

THE EASTERN AND WESTERN “SCRIPTURES” FOR POSTMODERNITY: TOWARD A UNIFIED ETHOS IN RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism underscores the impossibility of discovering any truth. One can at best only construct a truth capable of ensuring optimal wellbeing for everyone. The traditional undifferentiated efforts of science, religion, and philosophy, which became compartmentalized in the Enlightenment, are again streamlined in postmodernity. A new ethics is the point of convergence for these three disciplines to fashion a sustainable universe. Yet Nagarjuna, who has long been overlooked, advocates a passage beyond language. It is an initiative that finds resonance in some postmodern masters as well.

KEYWORDS: religion; science; postmodernism; stories; Enlightenment; chaos theory; complexity theory

INTRODUCTION

It is now commonplace to speak of our knowledge of the world as a function of our mapping of the world. The “universe” is fashioned by human beings and tells us more about the history of human struggle than truths about

the world. The knowledges so produced, whether they concerned themselves with the "barbaric" past or "scientific" present, are myths, in the sense that Terrence Hawkes defines the term: Myths "represent [people's] attempts to impose a satisfactory, graspable, humanizing shape on"¹ an incomprehensible world. The shape of the world is a projection of the human mind: "That shape . . . springs from the human mind itself, and it becomes the shape of the world that that mind perceives as 'natural', 'given' or 'true.'"² However, this world building, far from being a unilateral process, is a self-fashioning as well, "[f]or not only does man create societies and institutions in his own mind's image, but these in the end create him."³

The human impulse to shape the world, in retrospect, may be seen as a series of constructions—often masquerading as ultimate—in a word, paradigms. Jacques Derrida observes that the entire human history "must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center."⁴ One such paradigm may be said to have occurred with the inauguration of poststructuralism in 1966 when the status of the truths of the human sciences changed. Virginia Woolf's famous declaration—"in or around 1910, human nature changed"⁵—applies more to the aftermath of the Baltimore Conference in 1966 where Derrida made his remark than to the onset of modernity, to which Woolf was originally referring. His pivotal lecture at this conference argued for a shift in perspective toward the "*joyous affirmation*" of "*the noncenter*" rather than lament "*the loss of centre*."⁶ The event precipitated disillusionment and a reconstitution, preferring as it did a decentered universe, one without a landmark or a reference point. Derrida and his peers reoriented humanity away from its quest for the "discovery" of Truth toward the "invention" of truths, if with a certain smugness about themselves having finally caught up with the elusive truth about the nontruth.

With the passing of the old certainties, one is left, it seems, with tentative, and provisional, truth, and a provisionality that cuts across religion, philosophy, and sciences.

¹Terrence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 279.

⁵Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 70.

⁶Derrida, 369 (italics in the original).

This paper briefly surveys the shifts in attitudes effected by poststructuralism in Western philosophy, using Derrida as an example, in Western religion, using John Milbank as an illustration, and in science, with a focus on T. S. Kuhn for introducing a new paradigm. Philosophy, religion, and science will be shown to be gravitating toward ethics, specifically, an ethics that takes the shape of ecological sustainability in science and one that tends towards Levinasian “infinite responsibility” and “radical alterity” in philosophy and religion.⁷ The paper also argues that in spite of the threat of nihilism inherent in poststructuralism, one cannot get away from stories. The paper then moves on to the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, who at once anticipates many of the predicates of poststructuralism and points to the necessity of fashioning a universe through stories. Significantly, Nagarjuna moves beyond language yet desists from condemning language.

