

Negation and Action

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FIND Forum 2015: *Differences*

PRESENTATION

*Is it possible to transgress the Western radicalisation of difference through Eastern figures of negativity, such as Buddhist emptiness?
Can it be adapted to a new paradigm of thought/experience?*

There is no action without ignorance.

Economy of style - the epigraph is a familiar option. Economy of time, economy of space, for what echoes another history of philosophy, series of internal others, from Heraclitus to Nietzsche. The aphorism was already a response, an accommodative and creative intuition to come *after* a certain history of affirmation and negation - there lied, perhaps, already a possibility to “transgress the Western radicalisation of difference”...

How tempting is this option of the economy, the *more-in-less*, embraced challenge of the fruitful contradiction. I initially thought of contributing to the unique and pleasantly ambitious conceptualisation of this event on *Differences* in the form of one or two aphorisms, just for the sake of breaking expectations, of *differing* from an academic, detached, scientific language which many of us could start to find more than problematic; and also of *deferring* the arrival of the combination of the expertise that this illustrious audience demands, and of the experiential wits that those amongst you knowing me may await. Will we ever know if this would have been an easy exit or an audacious creativity, but my excuse would have been, to say the least, understandable: the subject concocted by Adrian and Sarah for me has been, not without the pleasure of a first euphemism: a “provocation of thought”. Requiring such provocations through life, and finding the agents able to engage oneself at this level, are two of the many points which I will not have a chance to mention, not to say dwell within, as deep as they should duly demand. A wise man once recognised that certain remedies initially seem like poisons — well, I must start by thanking Sarah and Adrian for

this beautiful *pharmakon*, which triggered in me a long series of dialectical cycles of emotional affirmation / emotional negation, before reaching the positive transcendence that marks this day... There was more than Hegel, already, much before entering into the topic proper — arguably a little bit of Derrida, indeed, for the uncontrollable *postponement* of my work across weeks, and perhaps even a pinch of Freud, for the degree of denial of my task which my mind started exploring... A necessary evil — *already* — because the event of the FIND Forum was a long time coming, probably for most of us, and arguably in the evolution of dynamics much bigger than us. And certainly for me, personally, since the very limited experience of more classical academic meetings which my age could offer me, already made me understand them as undeniably more poisons than gifts. Thank you to the organisers indeed, and their audacity was calling for another — my own. Through this process of development, of *differance* — already bringing time in the event of difference and self-difference — I first attempted to make up a distraction from my youthful mind through a few stylistic appetisers, before trying to reassure myself in front of the frightening scale of the questions asked, by reviewing old class notes from various contemporary countries recently visited, about philosophical civilisations of another time. After sharing some raw intuitions with a friend — the current weather was indeed one evoking the *brain-storming* — she suggested that I had covered enough to prepare 10 books — a fantasy plan that I may very well defer to another time. Indeed: how to do justice to the topic, and to the quality of participants here present? What of this “Western radicalisation of difference”? What are the faulty developments? Who are the culprits? *Quels philosophes devrions-nous dépouiller* - Which philosophers should we rob, which philosophers should we skin? Which are the philosophical directions that we must keep *au chaud*, warm in the pocket, to face the upcoming world challenges that this Forum also recalls? Which are the philosophers whom we should stone, to death or at least till avowal, for what is already suggested as a problematic status quo: the “Western radicalisation of difference”? And what of the equally problematic memories of colonialism, where East or West have been called up alternatively, sometimes randomly, to their mutual rescue? As for the “new paradigm of thought/experience”, the proposition is more than a *pharmakon*, it is a real *invitation*, the *invitare* which Latin speakers, not very far from here, understood as *summoning*, or *challenging*. The challenge of

two duel opponents — an imaginary in which philosophies across East and West may lose themselves a little too often. The blank slate of one's "new paradigm of thought/experience" is perhaps the philosopher's ultimate libidinal projection, but one that can turn into the colloquial French of the *casse-pipe*, this very pitilessness that would have broken many of our favourite philosophers' pipe. *Thank you* and *no thanks* — my affirmation and my negation for offering me one of philosophy's most ambitious and all-embracing questions, for what is still one of my first acts of intellectual exhibitionism. But if "*there is no action without ignorance*", as the self-motivating epigraph promised, then let us go on with our mixtures of knowledge and ignorance, with our ignorant knowledge and knowledgeable ignorances.

