

# CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON NĀGĀRJUNA'S VIGRAHAVYĀVARTANĪ

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Though from the point of view of Nāgārjuna's overall outlook as developed especially in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* (MMK), the doctrines enunciated in his *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV)<sup>1</sup> do not constitute much of a departure, that text deals with certain themes which Nāgārjuna chooses for either a special or a different sort of treatment. This paper is concerned with three of those themes: (1) Nāgārjuna's celebrated doctrine that all things are devoid of own-being or self-existence (*svabhāvasūnya*); (2) Nāgārjuna's unqualified rejection of the *pramāṇa* theory, and with that of all the 'accredited' means of knowledge; and (3) his contention that he has no (philosophic) view/proposition (*pratijñā*) of his own to advance or to buttress.

Before I proceed, I must clarify that my concern, such as it is, is not motivated by a desire to explore the supposed governing ends, soteriological or mystical, to the service of which Nāgārjuna's doctrines may seem ultimately to be directed, important as these ends might be in themselves. Nor do I mean to discuss Nāgārjuna's 'standpoint' (if such an expression be allowed, considering Nāgārjuna's aversion for such terms) in the historical frame. Both these perspectives are important and valid as such and often contribute towards an understanding of some of Nāgārjuna's obscure and controversial doctrines. I suspect, however, that somewhere from his writings Nāgārjuna also emerges as a thinker who is concerned to examine certain deeply entrenched ideas about certain things in terms of their internal coherence or cogency, put them to a severe logical

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\* This article is dedicated to the memory of my father-in-law.

<sup>1</sup> For the Sanskrit text of *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and Nāgārjuna's own *Vṛtti* (commentary) upon it in Roman script, see Kamaleswar Bhattacharya [1990]. In translating quotations from VV and Nāgārjuna's *Vṛtti*, help has been taken from Bhattacharya's translation. However, a few changes here and there have been made in the transliteration as presented by Johnston and Kunst. Nāgārjuna's *Vṛtti* has been referred to as *vṛtti* and VV's kārikās have been referred to as *k*.

test, and reach philosophic conclusions which seem to him to be in consonance with the reasoning employed.

Now if we are right in thinking thus about Nāgārjuna, i.e., if Nāgārjuna does not just remain content with stating his views dogmatically but rather argues them out, is he not thereby claiming universal validity for their 'truth'? Does Nāgārjuna anywhere seem to be meaning to say that if, for example, things are devoid of own-being (*niḥsvabhāva*), they are only for a Buddhist and that too for one of his own variety? This is one of our main questions and also, at least for the purpose of the present paper, a decisive one: the legitimacy of our (present) exercise derives from the validity of this question. Nāgārjuna for us is not a dead thinker. His doctrines, whether unusual or commonplace, whether sceptical-minded or agnostic, call for critical examination, and perhaps one fruitful way to do that is to try to understand and appraise them in the light of the reasonings Nāgārjuna himself seeks to muster in their defence.

## I

We first take up for consideration Nāgārjuna's doctrine of *śūnyatā* or 'emptiness'. As is well known, emptiness stands for many things in Nāgārjuna's philosophy, especially as propounded in the *MMK*.<sup>2</sup> Nay, even these meanings have received, at the hands of modern scholars, numerous interpretations, which offer anything but a unified or integral point of view. We shall here not be concerned to discuss all those meanings or all those interpretations. We are up to a limited and modest concern, which is to explore and discuss the paramount meaning of *śūnyatā* as it comes to be treated in the *VV*, invoking *MMK*'s aid only where it becomes extremely relevant. We believe this can be done reasonably well without enquiring into the whole set of issues that arise in connection with any attempt to give some one correct account or to show as correct some one out of all the possible interpretations of the true meaning of Madhyamaka philosophy as it is expounded by Nāgārjuna in his *MMK*.

Let us then start with Nāgārjuna's famed declaration that everything is empty (*śūnya*): *śūnyāḥ sarvabhāvāḥ* (*VV*, *vṛtti*, k. 1). 'Emptiness' means, in the first and chief of its meanings enunciated

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<sup>2</sup> Sanskrit references to *MMK* are chapter- and kārikā-wise, with only numerals indicating them.

by Nāgārjuna in his *VV*, 'being devoid of own-being or self-existence' (*niḥsvabhāva*).<sup>3</sup> But what does this 'emptiness' really consist in? What does a thing or an existent (*bhāva*) owe its emptiness to?, presuming (with Nāgārjuna) that it is indeed empty of *svabhāva*. So far as the *VV* is concerned, explication of the concept is contained in the *kārikā* 22: *yaś ca pratītyabhāvo bhāvānām śūnyateti sā proktā / yaś ca pratītyabhāvo bhavati hi tasyāsvabhāvatvam* 'That nature of the things which is dependent is called voidness, for that nature which is dependent is devoid of an intrinsic nature.' So the existents' lack of intrinsic nature is asserted by Nāgārjuna to consist in the fact or the consideration that they originate in dependence (*ye hi pratītya-samutpannā bhāvās te na sasvabhāvā bhavanti svabhāvābhāvāt*) (*VV*, *vṛtti*, k. 22), that they come into being dependent on causes and conditions: *hetupratyayasāpekṣatvāt*. The doctrine of 'dependent origination', as is well known, is not a theory of causation affirming any cause-effect relationship in its usual sense. Such a relationship is explicitly denied in *MMK* (chapter 1), for it is denied that a thing called cause (e.g. seed) and a thing called effect (e.g. sprout) are real existents: there is no such thing as real origination of anything in dependence on any other thing. Candrakīrti says blandly, "We interpret dependent origination as 'śūnyatā'." In short, the causal account is a 'delusion' in so far as it posits the independent reality of things. Things, as Nāgārjuna sees, are, on the other hand, devoid or empty of own-being: '*svabhāva-śūnya*'. I think, so far as it goes, the meaning of *śūnyatā* is fairly clear. The grand equation that emerges here is: emptiness (*śūnyatā*) = being devoid of self-existence (*svabhāvaśūnyatā*) = being dependently originated (*pratītyasamutpannatā*) (cf. *MMK* 24.18ab: *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣamahe*). This equation is the cardinal principle of Nāgārjuna's teaching and it recurs throughout our text, the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*.<sup>4</sup> The one claim that seems to emerge from the equation is that reality is the absence of *svabhāva* of all existents. It deserves to be noted that

<sup>3</sup> The concept of *śūnyatā* is employed by Nāgārjuna to serve many purposes in the *MMK*, especially chapters XIII, XIV, XVIII, and XIX. We are not here concerned with detailing all those purposes, nor to discuss the characteristic Nāgārjunian way in which so many notions — being and non-being, self and the way things are in reality, the nature of the enlightened being, the everyday world and its relation to the surpassing truth, *nirvāna*, etc. — are examined and declared empty.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, it is possible, as scholars like Burton assert, that *śūnyatā* has also been equated by Nāgārjuna with the nature of reality as unconceptualizable or ineffable. But that we think is a position which is taken in the *MMK*, not in the *VV*. See Burton [1999: ch. 3].

Nāgārjuna has a certain conception of *svabhāva* or self-existence in mind which he thinks consists in things being self-subsistent or absolutely independent in respect of their existence. It should be clear that whatever else the statement that all things are empty may imply, it is minimally the ontological claim that all things originate conditionally, in dependence. As Nāgārjuna observes at the same place: *yadi hi svabhāvato bhāvā bhaveyūḥ, pratyākhyāyāpi hetu-pratyayaṃ ca bhaveyūḥ* ‘If things (existents) existed by (their) own nature, they would exist even overcoming the aggregate of “causes and conditions”’ (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 22). In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* (15.2) Nāgārjuna formulates his conception of *svabhāva* thus: *akṛtrimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca* ‘A self-existent thing [by definition] is “not-produced” and is independent of anything else.’ Indeed, laying stress upon its etymological meaning, which in his view is *svo-bhāva*, Candrakīrti, the celebrated commentator of Nāgārjuna, explains (cf. *Prasannapadā* on MMK 15.2) that by *svabhāva* is meant a feature or character which is a thing’s own (i.e. exclusive) something (*ātmīya rūpa*) (*yasya padārthasya yad ātmīyaṃ rūpaṃ tat tasya svabhāva iti vyapadiśyate*). An *ātmīya* feature in turn is understood as what is *akṛtrima* (*kiṃ ca kasya ātmīyaṃ yad yasya akṛtrimam*). Self-existence as *svo-bhāva* then means a particular element’s own existence or nature which it owes to nothing (*akṛtrima*). The meaning here is that a self-existent nature is one which exists of and for itself.

