

THE CONCEPT OF 'EXISTENCE' AND ABSOLUTE SKEPTICISM

The existence or reality of different things which is almost a truism to us has been challenged by Absolute Sceptics in different ages. A view called the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā' (Absolute Nihilism) advocating total non-existence is found to be reported and criticised by Gautama in his 'Nyāya-Sūtra'. We find, again, in Greek philosophical literature a theory of total non-existence expounded by Gorgias of Leontini. Another peculiar type of Absolute Scepticism called 'Śūnyavāda' has been sponsored by Nāgārjuna, the chief exponent of the Mādhyamika school of Buddhist Philosophy. Absolute Sceptics are thus found to repudiate in different ways the concept of existence or reality and the cogency of their arguments cannot prima facie be ignored. And it would not be intellectually proper to make an assessment of the common-sense view regarding the *existence* of different objects of this world without an examination of these different types of Sceptical arguments.

The present discourse is concerned with an elucidation and assessment of the first of these three types of Absolute Scepticism, viz., Absolute Nihilism or the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā'.

Gautama mentions in his 'Nyāya-Sūtra' a peculiar type of Absolute Scepticism which has been designated by the later writers of the school as 'Sarvaśūnyatāvāda' (Absolute Nihilism). This theory asserts that everything is of the nature of 'nothing' because there is in every positive thing the absence of every other thing.¹ We find that there are different types of things with different forms and we give them different names. One particular type of animal is called 'cow', while another 'horse'. It is also seen that the peculiarities of one type of entities are not found in another : the peculiar features of a 'cow' are absent in a horse. In other words,

a 'cow' exists as a 'not-horse'. This means, according to the theorist, that what is called a 'cow' is constituted by some absence. In like manner, a 'book' exists as a 'not-tree' and a 'tree' exists as a 'not-bird'. Hence it is to be admitted, says the Absolute Nihilist, that there is in everything of this universe the absence of every other thing. And since 'absence' is something unreal or 'nothing', everything which is alleged to be real or existent is as a matter of fact unreal or non-existent.

The Absolute Nihilist emphasises that since there is in everything the absence of every other thing, everything is to be identified with absence or 'nothing' itself. As in the statement 'the flower is blue', the 'flower' is to be regarded as identical with 'blue', so in a statement like 'the horse is not-cow' the 'horse' is to be regarded as identical with the non-existence or absence of the 'cow'. In other words, by 'the flower is blue' is meant 'what is called flower is non-different from the thing having blue colour.' And by 'horse is not-cow' is meant 'what is called horse' is as a matter of fact non-different from the absence or non-existence of the 'cow'.

Now the assumption underlying this argument is that the proposition 'the flower is blue' is an identity-proposition in which both the subject and the predicate stand distributed. This amounts to saying that the entire class of 'flower' and the entire class of 'blue' are co-extensive. On this analogy, it is argued by the Absolute Nihilist that the proposition 'the horse is not-cow' is also an identity-proposition. That is to say, both the subject and the predicate of this proposition stand distributed. And this amounts to saying that the *entire class* of 'horse' and the *entire class* of 'cow' are co-extensive.

It might be remarked, however, in this connexion that both the subject and the predicate of a proposition stand distributed only in a definitional proposition like 'all men are rational'. But a proposition like 'the flower is blue' cannot by any means be regarded as a definitional one. The quality 'blue' is here only

predicated of the particular object called 'flower'. One cannot call it an identity-proposition because of the fact that the same attribute 'blue' can be predicated of other things as well, e.g., 'cloth', 'sky', 'sea' and so on. If a statement like 'the flower is blue' is taken to be an identity-proposition, then a similar statement, say 'the sky is blue' should also be taken to be an identity-proposition. Now if 'flower' and 'blue' were non-different then 'sky' and 'blue' would also have to be taken to be so. But that would be equivalent to saying 'the flower is the sky'. And this would be nonsense. To consider now the statement 'the horse is not-cow' which is assumed by the Absolute Nihilist to be an 'identity-proposition'. The 'horse' is here claimed to be identical with the non-existence or absence of the 'cow' only because in this statement 'not-cow' is predicated of 'horse'. But it is to be kept in mind that 'not-cow' can be predicated of other things as well, e.g., 'table', 'chair', 'tree', 'star' etc. In short the absence or non-existence of a 'cow' is in everything except the cow itself. And the non-skeptic would point out that if 'horse is not-cow' is claimed to be an identity proposition, then a similar one like 'tree is not-cow' should also be regarded as an identity-proposition. But if that were the case, then 'not-cow' and 'horse' and 'tree' would turn out to be non-different. And, as a consequence, we are landed in the absurdity of concluding that 'horse is tree'. Not to speak of the non-skeptic, the Absolute Skeptic himself will not surely be ready to accept this meaningless statement in support of his nihilistic contention that everything is of the nature of 'nothing' or, in other words, that 'all things are unreal'.

It might be urged, however, on behalf of the Absolute Nihilist that the statement above with all its meaningless-ness would not at all be unwelcome to him. For, as on his nihilistic view, all things of this world are without exception unreal or non-existent, there would be no harm in identifying two unreals, viz. a 'tree' and a 'horse'.

But the non-skeptic would point out that to accept a proposition like this would mean for the Absolute Skeptic nothing but a refutation of his own Nihilism. Since, according to a Nihilist, all things without exception are unreal, he would not demur to the equation 'horse=tree'. And to keep consistency with his Absolute Nihilism he should not also have any hesitation to accept another equation 'horse=cow'. Now by accepting such an equation, the Nihilist would at once be committed to two contradictory propositions, viz., 'horse is not-cow' and 'horse is cow'; for to him there should be no difference between 'not-cow' and 'cow'. But these two propositions are directly contradictory to each other. The Nihilist thus by his own logic is forced to infringe the law of non-contradiction.

