

## Sounds of Silence

### Ineffability and the Limits of Language in Madhyamaka and Yogācāra

#### THE SILENCE OF ŚARIPUTRA

The *Vimalakīrtinirdesa-sūtra* offers us two dramatic and contrasting moments of silence. The first of these, the silence of Śariputra, sets the problem for this chapter: when, and how, can silence be articulate? About what can silence inform? And what can it tell us? We will see that the two principal Mahāyāna schools—or at least prominent protagonists of each—disagree dramatically with regard to the answers they provide to this set of questions, and that this divergence reflects and illuminates their differences with regard to the status of emptiness and the nature of our knowledge thereof. But let us begin with Śariputra's predicament:

Then the venerable Śariputra said to the goddess, "Goddess, how long have you been in this house?"

The goddess replied, "I have been here as long as the elder has been in liberation."

Śariputra said, "Then you have been in this house for quite some time?"

The goddess said, "Has the elder been in liberation for quite some time?"

At that the elder Śariputra fell silent.

The goddess continued, "Elder, you are 'foremost of the wise!' Why do you not speak? Now, when it is your turn, you do not answer the question."

ŚARIPUTRA: Since liberation is inexpressible, goddess, I do not know what to say.

GODDESS: All the syllables pronounced by the elder have the nature of liberation. Why? Liberation is neither internal nor external, nor can it be

apprehended apart from them . . . Therefore, reverend Śariputra, do not point to liberation by abandoning speech!

(1984, p. 59, trans R. Thurman)

Poor Śariputra! Not only has he discovered that he has been in a house with a goddess in the closet, with all of the implications for *vināya* that suggests, but she turns out to be a clever goddess. And when he tries to wriggle out of a dialectical corner into which she backs him with what looks like a profound manoeuvre, she calls his bluff and humiliates him. This should be a lesson to us all: never appear as a *hinayāna* character in a Mahāyāna sūtra!<sup>1</sup> Śariputra abandons speech too quickly, after all. He has been asked a question, in a particular context, in which very little scaffolding is available, in which we begin an investigation almost from scratch. To refuse to speak at such a point is neither an indication of wisdom, nor a means of imparting wisdom, but at best a refusal to make progress. Even if the proverbial raft is eventually to be abandoned, we need it to cross the river. Śariputra would have us swim and possibly drown. Language is not, according to any Mahāyāna school, to be abandoned at the outset; it is not, whatever its limitations, a useless or a wholly misleading cognitive vehicle. To adopt an aphasia or cognitive quietism from the start would be pointless, and, as the Goddess notes, contrary to the practice of the Buddha himself, who uttered an enormous number of words during his career.

But of course the episode gets its point precisely from the fact that Buddhist literature is replete with a rhetoric of silence—with episodes of especially significant silence—and indeed, as we discover a mere two chapters later in this very sūtra, Śariputra's failed silence is but a contrastive prelude to Vimalakīrti's far more articulate silence. This forces us to confront the question, Just when is silence articulate, and just when is nonsilent language required? And this question in turn suggests two deeper ones: What explains the possibility of articulate silence, and what determines the limits of articulate speech? We will see that the answers to these last questions differ between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools, and that the difference is grounded in their account of the epistemology and ontology of emptiness.

#### EMPTINESS AND POSITIONLESSNESS IN MADHYAMAKA

Madhyamaka philosophers—I will be concerned primarily with Nāgārjuna, but also with Candrakīrti and Śāntideva, whose positions on these matters I take to accord in all major respects with Nāgārjuna's—distinguish between two truths: the conventional truth of the world as it appears to ordinary consciousness and as it is constituted by our conventions and practices, including prominently our linguistic and cognitive practices, and the ultimate truth, which is the emptiness of all phenomena. That emptiness, for these philosophers, is not to be understood

as nonexistence, but rather as a lack of essence or independence; more positively it is understood as being interdependent, and as having identity constituted by our conventions, prominently including linguistic and cognitive conventions for more on the nature of emptiness and its relation to the Two truths see chapters 1 through 4 of this volume, Garfield 1995, Newland 1992, Napper 1989, Huntington and Wangchen 1989, Rabten and Batchelor 1983). Śāntideva puts the point this way:

