

## CONCEPTUAL ATOMISM AND NĀGĀRJUNA'S SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS

Conceptual Atomism, if one may coin a term, offers the excessively ambitious or the careless philosopher a number of tempting precepts which stand in relations of Family Resemblance to one another. Consider some sayings which express several precepts of this kind.

(i) "When we agree that a concept like that of Bishop Tutu's body is distinct from that of Bishop Tutu's mind and thoughts, we must agree that his body is something detachable from his mind and thoughts, hence that either can exist without the other's existing or even having existed".

(ii) "More generally, if any two terms are distinct in meaning or any two concepts are distinct in content, and each term or concept corresponds to something real, then each of the pair corresponds to something real and separate or separable from the other".

(iii) "If it is even imaginable or conceivable that two things are separate or separable, so that one exists without the other, then they really are necessarily distinct and separable or separate".

(iv) "Since it is necessary that we as correct speakers of Latin or Greek or English, or Sanskrit or Pali, following the language's rules and norms, clearly distinguish the concepts of *BRAHMAN* and *ĀTMAN*, and *DIVINE FATHER* and *DIVINE SON*, no form of identity or essential connection prevents one from existing without the other".

(v) "Since *This Zen Abbot's face* and *This Zen Abbot's smile* are not the same concept, then the *Zen Abbot's face* could exist without a smile and the *Zen Abbot's smile* could exist without his face any longer existing".

The importance of such *fallacious* forms of reasoning and of others with a Family Resemblance should not be neglected. Spelled out so badly in saying (i) through (v), Conceptual Atomism's temptations to draw false inference may look infantile and dreadfully simple to detect. When, however, a Plato or a Hume or a comparably sophisticated and persuasively gifted philosopher becomes both the victim and the advocate of such temptations, the teachings may become insidiously potent and

widely influential. Hume subtly pointed to the knowable distinctness of those experienced events which we take to be causes and effects, then subtly pressed the conclusion that we have no knowledge at all of causation as a nominal form of necessary connection. Two centuries later many positivists and neo-positivists stridently analyzed causality in terms of constant conjunction or entrenchment by custom and habit. Earlier Plato in several dialogues argued for a separate, timeless world of Transcendent Forms (*chorista eide'* on grounds including this one: the concept of the supreme and immutable value, *Goodness*, is quite distinct from the concept of *limited and changing particulars which are good*.

Human intellects are similarly fallible in certain respects, whatever zone they inhabit. So it is important not to neglect the possible influence of Conceptual Atomism on Eastern thought. For a fascinating example, one may try to confront the genius of the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, the creator in the Second Century A.D. of sceptical arguments as challenging and sophisticated, and as successful in baffling others, as were many in Hume's epistemology and in his philosophy of mind. At some places where Nāgārjuna's reasoning draws with special boldness on areas where distinctness and separability are greatly in need of not being confused, philosophers of East and West should join in examining his sceptical moves. Two of his topics especially recommend themselves. Take, *first*, his treatment of the separateness of "Attachment" (*Rāga*) from what is called "*The attached place of resort or residing*" (*Rakta*). Take, *second*, some of his remarks on the *effability* of certain teams involved in talk of Time and Change. These include "origination", "Existence" and "Denial".

## I

### *Some'Separation' - Minded Arguments Of Nāgārjuna*

The following extracts are adapted from M. Chatterjee's edition and translation of the great sceptic's work. I shall focus on matter in volume II of Chatterjee's edition of Nagarjuna's *Mula-Madhyamaka-Kārikā* (Calcutta, 1962). Here the arguments make use of at least rough synonyms for "separation" and related words in order to support some extreme types of sceptical claims:

(i) (part missing)

The nature of an X cannot be fully described without *some mention* of Y—ish things it is apt to attract, when they exist and when certain circumstances obtain. But the nature of X can also be described as capable of existence without Y-ish things' being attached to itself and without Y-ish things' existing at all. At any rate, this is true if we do not commit the error of trying

to infer by deductivism "If F *can* be, F will be". One is especially likely to invoke that principle on the grounds that, if there is a distinction between antecedent and consequent, there must be an actualized form of separation. But saying this is to confuse the actualizable with the actualized. At any rate, if one distinguishes at least two kinds of distinctness and also distinctness from separation, Nāgārjuna's argument gives the impression of collapsing.

(ii) "Opponents think they can similarly argue from the existence of *Rakta* (the attached place) to the existence of *Rāga* (attachment). But can *Rāga* exist before *Rakta*? Then *Rakta* would have to come into being and grow by depending on *Rāga* (attachment), even though there is no longer any necessary connection between *Rakta* and *Rāga*! But *Rakta* could not have the faintest chance of doing this (perhaps otherwise conceivable, if incredible) thing, if *Rāga*, as postulated, exists before *Rāga* does. For now there is a time at which attachment exists and the supposed locus for attachment (or attached place) does not exist. They do not co-exist (and their existences are not constantly conjoined). They are not completely comparable. So how is *Rakta* to come into being and grow if it necessarily depends on *Rāga*? And if *Rāga* does NOT exist before *Rakta*, things are no better: if *Rāga* is non-existent, it has got no possibility to produce *Rakta* — *Rāga* cannot produce *Rakta* either in its position as before *Rakta* or after it." (pp.26-27.)

