

**PLATO AND NĀGĀRJUNA ON SAMVṚTI AND PARAMĀRTHA :
SOME CONVERGING PERSPECTIVES**

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If the popular proverb 'to err is human' be accepted as an adjustive behaviour, then 'Not to err is inhuman' can well be logically deduced from the former proposition. Now, the word 'inhuman' when analysed in the context of experiential values, would connote both the senses, that is, the above-manly as well as below-manly behaviour simultaneously. Hence, for a moment, leaving aside the human beings to continually err, the inculcating of the above-manly attitude due to the Platonic viewing of the soul as a captive in a living body on earth would definitely enliven us with the sublime ideas, such as courage, truth, beauty, justice etc. judiciously assessed and delineated in Plato's dialogues.

The highly potential problems we find being discussed by Socrates and his fellow philosopher in Plato's dialogues are of utmost importance even today. According to Harris "Plato's philosophy is the product of reflection upon the thought of the two preceding centuries-one of the most intellectually productive periods in the world's history.¹ Plato's thought is both technical and mystical, his style is amazingly abstract and poetical. Hence his dialogues provide insights and produce a continuous joy to read.

In India, Nāgārjuna, the renowned Buddhist philosopher of the second century A. D. (it is miserably strange that, his association with Nāgārjunakondā i.e. hill in Telugu language, on the right bank of the river Kriṣṇā has not been established on the basis of either archaeological finds or pertinent literary tradition) had been one of the greatest exponents of sūnyavāda or Mādhyamaka school. While studying Plato and Nāgārjuna one should never be satisfied with a few generalizations like the intellectual west and the intuitive east and so on. An attentive one would find that some of the arguments advanced in Plato's dialogues are astonishingly analogous to those of Nāgārjuna's dialectic. To

mention a few in this regard : Nāgārjuna has refuted the doctrine of origination, the concept of subject, object, space, time, causality, matter, motion etc. and proved them to be unreal. They are in fact, not as false as a skyflower or a hare's horn, but they do not have abiding or ultimate validity too.

At the outset, when we start inquiring into the nature of a physical object, we find that its description is full of contradictions. Nothing persisting is ever attributable to it.

“No sooner are objects thought about than they are dissipated”.² Even the concept of an object itself is full of self-contradiction. We can not logically prove whether an object is an aggregate of parts or a whole. Because if it be an aggregate of parts or atoms (very subtle though dependent particle of a thing is called an atom which is invisible to the naked eyes) then a simple aggregate of invisible atoms must necessarily be invisible. If we assume that an object is an integral whole beyond its constituents we instantly fail to explain satisfactorily the relation between the two, namely an object and its constituents. The same is the fate of all empirical things whether existent or merely referent of propositions.

Similarly, we find analogous arguments for the refutation of a material thing in Plato's dialogues. There too, according to Parmenides, multiplicity, difference, divisibility, motion and rest are considered as illusory. These are termed as ‘the way of Belief’, as opposed to ‘the way of Truth’. Parmenides precisely enumerates four possible relations of two things : (1) Sameness (2) otherness (3) Part and whole (4) Whole and part³ and finally proves all of them to be self-contradictory.

Further, Nāgārjuna has shown that the concept of motion is logically impossible. We cannot travel a path which has already been travelled, nor can we travel a path which is not yet travelled. And a path which has neither been travelled nor yet to be travelled, is also not being travelled. The mover does not move, the non-mover indeed does not move. Thus, motion, mover and destination are all being relative unreal⁴.

Motion has, certainly, very important role in the interpretation of nature. Since Plato believed the visible realm as unreal so he emphatically argues against the possibility of motion in ‘*Parmenides*’. Parmenides gives a detailed account

of the different forms of motion, such as, change of nature and locomotion. He again distinguishes between two forms of locomotion (a) in a place and (b) from one place to another. In this connection, Parmenides' disciple Zeno had advanced quite interesting arguments against the possibility of motion. "A moving body (for example, an arrow) must at each instant coincide with the space it occupies (that is, the points that make up its length); therefore at each instant it must be stationary, as is the space it occupies. But points and instants are indivisible, so between one set of points and the next, nothing intervenes; and between one instant and the next, there is no time in which the arrow can change its position", hence can not move at all. "Again, A body can not traverse a given space (or length) unless it first traverses half of the space; but it can not traverse half unless it first traverses half of that, and so on ad infinitum. Therefore, a body cannot begin to move".⁵

To clarify the above we can, here, well remember the last few pages of Plato's 'The Republic, Book VI' where Socrates says to Glaucon to draw a line and cut it into two unequal parts. The line so drawn would express the ladder of truth through which Socrates describes both the visible things and the intelligible things. Each division has been again divided and thus there are four subdivisions altogether : two in the visible and again two in the intelligible realm. "The first division in the sphere of visible consists of images i.e., shadow and reflection in water and in solid, smooth and polished bodies". Second division belongs to "the animals we see and everything that grows or is made". In other words, whatever is perceived belongs to the visible sphere whether that be impermanent or comparatively permanent. Plato distinguished between two divisions or sections of visible in respect of their clearness and want of clearness.

