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Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka Ethics

Nāgārjuna is perhaps the most influential Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha. The historical importance of Nāgārjuna may be greater than that of the Buddha, as Nāgārjuna's particular take on Buddhist philosophy was very popular through Asia. Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese versions of Buddhism are often highly indebted to Nāgārjuna's philosophy. I would also add that Nāgārjuna may be the most significant moral philosopher of the Indian tradition, not only because his contribution to ethics and other areas of philosophy are so worthy of serious consideration, but because of its wide-ranging reception in Asia beyond India. The importance of his philosophy for contemporary debates in ethics is to date underappreciated, much to the detriment of contemporary moral philosophy.

Nāgārjuna for himself seemed to have been writing to Indian philosophers. While his texts seem poetic and at times difficult to understand, they are filled with dense arguments, which are of interest to philosophers. It seems that he lived around the 2nd century in present-day South India. His particular version of Buddhist philosophy is known as the "Middle Way" or "Madhyamaka."

According to Theravada (Pāli Canon) Buddhist philosophy, while there are certain objects in the universe with strict definitions and identities (such as atomic constituents of experience), the self is something that can be reduced out of the picture. This was reviewed in the previous lessons on Buddhist ethics, and is brought to fore vividly in the model of the chariot employed by the philosopher Nāgasena in the dialogue *Question to King Milinda* (see module 4.6 in this series). The self can be reduced out of the picture because any objective example of the self can be analyzed into dependently arising constituents—none of which are themselves the self. This main line of Buddhist reasoning is at the core of Buddhism, and Nāgārjuna's argument. It is possible to emphasize the negative aspects of this philosophy. One might claim that it is a kind of nihilism, which denies the reality of everything. Buddhists tend to disagree. Nāgārjuna's philosophy is especially directed to such scepticism, though it is frequently misunderstood as an example of sceptical philosophy. One might also claim that Buddhist doctrine teaches an absolutist doctrine of dependency and the unity of all. This too is the object of Nāgārjuna's criticism.

Nāgārjuna's "middle path" charts a course between two extremes: Nihilism, and Absolutism. Nāgārjuna argues that similarly all things lack what he calls *svabhāva* – "own being" – the Sanskrit term for *essence*. Since everything lacks an essence, it is *Empty* (*śūnya*). To lack an essence is to lack autonomy; Nāgārjuna's account of essence is *own being* or autonomy. The corollary of this is that all things are interrelated. The Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) school of Buddhist thought draws heavily on this insight: if all things are related, individualism has to give way to inclusivity.

As noted, this philosophy is commonly mistaken for Nihilism: the view that nothing matters. According to Nāgārjuna's philosophy, this is a mistake. Moreover, it is possible to understand Nāgārjuna's philosophy as promulgating a new theory of reality: Emptiness. This too, his philosophy entails, is a mistake. According to Nāgārjuna, the key to understanding the Middle Most philosophy is dharma: ethics. It is only by a prior commitment to ethics that we can properly understand the Middle Most philosophy as teaching no doctrine of reality, for it is not a teaching of metaphysics, but of ethics.

1. Two Kinds of Truth

In Nāgārjuna's account, a distinction is to be drawn between conventional truth (*vyavahāra satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārthata satya*) (MMK XXIV.10). According to Nāgārjuna, conventional truth specifies essences. Put another way, convention is the categorisation of all things. All things have *svabhāva* from a conventional perspective. "*Svabhāva*" is the Sanskrit term literally

meaning "own-being", but serves to pick out "essence". However, from the ultimate perspective, in contrast, everything is under-defined, or perhaps undefined. It lacks *svabhāva*. The difference between the conventional and the ultimate, hence, hinges upon the issue of categorisation.

Consider an example. In India, one must drive on the left side of the road. In Canada, one must drive on the right side of the road. These are true by convention. There is nothing ultimately true about either of these rules. If we were to treat the question of which side of the road we should drive on as a question of ultimate truth, we would drive ourselves crazy: there is no ultimate truth to this question. It is always – and necessarily – a matter of convention.

So, ultimately, the question of which side of the road one should drive on – a purely practical question – is empty: it lacks *svabhāva*. Conventionally, we can discern the *svabhāva* of what side of the road we should drive on. But this is because we are the ones who make it true that in India, one must drive on the left side of the road, and in Canada, it is we who make it true that we should drive on the right side of the road. We can provide conventional answers to the question of "what side of the road should I drive on", but this covers up the fact that it is we who make the answer we give true. Hence, at the bottom of conventional truth is social responsibility. But this means that, ultimately, the right answer to conventions is open and under-defined. We can change them at our will. And the only thing that guides us correctly in modifying or answering questions of convention is a concern for our group coordination and betterment.