- 2 The conventional and the ultimate  
Are explained to be the Two Truths.  
The ultimate is not grasped as an object of thought;  
Thought is explained to be merely conventional.  
(Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 10)

Here Śāntideva explicitly draws the connection between the conventional character of the conventional world and the fact that it can be characterized by language and grasped by thought. This contrasts with the cognitive and linguistic inaccessibility of the ultimate. It, being the way things are independent of convention, is therefore uncharacterizable, unconceptualizable, precisely because all characterization and conception is convention-dependent and implicates ontologies that can only be conventionally constituted. Śāntideva follows Nāgārjuna, who writes in *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*:

- 7 What language expresses is nonexistent.  
The sphere of thought is nonexistent.  
Unarisen and unceased, like nirvāna  
Is the nature of things. (MMK 8)

In this stanza, Nāgārjuna sharply contrasts the character of things as they present themselves in conventional reality with the way they are ultimately and connects expressibility and conventional reality, inexpressibility and ultimate reality: language and thought indeed grasp and characterize phenomena (ab); those phenomena, however, do not ultimately exist. The true nature of things, by contrast (cd), is not graspable by thought, expressible by language, which can only comprehend things that arise and cease. Nāgārjuna develops this theme further in this important and oft-quoted verse:

- 8 The victorious ones have said  
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.  
For whomever emptiness is a view,  
That one has accomplished nothing. (MMK 13)

Views, of course, are philosophical theories, and so of necessity conceptual and expressible. Emptiness, the ultimate reality of things, cannot be the subject of any such view precisely because it is inexpressible, unconceptualizable. The limits of

thought and expression are coextensive with the limits of conventional truth. Candrakīrti, in commenting on this verse, writes:

So here emptiness is the ceasing of the perception of all views and of the persistence of all attachment to them. And since this is so, the mere relinquishing of views is not even an existent. We will not debate with whoever insists on seeing emptiness as an entity. Therefore, if one opposes this presentation through conceptual elaboration, how will liberation be achieved?

It is like this: Suppose a someone says to someone else, "I have nothing" and he says in reply, "I'll take that very nothing you say you have." If so, without anything there, by what means can we get him to understand that there is nothing there? In just this way, how can someone stop insisting on seeing emptiness is an entity through seeing emptiness as an entity? Therefore, the great doctors with great wisdom and realization, who have performed great medical deeds, understanding their illness, pass by them and refuse to treat them.

As it is said in the great *Ratnakūta sūtra*, "Things are not empty because of emptiness; to be a thing is to be empty. Things are not without defining characteristics through characteristiclessness; to be a thing is to be without a defining characteristic. Things are not without aspiration because of aspirationlessness; since to be a thing is to be without aspiration, whoever understands each thing in this way, Kāśyapa, will understand perfectly how everything has been explained to be in the middle path. Kāśyapa whoever conceives of emptiness through objectifying it falls away from understanding it as it has been explained to be. Kāśyapa, it would be better to view the self as just as stable as Mt. Meru than to view emptiness in this way. This is because, Kāśyapa, since emptiness is understood through the relinquishing of all views, whoever conceives of emptiness through a view, I have explained, will be incurable.

Kāśyapa, consider this example: If a doctor gives a patient medicine, and this medicine cures all of his illness, but stays in his stomach, do you think that suffering will not arise, Kāśyapa? Do you think this man will be relieved of the illness in his belly? No way, blessed one! If the medicine, having cured all of his illnesses, stays in his stomach, this man will certainly become seriously ill.

The Blessed one said, "Kāśyapa, you should see the insistence on any view in just this way. If emptiness is seen like that, Kāśyapa, whoever sees emptiness like that, will be incurable. I have said that it is like that. (*Prasannapadā* 83b-84a)

These comments, of course, are about emptiness and its absolutely negative character and are aimed at forestalling any reification of emptiness. But they are apposite to the issue of expressibility as well. For if someone was to object to the claim that the ultimate truth is inexpressible by arguing that one had just managed to express something about it, the same reply is available: I have denied that there is any available adequate expression. To say that this expression is adequate is simply to fail to accept the claim of inexpressibility and to beg the question. The fact that the same analogy works so well as an explication of the negative character of the ultimate truth and of the impossibility of its expression is certainly at least suggestive of the deep link between them.

