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Nāgārjuna's Arguments against Motion*

by Kamaleswar Bhattacharya

I want to take up again a topic I have discussed before: Nāgārjuna's arguments against motion.¹ It is a topic that continues to attract the attention of scholars, who have been giving most imaginative interpretations, and is important not only for our understanding of Nāgārjuna's own philosophy, but of Indian philosophy in general and the comparison between Indian and Western philosophy in particular.

That Indian philosophy follows the grammatical method and makes a massive use of grammatical concepts was for the first time emphasized—so far as I am aware—by Louis Renou, who, in 1942, in his great article in the *Journal Asiatique*, "Les Connexions entre le Rituel et la Grammaire en Sanskrit," wrote: "La pensée indienne a pour substructure des raisonnements d'ordre grammatical."² Later, Renou repeated the idea in different forms on more than one occasion. Its best expression was in *L'Inde classique* II (1953): "Adhérer à la pensée indienne, c'est d'abord penser en grammairien."³ Renou was thus echoing, as it were, what Ānandavardhana had said in the 9th century, in his *Vṛtti* on the *Dhvanyāloka*: *prathame vidvāṃso vaiyākaraṇāḥ, vyākaraṇamūlatvāt sarvavidyānām*.⁴ In Indian philosophy, Nāgārjuna's arguments against motion give the best illustration of this characterization.

In my previous papers, I discussed the various interpretations given by modern scholars of these arguments: those of T.R.V. Murti and Jacques May of course, but also those of Mark Siderits and J. Dervin O'Brien, for instance. The latter, in 1976,⁵ proposed of Nāgārjuna's arguments against motion what they called a "mathematical" interpretation beside what they called

a “conceptual” interpretation, and, naturally, in their “mathematical” interpretation they endeavoured to draw a parallel with Zeno’s arguments against motion. I believe, however, that they have demonstrated nothing, because of philological limitations: they refer often to Candrakīrti’s commentary, and believe that they find support from it, but it is only at the cost of grave misconstructions.

I know that Nāgārjuna’s arguments in the second chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakārikās* were sometimes interpreted by their ancient exponents in a temporal sense. In this connection, there is an interesting interpretation given by André Bareau: “Nāgārjuna critique ensuite la notion de temps, non pas de durée mais de temps fonctionnel, actif, la ‘marche du temps’ (*gati*). Celle-ci n’existe plus dans le passé et n’existe pas encore dans le futur. On ne la retrouve pas non plus dans le présent car ce dernier, sans passé ni futur en fonction desquels il puisse se mouvoir, n’est qu’un point immobile.”⁶ I am not aware, however, whether this interpretation is supported by any ancient authority.

So far as I am concerned, one must rely upon Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā*, the only commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamakārikās* extant in Sanskrit; and, in the present instance, I gladly rely on it, since the interpretation it gives of the arguments of the difficult second chapter—that “infamous chapter” as it is sometimes called—appeals to me as perfectly satisfactory—an interpretation which, alas, has itself been misunderstood by its modern exponents.

The first *kārikā* runs as follows:

*gatam na gamyate tāvad agatam naiva gamyate /
gatāgatavinirmuktam gamyamānam na gamyate //*

It can best be translated:

First, [the road] that has already been travelled (*gata*) is not being travelled at present; nor the one that has not yet been travelled (*agata*). And [the road] that is being travelled at present,—road independent of that which has been travelled and that which has not yet been travelled,—is not being travelled at present.

That neither the road that has already been travelled nor the

one that has not yet been travelled is being travelled at present needs no explanation: in the former motion has ceased, in the latter it has not yet occurred. But how can Nāgārjuna say that the road that is being travelled at present is not being travelled at present? Perhaps because of Nāgārjuna's qualification of *gamyamānam* as *gatāgatavinirmuktam*, the early commentators interpreted *na gamyate* at the end of the fourth *pāda*, as "it is not perceived," "is not known."⁷ Candrakīrti follows this interpretation.⁸ He explains that the feet are merely conglomerations of atoms (*paramāṇusamghāta*). Now, when a person treads a certain space, one distinguishes by taking as reference, on the one hand, the atom situated at the tip of one of the toes, and, on the other, the atom that is situated at the extremity of the heel, only a portion of space that has already been traversed (*gata*) and one that has not yet been traversed (*agata*); one does not perceive a portion that would be in process of being traversed (*gamyamāna*). The same situation occurs if one takes as references the spatial divisions of the atoms the foot is composed of.⁹

Understood in this way, this *kārikā* has nothing to do with Zeno's arrow paradox—contrary to what has sometimes been thought. Candrakīrti bases his interpretation on two Buddhist theories, namely that there is no whole independent of the parts, and that atoms have spatial extension.

