

Menye Menye Raymond

EXPERIENCE OF NOTHINGNESS : A FORM OF HUMANISTIC RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

1. Introduction

The "Experience of Nothingness" in human context is both frightening and fascinating. It is frightening because for many Westerners the idea of Nothingness suggests the notion of chaos, non-reality, or the opposite of anything positive, everything leading to despair and anguish; it is more or less akin to *Nihilum* and the atheistic philosophy of Heidegger or Sartre is the by-word of that position. In trying to understand the same notion in the thought and life of any Eastern people where Buddhism is a cultural force, we will soon discover that it is an invitation to transcendence, 'Absolute' or fulness of Reality as held by the Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna. When we go through the history of philosophy, we see how men of all ages have almost in the same sweeping vein dealt with some metaphysical problems such as Being and Non-Being. Man wants to know the Real. In all his endeavours to comprehend Reality, Man himself is in the centre of the eternal quest.

This paper is an attempt to understand the notion of Nothingness as expressed by two eminent thinkers representing two systems of thought distant in time and space, viz, Nagarjuna of the Buddhist tradition (2nd century AD) and Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialist of our own time. I deem the attempt a worthwhile project, because the emergent subjectivity as awakened in all cultural processes, refers to a depth psychology, which is a meditative process and is realisable by a continuous detachment from the conceptual, empirical or phenomenological modes. It severs all cultural barriers and renders a possible meeting of all cultural processes in a humanism in depth.

2. Nagarjuna's Philosophy

Nagarjuna is considered to be the father of the Madhyamika tradition in Buddhism. Scholars try to fix the period of his philosophical activities

between 50 AD and 120 AD. At present we only possess conflicting traditional accounts about his life and work. Of the twenty five different works attributed to this great Buddhist thinker, *Madhyamika Karika* with its commentary called *Prasannapada* and *Maha-prajna-paramita Sastra* are considered to be the most important of all.

Nagarjuna's philosophy is known as *sunyavada*. A careful examination of the *sunya* (void) theory will reveal that it has its basis in the doctrine of momentariness of early Buddhism. According to Nagarjuna, man wrongly clings to non entities, mistaking the relative for the absolute, the conditioned for the unconditioned. To save man from this illusion, he laid down three epistemological presuppositions. The first of these is that there is a radical dynamism in reality, or stated otherwise, "becoming" transforms all forms of 'being'. A second is that knowledge and "becoming" are co-extensive; one becomes what he knows. The third presupposition is that there are two kinds of truth, the mundane truth, valid for practical living and the ultimate truth, which is the beginning and end of release from worldly turmoil and so it is to be studied in detail.

3. True Knowledge is Prajnaparamita (Transcendental Wisdom)

Wisdom (*prajna*) is a concept for which *sunyata* (emptiness) has a particular relevance. Wisdom is a "means of knowing" which releases a person from the attachment to things. This is true since the chief design of Nagarjuna's philosophy is to establish that the ultimate ground of the determinate is a reality for whose realization we must know the authentic nature of our own being. Wisdom is an aid to differentiate between the two kinds of truth as Chaterjee puts it:

So long as we mistake our mundane experiences for the transcendental, our finite being for pure Being, the categorical features of our reasoning for the constituents of transcendental consciousness, we stay buried in ignorance and thus deprived of wisdom (*prajna*).¹

The Buddhist look upon man's life as a journey through ignorance, but having for its destination the state of true knowledge or Transcendental wisdom (*prajnaparamita*). It is due to ignorance that we seize wrong

1. Margaret Chaterjee, 279, Contemporary Indian Philosophy (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1974), p. 279.

impressions about the world, and have a tendency to cling to false expectations and consequently suffering and frustration. The Buddha, Nagarjuna wanted us to know the distinction between the transcendental and the mundane, the absolute and the relative, the permanent and the transitory. To know this distinction and realize the nothingness of all empirical experiences is the way of perfect wisdom (*prajnaparamita*) and authenticity of life.

