

Nothingness: A philosophical reconsideration to the meaning of negation and reality

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Abstract

Philosophical constructions have always revolved around fundamental existential issues. In an attempt to interpret the *meaning* of these issues, complex concepts capable of synthesising cardinal truths have been developed. This study intends to explore, on the one hand, the patterns of Mādhyamika philosophy of understanding *negation* as a logical-rational operation that denotes *reality*, and on the other hand, attempts to decipher the meaning of the term *śūnya* (“nothingness”), misunderstood in the West as nihilism.

Key words: śūnya, nothingness, Mādhyamika, reality

Introduction

Human being, regardless of his cultural or religious or even philosophical identity, has been and remains under the tension of formulating, of giving conceptual, verbalized expressions to the reality in which he is existentially located. It has sought meaning through philosophical or theological endeavors in order to *understand* itself in connection with the *understanding* of the Absolute towards which it is relationally situated.

From a general perspective of Eastern philosophy, negation is in a direct relation with reality, and as Eske J. Mollgaard (1993: 715) notes, it is situated at the heart of the philosophical discourse, regardless of its identity: either Eastern or Western. Thus, in the East we identify the *neti, neti* negative dialectic of the Upanishadic tradition, the *negation* of the Buddhist *Mādhyamika* school. It must be noted that the correct name for this system is *Mādhyamaka* and not *Mādhyamika*, because *Mādhyamika* means one who believes in or follows the *Mādhyamaka* system. Since the vast majority of scholars have generally adopted the term *Mādhyamika*, we will also use it to indicate this system of Buddhist thought. (Singh, 1978: 4)

In Western philosophy, since the period of early Greek philosophy, the problem of negation is constantly present in the philosophical discourse. The concept of *non-being* finds its place not only in the thought of Parmenides and Plato, but also in that of Hegel, Jaspers and Heidegger, regardless of the philosophical typologies they developed (idealism, existentialism, etc.). (Upadhyaya, 1988: 281)

Thus it is easy to see that at the heart of these philosophies are specific acts of *negation*. These clarifications make it possible for us to understand, first of all, that the philosophical discourse is indispensable to the problem of *negation*, especially with regard to the definition of the Absolute. Of course, *negation* also weighs heavily in the religious framework. In the spectrum of Christian theology, the *via negativa* has generated veritable treatises of dogmatics in order to make clear the impossibility of knowing God in His ineffable being. And in the Indian space, *negations* point the way towards the goal of liberation. They serve both as practical directions for spiritual fulfilment (Wayman, 1961: 114.) and as metaphysical statements of fulfilment or, as Basant Kumar Lal states, *negation* is “the basis of reaching the Absolute”. (Lal, 1999: 237)

1 The construction and meaning of negation in Mādhyamika Buddhist philosophy

We cannot proceed to the discussion of the topic proposed for analysis in this section without first bringing some clarifications regarding the linguistic construction of *negation*. The primary and decisive moment for understanding *negation* in Indian thought is when negative expressions themselves become the object of exegesis. The first delineations of the problem appear in ritualistic and grammatical texts where the semantic value of rules containing negative particles is discussed in order to resolve incompatibilities between their prescriptions or to specify their normative status. (Al-George, 2005: 155) Negation was deeply involved in pre-philosophical texts, in the first approximations of the idea of the Absolute. Thus, the ṚgVeda, situated *Ultimate Reality* beyond *Being* and *Non-Being* (ṚgVeda X.129).

