaking, it advocates a balanced position, a position *beyond both self-mortification and excessive enjoyment*. From epistemological consideration, its proper import lies in a *balanced mean* between *no knowledge-claim is certifiable* and *every knowledge-claim is certifiable*. In this sense it is multi-dimensional in import.

Nāgārjuna identifies *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*. It is also called *Madhyamāpratipad*. Truth lies neither in eternalism nor in nihilism, because both are extreme theories. Truth does lie in the middle position. But

this middle way has been used mainly in ethical sense by the Theravādins. For them, it means certain restrictions like avoiding from taking *too much* food or taking *too little* or avoiding *too much or too little* sleeping etc. Nāgārjuna mostly uses it in metaphysical sense. In *MMK* 15.7 it is said thus, “in the *Kātyāyanavada-sūtra*, the Lord who had the right insight into both *bhāva* (ens) and *abhāva* (non-ens) rejected both the extreme alternatives of ‘is’ and ‘is not’” (Singh, 1968 :49). In other words, according to Nāgārjuna, there is a clear indication for not accepting the application of the so-called Law of Excluded Middle. Because it (i. e. the denial of the Law of Excluded Middle) does not lead to the acceptance of the so-called Law of Contradiction. There is an indication that we can apply ‘consistency-phobia-free’ for our functional or conditional behaviour in the world.

Understood in its two fold aspects it has been described as *Madhyamāpratipad* as taught by Buddha, and this is said by Nāgārjuna in *MMK* 15.7. Again, in *MMK* 24.18, Nāgārjuna makes it crystal clear that what is meant by *śūnyatā* is meant by *pratītyasamutpāda*. It is also meant by *upādāyaprajñapti*, conceptual dependence. This is, in fact, *madhyamāpratipad*. This is also the nature of *tattva* or *nirvāṇa*. Despite a variety of imports of *Madhyamāpratipad* it *does not advocate a different theory of the world*; rather it advises us *to rise to a unitary world view*. In this sense it may be called *anānārtha*, as *nirvāṇa* is also called. The philosophy of *Madhyamāpratipad* advises us to keep vigilance to fight shy of any kind of inclination to any extreme or absolute position of metaphysical belief, however attractive it may be. “Freedom from the bondage of essentialist thought-construction that is inculcated by the critical insight of *śūnyatā*, being non-different from *prajñā*, could be conducive to peace both at the individual and world level only to the extent to which it is realized in the life of humanity at large.”<sup>13</sup> Its proper import cannot be grasped apart from *Pratītyasamutpāda*, *Śūnyatā* and *Nirvāṇa*. In this consideration perhaps, Candrakīrti equates them as '*Nirvāṇa* = *Samsāra* = *Pratītyasamutpāda* = *Madhyamāpratipad* = *Śūnyatā* = *Niḥsvabhāvatā*.

It is interesting to note in the passing that a similar charge is often brought against Advaita Vedānta that it obliterates all distinction (*bheda*) between *good* and *bad* and makes the issue of morality and spirituality irrelevant. Albert Schweitzer raised the objection that “the Hindu doctrine of *māyā* declares that life is an illusion, contains the ideas of flow of the world and life-negation, and in consequence Hindu thought is non-ethical.” (Schweitzer, 1951 :76).

S. Radhakrishnan refutes Schweitzer's charge in the second volume of *Indian Philosophy* by saying that “One who has shaken himself free from selfishness is at liberty to take upon him the task of the world-fleecing

but world-saving” (Radhakrishnan, 1927 :633). The Vedāntic approach to morality has its ontological foundation in essential identity of individual and the Absolute. Swami Vivekananda extends it to humanity as such and says that when I know you as myself and hurting you I hurt myself, this is moral. So any act with selfishness is immoral and when we act with no selfishness it is moral. “That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral.” (Vivekananda, 1989:110). For Swami Vivekananda, instead of making the notion of morality irrelevant Vedānta philosophy gives a solid ontological foundation of it. For him, “All the great systems of ethics preach absolute unselfishness as the goal. ...The little personality which had before is now lost to him forever; he has become infinite, and the attainment of this infinite expansion is indeed the goal of all religions and of all moral and philosophical teachings” (Vivekananda, 1989:109).

Both Madhyamaka philosophy and Advaita Vedānta philosophy recognize different grades of Reality. In the former, it is *saṃvṛti satya* and *pāramārthya satya*— in the latter it is *prātibhāsika*, *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika sat*. *Samvṛti* includes both *prātibhāsika*, *vyāvahārika*. Morality is an important concern in the functional (*vyāvahārika*) world. Advaita Vedānta tries to explain it with reference to transcendental Self whereas Madhyamaka philosophy explains it from an epistemic point of view based on the modal view of reality (*anātmā*) or non-substantiality or essence-less-ness of the world. Advaita Vedānta develops an ontological approach where the emphasis is not like Madhyamaka philosophy on ‘the attitude of our knowing’, but on ‘the thing known’ (Murti, 1960 :117). For Advaita Vedānta, when *aparokṣānubhūti* takes place, all the differences get vanished. It is the state of spirituality and morality, that is, its gateway. To realize ‘I’ as ‘Thou’, to realize one’s essential identity is the goal where all sufferings born out of false identification with the body are vanished.

Morality is meaningful in the functional level and helps to lead to spiritual realization. But what exactly is the nature of that realization cannot be described in language. In Madhyamaka philosophy it is the notion of ‘permanence’ about worldly things that causes suffering and the realization that it is *anātmā*, non-substantial, essence-less causes the eradication of suffering. It is the ultimate meaning of reality (*paramārtha*) to know one’s egoless-ness, one’s own limitation. What exactly it is – that cannot be said or asserted. This is also the indication of Buddha’s silence. But for meaningful application of morality the functional reality of the world cannot be denied. To borrow S. Radhakrishnan’s words, Madhyamaka philosophy is not *the world-fleeing but world-saving*. In spite of differences in ontological presuppositions none of the schools (i.e.



Madhyamaka philosophy and Advaita Vedānta philosophy) preach irrelevancy of morality in our mundane affairs of life.

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