4. Application of the Dialectic

In his illustrious work *Madhyamika Karika*, Nagarjuna undertakes a critical examination of all categories of thought and denies the true existence of empirical reality in its totality. The general structure and the concrete procedure of the application of the dialectic is the same. By using *reductio ad absurdum* he reduces all view points to absurdity and thus evolves and establishes the doctrine of *sunyata*. The general principle of application of the dialectic being the same, the critique of some of the important categories will suffice for one to understand the *Madhyamika* method and its implications.

i) Critique of Causality.

Nagarjuna opens his treatise, *Madhyamika Karika* applying his dialectic to the principle of causality.

There absolutely are no things
Nowhere and none, that arise (anew)
Neither out of themselves, nor out of non-self
Nor out of both, nor at random.²

There can be four alternative views implied in the aforementioned passage: i) Things are produced by themselves (self-becoming: *Svata Utpatti*) or *Sat Karyvada*, ii) *Asat Karyvada* or production from another (*parata utpatti*), iii) *Sat-asat Karyvada* or production from (*dvabhyam utpatti*) and *Svabhava Vada* or production by chance without any cause (*ahetuta utpatti*). The first two may be considered as the principal alternatives; the third is an amalgam of the first two, whereas the fourth altogether gives up the theory of causation as it stands for the production

2. *Madhyamika Karika*, I.I., trans. Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness – A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York: Abington Press, 1967).

through sheer chance. Nagarjuna rejects the theory of origination implied in all these four alternatives.

a) *Satkaryavada* : According to this theory, things are produced out of themselves, cause and effect are identical. Nagarjuna discards it. If the cause and effect are identical i.e. the effect is already present in the cause there is no point in its production. It serves no purpose. It is just a reduplication. Therefore the theory of causal relation as identity is utterly untenable.

b) *Asatkaryavada* : It is the theory of production by another. Here the cause and effect are different. Nagarjuna rejects it. If the cause and effect were different, the effect is an *Other* to the cause. Being an *Other* no relation can subsist between the two. The non-relation between cause and effect leads to the abandonment of this theory of causation, for causality *ex hypothesi* is a relation between cause and effect. They being different, relation is not possible.

c) *Combined Causality (Sat-asat karyavada)* : Nagarjuna denies the theory of combined causality. *Sat* and *asat* are mutually opposed notions. So the combined causality would invest the real with two opposed natures with all the incongruities attached to these views, namely identity and difference.

d) *Svabhavavada* : According to this theory, things are produced without a cause. This theory rules out the theory of causation totally. If reason is assigned for the theory, it amounts to a sheerly perverse dogmatism, if no reason is assigned, it is tantamount to accepting a cause. Then there is a manifest self-contradiction between what we assert and how we assert, for here we derive a conclusion (that things are produced at random without cause) from the premises applying the theory of causality.³

ii) *Critique of Atma view*

Atma drsti (substance view of reality) and *anatma drsti* (modal view of reality) were the two main trends in Indian philosophy in the past. Madhyamikas rejected both views showing the defectiveness inherent in these conceptions. So a critique of *atma* doctrine is a critique of the

3. T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1978), p. 135.

conception of Real as static being in general. The early philosophical traditions of India conceived the immutables as four : space (*dik*), time (*kala*), atom (*paramanu*), and self (*atman*). *Atman* is considered to be the chief category of the permanent. A definition of the permanent may be given as that which has no cause or that which was never not.

A general criticism raised against the theory of the permanent is that there is no entity by itself, or uncaused, since everything originates depending upon others. Everything is relative. In early Buddhism, self was conceived as momentary (*anitya*), since it is associated with momentariness, it is an eternally enduring flux without any permanent substance or identity underneath. Nagarjuna did not deviate from Indian atmalogical heritage but he proved to be extremely evolutionary, subjectivist and voidist. According to Nagarjuna, consciousness is only "an intermittent series of psychic throbs, associated with a living organism beating out their coming to know through one brief span of life." It is by some kind of habit of recognition that one acquires the capacity to refer to oneself as a soul, self, or mind.