The grammarian Pāṇini - one of the earliest Indian grammarians, best known for formulating the 3959 rules of Sanskrit morphology, syntax and semantics in the grammar known as *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (Cardona, 1970) - gives us the semantic interpretation of negative particles in an age before any Indian philosophical text. The technical term *nañ* denotes the negative particle in Sanskrit and has remained throughout Indian philosophy the term used to denote *negation* in general, specifically by the prefixes *na* or *a-* privative. (Al-George, 2005: 156) In Indo-European languages there are two forms of negation: the *negative sentence*, expressed by *ne* (*nē*) and *mē*, and the *negative word*, expressed through the so-called “privative prefix”. (Staal, 1962: 66) Pāṇini describes the negative particle *a(n)* as derivative of the negative sentence *na*, which loses its initial *n*. Thus, Indian tradition distinguishes two types of *negations* which are referred to as *prasajya* and *pariyudāsa*. The origin of the distinction is grammatical: in *prasajya* negation the negative particle is linked to a verb (e.g. *brāhmaṇa nasti* - “this is not a brahman”), and in *pariyudāsa* negation the negative particle is linked to a noun, as in the example: *abrāhmaṇa āsti* - “this is a non-brahman”. Thus *na brāhmaṇaḥ* translates as “non-brahman”, and *abrāhmaṇaḥ* as “one who is not Brahman”. This grammatical distinction corresponds to an important semantic distinction: if we refer to someone as a *non-brahman* we deny the term *brahman* and simultaneously affirm that he is a member of one of the other three castes. If, however, we simply say that “this is not a *brahman*” we deny a sentence, e.g. “this is a *brahman*”, rather than a term (in our case *brahman*) and we do not imply that we are talking about a person belonging to one of the other three castes; in fact, we should not be talking about a person at all. (Cardona, 1967: 40) In Indian philosophical discourse, especially in the *mādhyamika* context, this is the semantic distinction between the implicational term-negation and the non-implicational propositional negation, which the terms *pariyudāsa* and *prasajya* mark. (Ruegg, 1977: 20-21)

It is interesting to note the principle of the fourfold negation: “S is neither P, nor non-P, nor both P and non-P, neither: P or non-P”. (Raju, 1954) The Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, founder of the *Mādhyamika* school, adopted the principle of fourfold negation (in *mādhyamika* terms *catuṣkoṭi*) (Kalupahana, 1986; Chakravarti, 1980; Westerhoff, 2006) to validate his doctrine of *śūnya* (Absolute Nothingness). In mathematics *śūnya* means zero (0). *Śūnya* represents in mathematics the number '0', a number without any indeterminacy. “0” for Pāṇini is the absence of a *determinans*, the *determinandum* being as much an element of the expression as of its content. We find this valence of the figure “0” in Buddhist philosophy, where *śūnya* qualifies *nirvāṇa*, the Ultimate Reality. *Nirvāṇa* is not an ontological void, but an indeterminable reality, beyond the duality of *sign* and *signified* (*lakṣyalakṣaṇavinirmukta*) of *existence* and *non-existence* (*sat-asat*), of *object* and *subject* (*grāhya-grāhaka*). (Al-George, 2005: 205)

In metaphysics, *śūnya* represents “that which is neither positive nor negative”. Zero (0) is an indeterminate quantity in terms of plus or minus, and even though it is an

indeterminate quantity, it is still a number. We do not say that it is not a number, but that it is an indeterminate number. Now, if it is not positive or negative, can we say it is both positive and negative? No, since positive and negative are opposites and cannot be attributed to the same number. Then, can we say that it is neither positive nor negative, neither of which is positive or negative? No, we can't think of anything definite because zero is not that something either. To be something other than positive or non-positive, any entity must have a determinate nature; but we cannot think of any, therefore *zero* is indeterminate. (Al-George, 1967) *Zero* becomes a quantity that is denied all four alternatives: it is neither positive, nor negative, nor both positive and negative, neither not positive and not negative. (Raju, 1954: 702)

