

## The Middle Way Getting Its Way

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*Nāgārjuna: “Versos Fundamentais do Caminho do Meio” (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)*, tradução, comentários e notas de Giuseppe Ferraro (UFMG). Campinas: Editora Phi. 684 pp. 2016. ISBN: 9788566045338

### Book Review

#### Reseña de Libro

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In 2016 a very important step for the development of Buddhist studies, particularly in relation to the Philosophy of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka), was taken in Brazil, and its fruits are also reverberating in all ten directions<sup>2</sup> (in Sanskrit, *daśadiś*) of the universe. Giuseppe Ferraro, an Italian-Brazilian scholar, formerly educated in Philosophy at the University “La Sapienza” of Rome (under the guidance of Professors Raniero Gnoli and

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<sup>2</sup> This is a metaphorical reference to a canonical *mahāyāna* way to represent all directions of the universe. The ten directions are: the four cardinal directions, the four intermediate directions, the zenith (above) and the nadir (below).

Raffaele Torella), wrote a groundbreaking book with inaccurate<sup>3</sup> commentary and annotated translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* ("Root Verses of the Middle Way", hereinafter, MMK) - the first one made directly from Sanskrit into Portuguese<sup>4</sup>. His work, which was developed as part of his PhD research (awarded in 2014 as *best thesis 2012-13 in Philosophy* at the ANPOF<sup>5</sup> "Best Thesis Prize", the most important philosophy prize in Brazil for a doctoral thesis),<sup>6</sup> went far beyond that, bringing to light (in a universe of "Western"<sup>7</sup> scholars that rarely pays any attention to philosophers coming from the "Eastern" part of the globe) an amazingly rich material of research that is usually unknown to the majority of the academics born in South America.

We could probably describe the main philosophical topic of discussion in the MMK as being "emptiness" (in Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*), that is, the absence of "inherent nature" (*svabhāva*) of self and all phenomena. In the Madhyamaka way of thinking, the final experience of reality is beyond thoughts and words; even the concept of non-dual cognition, accepted by the Yogācāra/Cittamātra school, would erroneously postulate concrete absolutes which, according to the *mādhyamikas*, cannot be affirmed at all. Even though this is a very controversial subject, in Nāgārjuna's thought, emptiness can never be taken as the final understanding of reality in itself, but can be understood as a "way" that shows the untenability of every "metaphysical point of view" (*dr̥ṣṭi*), through the method of *prasaṅga*, which consists in the *reductio ad absurdum* of every philosophical position based on the category of "being" or "nonbeing".

Ferraro's book is "thick" not just in number of pages (about 700), but in the density of its research and effort to gather, explore and analyze many different perspectives and possible interpretations on each one of the 447 verses of the 27 chapters of the MMK. Ferraro's constant dialogue with both his contemporary peer specialists of Madhyamaka from all over the world and the ancient commentators of Nāgārjuna's *magnum opus* should also be highlighted. Regarding the use of secondary sources, Ferraro's work stands out with respect to other "commented translations" of the MMK in other Western languages. Even one of the most recent English translations, the one by Siderits & Katsura (2013), does not give due consideration to some important modern translations and interpretations of

<sup>3</sup>Part of Ferraro's translation work was made under the supervision of Prof. Anne MacDonald, one of the most important living scholars on Madhyamaka and a renowned Sanskritist.

<sup>4</sup> None of those is his mother language, making his task even more challenging, but he also overcame this "obstacle".

<sup>5</sup> ANPOF – Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia.

<sup>6</sup>This thesis, with the title "Verdade ordinária e verdade suprema no pensamento de Nāgārjuna", is being published by the UFMG University Press.

<sup>7</sup> As it is widely known by now, especially after Said's (1979) book on the subject, the terms "Eastern" and "Western" are extremely complex and are being used here only as "instrumental terminology". The analysis and comprehension of those terms require an acute critical approach that is beyond the scope of this review.

individual verses or chapters of the MMK, as it is pointed out by MacDonald (2015) in her review article of this book.