5. Sunya is the Absolute

Sunyata as non-dual intuition is the Absolute Reality. Before an intuition into this Absolute one has to do away with all the predications, thought-constructions. The world has only phenomenal reality. It is appearance. Knowledge of this distinction is essential to understand Buddha's teachings. It is through phenomenal reality that one reaches the Absolute. *Sunya* is the symbol of the inexpressible:

To designate the true Reality the Madhyamika school employs preferably the words *Sunyata*, voidness, *Sunya*, void. They are simply metaphors, perhaps the most appropriate to indicate the 'residue' that remains after the abolition of the empirical reality – a 'residue' that neither is nor is not and referring to which nothing can be thought, nothing can be said.⁴

Sunyata is negative for thought; but in itself it is the non-relational knowledge of the Absolute "and this Absolute has nothing divine, it is completely un-sacred Absolute, absolute Voidness."⁵ It may be even

4. F. Tola, "Nagarjuna's Conception of Voidness," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (Dordrecht : Reidel Publishing Company, Vol. 9, No 2. 1981), p. 277.

5. *Ibid.*,

taken as more universal and positive than affirmation. *Sunyata* negates something about reality but it is not reality itself. Negation is the way to Absolute, it is an end in itself. The Absolute is the reality for which the appearances of the phenomena stand. The term *Sunyata* signifies emptiness or void or nothingness and is used by Nagarjuna to denote the germinal experience which cannot be adequately described by means of intellectual configurations. Nagarjuna tries to show that the indeterminate ground of all that is given to consciousness is not only of the nature of absence but also identical with pure and self-effacing trans-phenomenality. The knowledge of this ground dawns when it has controlled one's awareness of the empirical world and achieved a total breakthrough from intellect.⁶

As a matter of fact, *Sunyata* and *prajna* are two aspects of the same thing, one is ontological and the other ontic. In *Sunyavada*, *sunyata* is the essence of the universe, the root of everything, that is, the basic unreality of things, and hence it renders any positive or logical statement about its superficial. All the differentiating and discriminating agencies cease to operate in the domain of *Sunyata*, which is an experience of total and indescribable negation. Therefore we must not look upon *Sunyata* as something existent, that is, as an area regarding which meaningful assertions can be made. Nagarjuna's *Sunyata* is a cipher, indeterminable, and occult, and unutterable in the entire range of actual and possible knowledge. *Sunyata* transcends all views, all statements, all opinions. *Sunyata* is beyond affirmation and negation.

The central metaphysical problem with which Buddhism was concerned was the ultimate end of human life redeemed from relativity and contingency. To achieve this man has to die to clinging. Thus for a person who has concentrated his mind on the fundamental meaning of human life, the everyday world consists of innumerable impressions floating on an absolute expanse of Nothingness. To 'feel' this Nothingness – this original hollowness at the root of Being is to get the innermost reason of one's sense of presence. Through *Sunyata* one is led to intuit the Void underneath the phenomenal reality, the No-self central to the Self, the vast hollow space at the bottom of the positive reals.⁷

6. Chaterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

Sometimes Nagarjuna and his followers warn us against equating *Sunyata* with sheer vacuity.⁸ The very name *Madhyamika* used to typify *Sunyavada* doctrine of the Middle Way between positivity and negativity, hints at the peculiarly ineffable sense behind the conception of *Sunyata*. *Sunyata*, Nagarjuna says, is the result of the deepening of understanding. What Nagarjuna might have meant to suggest by the positive element in *Sunyata*, therefore, is the possibility of this ontological reality's being the subject of our assertions. To sum up Nothingness in the *Sunyavada* philosophy represents the climax of a strict and ontologically unrestrained atmatology. From the eternal pervasiveness of Nothingness spring up instants of positivity, the flashes of Being, which constitute our self and world-experience. To re-trace all positivity to this Nothingness is, for Buddhists, the sole way of fulfilling life's commitment.

