Indian Nihilism: An Exposition of Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Nihilism believes that human existence has no objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. As such a nihilist bows to no authority and accepts no doctrine. The nihilistic interpretation of the world and thought process is quite different than that of common interpretation. The western nihilism found in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger, is very familiar to the academic world. Indian nihilistic philosophy, very precise and logical in its articulation, was flourished in the second century AD in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, a follower of Madhyamika School of Buddhism. This paper is an exposition of Nāgārjuna’s view of nihilism. It is also an attempt to enquire whether Nāgārjuna can be considered as a nihilist or not.

Key Words: Nāgārjuna, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Madhyamika School, nihilism, śūnyatā, svabhāva.

Introduction:

Nāgārjuna, the “greatest sceptic-mystic dialectician of the Voidist School of Mahāyāna Buddhism” (Honderich,Ted. Oxford Companion to Philosophy, p. 637) is widely known for interpreting Buddha’s ‘middle way’ as emptiness of all things. Buddhism as a school of philosophy, which has its roots in the life and teachings of Lord Buddha, has a long series of philosophical heritage. Philosophers and critics are of the view that the birth of Buddha (c.560–480), ‘the awakened one’, is a birth of a bud which was blossomed with the exposition of Nāgārjuna. The Encyclopaedia of Buddhism writes:

In the West, attempts have been made to compare Nāgārjuna’s thought with Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, or Francis Herbert Bradley, and more recently with Jacques Derrida (deconstruction, particularly of egocentricity) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (liberation of others from philosophical predicaments that result
from fundamentally confused preconceptions; return to the everyday world of praxis). Emptiness has also been portrayed as a philosophy of relativity, or ecological co-subsistence. (p. 582)

Nāgārjuna is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Mādhyamika school of Mahāyāna philosophy. Very little can be said concerning Nāgārjuna’s life. Scholars generally place Nāgārjuna in South India in approximately the second century AD. He is the most important, influential, and widely studied Mahayana Buddhist philosopher who is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Mādhyamika School of philosophy. Nāgārjuna has been a name around which tradition has woven a number of myths and legends. In the prologue of his book, *The Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, Vicente Fatone writes “His name Nāgārjuna, can be explained because he was the conqueror of the Nāgas; like a Nāga, he was born to the true doctrine from the depths of the ocean, and because his doctrine, like the ocean, does not have limits” (p. 5). Again, it is said that the eyes of the Nāgas are fiery and resplendent and Nāgārjuna burns and illumines with the fire of his teachings.

Mādhyamika tradition is also otherwise known as the tradition of “middle way”. Nāgārjuna accepts the middle path between two extremes. On the one hand he denies the life of extreme asceticism, and on the other hand, the life of luxury. Again, from the point of view of metaphysics, he prefers the middle path between the upanisadic philosophy and Buddhism, that is to say, the way between the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, eternalism and nihilism. Nāgārjuna attempted to expand the notion of the middle way into the philosophical sphere, identifying a middle way between existence and nonexistence, or between permanence and annihilation.

**Objective of the Study:**

Nihilism as a string of thinking has important bearing upon the world of philosophy and literature. The present paper tries to explore the development of Indian nihilism in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna. Though this study is purely analytical, there is a trace of historical development of nihilism under the light of Madhyamika School of Buddhism. The available secondary source of literature is consulted for this paper.

**Meaning of Nihilism:**

The word “nihilism” is originated from the Latin word *nihil* which means nothing. Nihilism is a theory according to which nothing is believable and no sort of distinction is significant. A nihilist is a person who believes that human existence has no objective
meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value and therefore, bows to no authority and accepts no doctrine. In metaphysics, the word nihilism is used to claim that the world and human life do not have any value and meaning which we believe them to have. In epistemology, the word nihilism holds that no knowledge is possible. There is a great significance of the term nihilism in ethical perspective because moral philosophy deals with the practical aspect of human beings’ conduct. In moral philosophy, the word nihilism supposes that there is no ground to justify any absolute moral value. Ted Honderich writes:

(Nihilism is) the extreme view that there is no justification for values and, in particular, no justification for morality. It is sometimes used to mean the active rejection of an attack on such values. The word was invented by the Russian novelist Turgenev to describe young rebels in Tsarist Russia. Ever since, the word has been used to condemn those who refuse to accept certain preferred prevailing values.” (Oxford Companion to Philosophy, p. 659)

In Indian philosophical tradition, the term “nihilism” is understood as “sunyata”. The term sunyata can be understood as “openness,” “inconceivability,” or “unlimitededness.” But the easy way to translate it is as “emptiness” or “voidness.” It refers to what dharmas really are through what they are not: not as they appear, not conceptualizable, not distinguishable, and, above all, lacking permanent, independent, intrinsic existence.

In western philosophical tradition, nihilism is associated with the German existentialist Nietzsche, who gave a detailed account of it as a widespread phenomenon of Western culture. Nietzsche held that “God is dead”. According to him recent developments in modern science and increasing secularization of European society had killed the Christian god, who had served as the basis for morality. Death of god leads not only to the denial of cosmic or physical order but also to the denial of absolute values which he considers as the absolute basis for morality and it leads to nihilism. Nietzsche challenged the imagined values of society, the morality of the west and believes that such morality makes people weak and negativistic. It produces only coward and pessimistic people and stands in the way of producing new and superior kind of human being. Particularly, he targets Christian morality which he believes as a producer of dull and static life that discourages human potential and achievement. Nietzsche uses the term in a variety of ways, with different meanings and connotations, both positive and negative. Nietzsche claimed to have developed an idea of moral nihilism and holds that the world lacks value and meaning. Of course, he considered this particular sense of value and meaning as we conceive them in a traditional way. That
means, Nietzsche tried to devaluate all values and tried to provide a motive to seek new values.

According to Heidegger, when all our concerns have been reduced to the common denominator of "experience," in the form of art, religion, sex, education etc. we will have reached the last stage of nihilism. Heidegger argues that we once had values but that we do not have values now and that we should regain our values or chooses new ones, is just another symptom of the trouble. Heidegger claims that thinking about our deepest concerns as values is nihilism.

There are certain interpretation of life and the universe as a whole which have invited Nāgārjuna the charge of involving nihilism. According to Nāgārjuna, “There absolutely are no things, nowhere and none, that arise” (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, I, 1). This paper is an attempt to focus on Nāgārjunian philosophy where the element of nihilism is distinctly visible, but the underlying thought of his writings reflects the other stories.

**Nihilism of Nāgārjuna:**

According to Nāgārjuna, the world of experience is imperfect because if it is considered as perfect, improvement would have been impossible. The effort of Nāgārjuna is to show the path of perfection. For this choosing, both the theoretical and practical aspects are important. For Nāgārjuna ignorance, which is the source of all suffering, is the belief in svabhāva, a term that literally means “own being” and has been rendered as “intrinsic existence” and “self-nature.” It is the belief that things exist autonomously, independently, and permanently. Svabhāva means substance or essential nature of things. To deny the essential nature of substance or svabhāva is the main objective of the philosophy of Nāgārjuna which is elaborately explained in his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. In the process of knowledge there are certain fundamental concepts, known as categories, without which the interpretation of the process becomes impossible. Categories are the most general kinds of things. They are the highest genera of entities in the world. They may contain species but are not themselves species of any higher genera. Nāgārjuna in his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā denies any kind of permanent existence. He denies the concept of substance, space, time, causality etc. It is observed that denying these concepts implies the denying the very basic age old beliefs of metaphysical basis.
Nihilistic approach is based on some epistemological rationale. According to Nāgārjuna, knowledge is intimately related to the knower and the known object. So, these three terms, namely, knowledge, knower and known are interconnected in an inseparable series of a complete process. If any of these three is proved to be weak, then the others do also necessarily fall short to stand to be existent. The possibility of this sort of short or incomplete or false knowledge, like the experience of a snake on a rope, is always attached to the knowing process. As such, all these knowledge, knower and known are total void.