The Absolute Nihilist nevertheless might urge that to his Absolute Skepticism, a logical law like the law of non-contradiction has no more sanctity than the so-called reality of this or that object of the world. On his view everything is unreal. And this is true quite as much of the so-called logical laws. Common people may think of a logical law as an item of reality very much as they think of a horse or a tree as an item of the real world. But, according to an Absolute Skeptic, they all sail in the same boat. The Nihilist is as much prepared to repudiate the law of non-contradiction as he is prepared to repudiate the reality of this or that thing of this world.

But it might be remarked that if the Absolute Skeptic denies the reality of the law in question, then he must have to do justice to the truth-claim of two statements describing two opposite facts, e.g., 'snow is white' and 'snow is not white'. And the non-skeptic would point out that if it be so, then the Nihilist should not also hesitate to admit that 'everything is real'—a view which contradicts his own theory that everything is unreal. But if he is thus once committed to the reality of all things, then how could it be possible for him to sustain at the same time his own theory

of Absolute Nihilism? By a denial of the law of non-contradiction, therefore, the Absolute Nihilist would have to discard Absolute Nihilism itself.

Now it might be urged on behalf of the Absolute Nihilist that the acceptance of the non-skeptic view does not mean for him the giving up of his own Absolute Nihilism. For the law of non-contradiction is, for him, without any value at all. This argument, however, can hardly be accepted. If the contradiction mentioned above is actually considered by the Skeptic as not anything damaging to the nihilistic position then why does he not admit the common-sense claim regarding the reality of things? But instead of it he is found to be quite reluctant to accept the non-skeptic view. We find him rather engaged in *establishing* his own thesis that everything is unreal by repudiating the common-sense view regarding the reality of things. And this shows that the Nihilist's denial of the law of non-contradiction is not anything genuine but is a mere playing with words.

A further difficulty regarding the position of the Absolute Nihilist has been pointed out by Vātsyāyana in his commentary on Gautama's 'Nyāya-Sūtra'. According to him, in this argument the proposition to be proved and the ground for the proposition are mutually contradictory.² To elucidate. The argument supporting the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā' is "Everything is of the nature of 'nothing' because there is the absence of every positive thing in every other thing". Now in this argument the 'proposition to be proved' is 'everything is of the nature of nothing': and the 'ground' is: 'there is the absence of every positive thing in every other thing'. Thus the Absolute Nihilist at first asserts and establishes the reciprocal absence of things in one another and then taking it as a 'ground' he claims to establish the absence or 'nothingness' of everything. But as Vātsyāyana emphasises, if the reciprocal absence of positive things in one another is admitted, then the thesis 'everything is of the nature of nothing

cannot be established.³ For the assertion made in the ground that 'there is the absence of every positive thing in every other thing' implies the reality of different positive entities. If anybody says that a horse is not a cow, then he surely admits the reality of both the horse and the cow. Otherwise he could not make such an assertion. The Absolute Nihilist, however, tries to establish in the 'proposition to be proved' a view just opposite to what is asserted in the 'ground', i.e., the non-existence or unreality of everything. Again, if 'everything' without an exception is claimed to be 'of the nature of nothing', then how is it possible to assert the reciprocal absence of positive things in one another?⁴ Thus to admit the 'proposition to be proved' is to deny the 'ground' for the proposition and, again, to admit the 'ground' is to repudiate the 'proposition to be proved'.

Moreover, the 'proposition to be proved' by the Absolute Nihilist itself appears to be quite self-defeating. To explain. The 'proposition to be proved' is that 'everything is of the nature of nothing'. The two significant terms of this proposition are 'everything' and 'nothing'. Now the term 'everything' signifies a comprehensive totality of an infinite number of things. 'Infinity' (aśeṣatva) and multiplicity (anekatva) are thus the two definite characteristics of the things signified by the term 'everything'. Again, by 'the term 'nothing' is meant a denial of anything real.⁵ Now it is to be noted that the term 'everything' signifies 'things having an essence' (sopākhyā), whereas the term 'nothing' can be predicted only of 'something having no essence' (nirupākhyā). But in the statement under reference the term 'nothing' is predicted of 'everything' and Vātsyāyana points out that it is a contradiction in terms. For a term signifying something *having no essence* (nirupākhyā) is here identified with another term signifying *something having essence* (sopākhyā).⁶ And it amounts to asserting the non-existence of what is already existent.

It might be urged, however, on behalf of the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā' that the statement 'everything is of the nature of

nothing' is to be interpreted as "that which is commonly described as 'everything' is as a matter of fact 'nothing'".⁷ Hence the self-contradiction as pointed out by Vātsyāyana is to be regarded as only apparent.

Vātsyāyana nevertheless emphasises that the contradiction cannot be removed even by an interpretation like this. By the word 'nothing' is never understood a thing having the two characteristics, viz., 'infinity' and 'multiplicity'.⁸ It always means something which is devoid of every characteristic i.e., which is absolutely unreal. In other words, the term 'nothing' cannot give us the idea of a comprehensive totality of an infinite number of things. Hence entities which are signified by 'everything' can never be identified with 'nothing'.