This generalises everything. Ultimately, the answer to any question is empty and lacks *svabhāva*. Conventionally, the answer to any question has a determinate answer. But here, the determinacy of the answer results from social responsibility. We are the ones responsible for the categories that we apply to the world. We are the ones who carve it up and divide its contents into separate categories. We must, therefore, ensure that our categorisation of the world corresponds to what is truly the case: open-endedness.

This distinction between the ultimate and the conventional, hence, hinges upon our role as categorisers. When people treat the categories they apply to the world as ultimately true, they deny the responsibility they have in the formation and application of such categories. Ultimately, we could say, no one or thing has a *svabhāva* (essence, category).

The distinction between the ultimate truth and the conventional is, hence, not a difference in kinds of things, or even between kinds of realities, but rather, perspectives on reality. From a conventional perspective, we superimpose categories on the world. However, in superimposing these categories on the world, we maintain a world in accordance with these categories. This can be a good thing, as when we draw distinctions in accordance with thriving, benefit and freedom. It can be a bad thing when we draw distinctions in accordance with suffering.

One of Nāgārjuna's main points (in his central *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā,* henceforth "MMK" – translations here are mine) is that because ultimately, reality is empty, things can change (XXIV). Causality functions, and there can be relationships of influence and change. Nothing is stuck in accordance with conventional truth. For this reason, we have grounds for optimism. Everything is open-ended.

2. Saṃsāra is Nirvāṇa: Criticism of Platonic Realism

MMK XXV.19
There is nothing that differentiates Saṃsāra (the world of Duḥkha) from Nirvana, as there is nothing that differentiates Nirvana from Saṃsāra.

MMK XXV.20
The boundaries of Nirvana are also the boundaries of Saṃsāra. There is no difference between these two.

MMK XXV.24
Giving up believing that everything has to exist is the auspicious end of illusion.
The Buddha taught no morals (dharma) about anything.

One way to capture this distinction between two truths is to claim, with Nāgārjuna, that the realm of *saṃsāra* (the whirlpool, trouble, suffering) is the world of liberation (nirvāṇa). When we view the world in terms of categories that are troublesome and inimical to beneficial change, it is *saṃsāra*. When we view it in terms of categories that are beneficial and open, healing change, it is nirvāṇa. This is possible for there is nothing defined about ultimate reality. It is open-ended, under-defined and unconstrained. Hence, we have a great responsibility and freedom in the choice we have in how we categorise reality.

The distinction between *saṃsāra* and nirvāṇa corresponds to the distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth in some contexts – when the conventions that we set up are contrary to our interests of being free of trouble. Then, indeed, *saṃsāra* is the world seen conventionally, and nirvāṇa is the world seen liberated from the trouble of convention. But when we take responsibility for formulating our conventions so that they respect our interests in being free from trouble, the relationship between *saṃsāra* and nirvāṇa and conventional and ultimate truth is different: conventional truth is what facilitates nirvāṇa.

Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist philosopher writing in India. It is unlikely that he had any serious exposure to Plato's philosophy. However, Nāgārjuna's orientation to questions of truth, and the relationship between nirvāṇa and *saṃsāra* offer fitting criticisms of Platonic realism.

In Plato's model, universals, or what Nāgārjuna would have called *svabhāva*-s, are objective and real, independent of convention. It is rather on the basis of an understanding of these Forms or Ideas that society should be modelled. This is, in part, the argument of Plato's *Republic*. In Plato's account, the ethical individual is one who organises their own soul so that they become open to the forms. On Plato's account in *The Phaedrus*, this comes about when the soul-as chariot (comprised of two horses corresponding to ambition and desire) and the charioteer (corresponding to reason) fly up into the heavens, leaving the world of particulars behind. In Plato's model in the *Republic*, the one who is most cognizant of these forms is also the one most capable of governing. But in this case, they lack the motivation to take responsibility for society and must be forced to do so.

Nāgārjuna's philosophy inverts these relationships. *Svabhāva*-s are not real, independent of convention; rather, it is convention that constitutes forms and ideas. Appreciating the world of form is a flight of fancy that must be grounded in absolute or ultimate truth, which is empty. The ethical individual on this account is someone who appreciates their obligation in the first instance not to mere convention, but to convention that must match up with ultimate truth. In this case, the *saṃsāra* of the limited world of forms and ideas is liberated, and is thereby nirvāṇa.