It may incidentally be noticed that this conception of self-existence (*svabhāva*) is quite akin to the notion of “absolute” reality that philosophers believing in the existence of such a reality often provide. One here thinks of the concept of Brahman which is regarded by Advaita Vedānta as causally self-existent, or of Substance (e.g. God) which is regarded by the European rationalists — specially Spinoza, Leibniz and Descartes — as causally self-sufficient in the sense that it is not produced or created by anything apart or external to itself. I do not mean to say that if Nāgārjuna has a conception of *svabhāva* or self-existence in mind it means that he is postulating the existence of some absolute reality. For it is possible that Nāgārjuna encounters nothing beyond what are commonly regarded as the objects of the world, but thinks them as devoid of self-existence from an absolute or *svābhāvika standpoint*. This absolute standpoint, I submit, need not necessarily mean the standpoint of some really

existing absolute reality, though how to separate the two can at times pose problems. What I mean is that finding everything as devoid of self-existence because of its being dependently originated, one can logically conceive and formulate the idea of *svabhāva*, as Nāgārjuna does, without implying the actual existence of any *svābhāvika* entity. However, even if *svabhāva* be a concept to which nothing in objective fact corresponds (like, e.g. the concept of 'classless' society envisioned by Karl Marx), its contradiction with the idea of 'dependent origination' is unquestionable. This contradiction (or incompatibility) between the two concepts is attested to by Nāgārjuna explicitly in *MMK* 15.1: *na sambhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyaya-hetubhiḥ*. Candrakīrti too points to this incompatibility in his gloss on *MMK* 15.2: *kṛtakaś ceti svabhāvāś ceti parasparaviruddhatvād asaṃ-gatārthām etat*. The notion of *svabhāva* then implies an existence which is independent absolutely and unconditionally.

Now while all this looks perfectly okay as it stands, things begin to become difficult when the issue of distinctive essence or nature of a thing (in its normal sense) is confused with the issue of its so-called independent or *svābhāvika* reality. This becomes apparent when (e.g.) Candrakīrti refers, as an example of "*kṛtrima*", to fire's heat (cf. *Prasannapadā* on *MMK* 15.2), which being dependent upon other particulars and so as arising only subsequently (from causes and conditions, and not being existent before), is said by him to lack precisely this self-existence. It is true that fire owes its heat to other factors, but to conclude from this that fire has no essence at all of its own — which is its heat and which does not in fact characterize as such the factors responsible for its so-called origin — is to miss the mark. That our protest is not unfounded is shown by the fact that Candrakīrti in his gloss on *MMK* 15.2 (referred to above) also cites twice "heat belonging to water" (*apām auṣṇyam*) as an instance of "*kṛtrima*". As anyone can see, fire's heat and water's heat can on no account be regarded as *kṛtrima* (or dependently originated) in the same sense. That heat is not an *ātmīya rūpa* (own feature) of water is understandable, but that heat is also not an *ātmīya rūpa* of fire in the same sense of that word is simply unintelligible. It is unintelligible because, as remarked above, somehow the issue of a thing's distinctive essence is being given a short shrift and so collapsed with the issue of its origination. Of course one can protest that we are here misguidedly resorting to essence-talk in respect of things which, being

dependently originated, lack precisely in any essence of their own. Our response to this would be that even if we avoid essence-talk, we cannot legitimately dismiss the question whether things differ from one another in one or another respect as otiose. To talk about things in plural is not only to admit that there are many things but also that they are different and so not absolutely identical, even if it be true that they all share the (common) character of being dependently originated. Our contention receives support from the fact that we have Nāgārjuna's own admission that things like chariot, cloth, pot, etc., even though devoid of self-existence because of being dependently originated (*pratītyasamutpanna*), are able to perform their respective functions, e.g. carrying wood, grass and earth, containing water, honey and milk, and protecting from cold, wind and heat (*yathā ca pratītyasamutpannatvāt svabhāvaśūnyā api rathapaṭagaḥādayaḥ sveṣu sveṣu kāryeṣu kāṣṭhatṛṇamṛttikāharaṇe madhūdakapayasām dhāraṇe śīta-vātātapaparitrāṇaprabhṛtiṣu vartante ...*) (VV, *vṛtti*, k.22). The paramount question then is: If the particular existents perform their respective functions, functions which are exclusive or peculiar to them, how can they be dismissed as lacking in any kind of nature in any (significant) sense at all?; for clearly on an ordinary view the nature or essence of a thing, which is capable of performing certain (distinctive) functions, may well consist precisely in that very capacity of its. Secondly, even if a thing like pot e.g. comes into being in dependence upon other factors, it in all likelihood will or may last for some time — even during the time it is not exactly performing its function — something which may well be cited as a proof of its existence. Surely the transience of its existence is immaterial here, for this transience in no wise affects its nature, i.e. its capacity to perform specific functions or serve certain ends. In fact, to put it bluntly, in so far as a certain function is peculiar to a particular, it does in a certain way confer upon it a distinctive existence, however relative (dependent) the particular be in respect of its origins. (Within the Indian tradition itself, there are thinkers who conceive the 'reality' of anything whatever precisely in terms of its ability to perform some sort of activity. Thus Vijñānabhikṣu says: *purusārthakriyā-kāritvam eva ca loke sattvam iti vyavahriyate*.<sup>5</sup> A similar notion is found expressed in certain Kāśmīra Śaivite texts.<sup>6</sup>) But once we concede a distinctive nature to a

5 Vijñānabhikṣu, commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.1 [VaB: 58].

6 Thus, e.g., Utpaladeva says: *yadarthakriyākāritvāt sat, tat sarvaṃ śivarūpam*. See his *Vṛtti* on

particular, the *śūnyatā* doctrine, which precisely refuses to recognize the essence of a thing as apart from its (dependent or derived) existence, turns out to be gravely deficient.

If would be noticed that in drawing a distinction between a thing's existence and essence (nature), I am being guided, not only by independent philosophical considerations, but by some of Nāgārjuna's — and Candrakīrti's — own pronouncements on the issue. Surely Nāgārjuna does seem to recognize, as seen above, that the fact of a thing's being dependently originated is something different from, and so does not affect, the fact of its performing specific functions. It is these latter which bestow upon a particular a distinctiveness which differentiates it from other particulars with different functions. But once we concede a distinctive nature to a particular, notwithstanding its dependent origination, the *śūnyatā* doctrine (as conceived by Nāgārjuna) in that important implication of its in which it seems to undermine the 'essence'-question, comes under severe stress.

If we connect this consideration with Nāgārjuna's view stated in *MMK* 7.30-31 — viz., that what exists must exist always, and if it does not exist at a certain time it cannot exist at any time — then it emerges that Nāgārjuna does away with the notion of potentiality too altogether, which in one form or another is entertained by many philosophers and laymen alike. Thus Nāgārjuna would have it that if the function of a pot is to contain water then it should contain water always such that the common view that at a time when it does not do so it can justifiably be regarded as capable of containing water is basically false. Causal potency is thus wholly equated or collapsed with actuality or actual doing. That Nāgārjuna rejects potentiality in its minimum form becomes further evident when in *MMK*, chapter 8 (Karma-kāraṅga-parīkṣā) he denies that an agent subject (*kāraṅga*) can actually be so or called so unless he is an actual — not potential as he can be at a time when he is not actually producing anything — producer (*sadbhūtasya kriyā nāsti kartā ca syād akarmakaḥ*: *MMK* 8.2). Candrakīrti comments: Because what is called an agent subject is essentially conjoined with the activity of agency, only an agent who exists as such conjoined with the activity of agency gives rise to something and receives the name 'agent' or 'producer' (*kriyā-nibandhanatvāt kāraṅgavyapadeśasya, karoti kriyāyukta eva kaścit sadbhūtaḥ kāraṅgavyapadeśam labhate*). This position is not new in

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Somānanda's *Śiva-dṛṣṭi*, in Chaturvedi [1986: Āhnikā 4, verse 32, p. 139].

the history of philosophy and was held, if Aristotle is to be believed, by the Megarian School in Greece:

There are some who say, as the Megaric school does, that a thing 'can' act only when it is acting, and when it is not acting it 'cannot' act, e.g. that he who is not building cannot build, but only he who is building when he is building; and so in all other cases. It is not hard to see the absurdities that attend this view.<sup>7</sup>

One of the counts on which Aristotle assails this rejection of potentiality is that it would mean that when e.g. anyone is not actually seeing or hearing, he will be blind and deaf. Needless to say, this Aristotelean objection holds good in the case of our Mādhyamika too.<sup>8</sup>

I now turn to a different consideration which in my view drastically undermines Nāgārjuna's theory of emptiness by involving him in a clear *svābhāvika* commitment. In the commentary on *VV*, *kārikā* 54, Nāgārjuna explicitly seeks to make the point that repudiation of *pratītyasamutpāda* and therefore of the emptiness doctrine renders impossible religious life: *evaṃ satyabrahmacarya-vāso bhavati*. The religious life, in other words, derives, according to him, its meaningfulness from the *pratītyasamutpāda* doctrine. Continuing, Nāgārjuna says: by rejecting Dependent Origination, one rejects the vision of Dependent Origination (*pratītyasamutpādasya pratyākhyānāt pratītyasamutpādadarśanapratyākhyānaṃ bhavati*). And in the absence of a vision of Dependent Origination, there can be no vision of the Dharma. Quoting the statement of the Buddha — viz. 'O monks, he who sees the *pratītyasamutpāda* sees the Dharma' — Nāgārjuna affirms that if one does not see the Dharma, there can be no practice of religious life (*dharmadarśanābhāvād brahmacarya-vāsābhāvah*). Now whatever else the above important statements may mean, it is evident that for Nāgārjuna the practice of religious life and so religious life itself does exist and also further has a nature in at

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Θ chapter 3. See Ross [1928 (a)].

