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T. R. V. MURTI'S REASON*

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the use by T. R. V. Murti of the term "Reason". It turns out that this term corresponds to philosophical usage among certain Western thinkers, primarily Hegel, but does not clearly correspond to any concept in Indian thought. It is shown that the use of this and other borrowed concepts leads Murti to impose certain schemes on the history of Indian philosophy which do not appear to be justified by the available evidence. The question is then raised whether and to what extent Indian philosophy can be studied on its own terms.

Readers of T. R. V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*[1] cannot but be struck by the peculiar role which Reason plays in it. This Reason is written with a capital R, and is not to be confused with reason with a small r. Murti uses both these terms, but never confuses them. Reason with a capital R is something special, and for unprepared readers it is not immediately clear what kind of thing it is. Murti does not introduce it; he does not say what it is before talking about it. It is there, all of a sudden, in the second chapter, where we are told that the Buddha was aware of "the conflict of Reason". Here and later Murti speaks about Reason, and about the conflict of Reason, in a way which suggests that he takes it for granted that his readers know what he is talking about. Those who do not can only try to find out by collecting passages in which Reason is mentioned.

Not until the fifth chapter do we discover that Reason is a human faculty, because there it is contrasted with another human faculty, viz. Intuition.[2] This other faculty is said to be higher, which implies that Reason is a lower faculty, at least in relative terms. This is indeed a theme that often re-

* This paper was read at the International Conference 'Fundamental Questions and Issues in Indian Philosophy: Retrospect and Prospect', held in honour of the Professor T. R. V. Murti Centenary, Varanasi, December 2002.

1 T. R. V. MURTI: *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. A Study of the Mādhyamika System*. Second edition, 1960. Reprint: Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1980.

2 P. 126: "The Mādhyamika denies metaphysics not because there is no real for him; but because it is inaccessible to Reason. He is convinced of a higher faculty, Intuition (prajñā) with which the Real (tattva) is identical."

curs in Murti's book. Denigrating remarks about the uselessness of Reason abound. Chapter two, for example, characterises Reason as a subjective device which, in spite of its attempts, does not succeed in reaching the Unconditioned.[3] The procedure of Reason, we learn, is dogmatic.[4] It also has a structure.[5] Reason moreover tries to apprehend the Real with the help of conceptual devices, viz. categories; the Real cannot however be categorised.[6]

But what is this faculty called Reason? We have to wait until chapter eleven to come across a passage that suggests that Reason is thought. The passage is unfortunately not very clear. It reads (p. 277): "All [the] knowledge [of a being confined to the phenomenal] is in and through the categories of thought, buddhi (Reason), and buddhi is saṃvṛti." 'Reason' occurs here in brackets as a translation for the Indian term *buddhi*, which can indeed mean 'thought'. Chapter twelve seems to equate Reason with the knowing mind.[7]

There can be no doubt that 'thought' and 'knowing mind' can at best be seen as approximations of what Murti understand by 'Reason'. It just does not work to put 'thought' or 'knowing mind' in the place of 'Reason' in all passages where this term occurs. Murti's Reason, it becomes clear, lives a life of its own and pursues its own objectives. As such it appears to be something which utilises thought and works through the knowing mind, without being identical with these two. Murti's Reason appears to be a faculty which he ascribes to the human mind (or should we say: to the human being?), and whose existence may not be obvious to those who do not share Murti's special understanding of what human beings are like.

How did Murti arrive at these far from obvious ideas? *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* makes no secret of the fact that its author had been profoundly influenced by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

3 P. 47: "The very futility of the attempts of Reason to reach the Unconditioned shows it up as a subjective device."

4 P. 47: "[... Buddha] had reached a position which transcended and annulled the dogmatic procedure of Reason."

5 P. 46: "[...] we [...] try to understand the structure of Reason itself."

6 P. 139: "The categories are so many conceptual devices (vikalpa, prapañca) by which Reason tries to apprehend the Real that cannot be categorised and made relative (buddher agocaras tattvam)."