These divisions are surprisingly similar to the divisions made in Śūnyavāda. We are, here, reminded of Chandrakīrti, a staunch follower of Nāgārjuna, who has further distinguished between the two aspects in the phenomenal reality itself; that which is phenomenally true *Tathyasaiivṛti* and that which proves to be phenomenally false *mithyāsaiivṛti* after a careful inquiry. Those things are phenomenally true which are perceived by people through correctly functioning sense organs; otherwise, things in a dream, a mirage, hair in the atmosphere, double moon etc. are even phenomenally false.⁶

According to Plato, the realm of visible is inferior to the realm of

intelligible which is the fontal source for the visibility and maintenance of the former. The lower division in the realm of intelligible implies the sphere based on hypotheses such as Geometry, arithmetic etc. whereas the higher realm connotes the sphere of ideas or forms like courage, beauty, justice and above all 'the idea of good'. "That the word Idea in this connection is very misleading transliteration, and in no way a translation of the Greek word 'Idea' which with its synonym 'Eidos', Plato frequently applies to these supreme realities".⁷ In other words "in the higher of the two, the soul passes out of hypotheses and goes upto a principle which is above hypotheses, making no use of images that is to say, as steps and points of departure into a world which is above hypotheses, in order that the soul may soar beyond them to the first principle of the whole".⁸

Plato quite cautiously uses the term 'first principle' as singular which is 'the idea of good'. Plato never tried to explain 'the idea of good' in terms of phenomenal predication except once when he speaks of 'the idea of good' as one. 'The good, said Plato, has a place of honour yet higher the author of science and truth, and yet surpasses them in beauty'. Again, "..... the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power".⁹

Parmenides' assertion about the singularity of the Reality i.e. The Real or The Being is one, the undifferentiated whole, Also *Republic*, VIth Book's 'the idea of good' and *Symposium*'s 'sea of beauty' seem to be interwoven and tripartite manifestations of the Indescribable 'Absolute Reality' as was once made in the tripartite division of the soul in Plato's famous dialogue '*Phaedrus*'.

It is worth considering that Plato's reluctance to describe 'the idea of good' again brings him closer to Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna too spoke about the reality or Śūnyatā as indescribable. It is Absolute (Paramārtha) Truth.

"That which can only be directly realized, that which is calm and Blissful, that where all plurality is merged, that where all cries of intellect are satisfied, that which is the Non-dual Absolute".¹⁰

It is very interesting to note that Parmenides assumes his undifferentiated whole or the being as spherical. But the spherical conception of being was

vehemently criticized by many western scholars as inconsistent and was thus rectified by Melissus one of Parmenides' able disciples.

I understand that the concept of spherical is, by no means, a novel concept in Indian context. Words like Maṇḍal, Parimaṇḍal and Bhūmaṇḍal (The earth is also round shaped) are in frequent use right from the beginning of Indian culture and civilization. Ṛgveda's hymns are divided in ten maṇḍals, Brahmapurāṇa also speaks of similar implications about the golden egg or Hiranyagarbha which was later divided into two hemispheres the heaven and the earth.

Furthermore, we observe that both Plato and Nāgārjuna are keenly interested in dialectical experimentation with a view to prove the unreality or the concealing nature of Saṃvṛti as held by Nāgārjuna or shadows or visible world as declared by Plato.

Finally, we again perceive Nāgārjuna re-examining and re-evaluating his own doctrine of śūnyavāda in Vighraha-Vyāvartanī. The same is the case with Plato. A thorough criticism of the theory of Ideas appears in the Parmenides. Though, in fact, Plato and Nāgārjuna were not criticising their main doctrines, they were rather criticizing the theory as misinterpreted by some of their own followers as well as opponents.

In the light of some of the aforesaid facts and similarities one may candidly discover the thread of underlying unity in Plato and Nāgārjuna regarding sublime values to transform human knowledge into human virtue without residue.

NOTES

1. Harris, E. E., *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969, P. 13.
2. "Yathā Yathārthāścintyante Viśīryante tathā tathā". Mādhavācārya, *Sarva-Darśana-Saṅgraha*, 1986, P. 31.
3. *The Dialogues of Plato*, Tr. in Eng. by Jowett, B., Random House, New York, 1937, Vol. II, P. 111.

4. *Mūlamadhyamaka Kārikā*, Nāgārjuna, 2/1-25.
5. Harris, E. E., *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, PP. 22-23.
6. Mādhyamakāvātāra as quoted in *Bodhicharyāvātārapañjikā, Prajñākarmati*, P.353.
7. Grube, G. M. A., *Plato's Thought*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1935, P. 1.
8. *The Dialogues of Plato*, Tr. in Eng. by Jowett, B., Random House, N.York, 1937, Vol. I. P. 772.
9. *Ibid*, P. 770.
10. "Aparapratyayam Shāntam Prapañchairaprapañchitam.
nirvikalpam anānārtham etat tattvasya lakṣaṇam."
Mulamadhyamaka Kārikā, Nāgārjuna, XVIII, 9.