<sup>8</sup> The Mādhyamika may rejoin, in an empiricist vein like someone like W.T. Stace, that e.g. the potential presence of the oak in the acorn is not something that can be experienced by any mind, human or non-human, and that therefore potentiality "is a concept without any application in any conceivable experience" and so wholly "meaningless". Our, or for that matter, Aristotle's (or Sāṃkhya's) reply would be that if potentiality is a wholly 'inexperiencible' characteristic, what do we experience when we look at an acorn and say, not only meaningfully but also correctly, 'If I plant this I can grow an oak'? Needless to say, it is experience which enables us to know what each will grow into, i.e. the potentiality of each. For W.T. Stace, see Stace [1935: 417-438]. The potentiality issue is discussed on pp. 428f.



least the sense that it consists in seeing things in the *prattīya-samutpāda* way. Of how much moment religious life is for Nāgārjuna can be seen from some of the further consequences which in his view the vision of *prattīyasamutpāda* necessarily entails and to which he thinks it fit to draw our attention. Rejection of Dependent Origination implies, he says, rejection of the origin of sorrow, and so of sorrow itself. But the origin of sorrow cannot be denied, for with that goes the whole idea of cessation of sorrow (*duḥkhanirodhasya pratyākhyānaṃ bhavati*). But if there is no cessation of sorrow, that is, if its (sorrow's) notion is rejected, the Way (*mārga*) gets rejected, or what is the same, loses its meaning, for the whole *raison d'etre* of the *mārga* consists in its leading to the termination of suffering. The *mārga* however cannot be rejected according to Nāgārjuna, for that will involve repudiation of the four Noble Truths (*āryasatyas*). Repudiation of the four Noble Truths in turn involves absence of the result of monasticism (*śrāmaṇyaphalābhāva*), which result is attained, on Nāgārjuna's interpretation, only through the vision of those Truths. Absence of the result of monasticism on the other hand entails absence of the practice of religious life.

I think, in the light of the above the following propositions can be safely asserted: Sorrow exists; its facthood cannot be denied, whatever its cause be. And (clearly) if (what is called) the Way cannot be repudiated as meaningless, it must in some sense *be*. In fact, sorrow needs to be known and acknowledged for what it is, if the Way or *mārga* is not to be eviscerated of all meaning and substance, which consists, besides the recognition of the Aryan Truths, in our seeking a total end to sorrow.

Now if these two things, *duḥkha* (sorrow) and the Way, cannot be denied or repudiated, it is a matter of indifference whether they also are, like everything else in the world, empty of intrinsic nature. Our initial observation then appears to get confirmed. Whatever Nāgārjuna may say or claim, there is for him no escape from the admission that the assumption — and so in a way the *pratijñā* — that sorrow and the *mārga* cannot be given up, is in itself *absolute*. Indeed, as we have tried to argue, he has to concede the reality both of sorrow and the *mārga*, which therefore cannot be called void: not sorrow, because it has a certain nature which is what compels us to seek its termination, and not the Way because it derives its value, and consequently its reality, from the fact that it is supposed to pave the way for freedom

from sorrow. And even if we grant that sorrow too is *pratītya-samutpanna* — for it originates in dependence upon the cause-condition complex other than itself — it cannot, without inviting a very serious paradox, be denied that its nature or character — its painfulness — does not reside, nor is exhausted, in that very cause-condition complex; our awareness of this (painful) nature of sorrow has to be admitted as a fact and so cannot be devoid of intrinsic nature in the sense other existents are, if they at all are.

If we combine the above reflections with the fact that for Nāgārjuna not only *pratītyasamutpāda* as an account of the way things are but also its recognition (what he calls *pratītyasamutpāda-darśana*) are critical for an understanding of (what he calls) Dharma and (besides) of the religious practice consequent thereupon, the conclusion becomes irresistible that Nāgārjuna is here caught in a hopeless bind. This recognition (*darśana*) and the Dharma cannot themselves be *pratītyasamutpanna* or at least *pratītya-samutpanna* in the *same* sense. Incapable of being denied, they then fall outside the totality of the things which are asserted to be devoid of self-existence.

Lastly, but importantly, if *śūnyatā* as *svabhāva-śūnyatā* means just that things originate dependently, then Nāgārjuna's doctrine, assuming that it is not questionable so far as the finite things of the world are concerned, ceases to be of much interest either; in fact it seems to state just a commonplace and so ends up being trivial. The only thing that can perhaps save the doctrine from the charge of triviality is that the meaning of 'emptiness' be stretched such that the particulars are denied even an individual (if relative) or distinctive existence. At some places in his (commentary) *Prasannapadā*, Candrakīrti seems to equate *svabhāva* with existence or 'reality' (*sattā* or *bhāva*) itself such that according to him all *dharmas* are devoid of reality (*abhāvāḥ sarvadharmāḥ*) or, in other words, *śūnya* or empty because as particulars they do not have a self-existent nature (*niḥsvabhāvayogena*).<sup>9</sup> However, so far as the *VV* is concerned, I am not certain what exactly is the case. One thing is clear, though, that (as we said above) if things like pot, etc. are admitted to have distinctive functional capacities, then they cannot legitimately be denied either a distinctive existence or a distinctive character in a certain significant

<sup>9</sup> *bhavaṭṭi bhāvaḥ sattā. na vidyate sattā svabhāvaḥ sarvabhāvānām ity abhāvāḥ sarvadharmāḥ, śūnyā sarvadharmā niḥsvabhāvayogeneti .... Prasannapadā on MMK 15.11 (p. 122).*

sense. The choice is Nāgārjuna's, but whichever option he chooses, he cannot avoid the deep dilemma that stares him in the face.

## II

We now move to our second theme, viz. Nāgārjuna's overt denial, perhaps much like the Pyrrhonists, that he has any proposition of his own to make: *nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ* (VV, k. 29).<sup>10</sup> On the face of it, Nāgārjuna acknowledges that the statement (*vacana*) of his teaching is a kind of thing and is consequently as empty and without self-existence (*na svābhāvikam*) as other things (VV, k. 24). To be empty is to lack self-existence; and what lacks self-existence is not really real. As such, it seems to follow — something that Nāgārjuna's words appear to confirm — that when he says 'All things are empty', he is not expressing any real view. If he were, he would be expressing the view that his own statement of a

