

Buddhism as Philosophy

An Introduction

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Madhyamaka: The Doctrine of Emptiness

The view that all things are empty, or devoid of essence, is definitive of philosophical Mahāyāna. In the last chapter we examined how Yogācāra tried to defend this doctrine by giving it an idealist reinterpretation. It is now time to see whether the doctrine of emptiness is philosophically defensible when taken literally. This is what the Madhyamaka school claims. In this chapter we will examine some key arguments of the Mādhyamikas for the claim that all things are empty.¹ We will also look at some key objections to the Madhyamaka view. And as always we will be exploring the soteriological consequences of the view we are examining. But before we do any of this we need to be clear about the difficulties facing anyone who takes the doctrine of emptiness at face value. This will enable us to sort out the various ways that Madhyamaka might be interpreted, and why some interpretations might be more plausible than others.

9.1

The Madhyamaka school traces its origins to Nāgārjuna, who was of South Indian origin and is generally thought to have been active around 150 CE. Nāgārjuna is the author of the foundational Madhyamaka text *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (MMK), as well as several other works. Nāgārjuna's disciple Āryadeva (ca. 200 CE) extended the kinds of analyses Nāgārjuna had given in MMK to new areas. But then there is a gap. It is not until the sixth century CE that we again see Mādhyamikas engaging in sustained philosophical activity. We then have three major commentaries on MMK, those of Buddhapālita (active around 500 CE), Bhāvaviveka (ca. 500–570 CE) and Candrakīrti (ca. seventh century CE). Why the gap? One possibility is that it took Mahāyāna philosophers that long to appreciate the power of Nāgārjuna's arguments. During the intervening three centuries, much energy went into developing the alternative Yogācāra understanding of emptiness. Perhaps it was not until this had been thoroughly explored that some began to suspect Nāgārjuna was right after all to take the *Prajñāpāramitā* doctrine of emptiness at face value.

To see why this scenario might be plausible, we need to remind ourselves of what the doctrine of emptiness says, and what the interpretive options are. As Nāgārjuna understands it, to say of something that it is empty is to say it is devoid of intrinsic nature (it is *niḥsvabhāva*). Yogācārins would agree. (See Chapter 8, §6.) The claim

¹The practice among scholars has been to refer to the school as 'Madhyamaka' and its members as 'Mādhyamikas'.

we find in the early Mahāyāna sūtras was actually that all things are devoid of essence (*nairātmya*). But the move from ‘devoid of essence’ to ‘devoid of intrinsic nature’ is easy to explain. According to Abhidharma’s mereological reductionism, an ultimately real thing has just a single nature. Abhidharma also holds that ultimately real things have their natures intrinsically; they don’t borrow their natures from other things, as the chariot borrows its size, shape and weight from its parts. So the essence of an ultimately real thing would have to be whatever single property is intrinsic to that thing. Thus if something ultimately real is devoid of essence, it must lack intrinsic nature.

Suppose we were persuaded by the Abhidharma argument for mereological reductionism. We agree that wholes are mere conceptual fictions, and that only things with intrinsic natures could be ultimately real. Suppose the Mādhyamikas then gave us a set of persuasive arguments to the effect that nothing could actually have an intrinsic nature. What would our options be? Two are immediately apparent. The first is to embrace metaphysical nihilism. We could say that ultimately nothing whatever exists. This is unpalatable. And as we will soon see, Nāgārjuna explicitly rejects it. Still it is an option. The second option could be called the ‘reality is ineffable’ strategy. The thinking that leads to this option is this: if what is ultimately real cannot be described as either partite or impartite, then perhaps the fault lies with the concepts we use to try to describe ultimate reality. Maybe the nature of reality simply transcends the conceptual capacities of finite beings like ourselves.² If so, then we might avoid the nihilist conclusion. We might say that there does exist something that is ultimately real; it just cannot be described – at least not by us. (Yogācāra adopted a variant of this option.)