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

As religion slowly moved out of life in the West as a reference point, its place was taken by science. However, Thomas Kuhn’s widely acclaimed *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* played a significant role as much in deflating the hardnosed objectivity of scientific knowledge as in the reunification of science and other disciplines.⁸ Kuhn stresses the perspectival orientation of all scientific theories which he argued were firmly related to a specific “paradigm” or framework. Truth of a scientific theorem, according to Kuhn, was closely related to the subjective position of a community. With Kuhn’s book, as Patricia Waugh says, “even scientific theories, therefore, begin to seem subject to the kind of historical provisionality more traditionally associated with humanities.”⁹

⁷“Infinite responsibility” is a term given currency by Emmanuel Levinas to indicate the unbounded, if unchosen, obligation that an individual has towards all others in need. “Radical alterity” is another key phrase in Levinas to refer to absolute otherness of people from one another. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

⁸See in addition to Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), a hugely influential work on the philosophy of science, Paul Davies and John Gribbin, *The Matter Myth Towards 21st-Century Science* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

⁹Patricia Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 19.

As early as the late 1970s, Jean-Francois Lyotard was describing the erosion of the objectivity of scientific knowledge even within the scientific community. A political philosopher, he alerted one to the fact that "there is something unrepresentable."¹⁰ Stephen Hawking, a contemporary embodiment of scientific genius, invites the attention of the world to the incomprehensible complexities of science. He refers to how "[Q]uantum mechanics, therefore, introduces an unavoidable element of unpredictability or randomness into science."¹¹ Such a view gains significance in the wake of a host of theories, like the Heisenberg uncertainty principle that disturbs the archetypal dream of a deterministic universe conceived by the French scientist Marquis de Laplace. The tenor of his argument is that the confidence regarding the knowability of the universe through science seems to have considerably slackened as "the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics implies that certain pairs of quantities, such as the position and velocity of a particle, cannot both be predicted with complete accuracy."¹² Both poststructuralism and science, in different ways, refer to the realm of the unknown, a universe governed by forces beyond human control and characterized at once by randomness and determinism.

Science has hardly embraced poststructuralism, but it has been moving in parallel with it. Science has come up with a series of theorems that challenge some of the modern, deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about life. Among them are chaos theory, complexity theory, catastrophe theory, strange attractors, the butterfly effect, self-organization, the wave function, the anthropic principle, and the edge of chaos.¹³

Chaos theory, dealing primarily with non-linear systems, claims that natural systems, like the weather, are regulated by mysterious forces. A minor variable can bring about a huge effect and hence render unpredictable the functioning of such a system. A rather commonplace example is the "butterfly effect" which proposes that the beating of a butterfly's wings in one region of the earth could, in principle, generate a storm in a far-off region. As

¹⁰Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Les Editions de Minuit, 1979; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 15. Citations refer to the Manchester University Press edition.

¹¹Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 60.

¹²*Ibid.*, 182.

¹³For an overview of these theories, see Stuart Sim, "Chaos Theory, Complexity Theory and Criticism," in *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 89–105.

randomness and determinism are simultaneously present, weather prediction becomes predictable as well as unpredictable.

Catastrophe theory casts doubt on the depth of our knowledge of the world. For instance, Benoit Mandelbrot says that our measurement of coast line is only a rough approximation and that it is impossible to have a precise estimation. The reason, as Stuart Sim observes, is that it is nearly impossible to go into such a minute level.¹⁴ The most one can have is a rough approximation of natural systems.

Complexity theory posits that natural systems are characterized by self-organization. It views self-organization as inherent to all systems emerging spontaneously, whereby a given system is taken to the next level of complexity unmediated by human handiwork. It is generally believed that systems and subsystems such as the universe, humanity, flora, and fauna, get self-organized, though rather in an unpredictable direction when they reach what is generally known as the “edge of chaos.” Besides, the theory holds that the universe is such a system and that by extension, everything in it, including the human consciousness, is governed by the very same principle of self-organization. Such a view problematizes as much the issue of human autonomy as the vaunted power of human intervention in the phenomenal world. Closely related to the complexity theory is the strong anthropic principle which views the world and its contents as a system in process and flux continuously evolving, if in unpredictable directions.