We can best understand Nāgārjuna's metaphysical understanding of *śūnya* if we apply the earlier mathematical understanding of *zero*. The word *śūnya*, as stated, has a secondary meaning: 'nothing', 'nothingness', 'emptiness', 'void'. And despite the repeated protest of Nāgārjuna and his disciples, even his contemporaries employed the word in its secondary meaning, accusing Nāgārjuna of being a nihilist, a negativist, in spite of the fact that his close followers constantly professed that *śūnya* is neither *Being* nor *Non-Being*, calling themselves *mādhymikeni* or those on the "middle path". Moreover, Nāgārjuna wanted to apply the same principle in metaphysics by asserting the middle ground between the positive and the negative, or between *Being* and *Non-Being*: *Reality* is neither *Being* nor *Non-Being*, neither both nor neither. It is the *negation* of the negation of *Being* and *Non-Being*. (Bharadwaja, 1984: 309). Each categorical expression must be one of the four forms: (1) S is P; (2) S is non-P; (3) S is both P and non-P; (4) S is neither P nor non-P (different from both P and non-P). Nāgārjuna says that none of the four forms is absolutely applicable to the *phenomenal world* or any of its objects (Davis, 2010: 90), because the phenomenal world is a domain of relativity. In conclusion, he denies the phenomenal world all four theses of the *fourfold negation*.

2 *Śūnya* - the philosophical interpretation of the ontology of Nothingness

In the previous section, we introduced the term *śūnya*, with the clarification of the meaning of negation in *Mādhyamika*, generally known as *śūnyavāda*. (Nagao, 1989: 3). Some clarification are in order: the notion of *śūnya*, according to Buddhist schools, must be understood as the negation of any permanent essence, as impermanence is the defining aspect of the phenomenal universe. The correct understanding of the term *śūnya* reveals this dominant aspect of *mādhymikene* metaphysics. M. Monier-Williams (1997: 1085) translates *śūnya* as "void", "emptiness". The same translation A. Wayman employs. (Wayman, 1961: 100) In H. Nakamura's opinion (1985: 120), the root term *śūnya* means "to be swollen, to be empty", because that which is swollen is empty (or void) on the inside. Theodore Stcherbatsky proposes translating *śūnya* as "relative" or "contingent" and *śūnyatā* as "relativity" or "contingency". *Śūnya* is a synonym for dependent existence (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and should not be understood as something "empty" but something "devoid" of independent reality (*svabhāva-śūnya*). (Stcherbatsky, 2003: 70)

The concept of *śūnya* has two philosophical implications: (1) no segment of the totality of the whole possesses an independent reality, and (2) the whole makes any formulation by concept or speech (*niṣprapañca*) impossible, as concept or speech (*vikalpa*) can only provide a distorted view of reality; it can never measure it. To complete this picture of the conceptual clarifications of the term *śūnya*, the term must be understood from two perspectives: (1) from the perspective of phenomenal or empirical reality, *śūnya* means *svabhāva-śūnya*, i.e. devoid of *svabhāva* or an independent, substantial reality of its own, and (2) from the perspective of the Absolute, *śūnya* means *prapañca-śūnya*, i.e. devoid of *prapañca* or verbalization, the

constructs of thought and plurality. Therefore, in line with these clarifications, Theodore Stcherbatsky denounces the reduction of the term *śūnya* to the mathematical emptiness or mere non-existence. (Stcherbatsky, 2003: 50)

Śūnya is used as a symbol of the inexpressible. In describing reality, *śūnya* means saying what is *avācya*, *anabhilāpya*, namely, that which is inexpressible. In the first verse of *Mādhyamika-kārikā*, Nāgārjuna sets out the criteria of *śūnyavāda* in a most prominent way. The perspective consists of eight negations: 1) *anūrodam* - beyond destruction, 2) *anutpādam* - beyond production, 3) *anucchedam* - beyond dissolution, 4) *aśāsvatam* - beyond eternity, 5) *anekārtham* - beyond unity, 6) *anānārtham* - beyond plurality, 7) *anāngamam* - beyond entry, penetration and 8) *anirgamam* - beyond exit, descent (Islam, 1988: 93). In short, *Reality* lies beyond the dichotomies of the intellect, it is inexpressible, neither cognisable nor describable. Empirical reality is radically relative. This radical relativity of reality is called *pratītyasamutpāda*. (Correya, 2003: 193) The different dimensions of reality are relatively connected to one another. Certainly, reality would mean that which is free from any plurality. The world is indescribable because it is neither existence nor non-existence. The absolute is indescribable because it is transcendental and beyond the ability of the intellect to adequately describe it. *Śūnya* is that which is neither *being* nor *non-being*, neither both, nor neither.