*Comment* : *Rāga* is a technical Buddhist term for a kind or worldly attachment that strikes a human (through the mediation of sense experience) in a particular way in a certain mental-emotional 'place'. It is in at least one way *distinguishable* from that mental-emotional 'place' *Rakta*, as we saw with passage (i), since the 'place' may be apt for attracting attachment, but in principle need never be attached to *Rāga*. To talk, however of *Rāga*'s existing before, without or after the existence of *Rakta* is to move from "distinct" to "separable" in a way that produces a contradiction in terms. Nāgārjuna goes on to argue rightly, however, that certain Buddhists cannot remove all problems about the relations between *Rāga* and *Rakta* by making them perfectly *simultaneous in origin*: two such simultaneous things need not be *interdependent*, and these Buddhists seek *interdependence* for *Rāga* and *Rakta*. (30). Unfortunately, Nāgārjuna's examples of mutual interdependence and simultaneous origin again show likely confusions of distinctness with separation. "According to the Buddhist, colours (like blue, etc.) and tastes (like salt, etc.) are not interdependent though they simultaneously originated with the earth. .... The two horns of a cow originate simultaneously, but one is not

dependent on the other". Let us suppose that a certain kind of tapeworm and a certain kind of mammal are simultaneous in origin; such a tapeworm must have a constant supply of *that* and only that mammal's blood and such a mammal must have that and only that tapeworm purifying its blood for its kidneys' and survival's sake. The organisms are quite distinguishable, but causally inseparable as far as survival goes. Or suppose a human's left cerebral hemisphere simply cannot *exist*, let alone function without the right one and *vice versa*. The organs are distinct, but causally inseparable as far as sheer existence goes. Yet these cases, though quite analogous enough as a pair to Nāgārjuna's, miss the relation of causal-cum-conceptual-independence between *Rāga* and *Rakta*. There is far too much distinctness and an intolerable separability arises - conceivable or imaginable separability, at least.

(iii) Next (32) Nāgārjuna argues that "Separateness (*Prthaktva*) cannot be regarded as the cause (*Avyabhicarita*) of co-existence (for *Rāga* and *Rakta*). Light and darkness, like cow and buffalo, are *different* from each other, and so are *not the same* as each other. But their co-existence cannot be always accepted as a rule. So co-existence cannot be proved through separateness as a cause. In the case of light and darkness on the other hand, separateness as a cause will contradict co-existence. Thus, it is clear that the co-existence of *Rāga* and *Rakta* cannot be proved either in the identity or in the difference of *Rāga* and *Rakta*. If *Rāga* and *Rakta* are admitted as the same thing, then their co-existence cannot be proved, because co-existence is possible only in the case of more than one object. Unless the objects are different, how can co-existence be possible? One never states that a pot co-exists with itself . . . If on the other hand, *Rāga* and *Rakta* are regarded as different from each other, in that case also their co-existence cannot be proved, because we are to say that their co-existence arises out of their separate existence."

*Comments*: There is much to be said for conceding respect and sympathy to Nāgārjuna's intuitions that co-existence could not be a reflexive relation, even if it were a symmetrical and transitive relation; also, that his point about co-existence should raise doubts about the reflexivity of Sameness as well. But treating *Rāga* and *Rakta* as identical might involve a form of Mind - Body Identity Theory, however, whose curious consequence would be that temporal predicates applied to attachments might differ somewhat from temporal predicates applied to the attached place. Leibniz's 'Law of Identity' implies that if A is identical with B, then A and B must have exactly the same properties. Some exceptions, modern semanticists would allow, are acceptable for, e.g. ,

"That thief" and "Xavier Smith" - but not *too many* exceptions. Some of the remarks suggest a trend in Nāgārjuna's times to analyze causality in terms of constant conjunctions, whose excesses he is rightly resisting. What Nāgārjuna fails to consider hard enough is the question of what sorts of otherness are required for two things to be said to co-exist. Is separateness usually a necessary, though not a sufficient condition of co-existence? (His talk of requiring at least two things for co-existence seems partly to suggest this.) Or are certain sorts of distinctness quite enough for co-existence - as with distinct, but inseparable properties of some spatiotemporal objects like length and width? How distinct must close emotions be if they are said intelligibly to co-exist? How greatly separated and by what may two shadows be to co-exist - or may they merge perfectly and still be two shadows? If I cause much more darkness to cover the room by blocking the one small aperture with one finger, and cause more light to appear by very briefly creating a spark as I strike a flint on a stone with the other hand, then the light and dark are of separate origins *and* have separable causes *and* have very different intensities and durations. But surely this does not stop them from co-existing?