But, now that I am at it, my pipe seems rustic but smooth and straight, yet perhaps *maligne* or malign. The ingredients of today's vaporous preparation are three: a *certain* history of the relation to "difference" in the supposedly hermetic canon of Western philosophy ; a contrasting sensibility to "negation" among so-called "Eastern figures," figures of the intellectual history of India, perhaps China, with a keen attention upon the Buddhist concept of *Shunyata* or emptiness, led by the philosopher Nagarjuna, of the 2nd century Common Era ; and finally, some highly personal, yet hopefully universalisable implications from the unforeseeable encounters of these two. I am now tempted to defer the invitation and tell anyone of you "after you !" — but this difference between courtesy and desertion is certainly what distinguishes the gentleman from the philosopher...

In this complex history of negations, I would be tempted to start with the most positive of the ingredients at hand — and this would be enough to make the concerned character turn over in his own grave (if he had one): let us start with Nagarjuna. This would be a serious makeover, for the figure often seen as the greatest Buddhist philosopher of history, or even less controversially, the symbol of the Mahayana metaphysics later popularised in the West as '*the*' Buddhist alternative to Western philosophy. More: it would be a hangover for Nagarjuna, he who built across his works the enticing paradox of a non-positive philosophy: through his method known as the *catuskoti* or *four-fold dialectic*, Nagarjuna aimed at disproving *all* possible, expressible statements, while advancing *none* of his own. As we know, Mahayana Buddhism emerged out of an internal schism

amongst influential Buddhist monks, somewhere around the first century of the Common Era. Their differences concerned a series of interpretations of the Buddhist doctrines, their supportive or implied metaphysics, as well as on the words and intentions of the Buddha. The introspection of Nagarjuna came as that of a rigorous, logical thinker, onto the fundamentally enigmatic statements of the Buddha. In particular, he inquired into a series of questions which the Buddha declared as *avyakrta* or inexpressible. Fourteen things, according to him, could not be expressed:

1. Whether the world is eternal
2. Whether the world is not eternal
3. Whether the world is eternal and not eternal
4. Whether the world is neither eternal nor not-eternal
5. Whether the world is finite
6. Whether the world is infinite
7. Whether the world is both finite and infinite
8. Whether the world is neither finite nor infinite
9. Whether the Buddha exists after death
10. Whether the Buddha does not exist after death
11. Whether the Buddha exists and does not exist after death
12. Whether the Buddha neither exists nor does not exist after death
13. Whether the soul is identical with the body
14. Whether the soul is different from the body.

As we can see, there is already an element of systematicity in Buddha's statement. The possible four alternatives around such questions were already crafted, and Nagarjuna's originality consisted in using the most rigorous logical process to demonstrate the insufficiency of any such statement, to bring the listener towards the conclusion he believed Buddha indicated: that Reality is transcendent to thought, and rational thinking must be re-discovered as necessarily partial,

preparing the mind for one's cardinal turn towards *Prajna*, transcendent insight. Nagarjuna's famous treatise, the *Madhyamika Karika*, presents his method, the four-cornered negation, mentioned as *Catuskoti*, possibly translated as *Tetralemma* or *Quadrilemma*. It operates a rejection of views by *reduction ad absurdum* (*Prasanga*), through the following structure:

1. A positive thesis, opposed by
2. A negative counter-thesis — they form the basic alternatives
3. The conjunctive affirmation of the basic alternatives
4. The disjunctive denial of the basic alternatives

The questions addressed span across all the major metaphysical themes debated in those days by the various active schools of thought: epistemology, senses, perception, ontology and elements, passion, causality, action, time, suffering, etc. Culmination of each of these logical demonstrations: the internal impossibility of any statement about reality, demonstrated through the very criterion which commanded the exercise: reason. But Nagarjuna negates only all views about reality: he does not negate reality itself. Nagarjuna's Madhyamika philosophy is not a *nastika*, a form of nihilism. By the dialectic or deconstruction of reason alone, the intuitive reception of *Shunya*, emptiness, operates on the mind of the listener as the beginning of a path to the development of transcendental insight, *Prajna*. *Shunyata* is thus not a theory, not a positive contribution, but the silhouette of a direction led by the aspiration of intuition, away from the conceptualising tendencies of the mind. Nagarjuna thus suggests what could be paradoxically formalised today as a 'non indicative use of language', or a creative renewed approach to language as a means towards its own transcendence.