It has been further emphasised by Vātsyāyana that if, as the Absolute Nihilist claims, 'everything' were to be regarded as having the nature of 'nothing', then the term 'cow' should also signify nothing but mere 'nothing'. But as a matter of fact we find that the word 'cow' stands for an entity having the characteristic 'Cowness' as its special feature. By the term 'cow' we never understand mere 'nothing' which is devoid of every characteristic.⁹

It might be argued, however, by an Absolute Skeptic that this objection urged by Vātsyāyana is without any value. For according to the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā', the 'characteristic' of an object is also to be regarded as unreal. Thus the 'Cowness' in question should be regarded simply as 'nothing'. In other words, there are not things like 'cowness', 'horseness', 'bookness' etc. which can be taken as the so-called 'differentiating characteristics' of different real entities like 'cow', 'horse', 'book' etc.

But if this is what the Nihilist really means then why does he not assert the absence or non-existence of an entity in the self-same entity? According to the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā', since there is in every positive thing the absence of every other thing,

everything is of the nature of 'nothing'. That is to say, an object, say a 'cow' is identified by him with 'nothing', because a cow exists as a 'not-horse'. Now Vātsyāyana urges that if there is really nothing like 'cowness' or 'horseness', then the Nihilist should also claim that a cow exists as a 'not-cow' instead of saying that a cow exists as a 'not-horse'. Why does he not proclaim that 'not-horse' is horse or cow is 'not-cow'?¹⁰ 'A cow exists as a 'not-horse' means that the 'differentiating characteristic' of a horse is not in a cow. But, since, on the Nihilistic thesis, there is not really anything which might be regarded as the 'differentiating characteristic', the Nihilist has no right to distinguish between 'not-horse' and 'not-cow'. An Absolute Nihilist, however, as a matter of fact does never claim that a cow is of the nature of an absence of a cow. An assertion like this would be, according to the Nihilist's own judgment, self-stultifying. Vātsyāyana emphasises that the Skeptic's reluctance to admit the absence of 'Cowness' in a 'cow' is a fact which proves the reality or existence of a cow.¹¹ If it were not so, then the Nihilist would not hesitate to admit propositions like 'cow is not-cow' or 'horse' is not-horse'.

It is to be remarked, further, that the nihilistic statement that 'everything is of the nature of nothing' implies the existence of 'everything' rather than proving 'universal' non-existence. And this point is taken up by Uddyotakara who emphasises that since every correct predication implies the reality of something, the predication of 'nothing' itself implies the reality or existence of 'everything'. To explain. A *valid* judgment cannot express any true cognition if the cognitum, that is, the object to be cognised has not any reality. To take for example, a true statement, like 'the sky is blue'. This statement would not be regarded as true if there were not any real entity answering to its subject-term 'sky'. To take now another proposition, e.g., 'the sky-flower is red'. This judgment does not express any true cognition since there is no actual object corresponding to its subject-

term, that is, the 'sky-flower'. In other words, something is described in this statement about an object which is admittedly unreal or non-existent, and, therefore, this statement cannot be taken to be a true one. Now Uddyotakara points out that if the statement 'everything is of the nature of nothing' is assumed by the Nihilist to be true, then, surely, the reality of 'everything' has got to be admitted by him. For, as has been stated above, a thing which is unreal cannot be regarded as the subject of a true proposition.¹² Thus Uddyotakara points out that the predication of 'nothing' itself establishes the existence of 'everything' instead of repudiating it. And, again, if the reality of 'everything' is denied, then it would mean the denial of the truth-claim of the nihilistic thesis under reference.

The Nihilist may here urge that this difficulty pressed by the non-skeptic against the nihilistic position applies to the non-skeptic's own position as well. Does he not accept the truth of a statement like 'the cow is not-horse'? Does not the statement predicate a 'nothing' of the 'cow' which is admitted to be existent or real for the reason that it is the subject of a true judgment? And if this statement is accepted as quite legitimate by the non-skeptic, then he should not hesitate to accept the truth-claim of the nihilistic statement 'everything is of the nature of nothing'? The Nihilist's position is rejected by Uddyotakara as self-contradictory on the ground that the predication of 'nothing' of 'everything' implies the 'existence' or reality of the latter. And the Nihilist would emphasise that on the same logic a proposition like 'cow is not-horse' should also be treated as self-contradictory, for here also we have a case of predication of 'nothing' (viz., not-horse) of something real (viz., cow).

It is to be replied, however, in the manner of Vātsyāyana that the predication of 'nothing' in the statement above, viz., 'a cow is not-horse' could not indeed be justified if it would mean simply the denial of the existence of a real entity called

'cow'. It is to be admitted indeed that the thing meant by the subject-term of a proposition should be something existent. But the existence of a 'cow' is not what is denied in the statement in question. What is here denied is only a relation of identity between the cow and the horse. In other words, this statement amounts to saying that 'the cow exists but it is not a horse' and clearly there is no contradiction involved in such a statement. But the case of the nihilistic statement is different altogether. By predicating 'nothing' of 'everything', the Nihilist here intends to deny the very *existence* of the entities signified by the phrase 'everything' and not of any of their particular characteristics. And at the same time he also asserts the reality of 'everything' by making it the subject of the proposition. And thus he is landed in the absurdity of asserting that real entities are unreal.

A fresh argument in support of the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā' has been reported in Vācaspati's 'Tātparyatikā'. It runs as follows :—

The entities alleged to be real are either eternal or non-eternal. Now it has been argued in favour of Absolute Nihilism that it is not possible to prove the eternal existence of a thing : nor, again is it possible to prove the reality of an entity that is called emergent. And, as a consequence, the notion of existence or reality turns out to be unintelligible.