(iv) "Is the separateness of *Rāga* and *Rakta* proved? If it is not proved the question of their co-existence does not arise at all. So it will have to be admitted that their separateness exists, but in actual cases it will be found that such separateness is not clearly existent. Separate existence of the two objects in different places simply *has* to be proved first. This is essential before one tries to demonstrate the co-existence of two entities. So if *Rāga* and *Rakta* exist independently in different places, then the establishing of this as a definite fact will cause one to say 'Yes! They really are independent in that way. So they truly *do* co-exist.' But no such fact has been established about their independence as existing things. What basis have we, then, for supposing that it is ever *possible* for them to co-exist?" (38).

*Comments:* Now Nāgārjuna clearly takes a much tougher line: only if there is a spatial separation of objects can there be meaningful talk of co-existence in the case of those objects. He makes it clear how right Chatterjee has been to stay with terms like 'separate' and "separation" in translating the text, never 'toning them down' to "distinguish" or "distinction". Again it is obvious that he demands a degree of separation, rather than distinctness from *Rāga* and *Rakta*. But this can lower his brilliant dialectical arguments to strange levels of invalidity and obscure verbiage, unless he specifies very carefully what are to count as objects or relevant subjects of his discourse. Even then he must justify

his restrictions on what sorts of subjects of discourse are relevant to *this* argument with the Buddhists.

## II

### *Nāgārjuna's Attacks On Time And Change*

(2) (Citation 20) "This verse is inserted here specifically to stress that the origin of objects in reality does not exist ... Objects are classed under two heads - existing (*Sat*) and non-existing (*Asat*). Let something be viewed as *Sat*, then it must be considered to be eternally *Sat*, even before its origin. For an existing object always remains an existing object and can never be *Asat* (non-existent). So, if something is *Sat* before it comes into being, then it is futile to reflect on its origin. For we never find cases of the repeated origin of something which *exists*. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that what is ever-existing (*Sat*) has no origin at all. But suppose we think of something as *Asat* (non-existent). It cannot have any kind of roughly distinguished, then something is highly suspect about (i) the distinction, (ii) the existence that is said to be distinct, (iii) the change that is said to be distinct. Note again: we sometimes distinguish between a baby's birth or clay's emerging from the place of firing and the baby's life time or the clay plate's span of useful service. But we also sometimes count the baby's time in the womb and time spent being born as part of its lifetime or part of its span of existence. We sometimes count the period when the clay plate was being fired as part of the time when it exists as a domestically attractive thing to have. We cannot force *one* sort of 'separation' on the child's or plate's existence which will correspond to *both* ways of distinguishing time."

Rather similarly, the term 'TIṢṬHATI' can be used if properly inflected, properly fitted into suitable sentences, etc., so that present, past and future assertions are correctly made, as desired, about various sorts of existing, once existing and not yet existing individuals. But Nāgārjuna infers that, because such momentous distinctions must be clearly marked in different parts of time, vastly greater linguistic separations are required than differences in inflections and sentence structure and the like. Perhaps separate terms should be used, along with quite separate rules of word order, to express judgements about different areas of time with different existential presuppositions. But since there are potentially infinite numbers of distinctions to be drawn on such subjects, we might need an infinity of separate words, grammars, vocabularies, languages, etc., to mirror Reality as Nāgārjuna implies that we should.

At any rate, because verbs can be used temporally or atemporally, yet preserve the same root meaning, and because semantic truths about root meaning are timeless, it may seem to follow that timelessness is inseparable from meaning and intelligibility. Temporal distinctions are separable from root meanings. Root meanings are real enough. So only the timeless is real.

Any such pattern of thinking about the timelessness of Sense, hence of Reference, about the timelessness of predominant root meanings in timelessly two sentences about meaning, about the dispensability of the tensed, but not the tenseless for the sake of preserving intelligibility, about a resulting necessity that the temporal must take is internally incoherent as well as excluded by tenseless discourse, will involve a tissue of confusions. (See discussions of Saint Augustine, McTaggart and others). But it is the fallacies of Conceptual Atomism, confusing distinguishability in thought with separation in reality, and with possible or necessary *exclusion from* reality that fuels the flames of such thinking. On the other hand, forms of mystical experience may provide a measure of serious support for treating Timelessness as what is ultimately real. That may be a partly exculpating point in Nāgārjuna's favour.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

If this short study has caught enough of Nāgārjuna's cunningly part-shielded meaning in his bold attacks on orthodoxy in his place and time, then several fallacies of Conceptual Atomism are there to be detected and rejected in a notable Indian sceptic. Errors resembling those sometimes found in Hume's partly sceptical Naturalism and in Plato's case for knowledge of Transcendent Forms have, I hope, been exposed in passages of a brilliantly original Indian thinker. It is to be hoped that Richard Bosley will soon complete and publish his book on what he calls *The Pure and the Modal - or - Modified Principles of Atomism*. For, perhaps there is a surprisingly widespread human tendency for professional and homespun philosophers to be attracted by a curious span of historically persistent confusions. The Philosophy of Religion is unlikely to be spared.

Department of Philosophy  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alta  
CANADA T G 2 E 5

JOHN KING-FARLOW

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