When we take responsibility for knowing the forms, we do so, in Nāgārjuna's account, via a critical contrast to the emptiness of ultimate truth. This allows us to exchange dogma for optimism.

Here, we find a way to cash out Nāgārjuna's claim that the Buddha taught no morals about things. If he had taught morals about things, he would have made claims about what has *svabhāva* and what does not. However, the Buddha's aim was not to reify convention, but to deconstruct it (nirvāṇa) so as to liberate.

3. Objection: This is Nihilism. Answer: Dharma

If Nāgārjuna is to be taken seriously, everything is Empty – in the final analysis. Nāgārjuna, being an excellent philosopher, considers an objection founded upon this observation, and moreover, he has a cogent response.

The objection is as follows:

> MMK XXIV.3
> Critic: If nothing exists, then the Four Noble Truths do not exist. If fruits of actions are illusions, then there are no consequences of actions.

> MMK XXIV.5
> If there is no ethics or association of Buddhists, how will we ever develop into Buddhas? By promulgating the doctrine of Emptiness, you deny the Buddha, the doctrine of Ethics and the community of Buddhists [i.e. the *saṅga*]!

> MMK XXIV.6
> (By promulgating this doctrine of Emptiness) you deny morality and immorality. You are forced to conclude that there is no point to action in this world.

This objection is a paraphrase of what has already been said by Nāgārjuna: the Buddha taught no morals about anything. But here, this seems to implicate the Buddha and Nāgārjuna in moral nihilism, the idea that nothing matters.

Nāgārjuna's response is that the critic has misstated the doctrine of Emptiness. Emptiness is not the claim that nothing is real. It is the more radical position that nothing has to be the way it is. It is the stand point of moral criticism and optimism:

> MMK XXIV.8
>
> The ethical instruction of the Buddhas rests on a distinction between two types of truth: conventional truth, and the ultimate truth.

> MMK XXIV.9
> Those who do not recognize these two truths do not appreciate the teachings of the Buddha.

> MMK XXIV.10
> Ultimate truth cannot be understood apart from the conventional, and without this understanding one does not understand Nirvana.

> MMK XXIV.11
> A poor awareness of Emptiness destroys the dim witted. It is like a snake grasped carelessly, or a spell cast irresponsibly.

> MMK XXIV.12
> This is the reason that Gautama the Buddha hesitated to teach the Dharma (Ethics), having recognized the difficulty idiots have in grasping it.

> MMK XXIV.13
> Your criticisms are incorrect. They are not relevant to what we mean by "emptiness". Your confusion about emptiness is quite irrelevant to my point.

> MMK XXIV.14
> Because everything is Empty, everything in existence functions together. If nothing were empty, existence as we know it would not function together.

> MMK XXIV.17
> Without Emptiness, there can be no cause and effect, agent and action, arising and ebbing. All would be impossible.

> MMK XXIV.18
> Dependent Origination (the central teaching of the Buddha) is Emptiness. The Middle Way is the mere recognition of Emptiness.

MMK XXIV.21
If Duḥkha (Discomfort) were without conditions, how would it come to be? As
Duḥkha is not eternal, it is certainly not autonomous.

MMK XXIV.23
Duḥkha could not come to an end if it were autonomous. By insisting that Duḥkha
is autonomous and real, you deny its end.

MMK XXIV.24
If the way to liberation were autonomous, one could not do anything to actualize it.
If we can do something to actualize it, it cannot be autonomous.

Nāgārjuna's point is that the dharma of the Buddhas – their ethics – is what contemporary authors might call *reflective equilibrium* (Daniels 2013). Here, the point of the process is to bring considered moral judgments into equilibrium with each other. This process of bringing about equilibrium is critical: old beliefs may be jettisoned while we acquire new ones. If were stuck with conventional truth, this would not be possible. Indeed, if we only had ultimate truth, we would also have nothing to deliberate on. It is because ultimate truth is to be understood via conventional truth (that they are to be brought into a reflective equilibrium with each other) that we see that conventional truth has to be justified by ultimate truth – lacking *svabhāva*. But this comparison of convention with the ultimate is code for taking a critical approach to conventions: they must be justified, not merely assumed. Dharma is this process of bringing about a reflective harmony between the two kinds of truths. To think about ultimate truth on its own, apart from conventional truth, is to conceive of criticism with nothing to criticise. That is nihilism, but it is also practically foolish. To think about conventional truth on its own is to buy the dogma and propaganda. But to understand that they ought to be related responsibly (as a matter of dharma) is to take a critical approach to conventional truth via the standard of ultimate truth.