6. Sartre and the Pursuit of Being

i) Nature of Being

"Sartre's philosophy is based on a dualism which, if not Cartesian to the letter, is certainly Cartesian in spirit."⁹ Being, says Sartre, is divided into two fundamental kinds: Being-in-itself (*être en-soi*) and Being-for-itself (*être pour-soi*). Being in itself is the self contained being of a thing. A stone is a stone; it is what it is. Being for-itself at the same is co-extensive with the realm of consciousness and the nature of consciousness is that it is perpetually beyond itself. It is not what it is, but it is what it is not.¹⁰ These two are very much inter-related concepts.

Now a question may arise as why "Sartre used the terms such as being in itself and being for itself, rather than using more familiar terms such as things or man."¹¹ In referring to things as in themselves, Sartre wishes to draw our attention to the absolute unity that matter has with itself. An apple is an apple; it does not have the task of becoming what it should be. The being of an apple is in itself and thus has no relation with itself. Man is said to be for-itself, because "he is not perfectly one

8. *Idem*.

9. William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (London: Mercury Books, 1958), p. 218.

10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) p. ixv.

11. Joseph Catalano, *Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness* (Harper Torch Books, New York, 1974), p. 3.

with himself. This lack of identity with himself allows man to reach out beyond himself.¹² Consciousness is thus being for itself because it has the natural tendency to relate all beings to its own purpose. Another reason for using these terms is to stress the intimate relation of consciousness to matter as well as to keep evident the differences of these two realms of being.

ii) *Nature of Consciousness*

To characterise the nature of consciousness, Sartre brings into philosophy a principle discovered by Husserl i.e., the principle of intentionality of consciousness. "This means that all consciousness is consciousness of something. Consciousness always refers to an object outside it. It has no content of its own."¹³ This consciousness signifies two things: consciousness of 'self' and consciousness of something. The latter is absolute because there is not and there can be no pure consciousness of self. In itself consciousness is empty, being strictly a Nothingness at the heart of being. It is purely transparent that we cannot grasp it. Hence we can define consciousness as "it is not what it is, but it is what it is not."¹⁴ Consciousness is absolutely indeterminate in character, it is always more than what it is and that it always creates a gulf between itself and the object.

iii) *Consciousness as Nothingness*

For Sartre consciousness is all emptiness, a pure activity transcending towards objects. As we have seen earlier, the 'in itself' is full of itself, whereas the 'for itself' does not coincide with itself in full equivalence. The being of consciousness qua-consciousness is to exist at a distance from itself and as a presence to itself, and this empty distance, the 'for itself' carries in its being 'Nothingness.' Consciousness is always tending to become what it is not. For to be conscious means to be not what it is and to be what it is not. Hence there is nothingness always in the consciousness. Nothingness, for Sartre, is not an abstract notion, nor is it a trans-worldly nothingness, but an object of human experience. Nothingness is an act of consciousness. Being in itself cannot generate Nothingness. Any activity is foreign to its nature. It lacks all relation

12. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

13. J.P. Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. xxviii

14. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

and therefore, nothingness has no place in the original structure of being. Nothingness is not; it does not have the necessary force to produce itself. Nothingness has a borrowed existence. It does not exist; it is made to be. Now a question may arise; what is the origin of Nothingness?