In the second *kārikā*, Nāgārjuna states the objection raised by the opponent:

*ceṣṭā yatra gatis tatra gamyamāne ca sā yataḥ /
na gate nāgate ceṣṭā gamyamāne gatis tataḥ //*

Here Candrakīrti states that *gati*, in the fourth *pāda*, has two meanings: "knowledge," and "motion," in accordance with the two meanings of the root *gam*, "to know," and "to move": *eko 'tra gamir jñānārthaḥ, aparāś ca deśāntarasamprāptyarthaḥ*. All this is, perhaps, unnecessary complication. We can simply translate the second *kārikā*:

Where there is effort, there is motion. Now, there is effort in [the road] that is being travelled, not in that which has already been travelled, nor in that which has not yet been travelled. There is, therefore, motion in [the road] that is being travelled at present.

Be that as it may, Nāgārjuna presents against this objection arguments which can best be explained if they are related to grammatical concepts, as Candrakīrti clearly perceived. I shall, therefore, summarize these arguments in the light of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*: Motion (*gati*, *gamana*), we have seen, cannot be conceived in relation to a road that has already been travelled (*gata*), nor in relation to a road that has not yet been travelled (*agata*). It can be conceived only in relation to a road that is being travelled at present (*gamyamāna*). But—Nāgārjuna argues—it is equally impossible to attribute motion to a road that is being travelled at present. Why? It is in virtue of a connection with the action of travelling (*gamikriyā*, says Candrakīrti) that one designates a road as “being travelled” (*gamyamāna*). There is no second action of travelling that can be coherently attributed to it. Or, one should suppose that in attributing ¹⁰ the action of travelling to a road that is “being travelled,” in the sentence *gamyamānaṃ gamyate*, “[The road] that is being travelled is being travelled,” one is using the verb *gamyate*, “is being travelled,” without there being any motion—which is absurd. In other words, one can only say *gamyamānaṃ*, “being travelled”; one cannot use the complete sentence, *gamyamānaṃ gamyate*, “[The road] that is being travelled is being travelled.” Now, if it is supposed for the sake of argument that the connection with the action of travelling is in the finite verb *gamyate*, “is being travelled,” then there is no connection with the action of travelling in the participle *gamyamāna*, “being travelled”; and we encounter the same absurdity as before: one would be designating a road as “being travelled” (*gamyamāna*) without there being any motion! Finally, it may be supposed that there is connection with the action of travelling in both *gamyamāna*, “being travelled,” and *gamyate*, “is being travelled.” But, in this case, it follows that there are two motions: one by virtue of which the road is designated as “being travelled,” and another that is attributed to that road, its locus, when it is said: *gamyamānaṃ gamyate* “[The road] that is being travelled is being travelled.” *gamyamānasya gamane prasaktaṃ gamanadvayam / yena tad gamyamānaṃ ca yac cātra gamanam punaḥ // (kārikā 5)*. “Locus” (*adhikaraṇa*) says Candrakīrti: although grammatically the road that is being travelled (*gamyamāna*) is, in the sentence *gamyamānaṃ gamyate*, the “object” (*karman*), semantically it is the locus (*adhikaraṇa*) of the action

of travelling, insofar as it holds the agent in whom inheres the action of travelling denoted by the verbal root *gam* (the "locus," *adhikaraṇa*, holds the action only indirectly by holding either the agent or the object in which the action inheres). Similarly, in the *Mahābhāṣya*, Patañjali says that in a sentence such as *adhvānaṃ vrajati* ". . . travels the road," the road is the locus of the action of travelling (*adhikaraṇam atrādhvā vrajatikriyāyāḥ*).¹¹ What harm is there if there are two motions? The harm is that, if there are two motions, then there should also be two agents of motion; for, without an agent of motion, there cannot be motion: *dvau gantārau prasajyete prasakte gamanadvaye / gantāraṃ hi tīraskṛtya gamanaṃ nopapadyate // (kārikā 6)*. "An action," writes Candrakīrti, "necessarily requires a means to bring it about (*sādhana* = *kāraka*): the object (*karman*) or the agent (*kartr*). Now the action of travelling also resides in an agent; therefore, it requires an agent of travelling (*gantr*)." ¹² Candrakīrti refers here to the grammatical theory according to which the action denoted by a verbal root resides either in the agent (*kartr*) or in the object (*karman*), and the verbal root *gam*, "to go, move, travel," is one of those which denote actions that reside in the agent (*kartr;sthakriya*). It is therefore indispensable that there should be two agents of motion if there are two motions. But we have only one agent in the case under consideration. The opponent, ignorant of grammar, says that one agent can perform more than one action, as, for instance, when the same Devadatta, standing, speaks and looks. But Candrakīrti teaches him that *kāraka*, in Grammar, is not a substance (*dravya*), but a power (*śakti*) which is diversified because of the diversity of the actions. In this way we can account for the fact that Devadatta performs simultaneously the actions of standing, speaking, and looking. Each of these actions has a different agent: it is not the substance Devadatta which remains the same in all these actions, but a power, different for each of these actions, which resides in him. When, however, Devadatta alone moves, there are not in him two powers which can account for the double action of moving implied in the sentence *gamyamānaṃ gamyate*, "[The road] that is being travelled is being travelled." There would be no difficulty if the two actions referred to two different times: there would then be two powers in Devadatta functioning as the agents of the actions of travelling at two different times. But, in the instance we are considering,