Again, when we experience a jar, then whether we experience the total jar or the part of the jar is also an important question according to Nāgārjuna. If we know the whole jar, then there arises the problem of co-relating the parts with the whole. Again, if we see the jar as the collection of its parts, then also the jar will no longer continue to be a jar, but simply as the collection of atoms. As atoms are not visible, Nāgārjuna argues, the collection of atoms does also no longer continue to be visible. Therefore, we can never say whether the jar is or is not.

According to Nāgārjuna, there is nothing whatever arises not from itself, not from another, not from both itself and another, and not without a cause. There are just four conditions of the existence of anything: efficient cause, supporting condition, precipitating condition, and dominant condition. There is no fifth condition. Among the four conditions of the existence of a thing, there is found no substantial essence (svabhava) of the thing. If things have no substantial essences, then there can be no real relations between different things. In the book Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Nāgārjuna tries to refute different Dharmas like Indriyas, the notion of aggregates or skandhas and Dhātus. Indriyas are the organs of sense perception. Skandhas are the aggregate likes of matter or consciousness or predispositions or sanskāras. Form or Rupa is of great significance, because reality of substance is known only by it. Dhātus are air, water, fire, consciousness etc. These Dhātus are considered as eternal by many schools of philosophy. According to Nāgārjuna, by refuting the unreality of svabhava, these can be easily refuted.

Again, Nāgārjuna tries to refute personality or individuality of any sort. He refutes the notions of karma, karmafala, personality, the notion of four noble truths. According to Nāgārjuna if all were empty of essence, then nothing could arise or dissolve. As such, even the Four Noble Truths could not exist. If the Four Noble Truths did not exist, then true knowledge, renunciation of the world, spiritual progress, and enlightenment would be
impossible. If knowledge, renunciation, spiritual progress, and enlightenment did not exist, then the four fruits would not exist; and if the fruits did not exist, then there would be no attaining of the fruits and thus no advancement toward Nirvana. Thus, the doctrine of emptiness negates the existence of actions, of the four fruits, of the Dharma, and also of the things taken for granted in the ordinary and everyday thought of the unenlightened.

The early Buddhism apparently shows that anything lacking an independent nature is a conceptual fiction and not ultimately real. According to Nāgārjuna, emptiness is a property possessed by each thing without exception. It is the property of lacking intrinsic existence as a result of being one way or another, the result of causal processes. C. J. Bartley writes:

> Everything is empty of intrinsic nature (svabhāva-śūnya). Emptiness (śūnyatā) must always be understood as meaning ‘absence of essence’. It does not mean non-existence. He often says that what we normally consider things, and the concepts with which we carve up reality, are neither real nor unreal. That is to say, while our discursive conceptual schemes and the entities that they posit do serve our purposes to an extent, they cannot be the whole truth. (An introduction to Indian philosophy, p. 57)

Nāgārjuna’s concept of nihilism has a teleological basis. He is of the view that realization of emptiness is essential for the attainment of liberation from the suffering all sorts. Therefore, he tried to systematize the assertion made in the Prajñāpāramitā of early Buddhism and says that all things are empty, that is, that is devoid of ‘own essential nature’ (svabhāva). By this assertion he tried to refute the view that says that anything exists solely in virtue of its own inherent nature. Thus, it can be said that if all things are empty, nothing is ultimately real. Like German existentialist Nietzsche who declared that God is dead, Nāgārjuna did also in the 10th chapter of his Twelve-Gate Treatise, argued, “God could not be our father because children should have some resemblance with their father, but in our suffering we are most ungodly. Being self-existent, God should also have no needs, yet obviously he needed to create, otherwise he would be whimsical like an infant. As omnipotent, God should not have any obstacles to his desire, so what explains the gradual unfolding of creation instead of creation of everything all at once? Finally, if God is the maker there should be no evil or ugliness in things, but obviously there is.”
Can Nāgārjuna be charged as a nihilist?

