

THE PROBLEM OF THE ABSOLUTE IN THE
MADHYAMAKA SCHOOL*

The problem of the absolute in the Madhyamaka school has given rise to numerous interpretations, not only divergent, but sometimes diametrically opposed. This lack of unanimity bears witness once again to the inherent difficulties which beset any attempt to understand the essence of a philosophy. These difficulties are even greater when we are dealing with a philosophy which is not based on one of the two great sources of western civilization: Greco-Latin antiquity and Christianity. One must beware of drawing too hasty conclusions about analogies and proximities with western thought, because one runs the risk of distorting Indian thought and failing to recognise that each philosophy is an organic whole. Neither can one expect to find ready-made answers in a philosophy. Thus, too often, in order to define the nature of the absolute of the Mādhyamikas, scholars are satisfied with searching for passages which could be quoted in support of a proposed interpretation. Isolated passages cannot be used to decide such questions.

The only way of arriving at a satisfactory and non-preconceived answer is to follow step by step the development of Madhyamaka thought. Only in this manner can enough data be gathered for an attempt to be made of finding a solution to the fundamental problem of this philosophy: the nature of the absolute. With this aim in mind, we will first examine the principal themes and leading ideas in the thought of Nāgārjuna. This philosophy is distinguished from all those which he attacks in that it excludes the possibility of establishing an ontology. He does not spare the Sāṃkhya doctrine, nor the Vaiśeṣika nor the Hinayāna, but his criticism is aimed particularly at the Abhidharma of the Sarvāstivādins and the Vaibhāṣikas. The Sarvāstivādins had reduced the world to a limited number of ontological categories (*dharma*). Even though they considered the *dharma*s as real, they did not attribute any reality to the entities, made up of groups of *dharma*s. For them these entities were nothing but designations (*prajñapti*). Nāgārjuna is not satisfied with this reduction to ontological categories and points out that each *bhāva* (thing),

each *dharma* is itself devoid of reality. The *bhāvas* are not real, because they cannot come into being. Nāgārjuna proves by *reductio ad absurdum* that 'a thing' does not originate from itself, nor from something else; it does not originate from itself and from something else, nor is it without cause. The idea of "production" therefore is false. But a thing which does not come into being cannot be real. Therefore, the things which the layman considers as real are not real. According to Nāgārjuna, a thing is real when it is endowed with *svabhāva*, a concept which is of great importance for the understanding of his thought. It is very difficult to know exactly what he wishes to express by this word every time, as it contains several notions.

Schayer has distinguished in it four meanings:

(1) *Svabhāva* means *svo bhāva*, the essence. Heat, for instance, is not the essence of water, but the essence of fire, because fire is always hot.

(2) *Svabhāva* is also the *svalakṣaṇa*, the individual character. In this form it is found in the doctrine of the Vaibhāṣikas, according to whom the world consists of a multitude of elements each having its individual character. The Vaibhāṣikas in fact make a distinction between individual and general character. Impermanency, for instance, is a general characteristic of all the *saṃskṛta* or conditioned elements. The *svalakṣaṇa*, on the other hand, only belongs to a single *saṃskṛta*, and distinguishes it from others.

(3) *Svabhāva* is the *āśraya* (basis) or *prakṛti* (nature), i.e. the unchanging substratum of each thing (*bhāva*).

(4) Finally, *svabhāva* is the *svato bhāva*, the absolute being, which is completely independent.

However, this fourfold distinction cannot be accepted because, for Nāgārjuna, the four concepts are directly linked one to the other and can be reduced to two. Let us take again the example of fire. Its origin depends on causes and conditions such as the sun, a lens, fuel etc. Heat, being the essence of fire, is dependent on the same causes and the same conditions. According to Nāgārjuna the real *svabhāva* is non-contingent and has no relation to anything whatsoever. Heat is thus not *svabhāva* and fire, not possessing *svabhāva*, has no 'own-being' or, as the *Mādhyamikas* say, is empty of 'own-being' (*śūnyaḥ svabhāvena*). All things, like fire, are born of causes (*pratītyasamutpanna*) and are empty of 'own-being'

(*śūnya*). The Mādhyamikas in this way conclude that the concepts of *śūnya* and *pratītyasamutpanna* are equivalent.

