

# The Dark Side or Just Terrifying Shades of Grey? The Spectres of Relativism and Nihilism in Western Responses to Hindu and Buddhist Non-Duality

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Sometimes literature, especially fiction, is able to show us things that philosophy cannot; it can allow us a glimpse into certain philosophical blind spots. This is especially significant since these blind spots, these dark corners, often conceal precisely those issues, or perhaps neuroses and paranoias, which have exerted the most pervasive influence in shaping philosophical attitudes and even philosophy itself. When, for example, Mrs Moore in E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* is overcome in one of the Marabar Caves, she exposes more than her fair share of Western philosophy's hidden demons:

The echo in a Marabar cave... is entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies... 'Boum' is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum', or 'ou-boum' – utterly dull. Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce 'boum'... when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur: 'Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value.' If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same – 'ou-boum'. If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present and to come, for all the misery men must undergo... it would amount to the same... at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words... only amounted to 'boum'... she was terrified... the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul.<sup>1</sup>

What Forster exquisitely conjures up here is a spectre which has haunted Western perceptions of Indian thought since at least the Romantic period, and it has been especially noticeable when it comes to the thorny issues of Advaitan Hindu and Mādhyamika

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<sup>1</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, (1924) (Harmondsworth, 1984 reprint) pp144, 146.

Buddhist non-duality (that is: where any distinction between perceiving subject and perceived object dissolves; often, it is conceptualised as a state of 'oneness' or 'non-separateness'). The problem, and with it Mrs Moore's terror, hinges upon what had, until very recently, been the dominant view in Western thought of a referential or representational view of ethics and morality, and a certain representational conception of epistemology tied up with it.

This view goes something like this: ethics and epistemology come together in the notion of 'truth' which comes about when 'being' is faithfully represented, or reflected. This, perhaps unavoidably, opens up a certain transcendent element. 'Truth' and 'being' – epistemological validity and an underlying ontology – are separate (and must remain separate if their relation is to 'objectively' mean anything), yet nevertheless, they are still inextricably related inasmuch as one reflects the other; and it is ethics which ensures the constancy of this relation, either by deeming a faithful representation of 'being' as 'true' or 'honest', or an unfaithful reflection as 'deceptive' or 'dishonest'. Either way, the underlying relation between 'truth' and 'being', whether accurately reflected or not, is taken for granted, thus allowing it to act as a basis for morality.

It is a model which probably goes back to Plato's *Timaeus* where the realm of Being – which is equated with the Ideal or the Good – is opposed to the realm of Becoming which acts as a poor reflection of Being. At best, 'Becoming' can be 'true', but of course this also opens up the possibility that it could be 'false' too: this indeterminacy is what makes it ontologically imperfect, and morally suspect, in comparison to Being which is beyond reproach.<sup>1</sup> This separation is perhaps even apparent in the Garden of Eden account with the need to make a firm and sharp distinction between the moral, yet tainted, 'Tree of Good and Evil' and the more ontologically orientated and undefilable 'Tree of Life' which is fiercely guarded by 'cherubim and a flaming sword'.<sup>2</sup> The relation, yet intensely maintained and guarded separation, between 'truth' and 'being', 'ethics' and 'ontology', has its origins in both the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian sides of our Western heritage.

This framework helps explain why the ethical implications of non-duality – especially non-duality in an *other* culture – have traditionally proven so difficult to deal with for Western interpreters.

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<sup>1</sup>See the *Timaeus* trans. Desmond Lee, *Plato: Timaeus and Critias*, (Harmondsworth, 1977) pp41-2.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:23-4 (New International Version).

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For in a state of non-duality, this necessary ‘gap’ between ‘being’ and ‘truth’ seems to collapse in on itself, and morality seems to collapse along with it. There no longer seems to be room for the transcendence necessary for ethical standards.