Nonetheless, this insistence on a domain of ineffable truth in Madhyamaka does not amount to a rejection of the utility of language, or even of a rejection of the utility of language as a means to come to know ultimate truth. And that, of course, is the point of the goddess's rebuke to Śāriputra. In the twenty-fourth chapter of *MMK*, Nāgārjuna addresses the relation between the conventional and the ultimate truth, and hence implicitly between the expressible and the inexpressible. He argues that the conventional and expressible is a necessary scaffolding for the ascent to knowledge of ultimate truth:

- 9 Without a foundation in the conventional truth,  
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.  
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,  
Liberation is not achieved.

But perhaps more surprisingly, Nāgārjuna argues for an identity—a nonduality—between the conventional and the ultimate, and hence between the expressible and the inexpressible. In the central verse of *MMK* he writes:

- 18 Whatever is dependently co-arisen  
That is explained to be emptiness.  
That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle way.

Here Nāgārjuna claims that the ultimate and conventional truths are not different from one another, despite the fact that one lies with the sphere of thought and language and one does not. This forces us to think hard about how the limits of expression are to be understood in Madhyamaka: how could it be that the same reality could be comprehensible through language and conception and at the same time be incomprehensible through those same media? The answer, we shall see, lies not in the character of reality, but in the distinction between conventional and ultimate perspectives on that reality. At the end of *MMK* Nāgārjuna writes:

- 30 I prostrate to Gautama  
Who through compassion  
Taught the true doctrine,  
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.  
(27)

The goal of Madhyamaka philosophy is the abandonment not of reality, but of a way of taking up with reality, and that way turns out to be inexpressible precisely because of the character of language and thought—always reificatory; always imposing a conventional grid. And against the charge that even to say this—even to express the true thought that truth is inexpressible—is to engage in self-refutation, Nāgārjuna responds:

- 29 If I had any proposition at all,  
Thereby I would have that fault.  
Since I don't have a proposition  
I don't have any fault at all.  
(*Vigrahavyāvartanī*)

That is, the language through which the bounds of expression are approached is itself to be understood by those who have transcended them as merely instrumental, as merely the scaffold to be used only so long as it is useful in climbing, or in assisting others to climb to that level where the language is no longer necessary.

Language and thought, for Nāgārjuna and those who would follow him, then, are adequate to the conventional truth precisely because it is conventional and nominal. The fact that language and thought are constitutive of our ontology explains the fact that they also characterize it. The ultimate truth, on the other hand, is purely negative—it is the emptiness of all phenomena of inherent existence, of all convention-independent existence. For this reason it is also the way things are independent of the conventions embedded in language and conception and for that reason cannot be captured by them. The moment they are employed, they impose the ontology with which they are saturated.

But we have also seen that language can be used to convey ultimate reality in two senses: first, it presents the necessary scaffolding by means of which the nature of reality, and hence its emptiness can be explained. Second, given the emptiness of emptiness and the ultimate identity of the Two Truths, truth as expressed by language and thought—then properly understood as merely conventional—shows, but cannot say, the ultimate nature of reality. Hence the inexpressibility of ultimate reality for Madhyamaka is limited—it is inexpressible from one side only, albeit the most important one—and rests on its purely negative character as compared to the positive character of conception and language,

and so finally its relation to its expressibility in another sense is grounded on the emptiness of emptiness and the identity of the Two Truths.