To begin with the difficulties in regard to the existence of a thing which is supposed to be eternal. It is to be noted that the argument in question can be made plausible only on the assumption that to be real a thing must have some causal efficacy: that is to say, it has to become the cause of something else directly or indirectly. Things like 'the son of a barren woman' and the 'hare's horn' do not possess any causal efficacy and these things are not admitted to be real. Now since the reality of a thing is supposed to be constituted by its causal efficacy, the causal efficacy of an entity admitted to be eternally real

should also be taken to be something eternal. But to admit an eternal causal efficacy of anything is to admit a perpetual effectuation. That is to say, it is to be admitted then that the object produces its effect unceasingly. But we find as a matter of fact that the effects of an object are not produced always and without any cessation¹³. The effects are rather perceived to come into being in a succession and not all at once. And that would mean that the object taken to be a cause ceases to effectuate at least for a while. But if that be the case, then its causal efficacy does not surely persist. Now if it is claimed that the efficacy remains in the object as before, than the break in effectuation cannot be explained. There is no reason why the effect should not be produced if the cause has the efficacy required. Causal efficacy cannot be said to remain in an object even when it does not cause anything. But if the efficacy is not admitted to be something eternal, then the object, viz., the cause cannot be admitted to be eternal. It follows then that a thing would exist at the time of exercising its causal efficacy and it would turn out to be non-existent at the very moment when its effectuation ceases. It is, however, patently absurd to assume that the self-same entity should some times be real and some times unreal.

So much for the difficulty regarding the existence of entities supposed to be eternal. To take up now the Nihilist's difficulties in admitting the existence of things which are non-eternal, i.e. emergent. A non-eternal object is by its nature destructible. It emerges at a particular instant and is admitted to perish subsequently. A jar, for example, emerges at a particular instant of time, say 'ti' and it perishes at a subsequent instant, say 'tx'. Now the Nihilist urges that if it is once admitted that a thing perishes at a subsequent instant then where is the difficulty in asserting that it perishes at the very moment of its emergence? A thing which is *by its nature* destructible may be destroyed at any moment and there is no good reason to assume that the very moment of its destruction must be 'tx' and not

'ti'¹⁴. In other words, the self-same temporal instant might be regarded as the moment of emergence of a thing as well as of its destruction. And if that could be the case, then such an object could not be the cause of anything. It could not be admitted to have causal efficacy, since to be the cause of an effect, a thing should have to *persist* for one instant at the least. But a thing which cannot be regarded as the cause of anything else cannot be called real; for it has been assumed by the objector that the existence of an object is constituted by its causal efficacy.

Now this skeptical argument as reported by Vācaspati is based on the assumption that the existence of a thing is constituted by its causal efficacy. It is to be remarked, however, that this assumption can hardly be conceded and for the following reasons :

(i) This assumed proposition is to be regarded either as analytic or as synthetic and, the non-skeptic would point out that it is neither. To explain. A proposition is called 'analytic' if its predicate is contained in the subject or is a part of the meaning of the subject. The proposition to be examined, viz., 'the existence of a thing is constituted by its causal efficacy' cannot, however, be called 'analytic' in this sense because the idea of 'causal efficacy' is not contained in that of 'existence'. If it were so, then the proposition would mean that the existence of a thing *is* its causal efficacy. But as a matter of fact what we understand by 'existence' is not what we understand by 'causal efficacy'. The proposition in question, therefore, cannot be regarded as analytic.

The proposition then is to be regarded as 'synthetic'. A proposition is called 'synthetic' if its predicate is not already contained in its subject-idea. Now the truth of a synthetic proposition is either to be demonstrated or it must be something self-evident. But the truth of this proposition under reference can neither be demonstrated nor can it be taken to be self-evident.

To demonstrate the truth of a proposition it is necessary to offer some valid ground for the proposition. In the present case, the valid ground cannot be put forward without taking for granted the truth of the very proposition that is sought to be demonstrated. In other words, if we are to demonstrate the truth of the proposition 'the existence of a thing is constituted by its causal efficacy' on the ground 'X', then this 'X' itself will have to be taken as something existent. But in order to claim existence for itself, the ground 'X' must have causal efficacy for itself. Now this is clearly a case of *petitio principii*.

Again, the proposition 'the existence of a thing is constituted by its causal efficacy' cannot be regarded as self-evident. For a proposition is called self-evident when to understand it means acceptance of its truth. But the proposition in question cannot be called self-evident in this sense since its truth is not universally accepted. By 'existence' all persons do not as a matter of fact understand 'causal efficacy'. A thing like a 'table' or a 'chair' appears to everybody as something real or existent but not always as the cause of an effect. If this proposition were self-evident as the Nihilist might claim it to be, then it would not be possible for the non-skeptic to challenge its validity. The proposition 'the existence of a thing is constituted by its causal efficacy' cannot, then, by any means be regarded as self-evident.

(ii) It might be urged, further, on behalf of the non-skeptic that sometimes an unreal entity appears to have causal efficacy, e.g., when an illusory snake causes fear. But if existence of a thing is assumed to be constituted by its causal efficacy, then it would not be possible to distinguish an illusory appearance from a real one. In other words, if causal efficacy is found to be in an entity which is admittedly unreal, then it is difficult to see how causal efficacy can be regarded as the mark of reality.

The Nihilist would urge, however, that this second objection is not at all unwelcome to him. For this objection establishes

in another way the thesis of Nihilism rather than repudiating it. To elucidate. The Nihilist intends to deny the existence of everything. That is to say, according to him, there is nothing that can be called real. And, therefore, it does not matter anything to him if a thing alleged to be real cannot be distinguished from something that is admittedly unreal. Thus the Nihilist would emphasise that since even an illusory object can have causal efficacy, there does not appear to be any distinction between the existence of a thing and its non-existence.