The cross-cultural difficulties can be neatly illustrated in the Sanskrit term *sat* which can mean both ‘being’ and ‘truth’, as well as carrying moral weight too, as in phrases such as ‘*saddharma*’, ‘the virtuous teaching’. The implication of the Sanskrit is that ‘to be’ is ‘to be good’, which must necessarily involve being truthful: being, virtue and truth all exist at the same ontological level. But when read in the light of a transcendently based ethical system this apparent ambiguity opens up the potential for some disastrous misinterpretations. Not that anyone, thankfully, has ever done this, but suppose, for example, that Krishna’s famous declaration to Arjuna of ‘*sad asac cāham*’, ‘I am being and non-being’, were translated – as it literally could be translated – as ‘I am truth and untruth’.<sup>1</sup> There would be no end to the religious and ethical complications, not to mention opening up the dreaded liar paradox: can one truthfully declare that one *is* untruth? In a sense, Mrs Moore’s terror virtually takes place within the confronting overlap of these three connotations of the term *sat*; yet these supposed dangers would not, and probably could not, have occurred to Sanskrit speakers themselves.

From Western ethics’ traditional representational perspective, when *sat* (truth) and *sat* (virtue) apparently melt into *sat* (being), moral judgments suddenly seem impossible. A separate reference point from which – or against which – to make moral judgments apparently disappears; and for this Indian thought has often met with righteous Western indignation. However, there is a stark ideological, perhaps Orientalist, side to this. For all the shock and horror we see in Western interpretations is not so much a response to the loss of separate reference points altogether – although naturally this is how the problem is loudly presented – but rather it is because the Western interpreter’s own ‘separate’ or ‘objective’ moral vantage point seems to disappear. What was proclaimed from on high suddenly appears as ‘poor little talkative Christianity’.

Now, this is not to say that there is no threat of relativism in some conceptions of non-duality, nor that the ethical danger of losing any vantage point may not be a genuine one. Indians and Tibetans themselves have traditionally considered this a very real threat,

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<sup>1</sup> *Bhagavad Gītā* 9.19d, my translation(s); Sanskrit edited by Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā* (Delhi, 1996 reprint) p93.

particularly when conceptions of non-duality have threatened the moral workings of *karma*. Within the Tibetan tradition, the debates at bSam yas monastery towards the end of the eighth century have continued to hold a particularly significant place precisely because it was there that the so-called ethical quietism of the Chan (Zen) school (as represented by the Chinese teacher Hva Shang) was defeated.<sup>1</sup> Hva Shang's teachings were, and still are, held up as *the* prototype of just this sort of moral (*karmic*) relativism which can result from an overly vague and intellectually sluggish conception of ultimate reality (that is: emptiness, *sūnyatā*).<sup>2</sup> The significance Hva Shang's defeat is accorded in the Tibetan tradition testifies to just how seriously this moral threat of relativism was taken.

Rather, what I am suggesting is that the charge of an all-out relativism can all too easily act as a shield behind which to hide a threat to one's own position, and this too is a trap into which traditional Indian and Tibetan polemics have been just as capable of falling. Śaṅkara's polemics against the Buddhists spring to mind as an example of this,<sup>3</sup> as do some of the more conservative orthodox polemics against Śaṅkara.<sup>4</sup> In Tibet, some of the criticisms wielded by the dominant dGe lugs pa school against esoteric rDzog chen practices may well be guilty of this tendency too.

The point is that non-duality can be highly ideologically charged, as can the charges of relativism or nihilism which are then

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<sup>1</sup> See David Seyfort Ruegg, 'On the Tibetan Historiography and Doxography of the Great Debate of bSam yas' in Shōren Ihara and Zuihō Yamaguchi (eds) *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Narita 1989; Vol.1: Buddhist Philosophy and Literature* (Narita, 1992), pp237-244.

<sup>2</sup> Ruegg puts it especially well when he argues that 'the 'Great Debate' at bSam yas often appears... more as a semi-historical *topos*... and the Hva Shang Mahāyāna as a... dehistoricized and emblematic figure standing... for a certain typological variety of Buddhism' (*Ibid*, p240) and that 'Hva Shang's simultaneist method is described in Tibetan sources... as an extremely etherialized spirituality associated with a quietistic abandonment of all activity' (p242); the target of Tibetan polemics was a certain 'ethical and karmic quietism as well as an 'ideoclasm' that tended toward intellectual nihilism' (p244).

<sup>3</sup> For Śaṅkara's polemics against the Buddhists see Gregory J. Darling, *An Evaluation of the Vedāntic Critique of Buddhism* (Delhi, 1987), especially p82ff, pp125-131; A.J. Alston, *Śaṅkara on Rival Views* (London, 1989), pp260-313 and Daniel H.H. Ingalls, 'Śaṅkara's Arguments Against the Buddhists', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 3 (4), January 1954.