The revolution of Nagarjuna's formal treatment inspired greatly the growth of Mahayana Buddhism — before its second major sub-school: the idealists of Yogacara or Vijñānavāda, in the 4th century with Asanga and Vasubandhu. The commentarial tradition of the Buddhist canons would be greatly re-oriented to apply Nagarjuna's two approaches to language across the various statements of the Buddha himself. The teachings of the Buddha would be divided across two groups: the first, *Nitartha*, primary or direct, would cover his necessarily

enigmatic discourses on the Absolute Reality, while the second, *Nevartha*, secondary or indirect, would cover his use of a conventional approach to language, to discuss only reality from a relative standpoint. A famous distinction emerges: the dual concept of Samvriti-Satya and Paramartha-Satya, opposing empirical or conventional to absolute, for domains as diverse yet organically related as: truth, language, and reality. Through this lineage of interpretation, the Buddhist approach to intellectual enquiry suggests that while the question is put at the logical level of reason, the answer can only be found at the supralogical, suprarational level of *Prajna*. And that this *Prajna* is not just another mode of intellectual, ideal life, but one returning to the materiality of spiritual discipline and morality.

Nagarjuna's thought highlights a major turn in the history of Buddhism, and indeed, a cardinal separation from the metaphysics of Hinayana Buddhism. The great Russian translator and commentator Fyodor Shcherbatskoy goes as far as balancing Hinayana and Mahayana along the the opposite poles of rationalism and mysticism: "The approach to truth adopted by Hinayana was one of mystically-tinged rationalism, that adopted by Mahayana was one of super-rationalism and profound mysticism." Indeed, the so-called 'Small Vehicle' and the 'Grand Vehicle' revealed their distinctions in the social construction, across centuries, of their ideals. Returning from metaphysical and cosmic considerations, the individual thus faces two routes. The Theravada line of traditions sees one's ultimate development in the form of the *Arhatta*, the "killer of enemies" — one's own enemies, namely attachments born out of ignorance. The Mahayana ideal locates in the self-development of the individual not a surrender to its own emptiness, but a refreshed connection to all other sentient beings: the Bodhisattva, while having freed itself from all self-attachments, would await for and guide the liberation of all other beings before going into Nirvana. This historical transition, between Hinayana and Mahayana, does not only reveal a move from personal to social concerns, but perhaps instead the adaptation of Buddhism to the cultural parameters of its Brahmanical-Hindu context. It perhaps contributed to the dissemination of the intellectual integrity of small communities of monks, onto more democratisable principles of daily life, meaningful and applicable by the masses. With Madhyamika philosophy, the void of *Shunya* is not an end in itself: it is the greatest of potentials, the absolute possibility of positivity: because it is nothing in

particular, it has the possibility of every thing. Naturally, in this direction which places the ideal in action and not in achievement, the well-known collapsing of opposites in Mahayana Buddhism emerges as a set of implications: because even the absolute illusion of phenomenal reality is untenable, the details of this empirical, conventional reality are pointers, paths to another 'level' of reality — for the enlightened being, phenomena *are* transcendent: ethics and contemplation *are* one and the same process.

Ethics and contemplation — perhaps the two archetypes, *clichés* of another time as to determining the final end or application of the exercise of philosophy, respectively in the West, and in India. The reason of our presence here today is, naturally, that we must pass beyond the construction of oppositions both internally to each philosophical civilisation, and externally, in this old temptation of placing Western and Eastern thoughts at times as duel opponents, or else, as humanitarian rescues to one another. “*Is it possible to transgress the Western radicalisation of difference through Eastern figures of negativity?*” — probably not. The task of inter-cultural philosophy, if not already in its very genetics, at least today, is to appreciate differences in order to transform the superficial impressions of respective and exclusive negativity, into new alignments for positive potentials.

No transgression, thus. [\[etymology of transgression\]](#) Looking Eastward for problems presumed to be of Western philosophy alone may be a major *digression*, forgetting the internal responses that a simple *ingression* may provide. This would be transforming an interpretative hypothesis (the “Western radicalisation of differences”) into a sedimented historico-philosophical meta-narrative, extending certain conceptual deadlocks onto *all* the philosophers and contributions of an entire intellectual civilisation, while forgetting the traces of appeasements several of them could have developed. Today, we *must* build with the help of them all: Socratic schools, Scholastic intuitions, rationalism, empiricism, and, for the more vivid wounds *and* strengths of our current culture of negativity and differences, figures like Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas, Derrida and many others. Along with — and this is precisely my point — the variety of sensibilities developed across the ages outside of Europe, for which the present discussion of Madhyamika philosophy is only one amongst many. So: in this global theatre, in this historical play, what is