7 P. 293: "[Both the Mādhyamika and Kant] were successful in shifting the centre of philosophical interest from the object to the knowing mind, to Reason."

Hegel. Hegel, too, accepted something called Reason, with a capital R. Reason, in Hegel's philosophy, progresses through triads consisting of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; the *antithesis* is the opposite of the *thesis*, with which it joins to give rise to the higher and richer *synthesis*. Murti describes the process as follows (127–28):

> Hegel derives the opposite [...] by a logical analysis of the concept. How one concept, by being insisted upon, passes into its opposite has always seemed a puzzle to students of Hegel. The dialectic is a passage, a movement, from concept to concept; it is at once creative of newer, more comprehensive and higher concepts. It is a negative and a positive function of Reason. It presses each concept (e.g., Being), squeezes out all its implications, as it were; and at this stage it becomes indistinguishable from its very opposite (Non-Being). But through this negation there arises a new concept. And as this concept has been engendered by its opposite, it is richer in content, and includes the previous one. Negation is not total annulment but comprehension without abstraction. This new idea itself is the starting point for another process, the thesis of a newer triad. The dialectical movement is a spiral. Rather, it may be conceived as an inverted pyramid. Its beginning is determined by the idea with the least content (Pure Being), and the end by the most comprehensive concept (Absolute Idea).

Murti borrows a number of ideas from Hegel. Like Hegel (and others before him) he speaks of Reason as a faculty which follows its own rules. Like Hegel he maintains that progress is only possible through a dialectical movement, in which the next stage is reached on the basis of an earlier opposition: Hegel's thesis and antithesis.

It is important to emphasise that Murti does not in all respects agree with Hegel. As a matter of fact, he develops a vision of reality which is quite different from Hegel's, though inspired by it. We will turn to it below. Here it must be observed that without at least some awareness of Hegel's philosophy, readers of Murti run a serious risk of getting lost in his book. The view is sometimes expressed that one needs to know Western philosophy in order to understand Indian philosophy. In this form this observation is certainly incorrect, for countless Indian philosophers did not know any Western philosophy and yet understood very well what they were doing. It cannot however be denied that one needs to know at least some Western philosophy in order to understand some of the modern books that have been, and are, written about Indian philosophy. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* illustrates this to perfection.

Murti borrows a number of key concepts from Hegel. We have already drawn attention to his use of the term Reason. Like Hegel, he furthermore speaks about a dialectic which is based on the pair thesis and antithesis. For Murti, the result of this dialectic is not, however, the synthesis, but something else. Murti attributes to the Mādhyamika Buddhists the vision that the dialectic of thesis and antithesis does *not* produce the next step in the development of Reason, viz. synthesis. On the contrary, the Mādhyamika dialectic, as understood by Murti, leaves the domain of Reason altogether. It allows us "to have Prajñā and reach the Absolute" (p. 278).

How does Murti justify this different dialectical development? Why does he not accept, with Hegel, that thesis and antithesis give rise to synthesis? The key to the answer lies in Murti's conviction of what he calls the 'conflict of Reason'. Over and over again he reminds us that conflict is inseparable from Reason, and that this conflict is insoluble. Reason, Murti points out (p. 40), "involves itself in deep and interminable conflict when it tries to go beyond phenomena to seek their ultimate ground. Speculative metaphysics provokes not only difference but also opposition; if one theorist says 'yes' to a question, the other says 'no' to the same." This creates an unbridgeable gap between the Hegelian dialectic and the one Murti ascribes to the Mādhyamika. He describes the situation as follows (p. 128):