<sup>10</sup> The word '*pratijñā*' has been variously translated and interpreted. D. Seyfort Ruegg interprets it as '(assertoric philosophical) proposition' and then 'a thesis giving expression to such a proposition'. See Ruegg [2000: 108]; Claus Oetke [2003: 449-78] understands it as 'assertion' and so on; A.M. Padhye [1988: 135] opines that VV 29 conveys that Nāgārjuna has nothing to expound. Oetke objects to such renderings of '*nāsti (ca) mama pratijñā*' in VV 29 as 'I have no thesis' on the ground that they are likely to "delude" a reader by the suggestion that the sentence *nāsti (ca) mama pratijñā* "has been employed by the author of the VV in order to characterize his own (philosophical) stance or position by some distinguishing mark." See Oetke [2003: 456]. Consequently Oetke prefers the rendering "(But) there is no assertion of mine", thinking that it at least weakens the misleading suggestion (ibid). Now, while this may be okay as it stands, Oetke's further contention (in reply to Ruegg) that '*nāsti ca mama pratijñā*' does not entail that Nāgārjuna "has said something *specific* about himself or about any assertion made by him ..." (p. 457) is open to question. It is open to question, for Nāgārjuna is not merely saying, as Oetke seems to believe, that his *pratijñā* too, like everything else, is without *svabhāva* and so without any distinguishing mark, but also and perhaps more importantly, that he has, unlike others, no *pratijñā* at all to offer or make. In other words, Nāgārjuna seems to be conveying that his so-called or apparent standpoint involves no (real) standpoint or position for the simple reason that he has nothing to assert, unlike other people's assertions which may often involve one or another view or stance; after all Nāgārjuna does not say "*nāsti ca mamāpi pratijñā*" (I too have no assertion to make); and this is important. Indeed, the initial words in VV 29 "*yadi kācana pratijñā syān me*" (If I have any assertion of mine) seem to confirm what we are attributing to Nāgārjuna. And it is because he has no assertion to make that Nāgārjuna says that no defect attaches to any specific character of his (alleged) proposition (*mama pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptivāt*: VV, vṛtti, k. 29). It is also to be noted that subsequently, as we shall see in the last part of our paper, when Nāgārjuna rejects the *pramāṇa* doctrine, he does so or attempts to do so mostly or mainly on independent philosophical / logical grounds and not merely because, what someone like Oetke should in consistency hold, *pramāṇas* too, like all other *bhāvas*, are devoid of self-existence (*niḥsvabhāva*). I recognize that certain of Nāgārjuna's remarks in the (auto) commentary on VV 29 — *tāsmāt sarvabhāveṣu śūnyeṣv atyantopāśānteṣu prakṛtivivikteṣu kutaḥ pratijñā* etc. — pose some problem for the interpretation we have given, but that we think is due to the fact that Nāgārjuna's utterances involve two distinct but only half-explicit standpoints: one that he, unlike others, has no assertion to make or view to advance, and second, that his so-called *pratijñā* is to be understood, much like other existents, as empty because of its being dependently originated.

view is unreal, the view, that is, that he is not really expressing any view.

Now let us briefly recapitulate the background as portrayed in the VV against which Nāgārjuna's denial that he has any proposition to make takes place. From the very first *kārikā* onward, Nāgārjuna represents the *pūrvapakṣin* (we need not here bother whether this opponent is a Naiyyāyika or a representative of some other Buddhist school) as noting his view that everything is devoid of self-existence and then confronting him (Nāgārjuna) with the following two options: (1) Either his own statement or thesis (which is also, as just said, a 'thing' on Nāgārjuna's conception) that things are devoid of self-existence (*svabhāva-śūnya*), is, like them all, void; or (2) it is not void and so self-exists. If the first, then it loses the force (perhaps even the right) to deny self-existence to other things: negation by a thing which itself is empty is a logical impossibility (*tena śūnyena pratiśedhānupapattiḥ*) (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 2); which means, as the opponent has it, that the self-existence of things remains intact, being unharmed. If, on the other hand, the second is true (i.e., that Nāgārjuna's statement is not empty), then that involves him in a self-contradiction (*vaiśamikatvaṃ tasmin*) and shows the falsity of what it strives to establish (*yā te pūrvā pratijñā ... hatā sā*). The opponent's meaning, to put it simplistically, is that in the event of (2) being true, Nāgārjuna's own statement comes to constitute an exception to the 'universal' law propounded by him — viz., that all things are empty — and so stands outside the rest of the world (*atha śūnyāḥ sarva-bhāvās tvad vacanaṃ cāśūnyaṃ yena pratiśedhaḥ, tena tvadvacanaṃ sarvatrāsaṃgrhītam*); which means that the truth of that statement, even while applying to everything else, does not hold in respect of the statement itself. And in that case Nāgārjuna, the opponent insists, must produce some special (valid) reason (*viśeṣahetuś ca vaktavyaḥ*). It is to be noted that the issue raised by the *pūrvapakṣin* concerns the question whether it is at all a philosophically defensible stance, especially when doing such a thing as explicitly denying self-existence to everything, to maintain that in doing so one is not taking any philosophical position. There are scholars — e.g. D. Seyfort Rugg — who do not confine themselves only to Nāgārjuna but rather generalize the issue so as to ask whether followers of the Madhyamaka school "may legitimately, within the frame of their school's philosophical principles, advocate a propositional thesis

(*pratijñā = dam bca'*) and maintain an assertion/asserted tenet (*abhyupagama = khas len pa*) or assertoric philosophical proposition/position (*pakṣa = phyogs*).<sup>11</sup> Explaining, Ruegg says: "The problem is, in other words, whether there is any place at all in Madhyamaka thought for a doctrine of one's own (*svamata = ran gi lugs*) in the form of an established philosophical system (*siddhānta = grub mtha'*)."<sup>12</sup> Now this or like questions are not illegitimate, for clearly they aim at a correct understanding or interpretation of the Madhyamaka as a whole without which perhaps that thought's basic motives cannot be fully grasped. But this too is clear that not to go further than that is not to go far enough in one's effort to critically appraise a philosophic standpoint. Philosophical criticism in our view should not rest content with accepting Nāgārjuna's claims and protestations on their face value and think that they are justified just because they constitute the Mādhyamika's own view about himself. (This would amount to regarding a man as beautiful or wise just because he thinks himself to be beautiful or wise.) Such a criticism has a further job cut out for it, and this consists, in the present case, in trying to scrutinize whether or not the Mādhyamika is willing to apply to his own position the yardstick which he is applying to other things when judging them.

Indeed, there are a couple of other consequences to which the opponent draws Nāgārjuna's attention and seeks an explanation thereof. (i) If the (your) statement is (also conceded to be) empty and yet is considered fit to negate the intrinsic nature of everything (*atha śūnyam asti cānena pratiṣedhaḥ*), then other things too, even if void, would be capable of performing (their respective) actions (*śūnyā api sarvābhāvāḥ kāryakriyāsamarthā bhavyeḥ*) and *śūnyatā* will end up being another name for existence, or at least would not be incompatible with the existence of things in so far as the latter is implied by their being *kāryakriyā-samartha* 'causally efficient'. (ii) If on the other hand things are (considered to be) void and also further (considered as) not capable of performing their functions such that the original proposition does not really get contradicted by the preceding example (*mā bhūd drṣṭāntavirodhaḥ*), then the negation by the statement, which is itself void, becomes infructuous. The sum and substance of the objector's contention thus is that any defence of the

11 Ruegg [2000: 106].

12 Ruegg [2000: 107].

(*svabhāva-*) *śūnyatā* doctrine inescapably involves one or another logical discordance: even when thinking everything void, one is forced to concede some things as non-void, for which no convincing explanation seems to be coming forth from Nāgārjuna's side.

Before we proceed further, we need to carefully attend to Nāgārjuna's reply to the opponent's objections, which runs as follows:

(1) If my statement ('all things are empty') is empty, and I accept that my statement too, being dependently originated, is empty, that only proves the voidness of all things, not their self-existence (*yathā caitan madvacanam niḥsvabhāvatvāc chūnyam tathā sarvabhāvā api niḥsvabhāvatvāc chūnyā iti*) (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 21).

I think, not much effort is needed to show that Nāgārjuna's reply is perfectly evasive here and does not squarely face the question put to him. It is evasive, for in the opinion of the opponent, if Nāgārjuna's statement is also included among other (worldly) things, then it (being empty itself) becomes incapable of negating the self-existence of all those things (which it sets out to do). The opponent, in other words, points out the contradiction involved in Nāgārjuna's attempt to prove *śūnyatā* through a *śūnya* or void statement. Of course Nāgārjuna still has the option to correct (as he seems to do) the opponent — if such indeed be the latter's understanding in the matter — by pointing out that it is not philosophers' statements which make or unmake the world: *niḥsvabhāvāḥ sarvabhāvā ity etat khalu vacanam na niḥsvabhāvān eva sarvabhāvān karoti* (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 64): if the world exists and exists in a certain way, then the situation remains unaltered whatever notion a philosopher may entertain about it. And there is no doubt that such a move would at a limited level be unexceptionable. The point, however, is that Nāgārjuna by resorting to a couple of other strategies undoes whatever initial strength his (above) move may seem to possess. And it is to these strategies that we now turn.

(2) In the next *kārikā* (VV, k.22) Nāgārjuna tries to come round the paradox — nay the contradiction — his statement is alleged to involve, in a different way. Construing *svabhāva-śūnyatā* as Dependent Origination (*pratītya-samutpannatva*), he argues that just as other things, even though dependently originated and so void, are able to perform their functions, similarly his statement, even though void in the same sense, is capable of doing the job of demonstrating the voidness of things (*evam idaṃ madīyavacanam pratītyasamut-*

*pannatvān niḥsvabhāvam api niḥsvabhāvatvapasādhane bhāvānāṃ vartate*) (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 22).

