Asymmetrical Interdependence: An Integration of Buddhism and Process Philosophy

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The process philosopher, Charles Hartshorne, contends that the 'tetralemma' (or four-cornered negation) used by Nagarjuna, founder of Madhyamika Buddhism, takes into account only symmetrical relations of mutual independence (or difference) and mutual dependence (or identity) and is thus not exhaustive as it ignores relations that are asymmetrical. However, I will argue in this paper that Nagarjuna was indeed aware of asymmetrical relations because his understanding of the core Buddhist idea of *pratitya-samutpada* – usually translated as 'dependent origination' or 'interdependent arising' – can be interpreted as 'asymmetrical interdependence'; a concept which, I maintain, is perfectly compatible with process philosophy. Before looking at Hartshorne's critique of Nagarjuna, I will first briefly outline both philosophers' theories of relations.

According to Hartshorne, one of the basic ideas with which process metaphysics either stands or falls is 'the idea of one-way dependencies or relative predicates' (1983: 376). Hartshorne views all ultimate contrasts as consisting of relative terms and absolute terms (called *r-* and *a*-terms for short). Thus we have the *r*-terms: relative, dependent, becoming, subject, effect, contingent, etc. and the *a*-terms: absolute, independent, being, object, cause, necessary, etc. The inclusiveness of an *a*-term within an *r*-term means that the contrast between them is itself included in the *r*-term, rather than in a third term between them. Hartshorne explains this 'principle of inclusive contrast' as follows:

> Since *r*-terms are inclusive and express the overall truth, … we can find the absolute only in the relative, objects … only in subjects, causes only in effects …, being only in becoming, … the abstract only in the concrete, … the necessary only in the contingent, …. If one wants to understand an *a*-term one should locate it in its *r*-correlate. There are not subjects *and* objects but only objects in subjects, not causes and effects but only causes in effects, … not necessary things and contingent things but necessary constituents of contingent wholes … (1970: 118-9)

That the relation between *r*- and *a*-terms is indeed asymmetrical can be illustrated by a few examples. Take being and becoming: it is easy to conceive of being as a special case of becoming, becoming which has slowed down or come to a stand-still – compare, for example, the becoming of a rock with the becoming of water in a river – but the derivation of becoming from being is inconceivable (*pace* Hegel). As Hartshorne puts it: 'The togetherness of Being and Process can itself only be a process; for if *anything* becomes, the total reality becomes, inasmuch as a single new constituent always gives a new totality' (1991: 269). The combination of a variable and a constant is itself variable, so the variable includes the constant; but how can the constant include the variable? Necessity and contingency are to be understood in the same way. It is an axiom of modal logic that the conjunction of necessity and contingency – for example: 'tomorrow it will rain and two plus two equals four' – is itself contingent. So the contingent includes the necessary, but not vice versa. These few examples are enough to demonstrate the asymmetry principle that *r*-terms are alone the total reality as they already contain within themselves their corresponding *a*-terms.

Hartshorne believes that this (descriptive) understanding of the nature of things is a middle way between, on the one hand, the extreme of two-way *internal* relatedness (which reduces *a*-terms to *r*-terms), as found in Hegel, Spinoza, Blanshard, Hwa-yen Buddhism, and others; and on the other hand, the extreme of two-way *external* relatedness (which reduces *r*-terms to *a*-terms), as defended by Ockham, Hume, Russell, Carnap, and others. For too long, argues Hartshorne, philosophers have defended these two extremes of interdependence and mutual independence – both ultimately absurd if carried through to their logical ends – and have completely ignored the possibility of relations which are dependent at one end and independent at the other; without denying the existence of the two kinds of symmetrical relation as abstractions from asymmetry. (Symmetrical relations of interdependence and mutual independence can occur between two *a*-term entities – that is, entities which are not events, but abstractions from events.)