> The Hegelian dialectic is a *conjunctive* or integrating synthesis: at every stage the alternatives are unified and transcended; and this leads to a higher and a lower view. [...] Hegel's is a logic of idealism and absolutism, [which subscribes to the] formula: *distinctions in thought are not merely in thought*, not subjective; *they are truly indicative of the real.* This the Mādhyamika denies. For him thought-distinctions are purely subjective, and when taken as the texture of the real they are nothing less than a falsification of it.
>
> The Mādhyamika dialectic tries to remove the conflict inherent in Reason by rejecting both the opposites taken singly or in combination. The Mādhyamika is convinced that the conjunctive [...] synthesis of the opposites is but another view; it labours under the same difficulties. Rejection of all views is the rejection of the competence of Reason to comprehend reality. The real is transcendent to thought. Rejection of views is not based on any positive grounds or the acceptance of another view; it is solely based on the inner contradiction implicit in each view. The function of the Mādhyamika dialectic, on the logical level, is purely negative, analytic.

The Mādhyamika, in Murti's interpretation, has (or is) a dialectic. In order to be able to use this Hegelian term meaningfully, Murti has to adopt at least two of the three elements that constitute Hegel's triangle: thesis and antithe-

sis. Like Hegel, he accepts that the interaction between these two gives rise to a next development. This next development is not, for Murti, the synthesis which integrates the two elements that give rise to it. No, for Murti thesis and antithesis lead to the complete rejection of Reason, making place for something different altogether, called Intuition or Prajñā.

In order to impose this modified Hegelian scheme on the history of Indian thought, Murti is obliged to depict Mādhyamika as resulting from the conflict of two earlier philosophical positions; these earlier philosophical positions have to play the role of Hegel's thesis and antithesis. These two incompatible positions are the result of the 'conflict of Reason' which plays such an important role in Murti's thinking. For dialectic – as Murti explains on p. 9 – "is the consciousness of the total and interminable conflict in Reason and the consequent attempt to resolve the conflict by rising to a higher standpoint. In a conflict there are at least two principal alternative views, totally opposed to each other in their solutions of the problems of existence and value."

Which are the thesis and antithesis that are supposedly necessary to explain the appearance of Mādhyamika on the philosophical scene? The question is far from innocent, for Mādhyamika is often thought of as a reaction to a certain dogmatic development in Abhidharma Buddhism, and therefore as a reaction to one single antecedent rather than two. This, if correct, would give short shrift to notions about a dialectical process. A dialectic presupposes several, and in the Hegelian case, two preceding stages, which correspond to the thesis and antithesis respectively. Murti's attempted use of Hegelian notions obliges him to reject, *a priori*, the idea that Mādhyamika may primarily have been a reaction to just one preceding school of thought. No, Murti *has* to distinguish two traditions of thought that are opposed to each other and together produce Mādhyamika, whether or not he can find any evidence to support this position. Only in this way can he present Mādhyamika as the dialectical result of what preceded it. We are not surprised that the third chapter of his book is called: "Development of the *two traditions* and the emergence of the Mādhyamika system". The question is: Which are these two traditions? And: Is it correct to think that Mādhyamika is the dialectical outcome of these two traditions?

Murti's answer to these questions is clearly formulated on pp. 75–76. Here we read:

> [The Mādhyamika dialectic] is the consciousness of the inherent contradiction present in the attempts of Reason to characterise the unconditioned in terms of the empirical. The dialectic exposes the pretensions of speculative metaphysics which seeks illegitimately to extend thought-categories beyond their proper field. As we have pointed out, there are two principal 'moments' or wings in a Dialectic. The systems of the ātma tradition represent the thesis, and the ābhidharmika system the antithesis of the antinomical conflict. [...] The Mādhyamika system represents the maturity of the critical consciousness within the fold of Buddhism.