iv) *Origin of Nothingness*

To the question what is the origin of Nothingness, Sartre answers: "Man is the being through whom nothingness came to the world."¹⁵ That man as such, that is, as being for-itself, consists in nothing, is shown in the following manner. Sartre begins by stating that negation does not provide the basis of the nothing, but contrariwise, that negation has a basis in the object itself, and thus that there are such things as negative realities. For example, when an automobile is out of order we can look at or investigate the carburetor and find that there is *nothing* there. But now, the nothing cannot derive from being-in-itself, for being in itself is as already noted, filled to the full with being. Hence nothing comes into the world through man. But in order for man to be the source of the nothing, man must already bear the nothing within himself. "The being by which Nothingness arrives in the world is such a being that in its being, nothing of its being is in question. The being by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness."¹⁶ This analysis of being for-itself shows, according to Sartre, that man, not only bears the nothing within him but consists in nothing, "what is specifically human consists beyond all in the Nothing."¹⁷ This shows the unique quality of human reality, that it can detach itself from the object and can conceive itself as the non-object. Human reality is not necessarily bound with the reality of the objective world. Man can dissociate himself from the world. Man's desires, projects, expectations and imaginations signify that he can negate the objective world around him and also himself as the object. His act of nihilation affects not only the world but also his own being. Thus "for Sartre's man, nothingness does not appeal because it is the end of everything, nor because, in thinking about things, he sees them swirling about between Being and Not-Being. Nothingness does not

15. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 22-23.

17. I.M. Bochenski, *Contemporary European Philosophy* (U.S.A. California Press, 1961), P. 176.

appeal because it is part of himself, and he cannot escape from it... Man says, I cannot completely become anything."¹⁸ If man is responsible to the emergence of nothingness in the world, according to Sartre, he must be free.

v) *Consciousness as Negation and Freedom*

a) *Consciousness as Negation*

It is well known that Sartre defines consciousness as nothingness. More precisely, he defines consciousness as a 'nihilation' or denial of being which creates a breach or chasm at the heart of being. The spontaneity of the for itself comes from the fact that it effects this nihilation or negation of being within itself. Thus consciousness creates pure nothingness at the heart of its being and thereby stands at a distance from itself. This self nihilation is the source of paradox of being for itself; it is its own being in the mode of not being it. But Sartre says that "I am not my body to the extent that I am not what I am; I am my body to the extent that I am what I am."¹⁹ Thus body becomes a contingent being of the for-itself from which the for-itself escapes by not being what it is. Sartre's explanation of being for-itself is in terms of its relationship to the in-self, because nothingness must be supported by being. The for-itself cannot simply be non-being. On the other hand, the for-itself is not simply being in itself, for being in itself cannot produce any relation to itself or to other beings. Nor can it be composite of two distinct kinds of being without forcing us into a kind of dualism. Rather being for-itself is a unique dialectical unity of being and nothingness. Being and Nothingness are, for Sartre, complementary and he quotes Hegel's assertion that there is nothing on earth or in heaven which does not contain being and nothingness.²⁰

Consciousness has no content, no essence, it is mere existence. Consciousness is release of being, a kind of fission of a being. Negating is evident in self-consciousness, for between that of which we are conscious and consciousness itself there is only a segment of the nothing. Even a thing so typically human as asking question is founded in the nothing, for, in order to ask, the questioner must first negate a

18. Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 100.

19. J.P. Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

particular being, for unless it were not negated, it could not be asked, and then negate himself, his being determinately so or so, for otherwise every question would be meaningless from the start. This approach of consciousness is called by Sartre as negation or nihilation.

b) *Freedom and Nothingness*

The nothingness of being-for-oneself appears clearer in the case of freedom. Human freedom, Sartre says, is absolute. If man were determined by his past, he could not choose. But the fact is, he does choose, and thus he negates his past. "To be free is to choose failure or the impossible."²¹ Likewise when man strives he strives necessarily for what is not. Hence freedom must not be thought of as a property of being-for-itself. If it were the case, it would constitute the essence of human being. But man as consciousness has no essence. Hence freedom is not the essence, but it is identical with human reality. Being absolute, there is nothing in man or in the world which can influence his freedom. To be free man *must* do away with God. Sartre affirms that human reality carries nothingness in its very structure. Sartre regards man as a project. It comes to be in due time, and here the basic ecstasis is what is yet-to-come.