<sup>4</sup> See K. Narain, *A Critique of Mādhva Refutation of the Śaṅkara School of Vedānta* (Allahabad, 1964) p44ff, p196ff.

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levelled against it. 'Non-duality' can be a 'weapon' for the underdog or the outsider since it is, literally, such a great leveller. The ensuing charge of an all-out relativism can then be a way for the dominant voice to reclaim, or safe-guard, their threatened high-ground. In other words, these charges can be used to conserve a pre-existing moral order. Of course, relativism can be a genuine threat, but we ought to be suspicious when the cry of an all-out 'relativism' is wheeled out a little too quickly, especially by those who maintain, or are doing well out of, the mainstream religious system. Often the eagerness to fire off the charge of nihilism or relativism belies just how much is at stake and also just how vulnerable the position is of those who are threatened. These vulnerabilities, these shortcomings, are precisely what can be safely hidden away behind the loud accusation of a *universal* relativism. After all, the terror at the loss of one's own vantage point is more immediate and desperate than the dissolving of *all* vantage points into a universal relativism; it is often easier (in the sense of being more convenient) to emphasize the latter, the universal, so as to conceal and ignore the former, the personal. For with the 'onset' of non-duality, when the interpreter's supposed higher reference point – and the very notion of a higher reference point – is challenged and held up to the light of day, it is all of a sudden rudely revealed as having only ever been the interpreter's own, and not something objectively 'out there'. As Mrs Moore found out, it is exposed as a terrifying yet 'utterly dull' echo.

All of this lends a certain irony to how Western interpretations have tended to respond to this supposed ethical crisis. That is, they have typically then accused Indian thought of itself being trapped within an all-engulfing subjectivity or hopeless solipsism: Indians are the ones hypnotized by an echo; or, alternately, they are enveloped in a pantheistic void. Either way, the ethical implications are considered identical. And while Mrs Moore is merely overcome by them, the arch-Romantic Friedrich Schlegel, a little more than a century before, violently recoiled at the prospect. In a state of non-duality, he warns that

the distinction between good and evil must unavoidably be neutralized... [since] everything melts pantheistically into one

single essence, and the eternal distinction between good and evil is set aside.<sup>1</sup>

Even more alarming for Schlegel is that this seems to imply that 'all, being one, must be equally perfect[!]'<sup>2</sup>. Yet what is most terrifying is not really that good and evil have disappeared, but rather that a particular (Western) representational conception of what makes good 'good' and what makes evil 'evil' seems to have disappeared, and with it the Western interpreter's own morally superior vantage point – this, of course, is the real dark side from which Schlegel recoils: what could be more terrifying for him than the prospect that his own and Indian thought might be 'equally perfect', or even equal at all!

Schlegel's critic, the Idealist and staunch anti-Romantic Hegel, however, does not recoil for a moment, and, characteristically, he goes on the offensive. He contrasts his own Idealist dialectic based on the notions of 'Concrete Oneness' and 'Being-for-itself' with an undeveloped and suffocating 'Abstract Oneness' and 'Being-in-itself' which he finds in Indian thought. Hegel argues that non-duality gives the world 'merely a negative, accidental character'<sup>3</sup>. Non-duality, he suggests, implies that 'everything exists as merely... negated'<sup>4</sup> meaning that 'all... qualities are absent... [and, as a result,] nature, with nothing to... give it stability, reels at the mercy of imagination'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, finding a parallel with those supposed aspects of Romanticism which he also attacks, Hegel concludes that Indian thought is held captive by 'horrible, repulsive [and] loathsome distortions',<sup>6</sup> with no epistemologically objective way of ever knowing that they are distortions<sup>7</sup>. Presumably here, as with

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schlegel 'On the Indian Language, Literature and Philosophy', (1805-6) Bk 2, Ch.4 in E.J. Millington (ed. and trans.) *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Friedrich von Schlegel*, (London, 1849), p483.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, Bk 2, Ch.5, p490.