3 Nothingness as denial of empirical reality

Essentially, *Mādhyamika* teaches that in fact there are no real existing things, that all things are mere appearances and their true nature is empty and devoid of any essence. Neither does their very non-being constitute an essence. Rather, all beings appear conditioned by other things. *Emptiness* or the *void* is not nothingness or annihilation, but is the abandonment of the contrariety between dualities, such as affirmation and negation, being and non-being, eternity and annihilation. In this sense, *emptiness* is the relationality of all things. H. Nakamura (1985: 132) traces in a unique way these explanatory notes of *śūnya* or *emptiness*: „Emptiness encompasses everything; there is nothing that stands over against it. Emptiness excludes nothing and opposes nothing. The true mark of emptiness is that it is essentially nothing, and yet it is the fullness of existence. It is the ground upon which all things come to be. It is a living emptiness. All appearances come about within it (...). Emptiness is like a piece of clear jade in which images are reflected.”

Mādhyamika denies the true existence of empirical reality in its entirety. Empirical reality includes all beings and things, everything that is an object of human experience and knowledge, which is merely an appearance, a phenomenon that has no real existence. (Crittenden, 1981: 323-333) The empirical universe is similar to a dream, a mirage, an illusion created by magic. Empirical reality is referred to by *Mādhyamika* as *saṃvṛtisatya* (enveloping reality or concealing reality). (Tola & Dragonetti, 1981: 273). This is an appropriate terminology since, according to the Madhyamik conception, empirical reality effectively envelops, conceals *paramārthasatya* (true reality). Nāgārjuna asserts the non-existence of empirical reality because there is nothing in it that exists *in se et per se*, nothing has a being of its own (*svabhāva*), everything in itself is conditioned, relative, dependent, composite.

Conditionality, relativity, dependence and the fact of being composite constitute the authentic nature and form of the being of empirical reality. The term *pratītyasamutpāda*, which literally means 'dependent origin', translated as 'universal relativity', designates this nature, this form of *being*. And it is this essential nature that allows the dialectics of Nāgārjuna's school to deny empirical reality. If empirical reality was composed of substances, or if an ultimate substance were its essence and foundation, the analysis of elimination, practiced by the *Mādhyamika* school, would stop before touching this unshakable foundation. The true form of the being of empirical reality is not perceived by us or at best is only partially perceived by us.

Empirical reality appears to us in a form that does not possess the stability of something permanent, compact, unitary, substantial, etc., as a result of the special constitution of our mind and senses, on account of our subjectivity. This erroneous perception of empirical reality hides from us its true nature, just as the erroneous perception of a snake superimposed on a rope hides from us the true nature of the object that is in reality in front of us. The true nature of empirical reality is *paramārthasatya* and the erroneous appearance in which empirical reality appears to us is *saṃvrtisatya*.

Conclusions

The word *śūnya*, “nothingness”, in the field of Western philosophy, has been misunderstood and misinterpreted because culturally different, but somewhat similar, concepts are employed that have radically different meanings. The literal meaning of this term is “void”, “emptiness”. In fact, *śūnya* is essentially used by Buddhists in interpreting reality and, in their understanding, it does not mean “nihilism” or “an empty void”, in an ontological sense, as Western philosophy thinks of ontology as a container of *being*, of *substance*. *Sūnyatā* is not pure negativism. Although it denies everything and has no positive suggestion, this logic would lead us to understand this concept in the sense that it defines precisely *nihilism*. But in fact it does not, since it does not simply deny all statements regarding *reality*, but also all denials about *reality* as well. In this sense, reality is neither *being* nor *non-being*. *Sūnyatā* summarizes that the Absolute is inaccessible to our thought, and not that the Absolute is a non-entity: *sūnyatā* is negative only to our thought, but is in itself non-relational knowledge of the Absolute. (Murti, 1960: 160).

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