I come now to Nagarjuna's theory of relations. But first, I will briefly outline the Madhyamika philosophy of which Nagarjuna is the key thinker. Madhyamika, in its simplest and most concise definition, is a philosophy which takes a middle path between all conceivable positions or pairs of conceptual opposites, but without settling in a middle or mediating position or concept; it is a dynamic middle *path*, rather than a static middle *position*.. Nagarjuna defines Madhyamika as a middle path between origination and extinction, destruction and permanence, identity and difference, coming and going. (1995: 2; 1997: 137). In these so-called 'eight negations' we see that the Madhyamika deny not only a concept's *existence*, but also its *nonexistence*; hence Madhyamika is

often defined, vis-à-vis other Buddhist schools, as a middle path between both eternalism and nihilism. But it would be incorrect to say that Madhyamika is the only form of Buddhism which follows the middle path, for Buddhism itself has often been called a 'philosophy of the middle path'; it is just that of all the schools, it is the Madhyamika which has been the most consistent in applying this philosophy to *all* conceptual opposites without exception. Correlates of Madhyamika outside of Buddhism can also be found, some examples being Pyrrhonean skepticism and deconstructive post-structuralism.

Now Nagarjuna's tetralemma considers the relation between two opposing concepts or positions, lets call them X and non-X. There are four possibilities: (1) X and non-X are identical, or interdependent; (2) X and non-X are different, or mutually independent; (3) X and non-X are both identical and different; (4) X and non-X are neither identical nor different. Nagarjuna argues that neither identity nor difference can supply us with an understanding of the relation between X and non-X, for in the case of identity (or mutual dependence) there are no longer two different terms to be related, so there can be no relation; and in the case of difference (or mutual independence), the relation must itself be a third thing between the two terms and thus itself needs to be related to the terms by the addition of further relations regressing to infinity, so again there can be no relation. And the combination of identity and difference – either as a conjunction or a double-negation (these are logically equivalent) – gets us nowhere, as this is clearly self-contradictory. (1995: 36-7, 54; 1997: 169-70, 187) The conclusion which Nagarjuna draws from this analysis is that the search for the relation between any two conceptual opposites is open-ended, like infinitely empty space, and thus unsuccessful. This is the meaning of *sunyata*, which is usually translated into English as 'emptiness'; but a more accurate translation, which takes account of both contextual usage and intertextual references, is 'openness' or 'open-endedness'. This translation better illustrates the identity between *pratitya-samutpada* and *sunyata*. As Nancy McCagney puts it: '*Pratitya samutpada* is the arising and ceasing of *dharmas* which are indeterminate (*animitta*) and open-ended (*sunyata*)' (1997: 35, 115).

Charles Hartshorne's critique of Nagarjuna's tetralemma is that '… he refutes interdependence and mutual independence, but neglects one-way dependence. Again he considers four relations of similarity and dissimilarity between cause and effect, but all four, as he formulates them are symmetrical' (1969: 60). Hartshorne's concern here is that Nagarjuna's tetralemma does not exhaust all the possible kinds of relation, but only the symmetrical ones. According to Hartshorne, Nagarjuna ignores 'the asymmetries which are the very means of distinguishing causes from effects, premises

from conclusions, and anything from anything else' (italics removed, 1979: 415). '[D]ivisions must be genuinely exhaustive', continues Hartshorne.

> Take two things (or momentary actualities) A and B. They might be mutually interdependent, they might be mutually independent; but third, *B might depend on A while A is independent of B.* This non-symmetrical case is conspicuously absent from Nagarjuna's discussion. That the relation RAB is internal to B does not entail that it is internal to A, just as (P entails Q) does not entail (Q entails P). Entailment is a kind of dependence, the truth of P upon that of Q. (*Ibid.*: 414-15)

Hartshorne agrees with Nagarjuna's rejection of both types of symmetry – namely, mutual dependence and mutual independence (or two-way internal, and two-way external, relations), but believes his ignorance of asymmetrical dependence and relatedness leads both to conclude that 'the truth about relations transcends discursive thought and can only be possessed by those whose meditation or intuition carries them beyond the rationally statable' (1984: 8). (Hartshorne agrees that symmetrical relations reduce to absurdity as long as it is assumed that they are concrete rather than abstractions from asymmetrical relations; hence, Nagarjuna's arguments can be used against those who make this kind of assumption.)