These might seem to be our only two options. But perhaps not. For we encountered a similar situation once before. In Chapter 4 we looked at the question whether the nature of nirvāna can be described. We saw that when the Buddha was asked whether or not the enlightened person exists after death, he rejected each of the four possible answers. Some have taken this to mean that the state of cessation without remainder (‘final nirvāna’) cannot be described. But this was not the point the Buddha was making when he rejected all four possibilities. Instead he was indicating that they all share a common, false presupposition. Here we find the same type of seeming deadlock: what is ultimately real cannot be described as having intrinsic nature, being devoid of intrinsic nature, being wholes, being partless parts, being utterly non-existent, etc. Should we thus conclude that the ultimately real is ineffable? There is a presupposition shared by all the possibilities here – including metaphysical nihilism and the ‘reality is ineffable’ option. This is the presupposition that there is such a thing as the ultimate truth. For any of these possibilities to be correct, there would have to be such a thing as the way that things absolutely objectively are. If we were to

²This leaves open the possibility that the ultimate nature of reality can be known through a kind of immediate intuition that does not employ concepts. Some Mahāyāna Buddhist thinkers embraced this possibility.

embrace the ‘reality is ineffable’ option, we would be accepting that presupposition. We would be assuming that it makes sense to ask how things are, independently of concepts that reflect our needs and interests. And this presupposition might be false. It might be that the very idea of the ultimate truth is incoherent. So this is a third option. If the Madhyamaka arguments for emptiness turn out to be good, we might take them to show that there can be no such thing as the ultimate truth. Now Mādhyamikas hold that the ultimate truth is that all things are empty. So we could put this third option as: ‘The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.’ Of course this sounds paradoxical. We’ll return to this later.

Broadly speaking, then, there are two types of interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness, metaphysical and semantic. A metaphysical interpretation takes the doctrine to be an account of the ultimate nature of reality. Our first and second options are both of this sort. The third option is not. It is a semantic interpretation, that is, it takes the doctrine to be saying something about truth.³ In particular, it takes the doctrine of emptiness to be the rejection of the idea that the truth of a statement must depend on the ultimate nature of reality. That is the idea that the Abhidharma conception of ultimate truth is based on. So on the semantic interpretation, the doctrine of emptiness is the rejection of the idea of ultimate truth. You will recall that Abhidharma claimed there are two kinds of truth, ultimate and conventional. We could accordingly say that Abhidharma has a dualist conception of truth. And then on the semantic interpretation of emptiness, Madhyamaka might be described as semantic non-dualism. For it says there is only one kind of truth.

At this point you might be wondering how truth could be strictly semantic, and not at all metaphysical. Doesn’t the concept of truth involve the idea of how things really, objectively are? Doesn’t it involve the idea that there is such a thing as the ultimate nature of reality? Take the statement, ‘There’s a soft-drink machine in the lobby.’ For it to be true, doesn’t there have to be a machine downstairs? Of course there really aren’t any machines. ‘Soft-drink machine’ is just a convenient designator for parts put together in a certain way. But those parts (or the parts of those parts) would have to be there, arranged in that way, wouldn’t they? Perhaps not all the statements that we commonly accept as true actually correspond to reality. The statement about the soft-drink machine doesn’t, for it’s based on the assumption that there are soft-drink machines when there really aren’t. It uses a concept that is molded by our interests and our limitations. But that statement is useful for us, it helps us achieve our goals. And to explain this fact, don’t we have to assume that something is objectively there? If the Mādhyamika is saying there is no ultimate truth, how can they explain the conventional truth? Why is it useful to be told there’s a soft-drink machine downstairs? Why does it lead to successful practice?