Now this reply of Nāgārjuna's, whatever else it may mean or not mean, seems for once to give up any pretence it may earlier have had that his statement constitutes no thesis of his own. You cannot claim efficiency for your statement in establishing a certain truth about the (character of the) world without yourself being committed to that view in the first place. In fact, your further claim that your statement, in so far as it discharges its duty, does exist in a certain sense involves you in clear presuppositions, with the result that adoption of this devious route also turns out for Nāgārjuna to be of no avail. Indeed, Nāgārjuna's despair on the question becomes further evident when, apparently not knowing how to avoid the paradoxes which his own 'thesis' enmeshes him in, he compares his negating statement (*pratiśedha-vacana*) with an artificially created person (*nirmitika*) who is able to prevent another artificial person engaged in something, or with a magic man (*māyā-puruṣa*) created by a magician preventing another magic man, engaged in something (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 23).

It should be evident on a slightly closer reading that the above analogy completely fails of its purpose, and so fails to bail Nāgārjuna out. In the first place, the actions of things such as chariot, pot, etc. are not a phantom as those of the artificial or the magic man; they are, however relative from a certain point of view, actual things. Nāgārjuna himself feels no compunction in ascribing to things functional powers (*kāryakriyā-sāmarthya*) in spite of their being devoid of self-existence, and thus distinguishes them from the unreal objects ('unreal' in the literal sense of the term) such that the latter are not even conceived as capable of causal efficiency. At the same time, however, when he compares them (i.e., those with causal efficiency) to the artificial man, he propounds their total unreality. If it be contended on Nāgārjuna's behalf that the worldly things like chariot, pot, etc., with all their capacity for certain sorts of actions, are real only from the *sāmvṛtika* or phenomenal point of view and that therefore the analogy with the *nirmitika* is not really inapposite, we will reply that the artificial man (*nirmitika*) is not even real phenomenally: the *sāmvṛtika* logic does not apply to him. In the second place, the artificial man, though unreal, is, from the standpoint of the universe of discourse in which he is entertained, neither false nor *niḥsvabhāva* (or devoid of self-existence) in that sense of *svabhā*

*va* in which he is distinguished from the non-artificial or *anirmitika* object. An artificial man is himself an imaginary product of the non-artificial if *sāmvṛtika* or *niḥsvābhāvika* world; it is however for that very reason possessed of self-existence (*svabhāva*), even if this *svabhāva* be something which is conferred upon it by us who imaginatively bring it into being. In other words, the *svabhāva* of the artificial man has its source in the *svabhāva-sūnya* world, which latter, needless to say, is so (i.e. *svabhāva-sūnya*) for altogether different reasons and at a different level. To compare the negating statement — which is empty from one point of view — with the artificial man, which though imaginary is non-empty from *another* point of view, *would be to conflate two altogether different realms or categories.*

(3) In the VV, *kārikā* 27 and the *vṛtti* thereon, Nāgārjuna attempts to resolve the matter through a somewhat parallel but different analogy. He asks us to imagine a man — a real man, I suppose — who, mistaking an artificial woman devoid of self-existence for a real woman, feels enamored of her. He asks us further to suppose that the Tathāgata, or a disciple of his, creates an artificial man (*nirmitiko nirmitaḥ syāt*) who dispels the false notion of that (non-artificial) man by showing (through the Tathāgata's power or that of his disciple's) the artificiality of that (artificial) woman and thus frees him from his craving.

Now I feel it is impossible to deny that in this explanation, the Tathāgata, the desiring man and his desire are all real in some indubitable sense. And this also is undeniable that the artificial man and the artificial woman, even though they have their source in the Tathāgata (*Tathāgatādhiṣṭhita*), are, in terms of their actions (which in the case of the woman consist in causing an amorous desire in the non-artificial man), real too. In other words, the artificial man and woman, even though creations of imagination (and so unreal), come to acquire a *svabhāva* such that their actions become real and efficacious. The analogy (in question) then breaks down, and so does Nāgārjuna's attempt to save from the shipwreck his initial statement, which ironically is intended by him to announce that very mishap and its all-encompassingness.

Nāgārjuna however seems unwilling to accept the full consequences of his (analogical) argument. The artificial man is to him acceptable but only as unfounded, with the result that the negating statement, negation and the negated are all of them, in his



view, unreal and so devoid of self-existence. But what then, one may justifiably ask, is the real point of conceiving the artificial man and artificial woman? The likely reply that in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* the Tathāgata too is declared as non-existent and devoid of intrinsic nature, does not really meet the objection squarely. In fact, it gives rise to a more fundamental question, namely how to distinguish the totally artificial (*nirmitika*) and 'empty' man from the totally unartificial (*a-nirmitika*) but empty particular, here the Tathāgata. After all, how does the artificial man in the *nirmitika* analogy expose the true character of the artificial woman? Surely, only by showing her artificial or unreal character. But then in so doing, his 'reality' (so to speak) as an artificial man also gets exhibited. But if the man, whose desire for the artificial woman is sought to be dispelled by the artificial man, were also an artificial man (*nirmitika*), then the Tathāgata-created self-exhibiting artificial man cannot be distinguished from the non-artificial man. The whole *nirmitika* operation then would seem to hinge upon two *a-nirmitika* beings, one for whose sake the *nirmitikas* have been brought into being, namely the desiring man, and the second who launches this entire *nirmitika* business, viz. the Tathāgata.

(4) I now try to show how Nāgārjuna, however unwittingly, leaves behind certain clues which can enable one to call his bluff, so to speak. In his *vṛtti* on *kārikā* 64 of *VV*, a part of which we have quoted just above to establish a different point, Nāgārjuna makes an extremely significant statement about the nature of his original statement. Thus he says: Even though his statement (*vacana*) does not render the world devoid of self-existence, however, since there is no self-existence (to the world), it makes known (*jñāpayati*) that things are void: *kintv asati svabhāve bhāvā niḥsvabhāvā iti jñāpayati*. In fact, importantly, Nāgārjuna goes on to illustrate his meaning through an example: If Devadatta is not in the house, and somebody (wrongly) says that he is in the house, then someone else (who knows the truth) tells him in reply: 'He is not in the house'. And this statement, according to Nāgārjuna, does not create Devadatta's non-existence in the house, but only makes it known. Thus according to Nāgārjuna himself, his own statement only *makes known*, i.e. intimates to those (who care to know), as against the view that the existents have an intrinsic nature, that they in fact are void of such a nature.

Now if we are not awfully mistaken in understanding Nāgārjuna's meaning, his view about the nature of his own statement has the following serious implications.

- (a) Nāgārjuna, in a way characteristic of a critical philosopher, takes note of the fact that a certain view or views about the nature of the world exist: in fact he claims to know at least some of them. (As those conversant with his *MMK* will readily vouchsafe, he discusses a good many of them in that (major) work.)
- (b) If Nāgārjuna's claim is that his statement only makes known (and does not create) the intrinsic voidness of things, the million-dollar question that arises is: How can he (or his statement) intimate to us the intrinsic voidness of things *unless* he, as a maker of that statement, himself *knows* or *believes* in the first place that this is how things truly are, and *not* as other philosophers represent them to be. Unless you are being utterly non-serious or otherwise unmindful of self-contradiction, you cannot draw someone's attention to a certain object or fact without admitting (or positing) on your own part (a certain awareness of) the actuality or otherwise of that fact or object. So making known something — whatever that something be — presupposes prior knowledge of that thing. And such knowledge willy-nilly involves one in a commitment in at least the sense of acceptance (acknowledgement) of that thing or condition as a fact. In fact, to illustrate through Nāgārjuna's own example, if A corrects X, who believes (mistakenly) that B is presently in the house and so proceeds to look for him there, by letting him know that B is not in the house, then A, though surely he is not causally responsible for B's absence from the house, does claim to be aware, firstly, of B, and secondly, a fact about him, viz. his absence from the house. The upshot so far then is that Nāgārjuna's claim that he has no *pratijñā* to put forward not only remains unsupported by adequate reasoning but also involves him, in view of the above standpoint of his, in a plain self-contradiction. Likewise, his negating statement (*pratiṣedha*), while it may not have a specific *negatum* of the kind conceived by Nyāya for example, it does claim to negate a certain conception about things, and in so doing advertises a contrary view about them. In fact, this is the special basic objection Uddyotakara (cf. *Vārttika* on the *Nyāyasūtra*

2.1.12) seeks to bring against the Mādhyamika sceptic (?) and accuses him of contradicting his own statement (*sva-vacana-vyāghāta*) by accepting the inefficiency of his negation (which in effect is denied by the latter to be a case of knowledge) (*pratiśedhasyāsādhakatvaṃ svavācaiva abhyupagataṃ bhavati*). He sums up the sceptic's predicament by comparing his effort to one who desires to burn others by burning his own fingers, regardless of whether he succeeds in burning others or not.