These theories belie the totalizing claims of science. The uncertainty principle is most pronounced in quantum physics, which is the most prestigious of the disciplines. Lyotard adds, “a scientist is before anything else a person who ‘tells stories’”¹⁵ that insist on evidence. However, the only life-bestowing mantra one can have for such stories is ecological sustainability whether it is science, technology, or any such system. Lyotard says that science may be like philosophy. It “is producing not the known, but the unknown.”¹⁶ Such a perspective would have far reaching implications for one’s life (and death). The new physics subverts beliefs regarding the way the universe works. In other words, as ordinary laws of science stand suspended, one either remains confused or is forced to look for fresh paradigms to account for such phenomena.

¹⁴Ibid., 92.

¹⁵Lyotard, 60.

¹⁶Ibid.

POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY: ETHICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY

This sense of a universe at once random and determined has called forth new attitudes in religion and philosophy as much as in science. One finds religion and philosophy converging on ethics. Given a decentered universe, the natural corollary is for one to look for guidance in the business of living, and that is the realm of ethics. The ethical concern is paramount, undeniably so, towards the end of the careers of the great masters of poststructuralism like Foucault, Derrida, and many others.

This trajectory is exemplified by Jacques Derrida in the two orientations of his thought, best elaborated in his book *The Gift of Death* (1992), that are germane to ethical and religious postmodernism. The first orientation is his philosophical theology based on the notion of "différance" and exclusive of the metaphysics of presence. Différance, being the ungrounded ground, as it were, which can never be erased or realized, offers a more liberating notion of "God." God as pure and endless difference would remain out of reach, as it is difference *ad infinitum*. Pure difference renders God ineffable and a sort of nonlocus; thus, it steers clear of the tyranny of one meaning. The second orientation is a commitment to the world described as "infinite responsibility."

The Gift of Death dwells extensively on the ethical resonance of the Biblical story of Abraham the patriarch, who was enjoined by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. The book describes God as the tremendous mystery (*mysterium tremendum*) and as wholly other. God as the wholly other, says Derrida, demands absolute obedience and commands Abraham to transgress the conventional idea of what is ethical. Such absolute responsibility binds Abraham to do something apparently irresponsible and incomprehensible, that is, murdering one's own child. Derrida here draws an identity between the exigency of one in need and God's own command. He goes on to say that all the others are to be treated as equivalent to God:

God as wholly other is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly other. And since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, non-manifest . . . then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation . . . to every other (one) as every (bit) other . . . in particular my relation

to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh.¹⁷

Derrida argues that every other is to be treated as wholly other (i.e., God-like) and hence every other demands absolute responsibility (i.e., self-sacrifice). The ethics based on nationality, race, class, and gender is unacceptable for him, and he advocates absolute duty toward the other. When one performs one's absolute duty towards another, one is rewarded by God. However, for Derrida, God is far from the conventional, transcendent God of Judeo-Christian tradition which he describes as "idolatrous stereotyping."¹⁸ Instead, remarkably enough, in one stroke, God and conscience merge in Derrida. His concept of God appears to run strikingly close to *advaitic* Indian thought when Derrida says, ". . . once there is secrecy and secret witnessing within me, then what I call God exists, (there is) what I call God in me, (it happens that) I call myself God . . . God is in me, he is the absolute 'me' or 'self', he is that structure of invisible interiority . . ."¹⁹ The mainstream nondualistic (*advaita*) Indian thought views the Absolute and the individual souls as One. The famous dicta such as "I am God" (*aham brahmah asmi*) and "That thou art," that is, you are God (*tat tvam asi*), point to the identification of God and the universe, though this relationship is interpreted variously by different schools. However, the resemblance here between Derrida's orientation and *advaita* appears to be rather superficial.

POSTMODERN RELIGION?