From this two important conclusions follow. First, man has as such no nature, no fixed essence. His essence, so to say, is simply his freedom, his indeterminateness. Second, man's conscious existence is not only prior to essence as with being-for-itself: existence is the essence of being-for-oneself.

Freedom reveals itself in dread. This is man's becoming conscious of his own being or freedom, which appears as the nothing. The consciousness which negates or nihilates exists as consciousness of nihilation or negation. That is, nothing else can cause nihilation to creep into the structure of consciousness. Nihilation is therefore the synonym of freedom, because consciousness carries nothingness in its structure, it cannot be determined. Consciousness has no content; there is nothing in it or behind it. It is pure subjectivity characterized by Nothingness.

21. Colin Smith, *Contemporary French Philosophy* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1964), p. 36.

vi) *The new way of Negation*

Concerning the Contemporary Philosophy Stephen Evans Writes: "The uniqueness of the twentieth century lies not in the universe that faces man, but in the man who faces the universe. For the first time man faces his problems alone in the universe—all alone."²² By denying the existence of God, or at least His relevance, humanity has opened itself to alienation, and alienation has led to despair. Jean-Paul Sartre reveals the fundamental uneasiness, or anxiety of the human condition. Because we are perpetually flitting beyond ourselves, or falling behind our possibilities, we seek to ground our existence, to make it more secure. In seeking for security we give to our existence the self-contained being of a thing. The for-itself struggles to become the in-itself, to attain the rock-like and unshakable solidity of a thing. But this it can never do, so long as it is conscious and alive. Man is doomed to the radical insecurity and contingency of his being: for without it he would never be a man but merely a thing and would not have the human capacity for transcendence of his given situation. Like every humanism, Sartre's philosophy contends that the proper study of mankind is man, or, as Marx put it, that the root of mankind is man. Again like every humanism, it leaves unasked the question: What is the root of man? Sartre does not participate in the search for the roots of man. He leaves man rootless, rather he grounds man in Nothingness.

To sum up, Sartre has given a detailed elaboration of the negative side of human existence by nosing out all the sordid and seedy strands of Nothingness that haunt our human condition like a bad breath or body odour. Never in the thought of the West has the Self been so pervaded by negation. One would have to go to the East, to the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, with his doctrine of *anatman*, the insubstantiality of the self, to meet as awesome a list of negations as Sartre draws up. The self, indeed, is, in Sartre's treatment, as in Buddhism, a bubble, and a bubble has nothing as its center.

7. Meeting of the East and the West in Nothingness

One cannot fail to notice an amount of very striking resemblance between the *Madhyamika* view of existence and the much discussed

22. Stephan Evans, *Existentialism*, (Dallas : Zondervan Pub. House, 1984), p. 15.

existentialism of some of the contemporary philosophers. Indeed, there are factors peculiar to the two schools of thought that would restrain any comparison between them. Yet *Madhyamika* Buddhism and existentialism are pre-eminently philosophies of life founded on an extremely overt anti-intellectualism. For both, human existence is so authentic a 'feeling' or 'awareness' that unless it is seized in all its immediate and transparent moods, one would not know its distinct metalinguistic nuance. Apart from the fact that the existentialists, like Buddhists, have given expression to a temper rarely to be found in the general rationalistic tradition of the west, the common ground that would bring the two sets of thinkers together is their determination to evolve the concept of trans-phenomenal Being or Nothingness. It would not be, therefore, out of place in the present section to dwell upon the principal metaphysical thesis that clearly establishes a concord between the two lines of thinking.

i) *The Ontology of Nothing*

For *Sunyavada* there is an opposition between the ordinary life of man, which Buddhists characterise as the life of naiveté or *avidya*, and of clingings or *prapanca*, and the state of *Tathata - Sunya* or *Nirvana* - realisation. Sartre interprets human reality as a tendency toward the unfolding of Being which itself signifies its folorness or fallenness on the one hand and its transcendence on the other. But "there is no absolute solid fact, no feeling of absolute safety. The very movement of human consciousness towards is the expression of Nothingness at the center of human reality."²³ Sartre, like all existentialists, emphasises the dynamic nature of human reality, which, according to him, is reflected in the endeavours and plans, the creativity and yearnings in which people engage themselves. Finally Sartre will conclude that "man is a lack, a useless passion,"²⁴ a craving for the re-establishment of himself, a desire to be God.²⁵ To Buddhism, man is a thirst (*trsna*).