It is to be pointed out, however, on behalf of the non-skeptic that if indeed the Nihilist had no mind to distinguish between existence and non-existence of a thing, i.e., between 'is' and 'is not', then all the arguments given by him in favour of Nihilism would be regarded as useless. The Nihilist intends to establish in his theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā' or Absolute Nihilism that the entity alleged to be existent is as a matter of fact non-existent. Thus it appears that he himself makes the distinction between existence and non-existence. And the Nihilist himself surely does not regard his own arguments as futile or unavailing. How can he claim then that there is not actually any distinction between a thing that is called real and another that is admittedly unreal?

(iii) It has been objected further by the non-skeptic that to admit that 'the existence of a thing is constituted by its causal efficacy' is to admit a regressus ad infinitum¹⁵. To elucidate. According to the Skeptic, that thing only should be regarded as real or existent which has causal efficacy. This causal efficacy should, however, be regarded either as real or as unreal. Now if causal efficacy is admitted to be real or existent then, as the non-skeptic points out, to establish its reality we must have to postulate a second causal efficacy, since the reality of a thing is supposed to be constituted by its causal efficacy. This second causal efficacy, again, to be real should have a third causal effi-

cacy and so on ad infinitum. Thus to admit that the existence of a thing is constituted by its causal efficacy would be to admit a vicious regress; and the Nihilist surely would not accept this regress.

Again, if the causal efficacy is regarded as something unreal, then it would mean that the existence or reality of a thing is described in terms of non-existence or unreality. And the absurdity of the position is patent. The nihilistic assumption under reference thus cannot be accepted as valid. As a consequence, the Skeptical argument in favour of the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā', as reported by Vācaspati has no legs to stand upon.

It is to be observed further that the argument repudiating the reality of emergent objects appears to involve another assumption viz., that 'the genesis and destruction' of a thing may occur at the same instant'. This assumption is also, on the non-skeptic view, equally untenable and for the following reason. Since an emergent entity is destructible by nature, the Nihilist urges that a thing which is *destructible by nature* may perish at any moment and that there is no reason why it should not be the case that the genesis and destruction of an object, e.g., a 'jar' take place at the same time 'ti'.

It might be urged, however, that an assumption like this cannot be admitted without violating the causal law. To explain. The destruction of a thing is not possible if there is no cause of the destruction. As nothing can emerge without any cause, so nothing can be destroyed without any cause. And since a cause is antecedent to its effect, the conditions of the destruction of a thing must precede the phenomenon of such 'destruction'. But the destruction of 'A' requires the emergence of 'A' itself. If 'A' itself does not exist at all, then what will be destroyed? Now let it be assumed that 'A' emerges at the instant 'ti'. And if its destruction is assumed to take place at the self-same instant, then the cause of the destruction in question, should have to exist prior to it. Now a 'blow' may be the cause of the

destruction of a 'jar'. But if the 'jar' itself were to emerge at 'ti', then how can the 'blow' occur at an instant prior to 'ti'? For the 'blow' cannot surely take place when there is no jar at all. The Nihilist might try to overcome this difficulty by asserting that the cause of the destruction of a jar and the destruction itself emerge together at 'ti' along with the emergence of the 'jar'. But this would mean that an effect and its cause can emerge at the same time. And that would be an infringement of the causal law that a cause must antecede its effect.

It might be urged, however, from the Nihilist's camp that the contemporaneity of the emergence and destruction of a thing can be justified if the destruction is assumed to occur when a thing is in the 'process' of emerging. A 'jar' may emerge at an instant, say 'ti'. Now if it happens that the destruction of the jar takes place in the 'process' of the emerging of the jar, then 'ti' which is the instant of emergence turns out to be the instant of destruction as well. And thus the contemporaneity of the emergence and the destruction of an entity can be made intelligible without an infringement of the causal law.

The non-skeptic would, however, emphasise that there is no actual state of a thing which may be described as the 'process of emerging'. It is a matter of fact that a thing does not exist before its emergence, and having emerged it persists as long as it is not destroyed. Thus we find in connexion with an object two states, viz., a 'state of emergence' and a 'state of persistence', and we cannot discover any 'process of *emerging*' other than these two states. Then why should one admit the reality of a thing, called the 'process of *emerging*'? To consider the case of the 'jar'. Before the emergence (of the jar) the lump of clay out of which a jar is to be produced is not regarded as the 'jar'. Nobody, again, speaks of a jar when it is only half-finished, because it does not serve any purpose of a jar at that time. And if the half-finished thing is destroyed, we do not say that a jar is

destroyed. It is called a 'jar' just from that moment when it is finished and that very instant is regarded as the moment of its genesis. Therefore, to use a phrase like 'state of *emerging*' or 'a process of *emerging*', is, according to the non-skeptic, nothing but to use meaningless words. The contemporaneity of the genesis and the destruction of an object cannot then be admitted.

It might be suggested, however, by the Nihilist that the contemporaneity in question can be justified if it is admitted that the emergence and destruction of thing can have the self-same cause. To elucidate, A thing comes into being at 'ti' and, therefore, the cause of its emergence must be regarded as existing prior to 'ti'. Now if it is assumed that its destruction is also conditioned by that same cause then the destruction is to be admitted to take place at 'ti'.

But it is to be emphasised, the non-skeptic would say, that this Skeptical suggestion is quite inadmissible. For it is obvious that the fact of genesis is opposed to that of destruction and vice versa. To claim, therefore, the self-same cause for the emergence and the destruction of a thing would be to assert that the same thing can produce two opposed effects. And it is like admitting that fire makes a thing hot and cold. The absurdity of such an assertion is patent.

This difficulty cannot be overcome even by asserting that two different causes may operate at the same time to produce at the same instant two opposed effects. For if two effects are found to be opposed to each other, their causes must also be opposed to each other. And two opposed causes cannot surely operate at the same time in the same context. Even if it were taken for granted that two opposed causes could operate at the same instant in the same context, none of them would be able to effectuate anything since they would always counteract each other. It is to be contended, therefore, that the contemporaneity of the genesis and the destruction of a thing as suggested by the Nihilist cannot be justified by any means.