I noted earlier that there are Contractualist elements in Buddhist thought, affirmed by Nāgārjuna. Contractualism is the idea that ethical choice must be the subject of an agreement. The Contractualism is affirmed implicitly in these passages. Acceptable choice and judgement must operate within the broad consent of the association of well-informed, free people: the community of Buddhists in Nāgārjuna's account. The reason that acceptable choice and judgement must pass this test is that this test forces one's deliberation to abdicate particularities that allow for autonomy. The right decision is not merely right for oneself, but right for all. This decision is no doubt conventional as it sets a precedent for others too, but it is one based on emptiness as it involves abandoning one's own *svabhāva* (own being) in favour of understanding rational choice as something acceptable to the moral community. Such a decision is at once conventional and empty.

As noted, in Nāgārjuna's account, ultimate truth is change and possibility of improvement. It is what renders causality possible, but also gives us reason to believe that difficulty (*duḥkha*) can come to an end. If we only relied on conventional truth, we would have no grounds for optimism. If we relied upon ultimate truth only, we would have no reason to care. It is because the two kinds of truths must be reconciled that we can live responsibly. This is dharma. But dharma so understood is not a moral code, much less a list of things to take seriously. It is our practical responsibility for the way we carve up the world.

4. Moral Realist Objection

It is a common view among Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism that the distinction starts with Buddhist thinkers. There have been some non-Buddhist writers who have claimed the view that the distinction has its roots in Upaniṣadic thinking – they are usually not looked upon that highly (cf. Murty 1970). The argument against such thinkers is that they are Hindus trying to claim that Buddhism is just a form of Hinduism. This is hardly the only take. For instance, Leonard Priestly, a specialist on Pudgalavāda Buddhism, was apt to point out that the similarities between the

Madhyamaka tradition and the earlier Upaniṣadic tradition are not so easy to dismiss (Priestley 2005).

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upaniṣad has a lively exchange between Yājñavalkya and his interlocutor, in which Yājñavalkya teaches that all the various gods are reducible to one thing: "Breath (*prāna*), and he is Brahman (the Sūtrātman [i.e., the one that connects us]), and they call him That (*tyad*)" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka III.9). Notice, this ultimate is something that is lacking its own being. It is defined by its ability to relate items with own beings, such as pearls on a string. Moreover, identifying it as *tyad* is very much in keeping with later Buddhist identification of the ultimate truth as *thusness* – a description in keeping with emptiness.

There are, of course, important differences. I argue elsewhere (see the lesson on Vedānta) that the Vedānta thrust was towards a deontological, bhakti ethics of self-governance: yoga. This ethics is neither agent relative nor agent neutral: it is agent inclusive. By taking care of one's own interests, one thereby takes care of all. One consults no one. One takes direction from no one. Being ethical is about being self-sufficient on the yogic model. Given the importance that Buddhists placed on the *saṅga* (association of free, informed, unforced Buddhists), Buddhist ethics is geared towards what we might call *Contractualism*. According to this account:

> An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be
> disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour
> that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced,
> general agreement. (Scanlon 1998, 153)

Buddhist contractualism is the *saṅga* – the general agreement of the informed and unforced Buddhas. This association sets off what is objectionable from what is permissible. The *saṅga* is, in short, the moral community that Buddhist moralists must appeal to – this is Nāgārjuna's central point. This picture of ethics is different from the Upaniṣad approach.

As discussed in the lessons on Vedānta, the Upaniṣads lean towards Yoga. The central moral ideal of Yoga is self-governance. In the Yoga account, there is no need to justify one's actions to anyone else. Indeed, taking responsibility is about being a leader, and this is trend setting. However, in the contractualist account, one has to appeal to a common fund of concerns as the justification for one's actions. Nāgārjuna himself directly appeals to the association of Buddhists and the importance of grounding one's judgements in terms of what no one in this association could reject. This approach to ethics is not affirmed in Vedic sources (though perhaps, to some extent, in later philosophies based on the Vedas). So while there is a similarity in the ethical foundations in so far as they rely upon a two truths doctrine, the normative ethics of the Buddhist and the Vedic approach diverge.

Here is a criticism that reprises the attempt to conflate Nāgārjuna's ethics with that of the Vedas. Nāgārjuna's theory of two truths is nothing but the *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, Upaniṣad's doctrine of Brahman and *ātmā*: Brahman is the ultimate truth that is under-defined and the *ātmā* is the conventional self that has to be brought into harmony with its higher, ultimate truth. This argument seems incorrect for the following reason: Brahman and *ātmā* are as though agents, whereas the distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth is epistemic. But this is a superficial difference. If we were to take seriously the idea that the two have to be brought into compliment to each other, then each is as though a locus of moral choice that must be harmonised.

