

Nāgārjuna on the Nature of Causation

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Law of Causality has been central to the discourses of the Buddha. Nāgārjuna, one of the most profound scholars gives a detailed exploration of causality on account of the theory of Dependent Origination (Paṭṭhasamuppāda in Pāli and Pratītyasamutpāda in Sanskrit). The philosophy of Mādhyamika School is preserved in Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika-Śāstra, which is a work of detailed exploration of various doctrines given by the Buddha himself. The Dialectical method of Nāgārjuna which is known as Catuskoti was constructed and widely asserted in various aspects of understanding the phenomenal existence. The formation of Dialectics was done on the fundamentals of Buddha's silence on metaphysical questions. Thus, Nāgārjuna formulates the four alternatives of his dialectical methods in order to refute the philosophical theories of causality during his period. He states, "A pleasant feeling is inconsistent, fabricated, dependently co-arisen, subject to ending, subject to vanishing, fading, ceasing. A painful feeling is also inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen, subject to ending, subject to vanishing, fading, ceasing. A neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling is also inconstant, fabricated, dependently co-arisen, subject to ending, subject to vanishing, fading, ceasing... A monk whose mind is thus released does not take sides with anyone, does not dispute with anyone. He words things by means of what is said in the world but without grasping at it."¹

The Sākyāmuni Buddha in his discourses on the Four Noble Truths and Dependent Origination, explores the Law of Causality to his followers. This explanation is linked to the coming into being and passing away of the individuals and the repeated cycle of birth and re-birth. Causal connections of all phenomenal existence lead to suffering which is indubitable. In his first discourse, after enlightenment, the Buddha gives the crux of entire Buddhist philosophy in terms of the Four Noble Truths (Pāli: Cattāri Ariyasaccāni, Sanskrit: Catvāri Āryasatyāni). These truths constitute the basis for emergence of philosophical, ethical and moral aspects of Buddha's teachings.

¹Kalupahana, David J., trans. *Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1999.

- The First Noble Truth - suffering. (Pāli: Dukkha Ariyasacca, Sanskrit: Duḥkha Āryasatya)
- The Second Noble Truth - cause of suffering. (Pāli: Dukkhasamudaya-ariyasacca, Sanskrit: Duḥkhasamudayai-āryasatya)
- The Third Noble Truth Buddhist – cessation of suffering, also referred to as the Doctrine of Enlightenment (Pāli: Nibbāna, Sanskrit: Nirvāṇa), (Pāli: Dukkhanirodha-ariyasacca, Sanskrit: Duḥkhanirodha-Āryasatya)
- The Fourth Noble Truth – the path that leads to the end of this suffering. It refers to the Noble Eightfold Path, traced by the Buddha (Pāli: Ariyaatṭhaṅgikamagga-ariyasacca, Sanskrit: Āryāṣṭāṅgamārga-āryasatya).

These four truths give a vivid and deep understanding of not just conventional world but also of the absolute. The first two truths reveal the nature of existence, which is endowed with suffering, and the main cause of this suffering according to the Buddha is greed or attachment. The world lies in a causal relation with no existent being constant. What remains constant is the continuous change. Thus, follows the doctrine of Dependent Origination or Pratītyasamutpāda that links to the first two truths. The third truth gives a way out of this phenomenal suffering by pointing out to the state of enlightenment. This is the state of annihilation of all emotions, feelings, birth and re-birth. It is a state of absolute bliss, which can be achieved through following the eight noble practices, prescribed by the Buddha. Referring to the theory of dependent origination, the third and fourth truth can also be linked to it. Following the twelve links in a clockwise motion taking avidyā or ignorance to be the first cause, leads to emergence and re-emergence in this mundane world. Whereas when one understands the true meaning and futility of phenomenal existence, one starts to move anti-clockwise, annihilating factors that lead to suffering, birth and re-birth until the stage of complete annihilation is achieved with the removal of ignorance.

The twelve links of causal connection follows: Ignorance (Sanskrit: Avidyā / Pāli: Avijā), Mental Disposition (Sanskrit: Saṃskāra / Pāli: Saṅkhāra), Rebirth-linking-Consciousness (Sanskrit: Vijñāna / Pāli: Viññāna), Mind and Matter (Nāma – Rūpa), Six bases (Sanskrit: Ṣḍāyatana / Pāli: Saḷāyatana), Contact (Sanskrit: Sparśa / Pāli: Phassa), Feeling (Sanskrit: Vedanā), Craving or Desire (Sanskrit: Tṛṣṇā / Pāli: Taṇhā), Clinging (Upādāna), Becoming

(Bhava), Birth (Jāti), Old Age, Decay, Death, Suffering, etc. (Vyādhi, Jarā, Maraṇa, Dukkha). In the cycle called bhavachakara, one factor gives rise to the other with other factors joining in as one passes on through various levels of existence.