Also in regard to the use and quotation of the ancient Indian commentaries, Ferraro's book is extremely rich, benefiting from Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* ("Clear Words"), that was approached by Ferraro in its original language. As for the texts that are only extant in Tibetan – such as the anonymous Akutobhayā ("Fearless"), Vimalākṣa's (?) Chung-lun ("Treatise on the Middle"), Buddhapālita's *svṛtti* ("Commentary") and Bhāviveka's *Prajñāpradīpa* ("Clarification of the Wisdom") – or, in the case of the Chung-lun, Chinese versions, he consulted and frequently quoted the English translations or, less frequently, Pandeya's (1989) "reconstruction in Sanskrit".

A further improvement with respect to previous translations of the MMK – based on the editions of the Sanskrit root text by La Vallée Poussin (1913), De Jong (1977) and Vaidya (1960)<sup>8</sup>—is Ferraro's use of the recent Ye (2011) edition, which incorporates corrections (of the previous editions) suggested by Saito (1985), MacDonald (2007) and the same Ye (2007).

Ferraro's competent translation and critical commentary offer us, through hard and dense research, a powerful opportunity to immerse ourselves inside of this universe of knowledge, and opens a new door not only for Portuguese speakers to learn about Madhyamaka from a reliable source, but also for researchers from all over the world not to feel "shy" to engage themselves in a field of knowledge that is often placed on the backstage in so many countries where Buddhist studies have no academic tradition, as yet.

This lack of understanding in relation to the importance of Madhyamaka's philosophical perspective of reality happens not only among South-American scholars who do not have the opportunity to study this field of knowledge at their universities, but also with many North-American and European ones that, out of mere ignorance, still have lots of prejudice against philosophies that transcend the field "delimited" by Aristoteles, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and so forth.

Due to the development of the cognitive sciences, philosophy in itself (particularly in its epistemological field), and other studies based on our "nature" and the work of the mind, it is possible to understand that, as hyper-social beings, the real ability to change our minds – i.e., being flexible enough to actually transform our perspective when facing an evidence that something is not exactly as we thought it was – is not a quality that is necessarily

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<sup>8</sup> We are only mentioning the translations based on the Sanskrit version of the MMK, but it is also important to consider the versions that were based on the Tibetan Buddhist canon, which is renowned for its accuracy in regard to the Sanskrit original. In particular, it should be mentioned Garfield's translation (1995), and the very accurate translations from Tibetan into English that was published by the *Padmakara Translation Group* (2008). The group is renowned by the precision of their translations, legitimated by the Tibetan scholars themselves, and by the poetic and fluid quality of the text, that effectively transports its message.

“natural” for us, for many different reasons. As it is demonstrated by Mercier & Sperber (*forthcoming*, 2017)<sup>9</sup>, originally, human reason evolved not to enable us to solve abstract, logical problems or even to help us draw conclusions from unfamiliar data; rather, it evolved to resolve the problems posed by living beings in collaborative groups. From this perspective, it is relatively easy to understand that, even among highly rational beings, like philosophers and most of the academic researchers, the propensity to abandon previously rooted assumptions such as, for example, that “Western philosophy”, especially European, is the only “real philosophy”, is a rare attitude. In the direction of amplifying and enhancing this attitude, of using reason in a “more rational way”, Ferraro’s commented translation of Nāgārjuna’s MMK could be useful in at least two ways: firstly, it presents to the Portuguese speaking academic community how deeply and undeniably *philosophical*<sup>10</sup> is the thought of this ancient Indian master, renowned in some Buddhist traditions as the Second Buddha. Secondly, Nāgārjuna’s philosophy in itself, whose explicit aim is to get rid of all false discriminations and show the intrinsic inconsistency of any philosophical assertion or position, could play a big role in the direction of transforming our “natural tendency” to use reason mainly as a “social device” in a mental attitude that exploits reason as an actual tool enabling us to solve abstract and logical problems; a tool that does have the power to transform ourselves positively, not allowing us to deceive ourselves believing that we already know things that we actually don’t, like the nature of phenomena, the nature of our minds, the nature of existence.

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<sup>9</sup>This relevant study argues that reasonable-seeming people are often very irrational, and that this is related with our social habits. See also the reference of this research in: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>.

<sup>10</sup>“Philosophical” also according to a narrow and questionable definition of “philosophy” as mere logical exercise and rational analysis, with no openness to “trans-conceptual” contentions.

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