<sup>3</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, (delivered between 1823 and 1827) trans. J. Burdon-Sanderson and E.B. Spiers (London, 1895), Vol. 2, p1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p11.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel's brazenness, in contrast with Schlegel, may be because the exposure of an underlying subjectivity as a driving force in interpretation and moral judgement is not really the problem for him that it was for Schlegel (and Mrs Moore) especially in the light of his forthright Idealist dialectic. After all, for Hegel, subjective bias (depending of course upon *whose* subjectivity we are talking about!) can simply be seen as none other than the *Geist* manifesting itself – which is precisely the basis

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Schlegel, Hegel is referring to philosophical Advaita Vedānta with bits of *bhakti* devotionalism and *tantra* thrown in. Commenting on Buddhism directly, Hegel's critique is the same, only harsher:

In so far as...nothingness, this... annihilation is the highest state for man, and his destiny is to immerse himself in... non-existence... where all determinations cease... [to that extent] There is no...virtue [or] vice.<sup>1</sup>

The recurring assumption is that without a clear hierarchy of being, there is no way to determine what ultimately has value and what does not, and that without this, there is no way to determine right from wrong. In ontological terms – and the assumption of a solid ontology is after all what underlies all this – there is no way of knowing real from unreal, and this can only lead to a state of epistemological and ethical relativism or nihilism since there no longer appears to be any concrete relation between epistemology and ethics, or at least, no ontologically concrete way to determine this relation.

This representational model of truth and semantic meaning was, in the realm of linguistics, first questioned by figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce at the outset of the twentieth century. For Saussure, there is no definitive one-to-one correspondence (such as that guaranteed by the traditional notion of truth) between word and object, but merely 'floating' signifiers defined from each other not through reference to extra-linguistic signifieds (that is, metaphysically substantive 'things') but simply through their phonic differences from other signs within the linguistic system.<sup>2</sup> Peirce similarly moved the emphasis away from

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of his phenomenology. For Hegel, the intrusion of subjectivity is not so much rudely exposed as it is instead welcomed as simply confirming what he had already unashamedly maintained all along. This rough summary is based on Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Geist*. For some of Hegel's most succinct summaries of his overall dialectic, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, (1807) trans. J. Baillie, (New York, 1967) pp 211, 790ff, and G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 2, pp19-20.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p60. By 'nothingness' and 'annihilation', Hegel is presumably referring to the Buddhist notion of *sūnyatā*, 'emptiness'.

<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, (New York, 1959) p120.

truth as representation to truth as defined by functionality in his championing of 'Pragmatism'.<sup>1</sup>

More importantly though for our present purposes, it was arguably Friedrich Nietzsche who was the first to directly challenge this model on the ethical and philosophical front. For, as noted earlier, being and truth, although traditionally considered separate so that they can 'objectively' reflect each other, are nevertheless seen as intimately related. Nietzsche exposes precisely that which has traditionally been hidden; namely: this separation between being and truth and the extreme fragility of the supposed 'ethical relation' which holds them together. According to Nietzsche, if anything has held ontology and epistemology together, then it is not ethics, but merely a self-affirming 'will to power' concealed beneath, or, alternately, suppressed by, the thin veneer of ethics.<sup>2</sup> The obsessive need to appeal to a transcendent or underlying ontology (such as God) which holds ethics and epistemology together already belies just how tenuous their relation really is. The postmodern critique which has followed Nietzsche has sought to show that ethics does not have, or need, a direct relation to ontology and, moreover, that the notion of 'truth' has little to do with this relation. The postmodern critique has taught us to be rightly sceptical whenever ethics – that is: one particular ethical system out of many – claims to have a definitive relation to ontology and epistemology. We are well aware nowadays of the issue of *whose* ethics we are talking about and on *whose* terms, or rather, on *whose self-justifying* terms, an ontology is laid down, since ontology is never as neutral as it claims to be.

This partly explains why Buddhism in particular has appeared so open to postmodern readings. Traditionally, Buddhism has shunned the necessity for an underlying ontology to support an ethical framework. Most famously, the Buddha refused to even speculate

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Sanders Peirce in Justus Buchler (ed) *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, (London, 1940) pp251-68 and James Hoopes (ed) *Peirce on Signs*, (Chapel Hill and London, 1991), pp253-9.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 39, ed. and trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago, 1955); *The Will to Power* 461, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (London, 1968); and *The Gay Science*, 110, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge, 2001). See also *Beyond Good and Evil*, 35, *op cit*, p42 where Nietzsche cites Voltaire's edict that 'il ne cherche le vrai que pour faire le bien' ('He only searches for the truth for the sake of doing good') so as to brush it off with the flat rejoinder: 'I bet he will find nothing'.