“The Philosophy of the Middle Way arrives at this insubstantiality and relativity of all phenomena through an examination of interdependent origination: that all things exist dependent on a combination of causes and conditions, that all things have no independent existence, and that all things are empty. This is developed through the investigation of the three classes of phenomena: causality, concepts, and knowledge. The fundamental critique of causality in the Philosophy of the Middle Way is that no entity is produced at any time, anywhere, or in any manner from self, from other, from both, or without cause.”² Thus, the theory of Interdependent Origination leads to an understanding of causal connection between indubitable links of phenomenal existence. It is the coming into being, the sustenance and the passing away that is governed through a continuous process of birth and re-birth through these twelve links of Pratītyasamutpāda.

Nāgārjuna propounded his theory of Catuṣkoti, which is also known as his Dialectical Method or the Four-fold Dialectics, to unveil his way of exploring causality, and further assert Buddhist theory of relativity. The Dogmatists who claimed ‘reality to be definite and who ruled out reasoning from reality’ came under the critical spectrum of Nāgārjuna who dismissed their theories claiming them to be hollow and self-contradictory.

Nāgārjuna with a certain and uncontested theory of causal laws rejected other philosophical theories. His Catuṣkotipointed out to three things:

“(a) The Phenomena of Empirical Reality is a realm of relativity in which an entity is Śūnya or Nis- Svabhāva i.e. devoid of any Independent reality or unconditioned-ness.

²Santina, Peter Della, *Fundamentals of Buddhism*, Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1984, 159.

(b) Reality can be understood only by rising to a plane higher than Logical thought i.e. the plane of Prajñā.(c) Reality cannot be expressed in terms of 'is' and 'is not' - dichotomizing mind.”³

Nāgārjuna disproved the views of others through Dialectic but he did not advance any thesis of his own to prove to others. He said that no one could find fault with Mādhyamika, because he has no view of his own to advance. He stated that while causation and dependent origination in themselves represent the very core of Buddhist philosophy, one should avoid clinging on to them like dogmas.

Nāgārjuna goes on to show that everything is dependent on something else to exist. Nothing can exist without something else existing. This is the meaning of emptiness. And this is dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda), which on a whole narrates law of causality as pointed out by Nāgārjuna. C.W. Huntington in his important work of emptiness gives a relationship of emptiness with dependent arising that leads to the formation of entire Middle Way philosophy. “A carriage is designation in dependent on its parts, the wheels and so forth. Whatever designated as dependence on its own parts not produced through any intrinsic being, and non-production through any intrinsic being is emptiness. Emptiness defined as non-production through any intrinsic being, is itself the Middle Way. That which not produced through any intrinsic being cannot possibly be existent, and yet because it lacks non-being neither can it be non-existent. Therefore, on an account of it is avoiding the two extremes of being and non-being. Emptiness defined as non-production through any intrinsic being, called the Middle Way, or the Middle. Therefore, it is that the following expressions are synonyms for dependent origination: ‘emptiness,’ ‘dependent designation,’ and ‘the Middle Way’.”⁴

Further, Nāgārjuna developed his Dialectical method consisting of four possible alternates on which various theories of causality extended by many schools of his time could be placed, analyzed and refuted. The Fourfold Dialectics constitutes of a thesis, an anti-thesis,

³Santina, *Fundamentals of Buddhism*, 111.

⁴Huntington, C.W. Jr., *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction To Early Indian Madhyamika*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. 41.

both thesis and anti-thesis and neither thesis nor non-thesis. This method of Nāgārjuna gave rise to four possible views of causation: causation by self, causation by another, causation by both self and another, and causation by neither self nor non-self.

Self-causation / Causation by self (Svataḥ Utpattiḥ)

Svataḥ Utpattiḥ refers to causation by one's own self. It points out to the philosophy of Vedānta and Sāṃkhya who accept cause and effect to possess a relationship of similarity. This identity of similarity brings together cause and effect to a state where any effect is merely seen as an expression of the cause. The upholders of Self-Causation theory refute any external cause as giving rise to an effect. The factors that give rise to an effect do not lie outside of the cause and stand as mere manifestation of this cause. This would lead to the futility of production, as the same inherent nature, which lies in the cause, would be produced again in its effect, leading to simply self-duplication. In defence of the theory of self-causation it is said that the factors emerging as an effect have potentiality to emerge in actual form owing to a nature of sameness in identity of a form. This leads to formation of the tree from a seed in its later state, when the seed with its potential nature renders to the formation of a tree in its actual form.