Candrakīrti rejects the *svalakṣaṇa*, equating it with the *svo bhāva* which has already been eliminated. As a matter of fact, in his opinion, the layman attributes to things an individual character (*svalakṣaṇa*), because they believe in a plurality of real elements. Consequently, the *svo bhāva* and the *svalakṣaṇa*, the 'own-being' and the individual character have one and the same meaning.

On the other hand, for Candrakīrti, the unchanging basis (*āśraya*) is identical to the absolute being (*svato bhāva*). By no means does he distinguish, as Schayer leads us to believe, an *āśraya* or a *prakṛti* peculiar to each thing, but he gives a more extensive meaning to this concept: *āśraya* to him is the unchanging support of all things (*bhāva*) taken together. This support can only be non-contingent, because there is nothing outside of it. It becomes thus the *svato bhāva*. We may therefore conclude that for the Mādhyamikas the concept of *svabhāva* has only two meanings: (1) that of the 'own-being of each thing' (*svalakṣaṇa* or *svo bhāva*), which, incidentally, they consider unreal, and (2) that of the 'own-being of all things taken together' (*prakṛti* or *svato bhāva*).

Do the Mādhyamikas likewise reject the reality of this latter *svabhāva*, arriving in this way at a total nihilism which has often been attributed to them?

To answer such a question, one must proceed from the distinction made by the Mādhyamikas between *saṃvṛti* and *parāmārtha*. *Saṃvṛti* is the 'apparent reality' of the world as seen by the layman. The laymen believe in the reality of things, they believe that everything is born and perishes. They believe in the reality of suffering, of transmigration and of deliverance obtained in Nirvāṇa. In fact, they accept all the views and the whole soteriological doctrine of the Hīnayāna. The Mādhyamikas, on the contrary, consider that the plurality of things and the categories of the Hīnayāna have no reality. They maintain that things are not real, that there is no real origination (*samutpāda*), but only origination dependent on causes (*pratītyasamutpāda*). On the level of *saṃvṛti*, things exist, but they do not exist on the level of *paramārtha*, 'the supreme meaning', 'the absolute'. The layman remains on the level of *saṃvṛti*, the Yogin is beyond it, on the level of *paramārtha*. He does not see that what is seen by the layman. Candrakīrti compares him to a healthy man whose eyes

do not see the hairs which are perceived by the eyes of a man afflicted with ophthalmia (*taimirika*).

Is *paramārtha* then nothing but nothingness? Never has a direct and precise answer been given to the question "What is *paramārtha*?" *Paramārtha*, say the Mādhyamikas, cannot be reached by words. The duality between words and the things that they designate, just as the duality which exists between knowledge and its object, belongs to *saṃvṛti*, but does not exist in *paramārtha*. *Paramārtha* cannot be taught or known.

However, the Mādhyamikas have not refrained from talking about it. They resort to three methods which one finds again and again in the history of philosophy, when it is a question of expressing a concept which goes beyond the bounds of discursive knowledge.

The first is the method of negation, which consists in denying a series of attributes to *paramārtha*, yet without bestowing on it the contrary attributes. The second method bestows on it contradictory attributes. *Paramārtha* becomes at the same time a void and a non-void, *svabhāva* and *asvabhāva*, *śūnyatā* (voidness) and *svabhāva*. These two characteristics can also be simultaneously denied: *paramārtha* is neither being nor non-being, neither a void nor a non-void. Therefore, the logical rule that "what contradicts itself cannot exist" (*na vipratishedham sambhavati*) is no longer applicable to *paramārtha*.

The third and last method makes use of metaphor. Expressions by which the absolute is indicated, such as *pratītyasamutpāda*, *śūnyatā*, *dharmatā*, *prakṛti*, *naiḥsvābhāvya*, *tathatā* etc. must be considered as metaphors in as much as the term "metaphor" is exact, because in each of these metaphors one of the terms is missing or rather escapes our knowledge.