A good deal of speculation prevails on what the *Madhyamika* thinkers might have referred to by the term *Sunya*, and also on whether the term does not posit Nothingness as a sort of absolute reality. "Although, as a matter of fact, for one's task of determining the

23. Ramakant Sinari, *Reason in Existentialism*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966), p. 64-67.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

25. *Idem.*

Madhyamikas' ethical position, a complete analysis of the content of *Sunya* or void is indispensable, such an analysis would not throw any light on our understanding of what Nagarjuna calls "the awareness of the hollowness."²⁶ As a quasi-epistemological and quasi-psychological concept, *sunyata* would imply Being and Non-Being, or the self and the non-self at the same time. Looked at from this point of view, the concept is akin to Sartre's *Néant* (Nothingness). While giving an extremely suggestive explanation of the aim of the assumption of negation in Buddhism, Zimmer remarks,

... The concept of emptiness, the void, the vacuity, has been employed in the *Madhyamika* teaching as a convenient and effective pedagogical instrument to bring the mind beyond that sense of duality which infects all systems in which the absolute and the world of relativity are described in contrasting and antagonistic terms.²⁷

Thus with Nagarjuna, along all *Madhyamikas*, the notion of *Sunya* appears to denote the fullest negativisation of everything including *Sunyata* itself. It is in this elementary sense that *Sunyata* and *Néant* have for their intentional range the whole field of ontologically intuitable emptiness, where Nothingness itself is found to nihilate itself. The peculiar sort of helplessness and impotency of verbal expression Buddhists might have felt while putting across the exact content of the *Sunya* situation is understandable when we see that life's ultimate essence is inaccessible to ratiocination. Not a few thinkers in the West have given expression to what can be called the unclear innermost kernel hidden behind ratiocination itself. All existentialists, in an open revolt against rationalists maintain that our awareness of the fact that we exist is prior and untranslatable into logical thoughts. Buddhists and existentialists may very well find their thought capsulized in the words of Camus Albert:

If I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all the aspects it is able to assume, all those likewise that have been attributed to it ... This

26. Ramakant Sinari, *Structure of Indian Thought*, (Illinois Charles C. Thomas Pub. 1970), p. 91.

27. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (New York: Bollingen Foundation 1953), p. 523.

very heart which is mine will for ever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. For ever shall I be a stranger to myself.²⁸

What they finally alluded to is the rationally inaccessible core of human existence. Nagarjuna does not hesitate to characterize *Sunyata* or Nothingness as the abode of the worldly and yet beyond the worldly, the fleeting stream of momentary flashes and yet no-self or no-substance. This is why Nothingness as an ontological entity is, for him an unidentifiable principle owing a power of transmitting itself to the mundane world. Therefore, for Nagarjuna, as well as for Sartre "Nothingness is not in opposition to Being, it is rooted in the very Being."²⁹

Existentialists, in general, reject the commonly accepted authority of the logical method to discuss the nature of ontological reality. Since their principle concern is to grasp reality by means of an ego-exploring process, a metaphysics reduced to psychology, they propound a view of the inwardness of man. Having opposed all rationalist philosophies, as Nagarjuna opposed the Upanishadic tradition of stressing the absolute positivity of Brahman, for Sartre as for Nagarjuna, Nothingness takes the place of Being. Being dissolves in Nothing.