But as far as Gautama's writings are concerned, it appears that the exponents of Absolute Nihilism cannot be kept silent by all this. He is found there to refer to another argument of the Absolute Nihilist (Sarvaśūnyatāvādin) in which the reality of a thing has been denied on the ground of its relative existence. By 'relative existence' (sāpekṣatva) of a thing is meant that a thing exists only in dependence on the existence of another thing. It has been observed by the Nihilist that every object is relative in its character, e.g., a 'short thing' is regarded as 'short' in relation to a 'long one' and a 'long thing' is called 'long' in relation to a 'short one'. 'Farness' implies 'nearness' and the word 'large' can be understood only with reference to the word 'small', and so on. Again, the 'difference' of one thing from another thing is also to be admitted as dependent on the existence of *that other* thing since it is not possible for an entity, say 'A' to be different from 'B' if 'B' itself were non-existent. The existence or reality of each thing is thus to be regarded as relative because it is dependent always on the existence of another thing. The Absolute Nihilist, therefore, urges that the reality (svabhāva) of a thing cannot be established because everything has a relative existence (sāpekṣatva). To take for example, the red colour appearing in a piece of crystal which is unanimously admitted to be bright white. It is perceived, says the Nihilist, that if a red flower is kept near a white crystal, the crystal appears to be red. Now this *red colour* is not regarded as anything real. It is well-known that this red colour exists only in dependence on the existence of the red flower, it disappears as soon as the red flower is taken away. From this analogy the Nihilist asserts that the reality of a thing having relative existence cannot be admitted just like the reality of the red colour appearing on a piece of crystal¹⁶.

Now let us see whether this fresh nihilistic argument can be accepted.

According to the theory of relative existence sponsored by the Nihilist mentioned in Gautama's 'Nyāyasūtra', the reality of one thing 'A' depends on the reality of another thing 'B'. But if, as the skeptic claims, 'A' exists in dependence on 'B', then 'B' should be admitted to have an existence prior to that of 'A': for A cannot be said to 'depend on' B if the latter itself were non-existent. This amounts to saying that in the context of 'A' and 'B', 'B' cannot be regarded as something dependent on 'A'. In other words if, as emphasised by Vātsyāyana, according to the theory of relative existence, the existence of a 'long' object were to depend on that of a 'short' one, then, the 'short' one should be admitted to have an existence prior to that of the 'long' one; again, on the same logic, a 'long' thing is to be regarded also as having an existence prior to that of a 'short' one and that would mean an independent existence of the former. But to admit the independent existence of any one of them is to give up the theory of relative existence.

It might be urged, however, on behalf of the Nihilist that by 'relative existence of all things' it meant that things exist in reciprocal dependence on one another. That is to say, to be real a 'short' thing must have to depend on the reality of a 'long' one and vice versa. And thus things of this world are reciprocally dependent on each other for their reality or existence.

But, as Vātsyāyana points out, this skeptical position is self-defeating. If neither the 'short' nor the 'long' can be said to exist in its own right, then the skeptical contention that they are reciprocally dependent turns out to be unintelligible. Since, on the skeptic view, there is no reality either of the 'long' or of the 'short' it is unintelligible how one can speak of the *dependence* of the 'long' on the 'short' and vice versa¹⁷. That is to say, how can there be a *reciprocal dependence* between two entities which are claimed to be unreal?

And it is to be added that if, for argument's sake, this objection be waived for the present then also the skeptic has to meet a fresh difficulty urged by Vātsyāyana. He points out that if it is admitted that things exist in reciprocal dependence then the existence of two things having equal magnitude appears to be unintelligible. To take for example, the case of two objects having equal magnitude, say, two rods each one foot long. The magnitude of these two rods are, surely, regarded as equal to one another since both are one foot long. In other words, none of them is regarded as 'short' in relation to the other. But, according to the skeptical theory of reciprocal dependence, a 'short' thing cannot be regarded as 'short' by its own nature but its 'shortness' is real only in dependence on the 'longness' of another thing and vice versa. And the non-skeptic urges that the magnitude of these two rods under discussion should not surely be an exception to this skeptic principle. The skeptic should have to say, then, in consistency with this position that one of these two rods equal in magnitude is not 'short' by its own nature but that its 'shortness' is real only in dependence on the 'longness' of the other¹⁸. In other words, one of these two *equal* rods should be regarded as 'longer' or 'shorter' than the other. The conclusion would be then that two rods which are each one foot long are yet not of equal magnitude! How otherwise can it be said that these two rods exist in reciprocal dependence? But to accept a claim like this is to deny that two things can possess equal magnitude. But as a matter of fact the existence of many such objects is claimed by everybody and the Absolute Nihilist has no good ground except his own Nihilism to repudiate this.

Thus the acceptance of the theory of reciprocal dependence of all things makes the existence of two things having equal magnitude quite unintelligible.

It might be urged, however, by the Absolute Skeptic in defence of his own thesis of relative existence of all things that it is true

indeed that two things having equal magnitude are not reciprocally dependent but that they depend for their existence on other things. The 'shortness' of the rod under discussion depends on the 'longness' of a third rod which is more than one foot long.

But it is to be noted that to admit that two things having equal magnitude are real in dependence on a third thing is not to deny that things having equal magnitude do exist independently of each other. And that would be a denial of the nihilistic thesis that things of the universe are real as reciprocally dependent on one another. It is to be concluded, therefore, that the skeptical theory of relative existence of all things cannot in any way be conceded.