- (c) Things may begin to get worse for Nāgārjuna, if an opponent, Naiyāyika or someone else, with a faith in the existence of (some) means of knowledge, turns around to query that if his (Nāgārjuna's) statements can do certain wonders, why can't his (the epistemologist's) 'cognitions'? Indeed an epistemologist can claim with perfect justice that his cognitions of things reveal to him and so do or can enable him also to 'make known' certain facts about the world. No cognitivist, least of all one with the Nyāya-like realist commitments, can ever claim that it is his knowledge which makes or unmakes the world which it thinks it reveals or represents. And if Nāgārjuna can assume *his* statement to be possessing a certain power, the power to make known, why can't a cognitivist claim the same power for his (valid) knowledge. In fact, the latter can turn the tables on Nāgārjuna himself by asking him, wherefrom does his statement derive the special power which he thinks it possesses? To this last point we shall return again in our next section when we discuss the question of the self-evidentness of the means of knowing.
- (d) Before we close this part of our treatment, let me at once make it clear that I have no wish to deny outright that a 'commitmentless denial' is in principle possible, and that therefore to that extent the air of paradoxicality about Nāgārjuna's statement is mitigated. I do want to assert, however, that in that case the denial at least would exist, and it would be sheer mystery-mongering to deny that one denies.

At this point it might be worthwhile to briefly note and comment upon a few of the important views that have been expressed with regard to Nāgārjuna's celebrated statement 'I have no *pratiñā* (to make)'. Raising a number of interesting and provocative philosophical issues, though also at the same time emphasizing the historical

perspective, D. Seyfort Ruegg observes: “In accordance with the second, and narrower, of the two uses of the word *pratijñā* noticed above (§2), in the textual and philosophical context in which it appears in the *VV*, the statement ‘I have no *pratijñā*’ may be understood as signifying: I have no propositional thesis asserting a hypostatized entity (*bhāva*) having self-existence (*svabhāva*).”<sup>13</sup> I am somehow unable to agree with this interpretation of Ruegg’s. Nāgārjuna’s denial of any *pratijñā*, I may point out, does not have to do with the assertion of a *bhāva* as having self-existence but with the teaching, if I may so put it, that all things (*bhāva*) are void of *self-existence*. In other words, Nāgārjuna is not maintaining that he has no propositional thesis asserting a hypostatized entity having self-existence but rather that he makes no assertion to the effect that things are devoid of self-existence. For clearly, it is when the opponent maintains that Nāgārjuna’s assertion, *śūnyāḥ sarvabhāvāḥ*, is also included in all the *bhāvas* and so being devoid of self-existence is unreal, that Nāgārjuna replies that he has no (such) *pratijñā* to make. Indeed, as we know, Nāgārjuna goes on to add that if indeed he had any *pratijñā*, then the defect alleged by the opponent (in *VV*, k. 4: *evaṃ tava pratijñā lakṣaṇato dūṣyate na mama*) would be his (*yadi kācana pratijñā syān me tata eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ*: *VV*, k. 29). It is to be marked here that the *pūrvapakṣin*’s case in *karikas* 1-4 (especially in 1-2) is not that Nāgārjuna’s tenet ‘*śūnyāḥ sarvabhāvāḥ*’ is untenable because there is something that possesses a *svabhāva*, but that the words (the statement) or the act of producing the words, which convey the central doctrine of the Mādhyamika, give the lie to the claim that is expressed by the sentence that *svabhāva* is not to be found anywhere in the world (*śūnyena tvadvacanena sarvabhāva-svabhāvapratiṣedho nopapanna iti*: *VV*, *vṛtti*, k. 2). Besides, even if Ruegg’s construal of Nāgārjuna’s statement be right, his understanding of its signification is obscure. It is obscure because it is not clear how a ‘propositional thesis can assert any hypostatized entity having self-existence’. Incidentally, such a criticism of Ruegg’s interpretation is made by Claus Oetke too in his “Some Remarks on Theses and Philosophical Positions in Early Madhyamaka” (cf. above).

Indeed, Oetke in an earlier analysis of Nāgārjuna’s statement asserts that Nāgārjuna’s “denial of the existence of any assertion of

<sup>13</sup> Ruegg [2000: 207-8].

his own should be taken as pertaining to the *paramārtha*-level, because the main tenet logically entails precisely this".<sup>14</sup> And this *paramārtha*-level according to him does not allow any *pratijñā* to be attributed to Nāgārjuna: "... if one views the situation from the *paramārtha*-viewpoint, there is no *pratijñā*, no feature of a *pratijñā* and accordingly no feature which might constitute a defect pertaining to the Mādhyamika's *pratijñā* in particular, as it is made clear in VV(V) 29."<sup>15</sup> Prior to offering this explanation, Oetke calls attention to his "rival" interpretation — rival to Ruegg's — according to which, in his words, "the author of the VV says in *kārikā* 29 that in the final analysis (i.e. on the *paramārtha*-level) no *pratijñā* made by him exists because all entities, and *a fortiori* any *pratijñā*, are empty and without *svabhāva*".<sup>16</sup> This interpretation, urges Oetke (as noted above), "has been supported by remarks made in the *Vṛtti* on *kārikā* 29".<sup>17</sup>

It is on this view of Oetke's, that Nāgārjuna's denial that he has any *pratijñā* to make should be taken as occurring at the *paramārtha* level, that I wish briefly to comment. I have come to form the view that even if we grant that the case is as Oetke supposes, it does not help in determining Nāgārjuna's final vision about the existents (*bhāvas*) with any great clearness. Indeed, this final vision, if we are to follow Oetke's interpretation, turns out to be a little idealistic. Its idealisticness consists in the fact that though 'existent particulars' (*bhāvas*) — and this includes Nāgārjuna's *pratijñā* as attributed to him by his opponent — are considered on ultimate analysis to be devoid of own nature (*svabhāva*), they are yet considered causally efficient. That is, while entities are retained intact in terms of their 'normal' or pragmatic causal efficiency and all that this implies, they are declared as lacking in own nature or independent reality. The problem however is that Oetke's hypothesis about an (ultimately) empty yet pragmatically causally efficient entity, while it certainly applies in respect of Nāgārjuna's *pratijñā*, it does so only partially. It is true that in his *vṛtti* on VV, k.2 Nāgārjuna says that his *pratijñā* too, like other *bhāvas*, is empty and so devoid of own nature, but it is also true that he denies that he has any *pratijñā* to make. In other words,

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14 Oetke [1991: 320].

15 Oetke [2003: 471].

16 Oetke [2003: 465].

17 Oetke [2003: 465].

his *pratijñā* rather than being simply empty (*śūnya*) like other *bhāvas* is also non-existent in a very special way.

Its special non-existence consists in the fundamental fact that while all other entities are declared or intimated (*jñāpita*) as being empty because of being devoid of an intrinsic nature, it (i.e. Nāgārjuna's *pratijñā*) is also denied existence due to its non-assertion: *na mama kācid asti pratijñā* (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 29). In other words, Nāgārjuna's *pratijñā* is not only void of intrinsic nature, it is also, as unasserted, void of existence in a minimal way, however that term be understood or interpreted.

Another question that arises with regard to Oetke's *paramārtha*-view of Nāgārjuna's denial is whether such a view would allow assertion of a thesis/view on Nāgārjuna's part at the *saṃvṛti* level. If Oetke answers 'yes', then our question would be whether dependent origination, with which (*svabhāva*-) *śūnyatā* is equated by Nāgārjuna, is something that is a feature of *bhāvas* from the *paramārtha*-viewpoint in such a way that at the ordinary *saṃvṛti* level there is no dependent origination. It is needless to say that acceptance of this position goes against the basic spirit of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, as is commonly minimally understood. That things originate dependently is, I may point out, believed by Nāgārjuna to be a feature of things even at the *saṃvṛti* level. The *paramārtha*-standpoint, even admitting that there is such a standpoint in this particular respect, only, though of course importantly, suggests that as dependently originating things are devoid of self-existence (*svabhāva-śūnya*). There is another paradox which ensues from Oetke's view. If the non-existence of all *pratijñās* (assertions) — whether one's own or any other — is entailed or "necessitated" (as Oetke says) by the fact that all things (*bhāvas*) are void, then one's own existence, whether as a momentary entity or as a series of momentary particulars, also cannot be asserted as something real; which means, Nāgārjuna has to deny that he (however this 'he' be viewed) himself exists. But can Nāgārjuna deny his own existence whether in thought or in words without risking self-contradiction. What would be the status, or implication, I want to ask of Oetke, of the assertion "I exist" or of "I do not exist".