There is a deeper reason to believe that the theories are not the same. Brahman is a positive idea of the ultimate. It is the ultimate truth understood as *development*. Specifying that development as the ultimate truth is to identify something with *svabhāva*. But in Nāgārjuna's account, the ultimate truth has no *svabhāva*. This is a significant philosophical difference. In the Vedānta model, the Ultimate Truth has an essence. If anything, it is the individual self (*ātmā*) that might be thought to be empty on this account, for the *svabhāva* of the individual self – aside from its group inclusion in

Brahman – is nothing specific. Certainly, the Madhva, Dvaita approach disagrees, but the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita approaches seem to hold open the reality of the individual self as under-defined.

Given this distinction, we see there is ground for a criticism of Nāgārjuna's philosophy from a Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta perspective. The identification of the ultimate truth as lacking *svabhāva* plays into nihilism by assuming that we cannot talk positively about the ultimate truth. But if we can understand the ultimate truth as Development, we have a morally charged categorisation of the ultimate truth, which provides positive moral guidance, but is yet not identifiable with conventional truth and its ideology. In this approach, the reality of Brahman is the reality of the class interest in personal development, which individual selves inherit by virtue of their inclusion within the genus of Brahman. Meditating on Brahman, so understood, provides a foundation for ethical choice. The right decisions would be in conformity with Brahman as development. We can positively criticise convention from this standpoint, but we can also contemplate the ideal without having to buy conventional truth. This contrasts sharply with Nāgārjuna's approach, where the ultimate truth provides no guidance and we need to buy conventional truth.

The following defence is open to Nāgārjuna. If we understand ultimate truth in terms of some essence, even minimally, we are stuck with a dogma that cannot be criticised. For instance, if we identify the ultimate truth as development, then it seems that we should be amenable to development in all contexts. But development is only good when it liberates, and it is bad when its stifles. Disease can be developed. Development as such is not a good thing. It is good only when it comes about by what is acceptable to the moral community (the *saṅga*) and bad otherwise.

The moral realist of the Viśiṣṭādvaita sort can respond that development is a class that is inclusive of some things, but not all. Disease is not something that fall within this class, but persons do. That is because there is nothing essentially developmental or progressive about disease (indeed, its essence is the opposite), though this is true of persons. Disease seems contingently developmental, but as it develops, it kills its host, and thereby its own prospects to thrive, so it is not properly developmental. So, development is always good when it is inclusive of persons with interests, and not good by definition when applied to categories outside of its bounds. This provides us the appropriate grounds for moral criticism, without having to think that the ultimate truth itself must be criticised. Moral reality is top down, not bottom up.

This will not satisfy Nāgārjuna. Indeed, Nāgārjuna's intuition is that if we do not render absolute truth without essence, we confuse it with dogma, which we create. One way in which Nāgārjuna's intuition that ultimate truth should be understood as under-defined is to appreciate his philosophy as contextualist. Contextualist orientations in philosophy believe that contexts deliver important information for determining correct decisions. If the correct decision was context independent, then the ultimate truth would be something characterisable as context independent, and hence, essential. But if ultimate truth is relative to conventional truth as its complement, and if conventional truth *defines* a context, then ultimate truth is context sensitive. This means that how we understand emptiness depends on the context. This means that we cannot do without conventional truth. It provides the parameters for criticism. Moral realism is bottom up, not top down.

5. Conclusion

Nāgārjuna's moral philosophy is the kernel of his argument as he argues that one cannot understand the doctrine of emptiness without a proper grounding in the life of the moral community of Buddhas. The reason that this foundation is important is that the moral community provides the safe, prudent context to maximise decisions of emptiness: decisions that undermine past convention, but thereby set up new beneficial outcomes. The criteria that make this type of decision possible is the background consensus of the community, but this consensus is open-ended as it is defined by the consent of the Buddhas – which is to say, the well-informed, free individuals.

Apart from the ethical constraint on emptiness, attempting to understand emptiness on its own is like holding a snake imprudently. This points to a fact: that any strategy that safeguards oneself involves some judgement, and this judgement is not empty, but places the individual within a world lacking *svabhāva* – autonomy. This is our moral freedom.

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Glossary

Letter	Term	Definition
D	Dharma	Ethics
E	Emptiness	The ultimate truth, characterised by a lack of definition
S	*saṅga*	Association of well-informed, free individuals (Buddhas)
	Sunya	Emptiness
	Svabhāva	Own Being, Essence