Nāgārjuna, forwarding his theory of causation rejects Self-Causation on grounds of accepting two conflicting natures of the same thing, that being partially potential and partially actual. A seed for example cannot turn into a tree by possessing both, conflicting natures of potentiality and actuality. Self-Causation hence, stands refuted on logical grounds of accepting opposing nature of things, which lies beyond all possibilities.

Causation by the other / Causation by non-self (Parataḥ Utpattiḥ)

The upholders of this theory of causation believe in causation only by factors external to it. According to them the relationship of cause and effect is led by factors that lie outside of the periphery of any usual causal connection. By usual causal connection reference is made to the idea of a cause giving rise to an effect. The Hīnyānist who believe in causation by another rely on the fact that there are certain conditions and factors that have separate identity from a cause, give rise to an effect. The view that an effect is produced with the help of factors lying outside its domain needs a combination of certain factors that bind them in a

relationship of cause and effect. This leads to two major fallacies, one that if a relationship of cause and effect is required to be formed, it simply means that the cause is giving rise to the effect, which stands contradictory to the belief of causation by another; and second that, if combination of certain factors are need to bring a relationship between cause and effect then certain other factors would be required to draw the combination and so on leading to infinite regress.

Nāgārjunafurther refuted this theory of causation by factors other than itself by stating that if effects are produced by factors different from them, then anything could be produced from anything. The idea that cause would cease to exist with an effect coming to existence would lead a state of chaos and confusion where things would arise out of anything and everything. Like a mango seed giving rise to an apple tree, or a mango seed producing something that falls totally outside of the genre of plants or trees. The co-existence between things and cycle of existence would fall apart, rendering a meaningless state of affair to the cycle of causation.

Causation from both – the self and another / A conjunctive theory (Dvābhyam Utpattiḥ) The theory upholds causation to be inferred as self-driven and as produced from the other factor than the self. On one hand acceptance of causation is inferred as a relation between cause and effect to be based on the idea of mere manifestation, where effect becomes a manifestation of cause and on the other hand, the other theory of causation states this relationship of cause and effect to be based on something absolutely different and apart from each other based only on external factors. As both these theories are cantered irregularities and contradictions Nāgārjuna terms them to be inconsistent and thereby refutes them. He shows the impossibilities of bringing together two theories that have already been rendered inconsistent and unacceptable. “Production from both is also patently unreasonable, because the faults already explained also accrue to this [thesis]. Neither [self-] production nor production from [another] has been proven, and this [third alternative] is unacceptable both from the perspective of the truth [of the highest meaning] and within the context of everyday experience.”⁵

⁵Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction To Early Indian Mādhyamika*, 168-169.

Causation not associated with a cause / Causation by chance (AhetuḥUtpattiḥ)

The theory undermines any role of a cause in producing an effect. The relation of cause and effect itself is negated in the process. "If production is believed to take place only in the absence of a cause, then it follows that anything could be produced anywhere at any time, and hundreds of thousands of seeds sown by common people for the purpose of raising crops would result in no harvest whatsoever."⁶ Also with no link between a cause and an effect, morality and justice in the society would come to a standstill where no ownership of any action would be taken.

Nāgārjuna, and his philosophy of Middle Way asserts that, "Causation is linked with interdependent origination, emptiness, and the Middle Way. These are identical in significance. Taken from the point of view of ignorance, interdependent origination explains, sustains, and is the very essence of saṃsāra. But interdependent origination is also emptiness, because everything that exists dependent on something else does not really exist-- it has no independent being and does not exist by itself. Therefore, it is empty. All that is interdependent origination is also emptiness. And interdependent origination which avoids the alternatives of identity and difference, existence and nonexistence, eternalism and nihilism is also the Middle Way taught by the Buddha."⁷ Thus, the theory of Causation stand at the core of Mādhyamika philosophy by refuting intrinsic nature of phenomenal existence as it does not fall in any of the four alternatives given by Nāgārjuna – causation by self, or another, or both, or neither.

⁶Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, 169.

⁷Santina, *Fundamentals of Buddhism*, 166.