#### EMPTINESS AND MIND ONLY IN YOGĀCĀRA

When we turn to central Yogācāra texts,<sup>2</sup> the account of emptiness we discover is subtly different and underpins an idealism contrasting sharply with the more homogenous ontology of Madhyamaka: mind is accorded a fundamental ontological status, and the existence of external objects is denied altogether. Emptiness must then be reinterpreted if all is to come out empty. For if emptiness were to be understood in this system as the mere absence of inherent existence, mind could not be regarded in this way, and if emptiness were understood as equivalent to conventional reality, external objects could not be regarded as empty. The opening verses of *Madhyāntavibhāga*, a text attributed to Maitreya and delivered by Asaṅga, sum things up nicely:

- 1        There is the construction of the nonexistent  
          In that there is no duality.  
          There is emptiness there.  
          It exists in that very thing.
- 2        Thus all things are taught to be  
          Neither empty nor non-empty  
          Because of existence, nonexistence and existence.  
          This is the middle path.

External objects are nonexistent. But their conceptual construction by the mind is real. That construction, being itself purely mental, is not dual: it does not resolve into subject and object simply because there is nothing to be found on the object side—there is only the conceptual activity of the subject, which is mistaken for an independent object. Now, whereas for the Madhyamaka we saw that emptiness is a purely negative phenomenon, emptiness appears more positively on this view: “There is emptiness there.” The emptiness in question is the absence of subject-object duality, not the lack of essence or inherent existence. That, to be sure, is negative—it is, after all, an absence—but it is not a *pure* negation. It is an absence of *something* (like Pierre’s absence from the café), but it is not an absence of essence, and in fact this emptiness turns out to be an essential characteristic of things. So while the mādhymika’s emptiness is itself empty, and leaves things benefit of nature, even the nature of being empty, the Yogācārin’s emptiness is precisely the nature of things.

So we find in the second verse that things are *not* empty of *all* essence, though they *are* empty of subject-object duality, precisely because of the actual existence of conceptual construction, the complete nonexistence of that which is con-

structed (the external world) and the existence of the emptiness of subject-object duality as the nature of these phenomena. Instead of Nāgārjuna’s middle path, regarding emptiness and dependent arising as identical, and emptiness as empty as everything else, we have a middle path regarding emptiness as ultimately real, and the dependently arisen as absolutely nonexistent, its nonexistence—not its dependent existence—being precisely the ultimate reality.

Just as Madhyamaka philosophers adopt a rhetoric of ineffability regarding the ultimate, Yogācāra philosophers argue that ultimate reality as they conceive it is ineffable. In order to explore that claim and its connection to their account of emptiness, I would like to take a tour through Sthiramati’s commentary to the last ten verses of Vasubandhu’s *Triṃśikākārikā*, *Triṃśikābhāṣya*. We will occasionally turn as well to Vinitadeva’s subcommentary:

- 21        The other dependent nature is conceptual:  
          It arises from conditions.  
          The consummate is  
          The eternal nonexistence of the former in that.

Since it is unchanging it is called “the consummate.” The “that” is the other-dependent, and “the former” is the imagined. With respect to the conceptual, the imagined has the nature of subject and object, and therefore with respect to it, given the absence of subject and object as it is imagined, it is imaginary. The complete, permanent and eternal separation of subject and object from the other dependent is the consummate nature.

This text explores the Three Natures and the implications of *trisvabhāva* theory for the nature of our knowledge of ultimate reality—of fully enlightened consciousness. One of the principal issues Vasubandhu and Sthiramati explore in this text and commentary is the implication of the complete nonexistence of objects of consciousness for the character of enlightened consciousness itself. Just what is objectless knowledge? And of course it turns out that such knowledge will also be inexpressible and unconceptualizable. In the commentary to (21) Sthiramati emphasizes that the consummate nature of all things—the way the world is understood when it is understood perfectly—is free from all subject-object duality, and that all objects distinct from subjectivity are purely imaginary.

- 22        Therefore it itself is neither  
          The same as nor different from the other-dependent. (a, b)

Since the other-dependent is without subject and object, then, you might ask, “How do you know that it exists, grasping where there is no grasping?” He therefore says,

23 Without seeing that it is not seen. (d)

He says "without seeing that," meaning the consummate. He says, "[T]hat is not seen," meaning the other-dependent. "Without seeing" means neither apprehending nor realizing the consummate nature, which is the object seen by transcendental wisdom.