In the midst of the many manifestations of postmodern religion like syncretic sects, esoteric systems, and reactionary outfits, one can identify two broad directions which are at once related and oppositional, namely, the postsecular theology in Europe and fundamentalism on a global level. The postsecular is both a return to the premodern as well as an attempt to embrace the postmodern. It claims to make a just critique of the project of modernity, in which the belief that reason would bring happiness to everyone turned out to be an illusion after all. The postsecular would join forces with postmodernism

¹⁷Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 78.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 109.

in its denunciation of reason, even though it is privileging a premodern centrality—almost a return to traditionalism—that clashes with some of the core tenets of postmodernism. As Sue Pamela Anderson explains:

Despite twentieth-century postmodern critiques of religion as a western conception, twenty-first century critiques focus on what had been readily accepted as the opposite of the religious—the secular—by modern western Christians and by those who, in response to the postmodern, assumed a post-secular point of view. An irony emerges here for the (modern) concept of religion: post-secular perspectives on the secular, as well as on "the philosophy of religion" resemble ideas much closer to premodern thought—even to medieval Christianity—than to contemporary thinking in other fields of postmodern study of religious or other lived experiences.²⁰

The second direction it takes is fundamentalism, which has a global sweep involving not only Islam, but Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism among others. Whether postmodern fundamentalism is a reaction to postmodernism or it is its offshoot has been a point of contention. Anderson says that it is both: "Arguably, then, religious fundamentalism could be read as an offshoot of postmodernism itself even while claiming to be in opposition to it."²¹ John Milbank searches as well for a new set of coordinates conforming to the new society and a postmodern religion rather than advocate for a naive return to traditionalism.²² Milbank, the pioneer of the movement called Radical Orthodoxy, tries to accommodate the opposing claims of faith and postmodernism while condemning the project of modernity and its insistence on reason. His approach promotes a return to premodernity, critiques modern philosophy, conveys his affinity to postmodernity, and asserts his ethical orientation. He takes the great Christian critics of the Enlightenment, like Hamann and Jacobi, to demonstrate "insistence on knowledge only 'by faith,' whereby we allow that the visible affords some clue to the invisible, [which] alone prevents nihilism, and at the same time ensures that sensory desire is neither denied nor hypostasized" ²³ According to Milbank, "to

²⁰Sue Pamela Anderson, "Postmodernism and Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 2011), 73.

²¹Ibid., 78.

²²See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 3–6, and Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997).

²³John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, "Suspending the Material: The Turn of the Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 6.

be human, means, primarily, that we must reckon with an immense depth behind things.”²⁴ By embracing the premodern religion he discountenances the nihilism inherent in postmodernism. He is critical of modern philosophy, as it advocates nihilism, but privileges postmodernism because of its deep-seated suspicion of reason and because of its insistence on plurality and becoming. “The twist added by postmodernism,” Milbank states, “is simply that appearances themselves cannot be made clearly present, but are in ceaseless flux.”²⁵ Significantly, Milbank centers on the ethical practice of gifting, with which divinity is fundamentally identified. He asserts that “prior cause remains more fundamentally at work even in lower self-reflective intellect, donation as the outworking of self-reflection is still *more primarily donation*, even for Neoplatonism, never mind Christianity.”²⁶

Thus, confronted both by its protean manifestation as well as by the necessity of a theoretical rigor, perhaps contemporary religion seems to opt for a system that is not based on revelation and faith, but one that gravitates towards ethics. Kevin Hart describes this phenomenon as “religion without religion,”²⁷ where dogmas, far from being metaphysical truths about Christ, are “paradigms by which it is possible to be a Christian,”²⁸ rather than bothering either about religious rituals or nuances of theology, when one goes out of one’s way to bring solace to the one in need. One recalls T. S. Kuhn’s observation about the impossibility of a paradigm-free scientific truth. If so, can one ever hope for a religion or a philosophy that is not paradigm bound?