But it might be objected on behalf of the opponent that a property like 'shortness' or 'longness' is always admitted to be something relational in character. If it were not so, then surely every object would be regarded as both 'short' and 'long'. Now a thing or a property which is claimed to be 'intrinsic' or real by its own nature does not have to depend for its existence on its relation to any other thing or property. Now if a property like 'shortness' or 'longness' is, the non-skeptic claims, something intrinsic to an entity, then, how is it possible to assert at the same breath that it has a relational character?

It appears, however, that this skeptical difficulty springs from nothing but a confusion between two standpoints which might be denominated as the 'constitutive' and the 'epistemic'. The 'constitutive' standpoint may be described as that attitude in which the analysis of something is done with reference to its constitution or existence, while by the 'epistemic' standpoint is understood an attitude in which something is analysed with reference to its cognition or knowledge. Now a property designated as 'short' is something intrinsic (svābhāvika) and a particular thing which is apprehended to be 'short' is as a matter of fact possessed of this property. And the same is to be said in regard to the

property described as 'long'. And the property in question is called intrinsic or real by its own nature so far as its existence is concerned. But the same case appears to be quite different when one considers the *cognition* of the 'shortness' or 'longness' of a thing; for the *cognition* of the 'shortness' of a thing *depends* on the *cognition* of the 'longness' of another thing. In order to *know* a thing as 'longer' or 'shorter' than another object, it is necessary to have the *cognition* of those two things. As for example, by comparing the magnitude of a mountain and that of an elephant we say that the former is 'larger' than the latter and the latter is known to be 'smaller' than the former. This knowledge is possible only if the magnitude of these *two* objects can be known previously. And thus it is seen that the *knowledge* of the property of the mountain designated as 'large' is relative to *that* of the property described as 'small' belonging to the elephant. But it is to be kept in mind that the reality of any of these properties does not depend on each other.

It is to be emphasised, further, that the skeptical assertion that the *difference* of one thing from another is a proof of the relative existence of two things is also the result of the same confusion between the two standpoints, constitutive and epistemic. Everybody admits that two things, say, 'A' and 'B' are different from each other. But that does not mean surely that 'A' is real, that is, dependent for its existence on 'B' and vice versa. What it only means is that without a knowledge of the nature of these two things it is not possible to *assert* their difference¹⁹.

It is a matter of fact that the reality of an object and the cognition of that object are two distinct things. There are certain things the cognition of which requires the cognition of some other thing, e.g., the knowledge of a thing *as* 'small' requires the knowledge of a thing *as* 'large'; and regarding this cognitive aspect the former is relative to the latter and vice versa. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the existence of a thing apart from its awareness is relative to the reality of another

thing. The existence of a thing and its magnitude that is described as 'long' are surely independent of the existence of a thing and its magnitude that is described as 'short'. 'A thing is in the realm of reality' does not always mean that 'the thing is in the realm of cognition'.

Uddyotakara remarks further that one cannot admit even from the cognitive standpoint that *all* things are relative to each other. For as there are some qualities like 'largeness', 'smallness', 'farness', 'nearness' etc., there are also some others like 'colour', 'smell', 'touch' etc. and nobody thinks that qualities like 'smell', 'touch' etc. are relative to each other²⁰ even in regard to their cognitive aspect. The awareness of the red colour of a ball as 'red', for example, does not depend on the awareness of the colour or any other quality of another object.

The Absolute Nihilist nevertheless might say that a thing is surely dependent on its cause and, in this sense, at least the reality of a thing should be regarded as relative to that of another object. It is a truism that without a cause a thing cannot come into being.

But it is emphasised by the non-skeptic that as far as the origination of things is concerned, he has no disagreement with the opponent. It is nobody's point to claim that a thing is an unconditioned real in respect of its genesis. And the non-skeptic does not deny that an object exists in dependence on its cause. What he denies is that a thing is necessarily dependent for its existence on some other thing *which is not any of its causal conditions*. That is to say, the existence or reality of an object, as an effect depends on the reality of its cause but not that it depends on the reality of a thing other than its cause²¹.

We should like to conclude the discussion with an elucidation of four arguments urged by Uddyotakara²² against the nihilistic thesis that 'everything is of the nature of nothing'.

(a) The assertion that 'everything is of the nature of nothing' is based either on some evidence or not. Now if it is

claimed to be based on some evidence, then Uddyotakara asks : Is the evidence itself something real or is it something unreal ? If the skeptic admits its reality or existence then how can he utter in the same breath that *everything* without an exception is of the nature of ' nothing ' ? Again, if the evidence in question is held to be something unreal then the nihilistic statement cannot surely be taken to be valid. For why should one admit the truth-claim of an assertion based on unreal evidence ? And if the thesis in question is regarded as not based on any evidence, then, obviously a statement not supported by any evidence does not deserve to be accepted.

(b) Again, either the nihilistic statement that ' everything is of the nature of nothing ' conveys some sense or it does not. Now if the Nihilist claims that his statement conveys any sense then the Absolute Nihilist must have to admit at least the existence of the sense itself. And thus the nihilistic statement turns out to be self-stultifying. If again, in order to escape from this difficulty the Nihilist asserts that the statement ' everything is of nature of nothing ' does not convey any sense, then it is to be regarded as nothing but a non-sensical collection of words.

(c) Like every assertion this skeptical statement undereference also requires the presence of a person who asserts something (*pratipādayitā*). In other words, there must be a speaker of the statement and an auditor. Now Uddyotakara emphasises that if there are actually a speaker and a listener of the nihilistic statement then that would be a direct contradiction of the statement itself. For to assert that the statement in question is spoken by a person and is listened to by another one is to assert the reality or existence of the speaker and the auditor and that would mean the renunciation of the theory of Absolute Nihilism. But if, again, the reality of a speaker and an auditor is not admitted, then the assertion could not be made at all since a statement which is neither spoken nor listened to is no statement at all.