both the actions refer to the same time, the present. Hence the paradox.¹³

Candrakīrti, coming after Bhartṛhari, naturally uses his terminology. It is well known that Bhartṛhari had defined *sādhana* (= *kāraṅka*) as the capacity (*sāmarthya*) or the power (*śakti*) that a thing has to bring an action to accomplishment. But the author of the *Mahābhāṣya*, Patañjali, had already shown—unless the idea goes back to Pāṇini himself—that *sādhana* cannot be a substance (*dravya*), and it is perhaps to Patañjali that Nāgājuna owes his inspiration.¹⁴ All the other arguments of this second chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* will be found to be equally based on grammatical concepts, if we follow Candrakīrti. In fact, the majority of them will be found to be merely variants of those which have just been summarized. They will therefore be easily understood, once one has understood these.

The importance of the arguments of the second chapter will be seen from the fact that they serve as a model for other arguments contained in other chapters, for instance, in the third, the seventh, and the tenth. The eighth chapter is a continuation of the second, since the last two *kārikās* of the second chapter will be elucidated only in the eighth.¹⁵

I am satisfied with Candrakīrti's interpretation insofar as it helps me discover in Nāgārjuna's arguments an inner coherence, and I am better satisfied with it than with any other interpretation given by ancient or modern authorities of which I am aware. Nevertheless, I do believe that the Mādhyamika, who uses the grammarian's concepts to serve his dialectical needs, is open to criticism from the grammarian's own side. The latter would say that the Mādhyamika is unduly mixing up facts of language with ontological considerations which are foreign to them: these facts are to be explained, not, as the Mādhyamika assumes or feigns to assume, by reference to the "external being" (*bāhyasattā*) or "primary being" (*mukhyasattā*) of the things, but only by reference to their "superimposed being" (*aupacārikī sattā* or *upacārasattā*) which is conceived and externally projected by the mind of the speaker and hearer. It is this being, which exists in the mind alone (*buddhisattā*), that is the ground of all verbal behaviour. "The meaning of a word never deviates from being" (*na sattāṃ padārtho vyabhicarati*), said Patañjali, and, according

to Bhartṛhari and the later tradition, it is this "superimposed being" that he had in mind.¹⁶

I believe equally, however, that the Mādhyamika would never have been able to formulate his arguments against motion if he had not found in grammar the concepts which furnished him with the technical basis for them.

Here is a significant point for those who are interested in the comparison of Indian and Western philosophy, nay, for the historian in general, who is not merely interested in what may be termed the surface of a civilization, chronology of facts, institutions, and so on, but wants to get at its deep roots. For the difference that separates here two philosophies is also one which separates two civilizations. This difference, which is of a scientific character and therefore, it seems to me, more important than the occasional similarities concerning axioms and dogmas that have been found between Indian and Western philosophy, was emphasized for the first time—so far as I am aware—by Professor Daniel H.H. Ingalls, in his celebrated article "A Comparison of Indian and Western Philosophy."¹⁷ I do not know yet what this difference is due to, but it is there, and I can give it no better expression than the one which Professor Ingalls gave it. "The Greek example," he said, "is based on a problem of mathematics, the Indian one on a problem of grammar. Here is a noticeable difference between Greek and Indian philosophy, a difference of a scientific, not a dogmatic character. In philosophizing the Greeks made as much use as possible of mathematics. The Indians, curiously, failed to do this, curiously because they were good mathematicians. Instead, they made as much use as possible of grammatical theory and argument."¹⁸ Professor Ingalls did not take into account Nāgārjuna's arguments against motion. However, it is these which seem to illustrate best, in the light of Candrakīrti's interpretation, what Nāgārjuna owes to grammar, and, at the same time, the difference that separates him from Zeno, also arguing against motion.