Murti is aware that Mādhyamika can be looked upon as merely a reaction to Buddhist Abhidharma. At the same time he insists that both a thesis and an antithesis must have been at work. The following passage shows this (p. 57):

> The inadequacy and inconsistency of the Abhidharma system – the theory of elements – led to the Mādhyamika dialectic. [Within Buddhism] schools and sub-schools multiplied without number, and in the welter of ideas, Mahāyāna was born. It was a revolution in Buddhism, and is in a sense the re-affirming of the oldest and central teaching of Buddha. Here too two influences may be seen at work. One, the passion for consistency: the very dynamism of the nairātmyavāda must have made the realist phase (the Theory of the Elements) seem just a step. Then there was the Sāṃkhya and probably the other systems which conceived reality from a totally different standpoint. The difficulties in each standpoint with regard to philosophical problems were there as ever. This must have led an acute and sensitive mind to reflect that the fault lay not in this or that system; there was something fundamentally wrong about the constitution of Reason itself. Kant was led, in similar circumstances, when faced with the impasse created by Rationalism and Empiricism, to examine the claims of Reason in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. We have reason to think that the opposition in philosophy created by the Sāṃkhya and the Vedānta on the one hand and the Ābhidharmika philosophy on the other was much more total and basic than that between Rationalism and Empiricism. Reflective criticism was inevitable. The Mādhyamika dialectic is the expression of this criticism.

Note Murti's use of words: "This *must have led* an acute and sensitive mind [...]". As a matter of fact, Murti has no evidence whatsoever to support the claimed influence of Sāṃkhya on Mādhyamika. We have no evidence that Nāgārjuna knew the Sāṃkhya philosophy, much less that Sāṃkhya played a role in the formation of Mādhyamika. For Murti, on the other hand, some such influence as that from Sāṃkhya is not just a possibility, but a necessity without which his dialectical vision of the development of Mādhyamika could not survive.

Elsewhere in his book Murti proposes a more flexible way of dealing with the thesis-antithesis dilemma. There he says (p. 8):

> An intelligent reading of the development of Buddhist thought shows the Mādhyamika system as having emerged out of a sustained criticism of the Ābhidharmika schools, which themselves grew as the rejection of the ātmavāda. It is thus a criticism of both the ātma and anātma theories.

This is no doubt a clever way of avoiding the issue. It is, however, clear that this solution completely abandons the triadic notion characteristic of a dialectical development, and replaces it with a linear scheme in which each next development is to be understood as a reaction to the immediately preceding one. The idea, by the way, that the "Ābhidharmika schools [...] themselves grew as the rejection of the ātmavāda" is not based on any evidence and is certainly incorrect.

Murti knew, as will be clear by now, that "[the dialectic of Nāgārjuna] is mainly directed against the Vaibhāṣika system" (p. 69). Murti was also aware that "the great contribution that Buddhist thought made to Indian philosophy was the discovery of the subjective – the doctrine of appearance" (p. 57). Already before Mahāyāna many Vaibhāṣika Buddhists believed that the objects of our experience are no more than appearances. The fact that Nāgārjuna provided proofs to show that these common-sense objects cannot possibly exist, that they are somehow self-contradictory, goes a long way toward explaining his success among his co-religionists, quite independently of any other possible influences he may have undergone. Seen in this way, Mādhyamika can be understood, not as a dialectical development, but quite simply as a linear development within Buddhism. We have seen that Murti comes close to admitting this.

According to Murti a similar dialectical process is already at work in the teaching of the historical Buddha. The Buddha, like Nāgārjuna several centuries later, presumably developed a philosophy in dialectical interaction with opposing points of view that were in conflict with each other. Here too, the conflict of Reason with which the Buddha was confronted allowed him to escape from Reason. The Buddha, according to Murti, "is conscious of the interminable nature of the conflict [in Reason], and resolves it by rising to the higher standpoint of criticism" (p. 40).

Murti presents his views on the dialectic of the Buddha in the following passage (P. 8–9):

> It is possible to perceive the initial stages of the dialectic in the direct teachings of Buddha himself. Buddha pronounced some problems to be insoluble or inexpressible

> (avyākṛta). This is the so-called agnosticism of Buddha. Criticism is the very essence of Buddha's teaching. He was aware of the antinomical character of Reason. His refusal to answer questions about the beginning and extent of the world or of the unconditioned existence of the soul (jīva) and the Perfect Being (tathāgata) was the direct outcome of the awareness of the conflict in Reason. It is at the same time an attempt to transcend the duality of Reason. Dialectic was born. To Buddha, then, belongs the honour of having suggested the dialectic first, much before Zeno in the west.