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upon metaphysically loaded questions, instead remaining silent on what came to be known as the ‘undefined points’ (*avyākṛtavastu*):

What is a question to be avoided? It is like this: ‘is the world eternal; or non-eternal; both eternal and non-eternal; or neither eternal nor non-eternal? and does it have any limit and [what is this] limit; or indeed does it neither have nor not have any limit? Does the Tathāgata [the Buddha] exist beyond death; or does the Tathāgata not exist beyond death? insofar as there is another vital life-principle, is there another body? [that is: can one exist apart from the other? or: are they identical or different?].<sup>1</sup>

Metaphysics and ontology, far from being essential for morality, can actually hinder progression along the Path (*marga*). Buddhism’s apparent separation of ontology from ethics and truth seems, superficially, to coincide with the postmodern project.

The second century Mādhyamika Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna especially has become a postmodern favourite due to his relentless attack on the notion of any inherent nature (*svabhāva*) or ‘metaphysical essence’ of people, things, and even ethical concepts and the Dharma itself, leaving in their wake only the non-dualistic emptiness of all things, yet even this – emptiness itself – is empty too. From a postmodern perspective – and this is not necessarily untrue – Nāgārjuna’s attack is decidedly ‘deconstructive’: it seeks to undermine the *false conception* of an inherent nature rather than an actual existent inherent nature itself. Consequently, it has been compared with the later Wittgenstein’s suggestion that ‘what we are destroying is *nothing but* houses of cards’.<sup>2</sup> For like Nāgārjuna’s attack on *svabhāva*, Wittgenstein’s implication is that what is under attack are, like ‘houses of cards’, the mere constructs of metaphysics (such as ‘essence’) rather than anything real; hence the process is *deconstructive*, rather than *destructive*.

Often cited in this regard has been Nāgārjuna’s advice that

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<sup>1</sup> Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* ad *Abhidharmakośa* 5.22. My translation of the Sanskrit: *katamaś ... sthāpanīyah praśnaḥ tad yathā śāśvato loka ‘śāśvataḥ śāśvataś cāśāśvataś ca naiva śāśvato nāśāśvataḥ antavān antaś ca naivāntavān nānantavān | bhavati tathāgataḥ paraṃ maraṇān na bhavati tathāgataḥ paraṃ maraṇāt yāvad anyo jīvo ‘nyac charīram |* Sanskrit edited by Swāmi Dwārikādās Sastri, *The Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya of Acārya Vasubandhu*, (Varanasi, 1998) vol.2, p630.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 118, trans. G.E.M Anscombe, (Oxford and Malden, Mass. 1953) p48, my italics.

Without depending upon the conventional, the Ultimate Truth is not taught; without coming to the Ultimate Truth, one does not find *nirvāṇa*.<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis here upon restoring the conventional (*vyavahāra*) status of things has been seen as a reaffirmation of 'truth as context' or linguistic usage along the lines of Wittgenstein's insistence that we 'may in no way interfere with the actual use of language... [but instead] leave... everything as it is'.<sup>2</sup> Also widely used in the quest for postmodern comparisons has been Nāgārjuna's famous declaration that

*Samsāra's distinction from nirvāṇa is nothing; nirvāṇa's distinction from samsāra is nothing.*<sup>3</sup>

which seems to neatly correspond with the postmodern suspicion of transcendent validity claims inasmuch as it seems to suggest that there is no *nirvāṇa* which exists as a reference point *beyond samsāra*. Nāgārjuna is seen as championing an ethical system that rejects any semblance of transcendent or absolutist underpinning, and which thus has little or no connection to the epistemological or ontological realms.

On the tide of these apparent similarities, the threats of relativism and nihilism suddenly drop out of the picture: Nāgārjuna's conception of non-dualistic emptiness is praised for precisely the same reason that it had previously been condemned; namely, for promoting a moral system that rejects absolutist underpinning. So, in other words, the same underlying assumption remains, even if the attitude to it may have changed. To allow the spectre of ontological nihilism back into the critique would be to risk inviting back in the metaphysical baggage which has always gone along with the notion

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<sup>1</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.10. My translation of the Sanskrit:

*vyavahāram anāsrityaparamārtho na deśyate |  
paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate ||*

Sanskrit edited by Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā Commentaire de Candrakīrti*, Bibliotheca Buddhica IV (St Petersburg, 1903-13) p494.12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein *op cit* 124, p49.