Thus, making use of all the resources of philosophical dialectics the Mādhyamikas attempt to give an approximate idea of *paramārtha*. But *paramārtha* always remains beyond the comprehension of the layman. For it cannot be taught; it is only accessible, comprehensible to the saint (Yogin) who obtains deliverance.

We have seen the layman being compared to the man afflicted with ophthalmia seeing hairs which do not exist in reality. The Yogin might be able to convince the layman of his illusion, but cannot prevent him from seeing those hairs; this vision disappears only when the ophthalmic has regained normal sight. It is the same with *paramārtha*. Only that

layman who by himself attains true self-knowledge – he has access to *paramārtha*. This knowledge, this “state”, is dependent on mystical intuition, which dispels ignorance and so leads to deliverance. We are here beyond the realm of philosophical thought, where one proceeds with the aid of words and concepts, we are on the plane of individual experience, beyond all language and all thought.

There is no doubt that *paramārtha*, being the “supreme goal” of the believer, may be called ‘the absolute’. But this absolute by its very nature is inaccessible to philosophical thought. One might try to approach it by indirect means, but all one could say or think about it would of necessity be false. It cannot be thought of as being or as nothingness. For the Mādhyamikas it is “the silence of the saints”.

Schayer must rightly be credited with having emphasized the very important role of mystical intuition in the Mādhyamika school. But it is impossible to follow him when he attempts to identify *paramārtha* with the totality of being. According to Schayer the Mādhyamikas only accept as real the totality of being and consider the plurality of ontological entities as resulting from discursive and analytical thinking and consequently as unreal. This interpretation is wrong on two points. In the first place it is contrary and entirely alien to the spirit of Buddhist thought, which never at any stage visualizes unreal constituents forming a whole, which is real. To illustrate this we need only look at the simile of the chariot and its parts, a simile taken up by Candrakīrti. In opposition to the Hīnayānists, but in conformity with the doctrine of the Mādhyamikas, he not only considers the chariot as unreal, but moreover the parts which make up the chariot are for him just as unreal as the chariot itself. In the second place, by considering the absolute of the Mādhyamikas as the totality of being, Schayer replies in philosophical terms to a question which, as we have seen, can only be solved on the mystical level. It seems that Schayer has floundered on the hazards which exist for Western thought with regard to an absolute which is neither totality nor nothingness.

Stcherbatsky, for his part, has studied this same problem with a vast store of philological and philosophical knowledge, but the essential fault in his method consisted in looking for analogies with Western thinking. This often leads to a distortion of Buddhist thought, as is witnessed by his translation of *sūnya* by “relative”. Stcherbatsky reasons: – Each

element is a void because it is *pratītyasamutpanna*. Consequently, it can only be defined in relation to other elements. Each element thus becomes relative and "empty" therefore means "relative". The word "relative" has two meanings, "being in relation with" and "opposite of absolute". Stcherbatsky, in playing on those two meanings, introduces an interpretation which nowhere follows from the texts. Because of this initial error, all his subsequent interpretations of Nāgārjunian thinking are false. In his article on *The three directions of Buddhist philosophy* published in 1934, Stcherbatsky departs even more from the spirit of Nāgārjunian philosophy. Here, it is no longer a question of a "non-relative absolute", but of an "absolute truth", which he sets up as the sole principle of explanation of this world. The absolute, identified by him with *dharmakāya* (the body of the doctrine, the absolute) thus becomes an idea of dialectic reason. The attempt to elucidate the absolute of the Mādhyamikas by means of the transcendental dialectics of the critique of pure reason, seems to indicate a lack of understanding of the mystical and soteriological character of the philosophy of the Mādhyamikas.

We hope that we have succeeded in establishing that it is impossible to consider the absolute of the Mādhyamikas either as the totality of being or as nothingness. Such an alternative can only be put forward within the framework of western thought. The absolute has a completely different meaning for the Mādhyamikas. On a philosophical level, they refrain from any opinion whatsoever, but mystical experience leads them to the absolute by way of deliverance.

NOTE

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