A different proposal has been made by Ian Mabbett in his article "Is there Devadatta in the house?"<sup>18</sup> Distinguishing five "relevant" interpretations of VV 29 'I have no *pratijñā*' (*nāsti ca mama pratijñā*)

<sup>18</sup> Mabbett [1996: 295-320].

he casts his vote in favour of that interpretation which maintains that on the level of conventional truth phenomena can be treated as manifestations of immutable essences, but on the level of ultimate truth, immutable essences do not exist: phenomena are merely manifestations of other phenomena.<sup>19</sup> Frankly I do not understand Mabbett's meaning. If the right interpretation or view is to regard phenomena as manifestations of immutable essences, whatever these latter may mean, then these must be treated as really real, for unlike the phenomena, they are not dependently originated. And if they are, unlike phenomena, really real, they must be so from the point of view of ultimate truth. Mabbett's assertion therefore that at this latter (ultimate) level these immutable essences do not exist turns out to be self-contradictory. Of course it is possible, as we have said above, to have some conception of self-existence and then deny that any thing (*bhāva*) of the world corresponds to this conception or has this *svabhāva*. But this is not Mabbett's contention.

Sometimes a still different proposal is advanced, and it would perhaps not be out of place to consider it briefly. This proposal claims that Nāgārjuna's statement "All is empty" ceases to involve him in a self-contradiction, which it is alleged to in the event of its claiming an exemption from inclusion in "all", if it is treated as something *unasserted*. Thus Bimal Matilal, drawing a distinction between truth and *assertion* of truth, remarks that the air of paradoxicality attaching to the Nāgārjuna-like proposition evaporates if Nāgārjuna is interpreted, following his own words to the effect that he has no thesis to propound, as not asserting the truth of his above proposition.<sup>20</sup> In this light, according to Matilal, Nāgārjuna would come to rephrasing his point thus: "It just so *happens* that everything is empty (lacks *svabhāva*), but it must remain *unsaid*, for to assert (say) it is to falsify it."<sup>21</sup> Matilal in this connection recalls that the medieval (Western) logician Jean Buridan made a similar point about the statement "no statement is negative". Suppose God had destroyed all negative statements, then there would be in fact no negative statements in the world, although we could not assert that "no statement is negative".<sup>22</sup>

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19 Mabbett [1996: 299].

20 Matilal [1986: 48].

21 Matilal [1986: 49].

22 Matilal [1986: 48].

Now there is no doubt that there is an important truth in the above suggestion. Some noted names in philosophy have after all held that propositions cannot be about themselves.<sup>23</sup> And yet we cannot help remarking that the statement “All is empty” which does seem to express an opinion about all that is, is sufficiently condemned by the fact that, if it were to apply to itself,<sup>24</sup> it also would become void. We say this because the statement “All is empty” is not an assertion about a proposition or about a number of propositions. It is an assertion that the possession of the characteristic ‘being an existent (*bhāva*)’ implies the possession of the characteristic ‘being empty (*śūnya*)’. Which means, rather than being an assertion about one or more propositions, it is an assertion about characteristics. And since the characteristic ‘being an existent’ belongs to the statement, the latter cannot avoid having the characteristic ‘being empty’. Add to this the consideration that (as noted above) Nāgārjuna assumes his statement to possess the capacity to convey (lit. make known) the true nature of the world, and you find that his claim that he has no proposition to make is rendered highly suspect.<sup>25</sup>

### III

I now turn to our last theme, viz. Nāgārjuna’s critique of the *pramāṇa* theory. This radical critique occupies *kārikās* 30-51 of the VV where Nāgārjuna seeks to demolish the claim of each of the accredited means of knowledge to yield knowledge of or about the world. It is worthy of notice that Nāgārjuna, unlike many other thinkers (both in India and the West), does not resort to the ‘argument from illusion’ to mount his attack either on our optimism about the intelligibility of the world or on our conviction that we possess the proper means by which to know it. His strategy takes a different route, one central contention of which takes the form of the following question: If objects are known and hence established through the

23 Thus Wittgenstein says (though he is not the first to take this view): “No proposition can make a statement about itself ...” See Wittgenstein [1981: 3.332]. For an illuminating comment on the same, see McTaggart [1934: 179-82].

24 Thus McTaggart [1934] holds that even if propositions cannot be *about* themselves, it is possible to show that they yet *apply to* themselves.

25 To this all can be added the following thought from Aristotle’s *Topics*: “Anyone who has made any statement whatever has in a certain sense made several statements, inasmuch as each statement has a number of necessary consequences.” Aristotle, *Topics*, Bk. II.5, 112a, 17, in Ross [1928 (b)].



*pramāṇas*, what will establish the *pramāṇas* themselves? (*yadi ca pramāṇatas te teṣām teṣām prasidhhir arthānām / teṣām punaḥ prasiddhiṃ brūhi katham te pramāṇānām*//) (VV, k.31). The question, in other words, is: How do we know that the various (accepted) means of knowledge are indeed such means or *pramāṇas*? Nāgārjuna formulates what he conceives to be four possible responses to this (fundamental) query: (1) a *pramāṇa*, while it establishes (the existence of) the object, establishes itself; that is, its character as a *pramāṇa* is self-certifying; (2) one *pramāṇa* is established by some other *pramāṇa*; (3) a *pramāṇa* is established by its object or *prameya*; (4) *pramāṇa* and *prameya* mutually establish each other.

A very brief look at Nāgārjuna's estimation of the last three alternatives shows that in his view, (2) involves one in vicious infinite regress (*anyair yadi pramāṇaiḥ pramāṇa-siddhir bhavet tadānavasthā*) (VV, k. 32a); (3) makes of *pramāṇa* a *prameya* itself in addition to putting the *prameya* beyond the pale of *pramāṇa* (cf. VV, k. 43); and (4) clearly involves circularity (cf. VV, ks. 45ff.). In this situation what a *pramāṇa* theorist is left with is only alternative (1) in terms of which to defend his article of faith; and his argument in that case could well be (as Nāgārjuna too does not fail to envisage) along the lines perhaps fairly recorded in VV, *vṛtti*, *kārikā* 33 itself:

*dyotayati svātmānaṃ yathā hutāśas tathā parātmānaṃ/  
svaparātmānāv evaṃ prasādhayanti pramāṇāṇīti*//

'Fire illuminates itself as well as other things. Likewise, the *pramāṇas* establish (or certify) themselves as well as other things.' As we know, the fire or light analogy is often invoked by Indian philosophers, specially the Vedāntins, the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas and the (idealistic) Buddhist *pramāṇa* theorists, to explain and defend their view that the means of knowing or cognitions,<sup>26</sup> while they reveal the existence and character of (other) objects, are self-certifying or self-evident with respect to their own existence. (In fact these philosophers regard, albeit in their own characteristic ways, consciousness too as primarily self-revealing or self-evident.) Nāgārjuna finds this strategy plainly questionable, firstly, because it

<sup>26</sup> It will be noticed that below I have, following the *Nyāyasūtra* tradition, used *pramāṇa* both in the sense of means of knowledge as well as 'cognition' or 'knowledge' (*pramā*). In later Indian epistemological tradition, of course, '*pramāṇa*' generally comes to denote the 'means' of knowledge', the word *pramā* being reserved for the knowledge thus obtained.

introduces a dichotomy between one class of objects called *prameyas* and another class of existents called *prāmaṇas*, by regarding the former as requiring proof for their existence and by declaring the latter as in need of no such proof. This dichotomy, specially because it accords privileged treatment to the *prāmāṇas*, needs, in Nāgārjuna's view, to be spelt out and, besides, justified: *viśeṣahetuś ca vaktavyaḥ* (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 33). Surely it would not do to stipulate by fiat that it is in the nature of some things, the *prāmeyas*, to be known and revealed, while it is in the nature of certain other things, the *prāmaṇas*, to reveal and make known the objects. So we get faced with a logical impasse here.

The second basic objection voiced by Nāgārjuna is that the *pramāṇa* theorist's, here the Naiyāyika's, own principle that everything is established by some means of knowledge or other is undermined by his setting up the above dichotomy. (And as, again, is well known, it is a basic postulate with at least the Naiyāyikas that whatever exists is knowable — in fact, even nameable.) Nāgārjuna consequently rejects the fire or light analogy adduced by the epistemologist, saying, 'Fire does not illuminate itself' and goes on to back up this rejection by a number of arguments (cf. VV, ks. 34-39). It is neither possible nor perhaps relevant to reproduce all those arguments here, though one may by the way remark that a tendency to 'over-kill' is clearly visible in them. What is relevant is the question whether Nāgārjuna is right in holding that light does not illuminate itself. Surely, it would be of no use here to treat light on the analogy of the objects which it reveals and so maintain that (like them) it exists prior to being revealed. The real point of the analogy is, I submit, rather different. It is this: Light, as and when it reveals the objects which happen to fall within its circumference, also at the same time reveals its own existence and character as an illuminator of (these) objects.