Mathematics has given, in general, the technical basis for philosophic thought in the West.¹⁹ In India, this role was played by grammar (*vyākaraṇa*). And Professor Frits Staal's brilliant statement applies not only to the ancient Indian philosophers but also to their modern students: "Just as Plato reserved admis-

sion to his Academy for geometricians, Indian scholars and philosophers are expected to have first undergone a training in scientific linguistics."²⁰

NOTES

*Paper read at the VI Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, held jointly with the XXXI International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa (31 August–7 September, 1983: Tokyo and Kyoto).

1. Cf. "Nāgārjuna's Arguments against Motion: Their Grammatical Basis," in *A Corpus of Indian Studies: Essays in Honour of Professor Gaurinath Sastri* (Calcutta, 1980), pp. 85–95; "The Grammatical Basis of Nāgārjuna's Arguments: Some Further Considerations," in *Indologica Taurinensia*, VIII–IX/1980–81 (*Sternbach Commemoration Volume*), pp. 35–43; "Reconsidération des arguments de Nāgārjuna contre le mouvement," in *Proceedings of the First International Symposium on the Sanskrit Language*, held in Mexico City in February 1982; Mexico, 1984, pp. 189–99.

2. *Journal Asiatique*, CCXXXIII (1941–42), p. 164 (= *A Reader on the Sanskrit Grammarians*, edited by J.F. Staal, Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1972, p. 468).

3. L. Renou and J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique* II (Paris-Hanoi, 1953), p. 86, § 1519.

4. *Dhvanyāloka* (Paṭṭābhirāma Śāstri's edition: Benares, 1940), pp. 132–3.

5. "Zeno and Nāgārjuna on Motion," in *Philosophy East & West* (Honolulu), XXVI, pp. 281–99.

6. A. Bareau in A. Bareau, W. Schubring & C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Les Religions de l'Inde*, III: *Bouddhisme, Jāinisme, Religions archaïques* (Paris, 1966), p. 181.

7. Cf. Musashi Tachikawa, "A Study of Buddhapālita's *Mūlamadhyamakavṛtti*," in *The Journal of the Faculty of Literature*, Nagoya University, LXIII, Philosophy 21 (1974), p. 5 and pp. 9–10, n. 5.

8. See also *Prasannapadā* on *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, II, 12 & 17; III, 3; VII, 14; X, 13.

9. *atha syāt: gantur gacchato yaś caraṇākrānto deśaḥ sa gamyamānaḥ syād iti. naivam. caraṇayor aṇi paramāṇusamghātavāt. aṅgulyagrāvasthitasya paramāṇor yaḥ pūrvō deśaḥ sa tasya gate 'ntargataḥ, pārśnyavasthitasya caramaparamāṇor ya uttaro deśaḥ sa tasyāgate 'ntargataḥ. na ca paramāṇuvyatirekeṇa caraṇam asti. tasmān nāsti gatāgatavyatirekeṇa gamyamānam. yathā caivam caraṇe vicāraḥ, evam paramāṇūnām aṇi pūrvāparadigbhāḡusambandhena vicāraḥ kārya iti . . . Prasannapadā* (L. de La Vallée Poussin's edition, *Bibliotheca Buddhica*, IV, St.-Petersbourg, 1903–13) p. 93.

10. On the precise nature of this attribution, see below.

11. See "Nāgārjuna's Arguments against Motion . . .," *loc. cit.*, pp. 94–5, n. 39.
12. *yasmād avāśyaṃ kriyā svasādhanam apekṣate karma kartāraṃ vā, gamikriyā caivam kartary avasthītāto gantāraṃ apekṣate . . .* "Nāgārjuna's Arguments against Motion . . .," *loc. cit.*, p. 87.
13. For more details see "Nāgārjuna's Arguments against Motion . . .," *loc. cit.*, pp. 87ff., with the notes.
14. See *ibid.*, pp. 89-90, with the notes.
15. See "The Grammatical Basis of Nāgārjuna's Arguments . . .," *loc. cit.*
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.
17. *Journal of Oriental Research* (Madras), XXII (1954), pp. 1–11.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
19. Cf. Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901–1950*, edited by Robert Charles Marsh, London-New York, 1956 (fifth impression: 1971), pp. 367–8.
20. "Euclid and Pāṇini," in *Philosophy East and West*, XV (1965), p. 114.