Sartre condemns the objectivity-oriented functioning of science and logic. Such a condemnation is quite consistent with his systematic attempt to show that all objective statements in respect of what is essentially real or true notably miss the anguish and Nothingness at the bottom of objectivity. In this condemnation, Nagarjuna would join hands with him. Moreover, in so far as Nagarjuna's anti-intellectualist passion in the pursuit of life's meaning is concerned, he can be easily regarded as a worthy precursor of the whole movement of existentialist ontology." But his motivation, that is the securing of an exit for man from the bondage and afflictions of the worldly life, is uniquely oriental and does not compare well with the largely descriptive procedure of existentialism."³⁰

ii) *Human Life is Futile*

There is an astonishing resemblance between the *Madhyamikas'* and Sartre's voidist interpretations of human life. In fact, it must be observed

28. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (France : Editions Gallinard, 1942), p. 22.

29. Margaret Chaterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

that a way is carved for the philosophy of existence of these thinkers by the socio-cultural milieu when they placed themselves in relation to the world so acutely that they were unable to find anything permanently good in the purpose of existence. While both *Sunyavadins'* method and existentialism are, fundamentally, configurations of an inward-seeing sensibility that finds itself hindered by the phenomenal world, they sustain and propagate themselves in the eras of frustration and ennui. This is why *Sunyavadins* like Nagarjuna and the existentialist philosophers like Sartre have reasoned in a style peculiar to human consciousness thrown vis-à-vis the spatio-temporal universe, and transmitted a mood of utter pointlessness about life.³¹ And Sartre makes Mathieu, the hero of the *Age of Reason*, utter, "a life is formed from the future just as bodies are compounded from the void."³²

Now while theistic existentialists have not carried their view about life's pointlessness to its extreme limit but have restrained it by positing Being or God as the absolute destination of the act of existing, Sartre, more than anybody else has stretched the theory Nothingness outside or inside it. Human consciousness acts so to say in a twofold manner: it posits things and thereby creates the world of Being and also tends toward, purely pre-reflectively, the possibility of their non-being. That is why Nothingness is not given to consciousness either before or after Being but rather along with or at the background of Being.

In one of the most penetrating chapters of his *Being and Nothingness* Sartre examines the various psychical processes that represent Nothing. For instance, our activities like questioning, judging and destroying reveal, according to him, negation – the metaphysical *négativité*. This *négativité* indeed varies in its intensity in accordance with the nature of the phenomenon or situation we encounter. Thus, Being is not a full, solid sphere of experience. Emptiness creeps into Being, whenever the latter is confronted by human reality. Perhaps there is a trans-phenomenal 'lack' concealed in the very sense of presence human consciousness enjoys in the world. It is only an object (being-in-itself), Sartre remarks, that is compact and free from negativity. But the moment in-itself is brought in in-relation to the subject (for-itself), Nothingness appears on the scene.³³

31. Ramakant Sinari, *Structure of Indian Thought*, p. 93.

32. Sartre as quoted by Maurice Friedman: *The Worlds of Existentialism* New York: Random House, 1964), p. 155-56.

33. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 23.

Sartre metaphorically says: " Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of Being . . . like a worm."³⁴

The originality of the philosophies of *Sunyavada* and existentialism lies in their endeavour to comprehend the ultimate truth as something pre-reflective and inaccessible to intellectual formulation. To a disciplined inward-seeing act of consciousness, aimed at ascertaining from what transcendental basis our experience flows forth, and what generates the forms and contents of what we perceive, it is the ontological study of man that finally matters most in philosophy. Both Buddhism and Existentialism are committed to such a study. By making the fragile life of man-in-the-world the starting point of their thinking, the *Sunyavada* Buddhist and the atheistic existentialists have sought to describe how man's estrangement from his ontological source has reduced him to a state of restlessness, affliction, despair, and anxiety. Man has lost his basis, which he is in search of. This is the lofty message Nagarjuna and Jean-Paul Sartre give to humanity. The ontology of *Nothingness*, is, therefore an attempt to verbalise this basis.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 21.