These are good questions. But the semantic non-dualist will reply that they all presuppose the very point that is at issue. They assume that in order for any of our

³Semantics has to do with linguistic meaning. Truth is considered a semantic concept because to understand the meaning of a statement you need to be able to say what would make it true.

statements to be true, there must be such a thing as how the world itself is, independently of concepts molded by our interests and limitations. The semantic nondualist takes the arguments for emptiness to show that this assumption is false. They also claim that truth can be explained in purely semantic terms, without bringing in metaphysics. But this is not the place to go into how that might work. At this point we are just exploring what our options might be if the arguments for emptiness are good. And we now know that the metaphysical options – nihilism and the ‘reality is ineffable’ strategy – are not our only ones. We now need to look at the arguments themselves. Once we have done that, we may be in a better position to resolve the dispute between the metaphysical and the semantic interpretations of emptiness.

9.2

There is no one Madhyamaka argument for emptiness. Nāgārjuna and his followers give us many different arguments on many different topics. In MMK, for instance, there are arguments concerning the causal relation, motion, the sense faculties, the relation between fire and fuel, the relation between a thing and its nature, and many other subjects. But these arguments all share a common form. They start from the hypothesis that there are ultimately real things, things with intrinsic natures, and they then show that this assumption has unacceptable consequences. They are all, in other words, *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, arguments that reduce the hypothesis in question to absurdity. The argument concerning causation, for instance, shows that if what is ultimately real had intrinsic nature, then there could never be causation, so things could never come into existence. This one argument does not prove that all things are empty. Someone who thought there are things with intrinsic natures could claim that they are not produced. But then the Mādhyamika will have other arguments meant to show that other absurd things follow from that view. The idea is that eventually the opponent will see that any possible move to salvage their view about the ultimately real is blocked. So they will give up their view that there are non-empty things. They will agree that all things are empty.

In the second chapter of MMK, Nāgārjuna tries to show that it cannot be ultimately true that there is motion. We will look at just the first part of MMK II. Now MMK is written in the same concise verse style that is used in the foundational sūtras of other schools of Indian philosophy. This makes it difficult to understand without a commentary. But the existing commentaries are often quite complex and hard to follow. So we will here relax our rule of giving only the original text. We will supply our own modern commentary to the verses of MMK. This commentary is based on the original Sanskrit commentaries, though. So your readings on Madhyamaka will still be quite close to the thinking of the Mādhyamika philosophers themselves.

1. In the first place the [path] gone over is not [now] being gone over; neither is the [path] not yet gone over being gone over.

The [path] presently being gone over that is distinct from the [portions of path] gone over and not yet gone over is not being gone over.

If motion is possible, then it should be possible to say where the activity of going is taking place. It is not taking place in that portion of the path that is already traversed, since the activity of going has already occurred there. Nor is it taking place in the portion not yet traversed, since such activity is still to come. And there is no third place, the presently being gone over, where it could take place. (This argument of the three times, to the effect that an event cannot occur in past, future or present, serves as the model for several other arguments.) The argument here is the same as that of Zeno's paradox of the arrow. Like that paradox, it relies on the assumption that space and time are both infinitely divisible.

2. [The opponent:] Where there is movement there is the act of going. And since movement occurs in the [path] presently being gone over, Not in the gone over nor the not yet gone over, the act of going occurs in the presently being gone over [path].

3. [Response:] How could it be right to say that the act of going is in the [path] being gone over

When it is not at all right to say there is presently being gone over without the act of going?

For something to be the locus of present going there has to be an act of going. And something *x* can't be the locus of something else *y* unless *x* and *y* are distinct things. In the ensuing vv.4–6 Nāgārjuna will use this point to show it cannot be right to locate going in the present.

4. If you say the act of going is in the [path] presently being gone over, it follows

That the [path] being gone over is without the act of going, since [for you] the [path] presently being gone over is being gone over.

Since the locus of present going and the going are distinct (v.3), the locus itself must be devoid of any activity of going.

5. If the act of going is in the [path] presently being gone over, then two acts of going will follow:

That by which the [path] presently being gone over [is said to be such], and moreover that which [supposedly exists] in the act of going.

