**Explain and evaluate the contribution of Nagarjuna to Buddhist philosophy**

Nagarjuna developed philosophical thinking within Mahayanist Buddhism. This essay will examine the key contribution he makes to Buddhist philosophy and examine the degree to which his ideas can be seen as in line with the philosophy of the Buddha and why he is controversial to other thinkers.

Nagarjuna was the founder of Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. Madhyamaka means ‘middle way’ and is referring to the distinctive work that Nagarjuna wrote on sunyata. Nagarjuna was very influenced by the ideas in the Heart Sutra and developed the ideas contained within them in a more analytical way. *Form is empty, emptiness is form. Emptiness is no other than form and form is no other than emptiness.”* This quotation from the Heart Sutra seems to be saying that everything is ‘empty’ of intrinsic existence which would imply a sort of nihilism – the idea that nothing really exists. Others might disagree with this and argue that whilst some things are empty of intrinsic existence there are those that are true eternally. The ‘middle way’ as explained by Nagarjuna argues for neither of these – he reacts against both the eternalism of some schools and the nihilism of others, by defining sunyata in a particular way.

Sunyata does indeed translate as emptiness but this does not mean a vacancy of anything. Instead Nagarjuna argues ‘it is paticca samupada that we call emptiness’ – things are not empty as such, but rather empty of independent existence. Thich Naht Hanh’s definition of sunyata as interdependence perhaps makes this easier to understand. He states that ‘in a piece of paper is a cloud and that we too are in that cloud’. This is a definition that is really talking about the interdependence of all things on each other. In a time when we are very concerned with the environment this view of sunyata as interdependence is one that is attractive and borne out by science as we are finding out that impacting on the natural world impacts on all of us. It also has an ethical implication and the idea that we all ‘inter be’ adds a significant moral dimension to Buddhism that very much prioritises how we treat others.

This idea can be also seen as a continuation of the Buddhist teaching on anatta. Nagarjuna is stressing here that we have no eternal soul but that this does not mean that we are ‘empty’. In this view of sunyata our emptiness is ‘full of interdependence’ as Thich Naht Hanh says. This echoes the traditional teaching from the questions of King Milanda and the teachings that a human is only five skandas – nothing permanent. Again as a middle way it is rejecting the eternalist ideas that Hinduism put forward about the eternal atman, or indeed the eternal soul of Christianity. Again, this is an idea that is borne out by many Western philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle who would argue that a person is a compilation of all the ‘parts’ that makes them an individual, and that it would be a category error to talk of an eternal soul.

More controversially from the perspective of Theravadan Buddhism is Nagarjuna’s teaching that ‘all dharmas’ are empty. This seems to imply that even the teachings of the Buddha are empty of intrinsic existence. However, Nagarjuna would argue that this IS the teaching of the Buddha – this is anicca – the belief that all things change. Indeed, this idea seems to be consistent with everything we know about both the natural world and the world of ideas and beliefs. Things do indeed constantly change. In some religious traditions this would be a problem but for many Buddhists this would fit in with the Mahayanist view of upaya –skilful means. It could be argued that the dharma too is dependent on other conditions and that as part of its interdependence means that change is inevitable and that the Buddha foresaw this when he talked about anicca.

Most controversially in this belief is the idea that even nibbana is empty of intrinsic existence. Theravadans would argue that this is contrary to the Buddha’s teachings, and that he taught that whilst all things in samsara were subject to change and interdependence that nibbana was the exception. However, Nagarjuna is arguing that a logical conclusion of the Buddha’s teaching is that nibbana too is ultimately empty of existence. Whilst we still view nibbana as being something to strive for we will never be free of the poison of tanha. Nagarjuna argues that an enlightened person is one who sees that nibbana is not as state to be reached but one which we already have within us and that nibbana is within samsara and that both are ultimately subject to sunyata. This idea is strongly prevalent in the practice of Zen Buddhists. In accordance with the parable of the Hidden Gem the aim of zazen is to discover within themselves this awareness. Keown describes this as the ‘calming of false concepts’.

Ultimately these ideas of Nagarjuna could be criticised for being incoherent and difficult to understand. This is true but in one sense not a criticism. Another key element of Nagarjuna’s teaching was the idea that there are 2 levels of truth. One is the level experienced by most of us where things do have an intrinsic existence – sunyata is apparent only at a higher level of reality. This reality is open to Buddhas but not to those of us within samsara. At a conventional level we are right in seeing people as individuals and dharmas as lasting and can only have experiential understanding of this when we too are enlightened. In the tradition of Mahayana view of the greater vehicle it could be argues that Nagarjuna’s philosophy is offering a higher level of understanding to those capable of understanding it whilst not negating the truths that have been presented to those who are less progressed on the path.