ALL-IN-ONE

Thus, in postmodernity, one encounters a science grown self-conscious, working on its strengths yet aware of its limitations, and a religion, already somewhat discredited during modernity, attempting to come into its own in terms of ethics. On the other hand, philosophy and religion meet in ethics. Hence, religion, philosophy, and science together fashion new paradigms

²⁴John Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, 33.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶John Milbank, foreword to *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Postsecular Theology*, by James K. A. Smith (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 19. Italics in the original.

²⁷Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 123.

²⁸Ibid., 131.

around ecological sustainability and infinite responsibility. Such exploratory endeavors, far more than a nostalgic longing for a continuation of the Enlightenment dream, may be viewed as a synergic momentum born of a new sense of urgency.

NARRATIVES

Such paradigms are underpinned by narratives. Narratives, fortunately, are not so much about death as continuity of life, or more precisely, they are about resisting the impending gloom of death, as Scheherazade's were, so that she and humanity may have thousands of nights ahead. Indeed, precisely because absolute certainties have vanished, narratives are more powerful and useful even if there persists the feeling that all our "takes" are sort of "mistakes." There is, however, no such nostalgia and regret in the postmodern condition as there would have been in the modern. After all, as Lyotard would put it: "In a sense, the people are only that which actualizes the narratives . . . by putting them [narratives] into 'play' in their institutions."²⁹ In a formless world, people can only turn to interminable narratives in store, of course, with fabricated forms.

Perhaps, the narrative warranted for a postmodern world is none other than an ethics of sustainability and infinite responsibility. If stories require form, sustainability and infinite responsibility will lend them the conceptual framework for that form to crystallize, even if that outcome only springs from the lack of a better rallying point.

NARRATIVES FROM THE EAST

Narratives have a supplementary character (in its bifold sense), that is, they take the place of truth as well as add to the store of truth in history. Some of them, rather mysteriously, come to assume a tenacious quality. Without the implication of any direct influence of Nagarjuna's philosophy on the European masters of postmodernity, one detects a close parallelism between the chief predicates of poststructuralism and Nagarjuna's thought. One might even say, if at the risk of sounding jingoist, that poststructuralism, often

²⁹Lyotard, 23.

held forth as a high watermark of Western thought, has only marked time in philosophical development at least as far as Indian thought is concerned. Without wishing to whittle down the achievement of the postmodern West, one might hazard the view that they have advanced little from the second century Indian thinker Nagarjuna.

Nagarjuna (CE 150–250), often known as the Second Buddha, is first and foremost an antiessentialist who interrogated all the then traditional thought systems (Sankya, Yoga, Vaisheshika, Nyaya, Sautrantikas, Sarvastivadins, among others), which viewed the world in terms of substance, causation, identity, selfhood, and so on. Nagarjuna's philosophy runs tantalizingly close to the thought of Gilles Deleuze whose thought stands out as the most radical among poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and others.

Nagarjuna's philosophy, fundamentally, is a scathing critique of both the then dominant—Brahminical and Buddhist—substantialist philosophies, and the assumptions underpinning them. Such assumptions include the belief in the existence of stable substances, unidirectional cause and effect, fixed identity and selfhood, atomic individuality of persons, and a certain way of liberation. One can see the points of convergence and departures between the East and the West in terms of epistemology, ontology, and philosophy of language.

NAGARJUNA'S EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY

If poststructuralism is a dislodgement of the entrenched Cartesian *cogito*, Nagarjuna's thought is a demolition of the traditional essentialist systems, which are predicated on substance and permanence. Nagarjuna's theories, like those of Deleuze, far from being intuitive or clairvoyant, are empirical. Nagarjuna's philosophy takes off from emptiness (*sunyata*), by which is meant the absence of autonomous existence (*svabhava*) rather than nihilism. He argues, "In the absence of self-nature, whence can there be other-nature? For self-nature of other-nature is called other-nature."³⁰ "Seeing oneself" (*cogito*) was a deeply entrenched substantialism that Nagarjuna encountered in his time, which he rejected. A substance, he maintains, is one that has its own (*sva*) existence (*bhava*). A conditioned or a contingent substance is a

³⁰David J Kalupahana, *Mulamadyamakarikā of Nagarjuna* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), XV 3.

contradiction, for "How could there be a self-nature that is made?" (*svabhava krtako nama bhavisyati punah katham*).³¹ In the absence of an unconditioned substance, one has conditioned or dependent arising/co-origination (*pratityasamudpada*), a notion that relates to the interconnectedness of all things. Yet, one recalls that neither emptiness nor dependent arising is the ultimate reality in Nagarjuna.