(d) The Absolute Nihilist admits that the sense conveyed by his own statement that 'everything is of the nature of nothing' differs from that conveyed by the non-skeptic's statement that 'everything is of the nature of something'. If it were not so, then he surely would not claim the truth of the former assertion by denying the validity of the latter. Now to admit the difference in question amounts to admitting at least the *reality* of the law of non-contradiction. But that would surely mean the downfall of the Skeptic's Absolute Nihilism itself. If, again, the Absolute Nihilist proclaims that the law of non-contradiction has no more sanctity for him than the other things of the world, then he could not possibly assert the difference between the above two statements, viz., 'everything is of the nature of nothing' and 'everything is of the nature of something'. But if on the skeptic's view, there is as a matter of fact no difference between these two statements, then the nihilistic assertion would lose all its distinctive character and would be equivalent to the non-skeptic contention. An exponent of the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā' will not surely give assent to this conclusion.

By these four arguments Uddyotakara proves conclusively that the skeptical tenet that 'everything is of the nature of nothing' is riddled with self-contradiction and, therefore, the theory of 'Sarvaśūnyatā' or Absolute Nihilism cannot by any means be accepted.

Bhaswati Bhattacharya

NOTES

1. "Sarvam abhāvaḥ bhāveṣu itaretarābhāvasiddheḥ"
—'Nyāya-Sūtra' 4-1-37
2. "Pratijñāhetvoḥ ca vyāghātaḥ —vātsyāyana on N. S. 4-1-37
3. "Atha bhāveṣu itaretarābhāvasiddhiḥ? Sarvam abhāvaḥ iti na upapadyate". —Ibid.
4. "Yadi sarvam abhāvaḥ, bhāveṣu itaretarābhāvasiddhiḥ iti na upapadyate". —Ibid.
5. "Anekasya aśeṣatā sarvaśabdasya arthaḥ, bhāva-prati-śedhaḥ ca abhāvaśabdasya arthaḥ", —Ibid.

6. Pūrvam sopākhyam uttaram nirupākhyam, tatra samupākhyāyamānām katham nirupākhyam abhāvaḥ syāt iti, na jātu abhāvaḥ nirupākhyāḥ anekatayā aśeṣatayā śakyāḥ pratijñātum", —Ibid.
7. "Sarvam etat abhāvaḥ iti cet? Yat idam sarvam iti manyase, tat abhāvaḥ iti", —Ibid.
8. "Anekam aśeṣam ca iti na abhāvapratyayena śakyam bhāvitum". —Ibid.
9. "Gauḥ iti prayujyamāne śabde jātivīśiṣṭam dravyam gr̥hyate na abhāvamātram. Yadi ca sarvam abhāvaḥ, gauḥ iti abhāvāḥ pratiyeta, 'go'—śabdena ca abhāvaḥ ucyeta. Yasmāt tu 'go'—śabda-prayoge dravyaviśeṣaṅ pratīyate na abhāvaḥ tasmāt ayuktam iti". —Vātsyāyana on N. S. 4-1-38
10. "Asan gauḥ aśvātmanā iti gavātmanā kasmāt na ucyate"? —Ibid.
11. "Avacanāt gavātmanā gauḥ asti svabhāvasiddheḥ". —Ibid.
12. "Sarvam abhāvaḥ iti ca vyāvartayasi; na hi asat adhikaraṇam bhavati, adhikaraṇam hi nāma yadi atra Vartate, tat ca abhāve na asti iti"— Uddyotakara : 'Nyāyavārtika' —On N. S. 4-1-37
13. Vide Vācaspati : 'Nyāyavārtikatātparyatikā' —On N. S. 4-1-37
14. "Anityatve tu vināśasvabhāvaḥ cet dvtiyādikṣaṇe iva prathamakṣaṇe api na syuḥ". —Ibid.
15. "Etena arthakriyākāritvam api sattvam pratyuktam, asataḥ arthakriyāyāḥ abhāvāt arthakriyāyām ca satyām tasya sattvāt, arthakriyāyāḥ ca arthakriyāpekṣayā sattvena anavasthāne sarvasya asattvaprasaṅgāt ca" —'Nyāyakandali' (Uddeśaprakaraṇam) : —P. 33 : (Vārānaseya Samskrita Viśvavidyālaya Ed.)
16. "Yat ca parāpekṣam tat na svābhāvikaṃ yathā javākusumasāpekṣam sphatikasya raktatvam iti ākṣepārthaḥ". Vācaspati in 'Nyāyavārtikatātparyatikā' on N. S. 4-1-40
17. "Evam itaretarāśrayayoḥ ekābhāve anyatarābhāvāt ubhayābhāvāḥ iti dīrghāpekṣāvyaavasthā anupapannā". —Ibid.
18. "Svabhāvasiddhau asatyām samayoḥ parimaṇḍalayoḥ vā dravyayoḥ āpekṣike dīrghahrasvatve kasmāt na bhavataḥ". —Ibid.
19. "Bhinnatvam ca bhedaḥ sa, ca vastuviśeṣaṅgam na utpattau vastvantaram apekṣate kim tu svanirūpaṇe". —Ibid.
20. Vide Uddyotakara : 'Nyāyavārtika' on N. S. 4-1-40.
21. Vide Tarkavāgīśa 'Nyāyadarśana' : Vol. 4 : pp. 203-206.
22. Vide Uddyotakara : Nyāyavārtika on N. S. 4-1-40.