In this passage Murti credits the Buddha with having suggested the dialectic first. A few lines further down on the same page he recalls that "in Buddha, the dialectic is but suggested", the reason being that the conflict of view points which engenders the dialectic – viz., that between the ātma and anātma systems – had not yet developed. The dialectic in its systematic form is not found until the Mādhyamika, this because by that time the divergent views had been cultivated and formulated into well-knit systems. However, some thirty pages later Murti shows less restraint with regard to the Buddha. On p. 40 Murti states: "To Buddha, then, belongs the honour of having discovered the dialectic [...]" A suggestion has in the interval become a discovery.

Honorary doctorates are often given to people who have no clue what academic life is about. Often they have done meritorious work of a different nature. Crediting the Buddha with discovering the dialectic is like giving him an honorary doctorate in a field in which he has made no contribution. He gets the highest distinction for something he has not done. We know that the Buddha passed his time doing many things: teaching, discussing, preaching, meditating, instructing in meditation, etc. etc. However, one thing he did not do: he did refuse to answer certain questions. And this, if Murti is to be believed, is his main claim to fame.

Half a century has passed since the first edition of *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* came out, fifty years during which much has changed in the study of the history of Indian philosophy. Few scholars nowadays would dare to fit the development of Indian thought into a general scheme, be it called dialectic or otherwise. Few would take Hegel's ideas as point of departure, for unless I am seriously mistaken, Hegel's vision of the development of philosophy has few followers today. During the last fifty years much more has become known about the history of Indian philosophy. Especially since Frauwallner, the in depth study of the history of Indian thought has abandoned broad outlines and has come to concentrate more than before on de-

tails. Few would seriously maintain these days that the Buddha was inspired by Sāṃkhya; as a matter of fact, it is very unlikely that anything like Sāṃkhya existed at the time of the Buddha. Nor would many researchers seriously maintain that the Buddha was a philosopher. Systematic thinking of the kind one might call philosophy does not appear in Buddhism until several centuries later. Moreover, the first serious efforts at philosophy by the Sarvāstivādins were certainly not inspired by Sāṃkhya or anything resembling it.

All this implies that few contemporary specialists are likely to be convinced by Murti's reflections. For all but those who take Murti as authority, Mādhyamika is not the outcome of a dialectical process based on the conflict between the ātma and the anātma systems. And nor is the Buddha the discoverer of this dialectic.

Does this mean that *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* has no value? I would be the last to suggest this. It is true that it is dated, and that contemporary scholars should be cautious in using it. It is safe to say that the way it presents Buddhist philosophy can no longer be accepted. But this book clearly had a role to play in its time. It went through a number of reprints, became a classic in the field, and galvanised numerous students and other readers. Indeed, it played a major role in the diffusion of knowledge about Buddhism at a time when this religion, and the Mādhyamika philosophy in particular, was largely unknown both in India and in the west.

The very success of *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* gives rise to a different question. Indian philosophy is often studied in comparison with, or even through the coloured glasses of, western philosophical ideas. The study of Mādhyamika in particular has been guilty of this. The question is: Is this necessary? I do not ask whether it is possible to study Indian philosophy independently of Western philosophy; I have already indicated that I am convinced that this is possible. My question is rather: Is Indian philosophy, in and by itself, so boring and lacking in intrinsic interest that it cannot interest anyone except some dedicated specialists? The way many scholars write about it suggests that this is indeed the case. Having myself spent many years of my life studying Indian philosophy, I refuse to accept this verdict. It cannot however be denied that we are here faced with a major challenge. Indian philosophy, presented on its own terms, has never found much interest among so-called generally educated readers. Only when served with a sauce prepared from Western philosophical ideas has it so far been digestible to them. It may be time that serious scholars make an effort to show that it can

be eaten without this sauce. I am sure that Professor Murti would be the first to applaud such an effort.