Hartshorne contends that one explanation for Nagarjuna's unjustified assumption of symmetry – shared by those who take symmetrical positions as much as by those who reject them but see no alternative – is 'the assumption that complexes are analyzable into equally simple ultimate constituents' (1979: 418). Yet 'If *B* depends on *A* but not vice versa, then whatever the complexity or simplicity of *A*, *B* is one degree more complex, for in it is relation to *A*, whereas *A* lacks relation to it' (1988: 105). But the asymmetrical relation between earlier and later events indicates that '[t]he complex cannot be reduced to a bundle of simples' (*ibid.*: 106). However, I do not think that Hartshorne is correct in his assertion that Nagarjuna is a reductionist. For while his 'method' is often described as being analytic, it is an analysis which does not rest or arrive at simple self-existent entities. All it finds is *sunyata* or open-endedness. Like postmodern deconstruction, Nagarjuna shows that every text has a context and every context is itself a text which has a context. All parts are wholes containing parts, and all wholes are parts of greater wholes. Thus, there are no absolute parts or wholes – only what Arthur Koestler calls 'holons'. (Hence, Madhyamika is not a bottom-up reductionism, but rather an anti-foundationalism or what Catherine Keller (1999) calls 'bottomless-up'.)

Hartshorne's charge that Nagarjuna overlooks asymmetry is very impressive, but there is evidence that Nagarjuna is in fact cognizant of asymmetry after all. For immediately following his famous deconstruction of causality (*hetu*), in which he states that

> Neither from itself nor from another,
> Nor from both,
> Nor without a cause,
> Does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (MMK 1.1 in Garfield 1995)

Nagarjuna affirms conditionality (*pratyaya*):

> There are four conditions: efficient condition;
> Percept-object condition; immediate condition;
> Dominant condition, just so.
> There is no fifth condition. (MMK 1.2 in *ibid.*)

Now conditionality, unlike *bi*-conditionality, is an asymmetrical dependence of the conditioned upon independent conditions. To be conditioned by an other is not the same as to be caused by it because the latter implies that the effect pre-exists in its cause, whereas the former does not. It is this denial of determinism and simultaneous affirmation of creative dependence on conditions by Nagarjuna which leads the process philosopher and writer on Buddhism, Nolan P. Jacobson, to conclude that it is 'a mistake to understand Nagarjuna as committing the fallacy of misplaced symmetry (that is, embracing the fallacious belief that the past and future determine the present in equal degrees)' (1988:77). In his tetralemma Nagarjuna does not intend to exhaust *all* possible relations, only those which are based either on an 'inter-essence' (identity or *svabhava*) or a total lack thereof (difference or *parabhava*) – namely the two possible forms of symmetry. His critique is thus directed at causal relations, which are based on the reification of relations into hidden or 'occult' realities behind phenomena. In a sense Nagarjuna's philosophy is in perfect agreement with William James's radical empiricism, which states that 'the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience', so that '[T]he directly apprehended universe needs … no extraneous trans-empirical connective support' (1970: xxxvi*f*). But these experienced relations are not self-existent things; rather, they are *pratyaya*, or conditioned entities in which experience and experiencer are one. That is, the subject of the relation is itself the relation, and the object is itself a

shorthand for an open-ended series of relations of relation of relations of .… (See Napper 1989: 88; Wayman 1981: 460; Garfield 1994: 222; Huntington 1989: 44.)