Self-nature (*svabhava*) stands rejected because it is not experientially known. The same logic applies to the rejection of "other-nature" (*parabhava*). David Kalupahana explains, "Often what he claims not to perceive (*na pasyati*) is self-nature or substance (*svabhava*) or permanent existence (*bhava, astitva*), what he claims to perceive (*pasyati*) is dependently arisen phenomena as well as dependent arising."³² This process implies a rejection of both a stable knower and a stable known, a position that finds resonance in poststructuralism.³³

With regard to ontology, Nagarjuna takes off from the Buddhist dictum: "Everything is nonsubstantial" (*Sabbe dhamma anatta*), including the elements. Significantly, Nagarjuna does not reject the reality of the phenomenal world even as he steers clear of all absolutist positions. Nagarjuna does not say "All is empty" (*sarvam sunyam*) but "All this is empty" (*sarvam idam sunyam*).³⁴

LANGUAGE IN NAGARJUNA

Nagarjuna does not dwell extensively on language as such as poststructuralists do, yet, if one is to piece together the scattered remarks in his writings, a cogent case can be made about his view on language. He uses three terms to refer to language, namely, *paramartha*, *samvrti*, and *nirvikalpa*, often translated as "ultimate reality," "language," and the "nonconceptual," respectively. Such a rendering of the terms would give the sense of essentialism. However, far from being isolated entities, they are so interdependent that the ultimate truth does not transcend the ordinary. For Nagarjuna, that one finds no "unbridgeable chasm between *samvrti* or *vyavahara* on the one hand and *paramartha* on the other is clearly expressed in his famous statement

³¹Ibid., XV 2.

³²Ibid., 82.

³³See Gilles Deleuze's concept of "transcendent empiricism" and his valorization of conditions rather than causality in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), 212.

³⁴Kalupahana, 86.

that without the former the latter is not expressed (*vyavaharam anastritya paramartha na desyate* XXIV).³⁵ In his *Vigrahavyavartani*, Nagarjuna refers to language as a tool to be used with clear perception of its nature. He implies that because of its emptiness, language is non-referring, yet useful. For instance, he posits, “Where someone said, ‘a name has a referent’, one would say ‘then substance exists’”; you have to reply, “we do not assert a name of this kind.”³⁶ In the same treatise he observes how “speech makes the nonexistent known, it does not refute it.”³⁷

This argument has profound bearing on language and ethics in Nagarjuna. Firstly, his theory of emptiness (*sunyata*) is incompatible with the traditional view of the world as “always already” or a ready-made world. Secondly, as nothing in the world has intrinsic nature (*svabhava*), they have to be textualized and structured by human beings. *Nirvana* then is to know that the world without intrinsic nature is being shaped constantly. Finally, in the absence of an ultimate truth, the linguistically mediated world is not dismissed as a distortion, precisely because a distorted world presupposes a “true” world, which, for Nagarjuna, is nonexistent. The absence of intrinsic nature (*svabhava*) and emptiness are not characteristics of things as such but only a corrective to the human habit of attributing qualities to things.

Here, language comes to have a place in the scheme of the middle way, of *nirvana*, as it is positioned between the extremes of absolute emptiness of everything and things believed to have intrinsic nature: “Thus when the Buddha and Nagarjuna emphasized the renunciation of all views (*sarvadrsti prahana*), they were insisting on abandoning all forms of dogmatism with regard to views.”³⁸ Non-attachment to views is something other than “no views.” Hence, linguistic mediation through stories receives due regard in Nagarjuna’s philosophy.