<sup>3</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25.19. My translation of the Sanskrit:

*na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam |  
na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam ||*

Sanskrit edited by Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *op cit* p535.2-3.

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of 'nihilism'. Instead, as I have already hinted at with my reference to recent comparisons between Nāgārjuna and Wittgenstein, and in keeping with trends in twentieth century philosophy generally, Nāgārjuna's, and Buddhism's conception of ethics is transplanted into the realm of language. Nathan Katz, for example, remarks that Buddhism holds 'the belief in a self' to be a merely 'a grammatical mistake'.<sup>1</sup> Nāgārjuna's refutation of an inherent nature, Katz suggests, is 'a grammatical rather than ontological statement'.<sup>2</sup> Nāgārjuna's ethical framework suddenly centres around a critique of language and is divorced from epistemology and ontology. Chris Gudmunsen too argues that

[t]he advantages of absolute over conventional truth, or of *nirvāṇa* over *samsāra* are not advantages of *correctness* or *validity*... [but] advantages stemming from *a better attitude to life*.<sup>3</sup>

Noticeable here, although Gudmunsen's point is basically a good one, is the way he has had to separate the epistemological from the ethical: 'correctness' and 'validity' are sharply delineated from 'a better attitude to life'. In Wittgensteinian terms, Gudmunsen's tacit assumption is that ethics and epistemology operate in separate 'language-games'.<sup>4</sup> The tendency is part of the overall postmodern

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Katz, 'Nāgārjuna and Wittgenstein on Error' in Nathan Katz (ed) *Buddhist and Western Philosophy*, (Delhi, 1981) p323.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p319.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, (London and Basingstoke, 1977), p103, my italics. For a more comprehensive critique of Wittgensteinian and linguistic interpretations of Nāgārjuna, see David Loy, 'How not to criticize Nāgārjuna: A Response to L. Stanford Betty' in *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 34 No.4 (October 1984) and also A.P.Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna*, (New York and Oxford, 1990) Ch4, 'Buddhism after Wittgenstein', p74ff.

<sup>4</sup> I hasten to add though that this strict distinction between language games actually seems foreign to Wittgenstein himself insofar as it promotes a view that language games suggest a sort of closed linguistic system. Often within accounts which attempt to justify the autonomy of religious language by appealing to Wittgenstein (perhaps paradoxically, since in their very need to *appeal* they undermine that very autonomy they are trying to protect), this sort of misinterpretation that 'language games' are mutually incomprehensible 'closed systems' has been responsible for a certain spectre of relativism looming over neo-Wittgensteinian interpreters, particularly those concerned with religious

imperative to sever all connections between ethics and epistemology and ontology.

Yet Buddhist thinkers such as Candrakīrti, Dharmakīrti and Dignāga, not to mention Nāgārjuna himself, would take issue with any suggestion that epistemological ‘correctness’ and ‘validity’ had nothing to do with dispelling the ignorance (*avidyā*) which gives rise to suffering (*duḥkha*). Ignorance – both epistemological and ethical (not that the two are traditionally separated) – obscures things as they are (*tattva*) and hence impedes any possibility of a ‘better attitude to life’. It was precisely this insistence on the integration of intellectual rigour and morality that was at the heart of Atiśa’s reforms, just as it was for Tsong kha pa’s later systemisation of Tibetan Buddhism and the consolidation of the ‘Gradual Path’, the *lam rim*. Indeed, the Indian Buddhist tradition, like all other Indian systems, has in fact always used the same term, *artha*, to denote both an epistemologically valid object and moral or ethical purpose or meaning, and the Tibetan tradition has followed this exactly with the term *don*.