Nagarjuna thus affirms the pan-Buddhist idea of *pratitya-samutpada*.. However, this term is usually interpreted as meaning that everything is dependent on everything else, thus apparently implying *symmetrical* interdependence. For example, G.M. Nagao says that '[i]nterdependent co-origination does not simply signify a causal chain of movement from a cause to an effect', rather it 'is a doctrine of mutual dependence and mutual cooperation' (1991: 163), so that 'everything is relative to every other thing' (*ibid.*: 174-5). But closer scrutiny shows that it really is a principle of asymmetry, whether interdependent or not. A classic statement of the doctrine is as follows:

> If this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises; if this is not, that does not come to be; from the stopping of this, that is stopped. (Majjhima Nikaya 2.32 in Horner 1954-59)

This is often interpreted as bi-conditionality or equivalence as opposed to conditionality. But the statement 'If this is, then that comes to be' (for example: 'If there is grasping, then karma comes to be') takes the logical form of the conditional proposition, 'If that, then this' (for example: 'If [there is] karma, then [there was] grasping'). For in the above quote, 'this' is the necessary condition of 'that', and the necessary condition in a conditional statement is the consequent. Hence, when it is further asserted that 'If this is not, that does not come to be' ('If grasping is not, then karma does not come to be') it is in keeping with the form of the Modus Tollens (that is, denying the consequent). That Nagarjuna also understands dependent origination in this way can be seen from his statement that conditionality does not imply that the essence of entities is present in their conditions (MMK 1.3 in Garfield 1995). Jay Garfield's commentary on this is that 'phenomena are not analytically contained in their conditions; rather, a synthesis is required out of which a phenomenon not antecedently existent comes to be' (*ibid.*: 110-11). In other words, events arise by creatively synthesizing antecedent events. The Buddhist '*pratitya-samutpada*' and the 'creative synthesis' of process philosophy are thus one and the same idea!

The misinterpretation of dependent origination as interdependence finds a parallel in interpretations of process philosophy. Whitehead, for example, often makes statements which suggest that all events – past, present, and future – are interdependent. However, these statements need to be understood in the wider context of his philosophical system, and when so understood we find that he means that

every event is dependent on every other event *in some sense* – specifically, events are dependent on *actual* (or *real*) antecedent events and on *potential* (or *virtual*) subsequent events. (For example, his statement in *Adventures of Ideas* [1967: 197] that there is a 'mutual immanence' of antecedent and subsequent occasions is, in his own words, 'not … a symmetric relation' but a conjunction of efficient causality in one direction with anticipation in the other, which also explains how there can be a sort of mutual immanence between contemporaries [*ibid.*: 195-9].) The practical relevance of asymmetrical interdependence is that it preserves both the asymmetry required for individual creativity and the interdependence required for social solidarity.

This reciprocal conjunction of one-way relations, in which one is a relation to actual events and the other a relation to potential events, I will call 'asymmetrical interdependence'. Which is congruent with Hartshorne's statement that there is a '[t]wo-way, yet asymmetrical necessity: an *r*-term necessitates … its particular contextual *a*-correlates; [whereas] an *a*-term necessitates only that a class of suitable *r*-correlates be non-empty, the particular members of the class being … contingent' (1970: 101-2). Asymmetrical interdependence is thus the principle that a universal is independent of any given particular, but dependent on the totality of particulars from which it is an abstraction, which is one of the key insights of process philosophy. Now it is quite likely that asymmetrical interdependence is the real meaning of *pratitya-samutpada*, which would explain why it is often interpreted as interdependence. For it *is* a kind of interdependence, but it is qualified by the term 'origination', which implies creativity and asymmetry.

Thus, the fact that both process philosophy and Madhyamika Buddhism can be interpreted as affirming asymmetrical interdependence is a strong indication that they share a common philosophical underpinning. That Madhyamika is often characterized as being deconstructive in nature and process philosophy as being constructive ignores the fact that both philosophies simultaneously deconstruct symmetrical abstractions that have become unjustifiably reified *and* reconstruct a process-relational worldview of asymmetrical interdependence.

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