If nuances are played down, one finds that poststructuralism and Nagarjuna’s Buddhism are radical in terms of their antiessentialism, antifoundationalism, and antihumanism. Indeed, writers like Magliola and Coward view Nagarjuna as more radical than Derrida. Coward asserts, “Nagarjuna employs the same logical strategy and often the very same

³⁵Ibid., 89.

³⁶Nagarjuna, *Vigrahavyavartani: The Dispeller of Disputes*, trans. and commentary by Jan Westerhoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), verse 57.

³⁷Ibid., verse 64.

³⁸Ibid., 92.

argument as are later used by Derrida.³⁹ Magliola, Coward explains, identifies Nagarjuna's concept of *śūnyata* (lack of being or identity) as "equivalent with" Derrida's *différance* but concedes that Nagarjuna, with his concept of "beyond knowing," is able to transcend "Derrida's quandary concerning entrapment in language."⁴⁰

Coward also refers to the study by Loy who concludes that Nagarjuna is able to transcend the "self-imposed limits" of Derrida, as Nagarjuna is "more systematic in his critique of all metaphysical views than Derrida."⁴¹ Loy is of the view that while "Derrida remains stuck in language," Nagarjuna is able to move "beyond language and its dualistic entrapments."⁴²

Notably, the most significant and radical element here is Derrida's "apparent entrapment within language" as against Nagarjuna's realization of an experience "beyond language."⁴³ Obviously, while Derrida's realization of truth, even when it is a truth about the nontruth, is through language and *différance*, Nagarjuna at once valorizes and bypasses all language. One recalls that Nagarjuna not only sets great store by the Buddhist scriptures but also has his treatises including the nonpareil *Mulamadyamakarikā* in language. Besides, Buddhism, unlike many other religions, has a surprisingly large number of scriptures in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan.

Importantly Buddhism, with no revealed scripture (unlike either the *Vak* in the Brahminic system or *logos* in the Judeo-Christian dispensation), views language as purely instrumental, and is far from according language, scriptural or otherwise, any intrinsic worth. For Nagarjuna, all words, including those of the Buddha, are merely imaginary constructions (*vikalpa*), giving access to, nor obstructing, no reality.⁴⁴

According to Nagarjuna, language cannot give us reality, yet there is no ultimate reality to be found outside language. Interestingly, both Derrida and Nagarjuna engage the notion of silence. While Derrida reaches silence in and through the medium of language, Nagarjuna transcends it. Coward explains, "For Nagarjuna, language is empty of reality and must be transcended for reality to be realized. By contrast, Derrida sees language

³⁹Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 126.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 127.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 128.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 136.

to be rooted in reality.”⁴⁵ And if the Buddha’s own response, as the legend goes, was silence, notwithstanding its varied interpretations, with regard to metaphysical questions, silence is perhaps not the least option before us in postmodernity. Besides, there is a time-hallowed Eastern tradition of valorizing silence. However, Nagarjuna does not particularly hold forth silence, which is suggestive of an attitude that accords as much significance to narrative as it accommodates an ethos of emptiness (*sunyata*) to fabricate a world. Notably, ethical concern is not ignored in Nagarjuna. So goes his precept in his *Ratnavali*: “So long then as the doctrine that destroys the misconception of an ‘I’ is not known, take care always to practice giving, ethics, and patience.”⁴⁶ After all, like the person wounded with a poisonous arrow—a metaphor for human existence—in the Buddha legend, the immediate concern is to bring solace to the sufferer rather than the details concerning the arrow.

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⁴⁵Ibid., 141.

⁴⁶Nagarjuna, *The Precious Garland and The Song of the Four Mindfulness*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins and Lati Rimpoche with Ann Klein (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), verse 125.

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