All of which means that there is little room here for the postmodern insistence upon severing the connection between ethics and epistemology, as is implied in Gudmunsen’s Wittgensteinian analysis, since, within the Buddhist tradition, ethics and epistemology had always been so tightly welded together (not of course, that they were ever considered separate realms which even needed to be welded together in the first place). Without conceptions of separate epistemological and ethical realms, there was no tenuous relation which needed to be maintained by appealing to an underlying ontology and hence there was no need for a Nietzsche-like figure to expose just how tenuous this relation could be and how shaky this underlying ontology was. And of course, this tenuous relation, and the underlying ontology which it desperately maintains, is precisely the object of the postmodern critique. Although, at the same time of course, Buddhism does indeed take an underlying ontology such as the misconception of an essence or abiding self as the object of its critique too.

But to summarize the key difference between the Buddhist and postmodern critiques, we need to remember Aristotle’s law of the excluded middle – which incidentally, Nāgārjuna adheres to as well. We need to remember that all critiques, and more basically, all

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language. See Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language* (Malden, Mass. and Oxford, 1996), p65ff for a useful summary of this issue.

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negations, set up a mutual exclusion: an 'either...or' or an 'a and not-a'. There are two, and only two, sides, which makes it difficult to fit the three elements we are dealing with – ethics, epistemology and ontology – into a straightforward critique. Two will have to fall on one side and one on the other. Both the postmodernists and the Buddhists agree that ontology (in the form of an underlying essence) ought to go on the negated or critiqued 'not-a' side and that ethics ought to go on the other side of the mutual exclusion: the affirmed 'a' side. But on which side does epistemology belong? What I would suggest is that this is where the key difference in their respective critiques lies.

For the Buddhists, epistemology and ethics have always been tightly bound together and clearly separated from ontology, meaning that there is enough conceptual room to negate ontology and reaffirm ethics without endangering epistemology: ethics and epistemology can be placed *together* on the affirmed 'a' side of any critique of metaphysics, while ontology can be isolated on the 'not-a' side. The conception of ontology which the Buddhists refute, such as an inherent nature (*svabhāva*) and a self (*ātman*), are far more self-contained units which can be negated without epistemological and ethical *artha* being affected (although this is of course precisely what their opponents have always maintained).

The postmodern critique, on the other hand, has not had the same conceptual room to move. Safeguarding ethics – ensuring it remains on the affirmed 'a' side – has meant placing traditional epistemology on the 'not-a' side along with ontology, since the conception of ontology which postmodernists have sought to challenge has been so closely entwined with traditional epistemology and epistemological validity, as the representational (Platonic) model of 'being' and 'truth' would suggest. Essentially, the problem is that the conceptual constraints which postmodernism has attempted to negate have been exactly the same conceptual constraints *from which* it has attempted to negate. If traditional ontology is to be undermined then traditional epistemology has to be thrown out too, and so if ethics is to be saved, then it has to be saved on its own: epistemology and ontology would have to be siphoned off together leaving ethics isolated, or, to put a positive spin on it, ethics would need to exist autonomously.

Ironically, this is also the only option that Mrs Moore, Schlegel and, most especially, Hegel envisaged too, only they imagined that this very same autonomy or isolation of ethics, its being left 'high and dry', amounted to its disappearance altogether in a relativistic moral void. The postmodern isolation and subsequent

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transplantation of ethics away from metaphysics and toward context, functionality or, more formally, Pragmatics and *praxis*, does not really seem to have solved this problem. In effect, it seems to have simply amounted to a shift in terminology, or perhaps merely a shift in the emphasis upon the same terminology: a delicate balancing act between, on the one hand, the negative isolation of ethics; and, on the other, the positive autonomy of ethics – which, curiously enough, ends up sounding almost Kantian. Those promoting traditional metaphysics *and* those challenging it seem bound by the same conceptual restraints, perhaps most interestingly of all when they attempt to negate them.

Thus, the Marabar Cave may yet prove just as difficult to escape for the postmodernists and postcolonialists as it was for the modernists and Romantics. There is another (darker?) side to the echo, a warning which goes in the ‘opposite’ direction. Non-duality seems just as problematic for those who attempt to critique traditional western conceptions of being, truth and morality and who eagerly draw upon Indian or Buddhist thought in order to vindicate this critique as it was for those who earlier *attacked* Indian and Buddhist thought so as to uphold traditional metaphysics. The same hidden demons re-emerge and, worst still, they are still revealed as being none other than the interpreter’s, or the comparativist’s, own. They are the same old demons who lurk in that most terrifying, yet simultaneously most narcissistically ‘cosy’ and reassuring dark side of all: the sound of one’s own ‘dull echo’.