For the locus to serve as locus of the act, it must itself be something whose nature is to be presently being gone over. But this requires an act of going, since something can't be being gone over without there being an act of going. So we now have two acts of going: the one for which we are seeking a locus, and the one that makes this the right locus for the first.

6. If two acts of going are supplied, then it will follow that there are two goers, For there cannot be an act of going without a goer.

Since this is an absurd consequence, the opponent's hypothesis of v.2 that led to it must be rejected. Note that there is no reason to stop at two goers; the logic of the argument leads to an infinite regress of goers. [MMK 11.1–6]

There are two different arguments here, that of the three times (v.1), and an argument

to the effect that identifying a locus where going takes place would require a second going (vv.3–6). The first argument is fairly clear. If the present is a dimensionless instant, how can anything be moving in the present? Nāgārjuna will later (in v.12) use the same reasoning to raise difficulties for the notion that something could begin to move. Beginning is a change, and changes require time to occur: a change involves something being one way at one time and another way at a later time. So something couldn't begin to move in the present, since the present is just a dimensionless instant. Likewise for the three times argument of v.1: motion involves being at one place at one time and at another place later, so motion isn't something that could occur at the present instant. It can only occur over two distinct instants, such as a past moment and the present. You might wonder why it couldn't still be true that motion occurs, even if we have to say it occurs between past and present. The answer is that it could then be conventionally true that motion occurs, but not ultimately true. For one thing, there would have to be a single thing that existed at the two different places, first at the earlier time and then at the later time. And if everything is momentary, then nothing exists from one instant to the next. (This was the reasoning behind the Sautrāntika denial that anything moves, which we examined in Chapter 6.) But deeper still, this analysis shows that motion involves mental construction. Motion involves how things are at two distinct moments. And only the mind can bring those two moments together. Motion could not be an intrinsic nature; it could not be ultimately real.

The second argument is more puzzling. It could be put as claiming that there is an inadmissible relation of mutual dependency between the locus of going and the act of going: neither can be what it is without the other, so neither could be ultimately real. Suppose there is a path with three segments, A, B and C. Suppose a goer has already traversed A, has not yet traversed C, and is presently traversing B. Can we say that B is where its going is taking place? The question then is how B comes to have this nature of being the locus of going. Nāgārjuna says this would require that there be a second act of going, separate from the going whose locus we are looking for, something that gave B the nature of a locus of going. But suppose we were to say that B's nature is just to be a place, something that might or might not be a locus of going. Then when the goer comes along and does its going there, this makes it a locus of going; but it could exist perfectly well without any going. In that case there wouldn't be any need for a second act of going to identify it as a locus of going; a single act of going would be perfectly adequate. Why can't we say this?

The problem Nāgārjuna sees with this proposal is that it gives B two natures – that of being a place, and that of being the locus of going – with the first being its essence (what it really is) and the second being a contingent nature it just happens to get. We are then treating B as a substance that bears both essential and contingent properties. And we already know that nothing that is ultimately real could be like this. Something with this sort of compound nature is not 'findable under analysis'. If it is ultimately true of B that it is a locus of going, then this must be its intrinsic nature. The difficulty is that it could get this nature only in dependence on an act of going.

How could something be a locus of going unless there were some going occurring there? And to supply a second act of going to fulfill this need is clearly absurd. The only alternative is to say that it is the original act of going that makes B a locus of going. Yet we've already seen that there can't be a going unless there is a locus in which it takes place. If going is dependent on a locus, we can't make the locus dependent on the going – at least not if they are to be ultimately real. So it looks like this strategy won't work.

Nāgārjuna gives several more arguments in MMK II. Like the two arguments we've just considered, they try to show it could not be ultimately true that things move. But we will end our examination here. The results may not seem all that far-reaching. The Sautrāntikas had already argued that ultimately there is no motion (see Chapter 6, §4). But it was worth looking at the first two arguments of this chapter in some detail. For we will see the strategies he uses – that of the three times, and that of showing mutual dependence—repeated elsewhere.

