Relativity

Nāgārjuna taught the idea of relativity; he gives the example that shortness exists only in relation to the idea of length. The determination of a thing or object is only possible in relation to other things or objects, especially by way of contrast. He held that the relationship between the ideas of "short" and "long" is not due to intrinsic nature (svabhāva). This idea is also found in the Pali Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas, in which the idea of relativity is expressed similarly: "That which is the element of light ... is seen to exist on account of [in relation to] darkness; that which is the element of good is seen to exist on account of bad; that which is the element of space is seen to exist on account of form."

II. The Concept of Time

Nagarjuna devotes chapter 19 of the MMK specifically to time. He attempts to show that time has no self-existence. There is an important difference in his arguments here however, for rather than developing all four arms of the tetralemma as he so often does, he concentrates only on the denial of time. Without trying to make too much of this fact, I wish to call attention to it in order to support the idea that time, like space, has a kind of special status for Nagarjuna, at least to the extent of requiring slightly altered forms of argumentation.

Three arguments regarding time are presented. The first argument is a reprise of the production argument and relies on the common-sense view that time is split into past, present and future. Nagarjuna argues if the "parts" of time have own-being, the conception of time quickly loses its coherence. If "the past" is considered to produce "the present" and "the future," the latter two parts would be already "in" the past and could therefore not be properly said to have separate being. On the other hand, if the present and the future are separate from the past, then their very unconnectedness leaves them uncaused, independent and without reference to the past. But since the very notions of present and future imply a relation to the past, this is self-contradictory. Therefore, the present and future do not exist. Neither identity with nor difference from the past is sufficient to establish the reality of the present and future. In a similar fashion, the independence of any of the parts of time can be attacked on the basis of their inseparability and necessary reference to each other. The past, for example, can not be independent because it is nonsensical if it does not terminate in the present and future.

Nagarjuna offers a second argument against the reality of time which does not specifically rely on time being "split." Rather, the objection is framed in epistemological terms:

5. A non-stationary "time" cannot be "grasped" and a stationary "time" which can be grasped does not exist. How, then can one perceive time if it is not "grasped"?

In other words, if time is acknowledged to be continuously fleeting, there are no absolute static components of it that can be experienced (or, perhaps, "grasped" by the mind). If we propose, as the Abhidharmic metaphysicians held, that there can be a "static moment" of time, it would no longer count as time. Time in and of itself can never be grasped.

The third and final argument shows that time can not be considered to be a self-existing thing that is somehow not dependent on other existing objects. This is because, as Nagarjuna has shown, there are no independent "objects" in the world, nor could time be itself truly independent as long as it remained defined by its relation to such supposed entities. To place the argument in more contemporary terms, time is not a self-existing substratum or arena in which equally independent things endure or independent events occur.

It is important to note that although Nagarjuna denies the independent existence of time in this chapter, he is not, apparently, denying what we might call the unmediated experience of change. What he does deny is that there is any coherent way of grasping or expressing this experience in terms of the flow of an independent substratum to reality. It seems that Nagarjuna's view of time is similar to Augustine's, who remarked that he knew what time was until he was called upon to speak of it. David Kalupahana summarizes Nagarjuna's view here nicely:

Time denied by him is absolute time....This is a rejection not of temporal phenomena, but only of time and phenomena as well as their mutual dependence so long as they are perceived as independent entities. (Kaluphana, p. 279)

Hence, although Nagarjuna makes no positive assertions regarding time and its relation to things, his view seems open to the interpretation that time and the things that change are essentially "one." We might phrase his view this way: phenomena are always phenomena-in-flux and time is always flux-in-phenomena. There is not a Time and Things that persist through it, but only a changing of things that "is" the change over time.

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Buddhism – Responses to issues of science.

*HH the Dalai Lama; New Delhi, India, 6 December 2013: - Vasant Valley School*

d) Buddhist teachings and responses to issues of science. How Buddhism has responded to these in the historical and contemporary world.