Nihilism is very often charged as a negative term. Nāgārjuna asserts that emptiness is nihilistic only for those who ignore the distinction between two truths: the ultimate, in which everything truly lacks intrinsic existence; and the conventional, in which, precisely because they are empty (that is, interdependent), things exist and function, and concepts are valid. The Encyclopaedia of Buddhism writes:

Nāgārjuna’s works embody arguments in the style of a sceptic, debunking concepts like existence and nonexistence, causation, perception, time, motion, and even religious concepts like the Buddha, or enlightenment itself. Nāgārjuna also offers methodological reflections on what he is doing, why he is not a nihilist or even really a sceptic, and how his practice fits into the overall Buddhist project. For Nāgārjuna this project is a deep “letting-go,” which nevertheless also facilitates compassionate reengagement. (p. 581)

It is observed, therefore, that Nāgārjuna cannot be considered as a nihilist in the true sense of the term. Nāgārjuna simply used nihilism as a method for establishing a philosophical truth. Again, David E. Cooper writes, “What Nāgārjuna is denying is the existence of things in the philosophers’ sense of substances, things, that is, which enjoy independent being-in-themselves, which exist purely from their own side, without any necessary reliance on anything else” (World Philosophies A Historical Introduction, p. 48).

Brian Dugnan edited book, The 100 Most Influential Philosophers of All Time, has placed Nāgārjuna among the 100 greatest philosophers of all time. Nāgārjuna defined emptiness in terms of the doctrine of pratityasamutpāda. According to this theory, things are not self-arisen but produced in dependence on causes and conditions. According to Dugnan, “ Adopting this view allowed him to avoid the charge of nihilism, which he addressed directly in his writings and which his followers would confront over the centuries” (p. 70). Brian Dugnan focuses on the doctrine of the two truths employed by Nāgārjuna, paramārtha satya (“ultimate truth”) and samvrti satya (“conventional truth”), explaining that everything that exists is ultimately empty of any intrinsic nature but does exist conventionally. The conventional is the necessary means for understanding the ultimate, and it is the ultimate that makes the conventional possible.

The uniqueness of Nāgārjuna lies in the fact that he endeavoured to avoid any extremism and above all, categories of all sorts. K Venkata Ramanan, in his illustrative book Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy has rightly said,
The depth of insight, the rigour of logic and the felicity of expression which he brought to bear upon his work as a teacher of the Great Way (Mahāyāna), the way of the perfection of wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) made a revolution almost startling in the history of Buddhist philosophy and influenced profoundly the subsequent philosophical thinking both within and outside the Buddhist fold. (Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy, p. 31)

Nāgārjuna is right in holding that any attempt to entertain the possibility that our limited conceptual capacities and schemes can capture the ultimate truth, is worthless. According to him supposition that things have unchanging and enduring natures, either at the fundamental or macroscopic level, only encourages us to become attached to them.

Conclusion:

If we have to cite any example of a nihilist in the true sense of the term, then we must take the name of Nietzsche, because he questions the value of such ideals as truth and morality. Unlike Nāgārjuna, Nietzsche believed that value of such ideals as truth and morality cast a shadow on more important values. Nietzsche did also accuse the Judaeo-Christian tradition as having nihilistic tendencies, because they emphasize the ‘other-worldly’ and reject ‘naturalistic’ values. But what Nāgārjuna said was that suffering, causation, temporal succession etc. all are shown to be uncharacterizable in any determinate manner, because all characterizations are equally empty.

Nāgārjuna’s world view is free from any sort of misconceptions and preconceptions. His interpretation is purely logical and a refutation of any sort of philosophical absolutism. Nāgārjuna, therefore, cannot be charged for indulging in any sort of nihilistic attitude. Emptiness, for Nāgārjuna is the true nature of reality, is not the absence of existence but the absence of intrinsic existence. His tact of applying reason for philosophical interpretation, has given him the unique height of the best logician of Indian soil has ever produced. Reasoning for entering into the sphere of truth, he says, is the meaning of life. His purposive negation of the world is logically grounded. Thereby one can see a new light to view the world under the light of Nāgārjuna’s world view.

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Notes and References:

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