everyone's speech? Beyond their own mutual relations within their own intellectual civilisation, and beyond their relevance to their own cultural milieu, what can we spot as the unique contributions, universally relevant, of the important thinkers of our histories? What is Hegel's line, for instance? We may appreciate, in his thought, for example, the relation between cosmic time and human history that the German philosopher reintroduced after the exploration of rationalism's subjectivist tendency. In what is probably an inspiration of Heraclitus, Hegel reaffirmed the unity of opposites, by indicating through the dialectic the non-radical otherness of the contradictory. We could complement this with another remarkable inspiration: Levinas. What is he bringing on the transcultural plane of today's societal questions? Levinas defended the everyday resonance of the impossibility of a radical monism, through the phenomenal reminder of the face-to-face. By positing *ethics as first philosophy*, he proposed a major alternative to the shared foundations of the developments of science and philosophy in Ancient Greece, where his understanding of *duty* would replace their assumption of *use*, and where a metaphysics of utilitarian observation would become one of action. *Action*, already — and we will get back to that soon. Third figure of this very elusive enumeration: Derrida. Observing the voluntary and involuntary rapports of the first two, Hegel and Levinas, Derrida could extend the cosmic effort of Hegel, while keeping Levinas's aspiration for Otherness, and yet bypassing his fundamental humanism. In the Cartesian cultural milieu of France, Derrida could promote with fame and actual outreach (something few intellectuals can claim) an almost mystical ambition for our daily use of language. Language becomes an object of contemplation: meditation on the emptiness of words, on the *aufheben* or constructive self-transcendence of our lexical histories. When Nagarjuna uses logic to dismantle the extent of reason's relevance, Derrida combines philology and literary style — using a method itself transcending reason, he relies upon the emotional connect of a writer to his reader.

And what of Nagarjuna? In the interpretative direction suggested here, Mahayana metaphysics can be seen as an *adaptation* of the soteriological rationalism of Hinayana thought — closer to a classical conception of philosophy in the Western traditions — in favour of the dense, primarily uneducated populations used to a Brahmanical-Hinduism whose spiritual inspirations were disseminated more through rituals and everyday actions, than via intellectual meditations.

Action is karma, and we should not forget that *karmic* metaphysics, even in their controversial socio-cultural constructions such as the caste systems, do highlight the role of action, and not thought alone, in permitting the development of any being. And, if we bring together, today, a certain history of differences and negation in Western philosophy, with the dialectic of Nagarjuna's emptiness, where emptiness ultimately translates into potentials for a socially compassionate philosophy of action, we may reach one particular element for a "new paradigm of thought/experiment": a combination of the pan-Indic intuition of karma with the more classically Greek quest of knowledge, perhaps in the form of this one proposition — *there is no action without ignorance*.

How is this *economic* proposition implying the said partners? Perhaps because it brings together, in one pole, the enterprise of knowledge of a certain history of thought in Greece onwards, and the refinement of this very object, *knowledge*, into its concretion in the form of *action* — action as ethics or relation to the other with Levinas, and action as performative openings through language with Derrida, for instance — and in the other pole, *another* history of action, far away from Greece, the history and plural threads of action as *karma*, which understood the event of action as necessarily linked and coming together, in each being, through burdens, attachments, patterns of behaviour and thought, and thus ultimately, in its many various forms and degrees: through ignorance. The ambitious horizons of the quest for knowledge in the science and philosophy of the so-called "Western cultures", took the form of affirmative or positive knowledge, about the human and its world, in order to enable the use of this knowledge for the material development of their societies. In India, however, the widely shared intuition of *karma* posited the quest of knowledge as necessarily limited by the ignorance of any enquiring being. And more: that ignorance and actions would perpetuate one another through a cycle maintaining beings in their conditions of suffering and division from the cosmos.

Can or should knowledge or even action still be attempted if they imply to perpetuate ignorance? Yes, and this is the creative flexibility that I will present before you, to conclude through a response that is more of an opening. If we are to consider "a new paradigm of thought/experience", that is, if it still makes sense to bring together thought — or *the economy of*

knowledge and ignorance — and experience — or the possibility of action as *the result of the economy of ignorance* — it is that action and ignorance are commensurable, that ignorance can be a means to the active objectives of knowledge. It is, perhaps, that we could interpret the identity of deep contemplation and everyday action permitted by the Buddha, through Nagarjuna's interpretation, as inviting us to consider all aspects of reality, that is, even the very facts of delusion, ignorance or attachments, as the actual means to achieve their own transcendence. All — included a symbol, a certain *bête noire* of Buddhism, but also maybe, therefore, its anti-symbol: the ego. *The Buddhist way — wilfully playing with one's ego ?* Intentionally playing hide-and-seek with attachment and ignorance, transcending a projection to arrive at another delusion: perhaps a few possible directions in order to ensure the creative and empowering energy of the continuous overcoming of our conditioning.