When the other-dependent nature is seen, we are seeing our experience of external objects as dependent upon the mind and mental processes. The other-dependent is Janus-faced: when seen from the standpoint of delusion, these subjective episodes are seen as external objects and as objectified mind—as objects for a perceiving or apperceiving subject. When seen from the standpoint of enlightenment, on the other hand . . . And here is where the problem begins. For since there is nothing for the mind to grasp in the consummate, the question arises, What kind of cognitive state is this? And why call it knowledge in the first place? Sthiramati first explains that the other-dependent nature is not really understood at all until one has apprehended the consummate. But then, since the apprehension of the consummate is nonconceptual and since the understanding of the other-dependent must be conceptual, how is this supposed to work? Sthiramati answers:

In the subsequent pure knowledge, since it is within both the spheres of mundane and transcendental knowledge, another consciousness apprehends the other dependent. Therefore, without seeing the consummate, the other-dependent is not seen; the non-seen is not seen by the wisdom subsequent to the transcendental wisdom.

So here is the story: the initial apprehension of the consummate, wholly within the sphere of transcendental knowledge, is objectless, nonconceptual, uncharacterizable, ineffable. But it is also not knowledge of the other-dependent per se and so cannot by itself be efficacious in ordinary life. On leaving meditative equipoise, however, the "subsequent pure knowledge" arises. This is a conceptual cognitive state, which takes as its object not the consummate nature but the transcendental awareness of the consummate achieved in meditation. The knowledge this apprehension enables allows one to see the dependent nature—and hence the totality of dependently arisen phenomena—for what it is: an illusion, a dream, a mirage. But all of this is an enlightened apprehension of the conventional world, and not an apprehension of the ultimate. It is hence within the sphere of conception and thought. Sthiramati expresses it this way:

As the *Avikalpaprapvesadharāni* says, "through that subsequent wisdom all things are seen as illusions, mirages, dreams, spectres, echoes and moons in the water and apparitions." (337) Here, things denotes all things having the dependent nature. Now he talks about the consummate: It is wisdom

always of one taste. As it says, "Through this nonconceptual wisdom, all things are seen as the vault of the sky." Through the dependent nature, the bare quiddity of things is seen.

26 As long as the understanding  
Is not grounded in mind only (ab)

"As long as the understanding is not grounded" means for as long as the appearance of subject and object is there; "in mind only" means in the nature of mind. The two graspings are the grasping of subject and the grasping of object . . .

By the words "not eliminated" he means this: For as long as the yogi's mind does not come to be grounded in the nondual characteristic of mind only, the two graspings will not be eliminated. Hence, having taught that if the external appearance is not eliminated, the internal one is not eliminated either, one might think, "I grasp form, etc through my eyes, etc." There one is an answer to this: When there is the appearance of objectless mind only, is that what it is to be grounded in the nature of mind? No way!

Sthiramati emphasizes here the sharp distinction between the nondual transcendental awareness of emptiness—of the fact that only mind is real—and any awareness of subjects and objects, including any conceptual awareness of ultimate reality. If objectless mind appears as an object of awareness, he argues, we do not have a real awareness of ultimate reality, precisely because there is an object of such an awareness. Vasubandhu develops this in the next verse, on which Vinitadeva offers a perceptive gloss:

27 Even the thought "All this is appearance only"  
Involves an object.  
And anything that places something in front of it  
Is not grounded in this-only.

That is not how it is to be grounded in the nature of mind. The reason is: Whoever thinks, "This is the pure representation-only," since that appearance has arisen, there is thereby an object in front of him. As long as there is something in front of him his is not grounded in mind only. Thus, only through the elimination of all other objects will mind only itself become apparent. . . . (Vinitadeva, *Trimsikatikā* 117c-e)

Any conceptual content, any object of awareness indicates a cognitive state directed in the first instance on the conventional, and at best—if it is causally connected to and directed subsequently on a transcendental awareness—indirectly on the ultimate. Sthiramati continues:

For instance, if some conceited fellow, just by hearing would think, "I am grounded in pure appearance only," in order to eliminate that grasping, it