It seems to me that it is here important to disentangle two otherwise closely related aspects of the problem. The one pertains to the question: how do we know that a certain cognition has taken place, assuming that there are things like cognitions. The other concerns the question, how do we know, assuming that we know, that a certain cognition is valid, i.e., is a *pramā*. This second question incidentally is a question concerning the criterion of truth (*prāmāṇya*). Now it is not very clear whether Nāgārjuna in raising the question about the

establishment of the *pramāṇas* is in fact asking the question about the criterion/criteria of truth (*pramātvā*) of a cognition. Even so, however, there is no harm, in fact something is gained, if we examine the issue via a consideration of the 'criterion' question. To be sure, the criterion question is also equally vexed. Yet I think if one is able to show, by proceeding to act (in a single case) on one's cognitive judgement in ways which subject the belief to some sort of test or confirmation, that the tests are successful, then one can claim to have shown, first, that there is at least one cognition that is valid, and second — and this follows from the first — that knowledge is possible and that there are means of knowledge which (under appropriate conditions) are capable of revealing things in their true character.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Nāgārjuna himself claims, if implicitly, to have a certain knowledge about the nature of things when he alludes to their capacity to perform certain functions, which knowledge's validation surely derives from those things' successful discharge of their presumed tasks. The point is that so long as the question we are concerned to answer is one of a general nature, one can adopt various stratagems, with support from other relevant factors (if any), by which to prove that there is such a thing as *valid* cognition. So what needs to be kept in mind is that while generally a *pramāṇa* constitutes a necessary condition for a cognition to take place, it does not by itself provide the justificatory ground for its knowledge-claim: a cognition does not 'wear its truth on its sleeves' such that as it arises its validity becomes self-evident unchallengeably.

The above suggestion may invite the charge that we are making validation of a *pramāṇa* parasitic upon the *prameyas* and thereby compromising *pramāṇas*' independent status or credentials as means of (valid) knowledge. This, however, is completely mistaken. It is mistaken, for it conflates (and so fails to distinguish what must be distinguished) the question of the general function (or rather aim) of the *pramāṇas* — which surely consists in apprehending the true nature of the real (*tattva-jñāna*) — with the question of the *validation* (*prāmāṇya*) of the knowledge-claim made. If my eye has the capacity to perceive things, it does not *necessarily* follow that validation of every instance of seeing also must come from this capacity of my eyes. That some *prāmāṇa* is always needed to know something does not by

<sup>27</sup> Note that it is not any epistemologist's claim that a means of knowledge at any given point provides complete knowledge of an object.

itself constitute sufficient ground for ascertaining the validity (or otherwise) of that piece of knowledge. The question of the exercise of a *pramāṇa* needs, therefore, to be separated from the question of the validity of the resultant knowledge; which means even the self-certification of a cognition as to its existence as cognition ought not to be equated with its self-validation, just as perhaps whether a pot (say) always succeeds in performing its job of carrying water is a question different from the question whether it even has that capacity.<sup>28</sup>

I now turn to the first question, viz., how do we know in a particular case that a certain cognition has taken place? It would be noticed that one part of the light analogy is meant to answer this question, and in my view the question *is* answerable in terms of that very analogy. (My answer however need not be construed as necessarily representing the standard Nyāya argument. It is meant to be on behalf of any one who subscribes to the *pramāṇa* doctrine.) However, before I venture to show this in my own way, it would be well if I invite attention to the well-known fact that the founder of the Nyāya school, Gotama (who perhaps was familiar with a version of this basic indictment of the *pramāṇa* doctrine), after taking due note of some of the Nāgārjūnian-looking objections (cf. VV, ks. 34-39) in his *Nyāyasūtras* 2.1.17-18, attempts to resolve the issue of (the analogy of) the self-establishment of the light of a lamp in the *sūtra* 2.1.19: *na, pradīpaprakāśasiddhivat tatsiddheḥ* 'No, because these (i.e. perception, etc.) are established in the same way as the light of a lamp'. It is amazing, though, that Vātsyāyana in his gloss (*bhāṣya*) on this *sūtra* altogether misses the real spirit of Gotama's insight and goes on to give a wholly different orientation to it, which, whatever its own merit, scarcely seems to do justice to Gotama's intentions — which (I think) should normally be transparent to anyone who has

<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, one here recalls Uddyotakara's implied hint (cf. his *Vārttika* under *NS* 2.1.11) that just as a cook does not, normally, cease to be a cook after he has done his duties, similarly we can, not unreasonably, call something a *pramāṇa* (or *prameya*) even when it is not functioning as a means of knowledge (or an object) (*pramāṇam prameyam iti cāsyāḥ samākhyāyā nimittaṃ trikālayogī*). He goes on to add: He who has no notion of the use of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* in respect of the three time segments (past, present and future) contradicts even such common usages as "Bring the cook" (*yastu traikālikam pramāṇaprameyavyavahāram na pratipadyate tasya pācakamānayetādivyavahāro viruddhyata iti*). Thus, in a way Uddyotakara seems to hold that a certain capacity of an object has two different states, a manifest one when that capacity gets actualised and a latent or potent one when the latter's presence is simply assumed (on the basis of past experience, etc.), even though not obvious in the form of action. Cf. also Vātsyāyana's *Bhāṣya* on the same *sūtra* for similar observations.

perused some of the immediately preceding *sūtras* dealing with the issue.

My own submission, then, is that a case can be made for the contention that a piece of cognition, valid or invalid, is self-certifying *in the sense of being self-revealing* much in the way the light of a lamp is self-revealing: no one, I think, needs confirmation that his eyes are open when looking directly into a mountain, say. In fact, this can even be done in somewhat like a Vedāntic or Cartesian manner without accepting all the conclusions which these philosophers draw from their initial (limited) premise. To illustrate it through an example, if I see a tree, I simultaneously become aware of my existence as a perceiver. Even though my consciousness (cognition) has tree for its obvious intentional target, it is immediately aware of itself as such a tree-perceiving consciousness (cognition) in *that very act*. The perceiving itself has a compulsiveness about it such that we do not require (as even Descartes supposes) the extra (higher) act of self-acquaintance or reflection to certify that the mind has something before it, something perceived in a certain way. In knowing something we know something of ourselves, our knowing for example. My perception of the object which I suppose myself to know is certainly fallible but *not* my awareness of myself as the owner or subject of that 'fallible' knowledge. It is self-certifying or self-evidencing even if it be true that this self-evidentness of its comes to the fore on the occasion of my cognising something *else*, much as light reveals its existence and nature as an illuminator of objects on the occasion of revealing those objects. The object's existence is known by something, a knower or cognition which is other than the object, while the knower's (or a cognition's) existence becomes known or established to the knower himself in an *unobjectivating* manner. What is being claimed here is, to put it differently, nothing more, though also nothing less, than this: As and when a cognition arises one is aware not only of the object (content) of that cognition but of that cognition itself. Awareness of an object and the awareness that there is this awareness (or even this knower) are not two distinct mental (cognitive) acts but one. From this it follows, needless to say, that my ability to report that I am aware of a certain object is not the result of any further mental act, introspective or inferential, which occurs subsequent to the (first-order) awareness of the object.

Now sometimes this fact about our (self-aware) cognitions is misconstrued as implying that when one has a cognition which is veridical, one must for that reason also be aware of the *knowledgehood* (*prāmāṇyatva*) of the cognition. This conclusion is drawn on the assumption that to be aware of the cognition must mean to be aware of those properties which are intrinsic to it, and knowledgehood is a property intrinsic to a veridical cognition. The assumption however must, in our view, be rejected as false, for if true, it would make one equally aware of the non-knowledgehood (*a-prāmāṇyatva*) of a cognition when the latter happens to be of a non-veridical variety. And this seems counter-intuitive on the face of it. It is counter-intuitive, in other words, to say that one is aware of the veridicality or non-veridicality of a cognition at the time of its occurrence. The truth of the matter in fact seems to be that a cognition, at the time of its occurrence, only *claims* to be true, that is, in other words, makes a knowledge-claim, which claim may well turn out to be ill-founded or otherwise false. It is this inherent knowledge-claim which normally makes us accept our cognitions on their face value, it often falling upon subsequent reflection to enquire into the credentials of our cognitions with respect to those claims in the event of arising of any doubt, etc.

This point about self-revelation or self-certification of cognitions is often misunderstood and untenable conclusions drawn. Thus, for instance, we have Mark Siderits observing in all earnestness: "It is widely assumed among Indian philosophers that an entity cannot operate on itself. If this principle holds, then it follows that a *prāmaṇa* cannot establish itself."<sup>29</sup> Now while it is true that such a doctrine is held, albeit in more than one form, by a number of Indian philosophers — among whom are, e.g., Śaṅkara and Vācaspati, as rightly pointed out by Siderits in his footnote — I very much doubt whether Siderits' reading of it is correct in the main. What this doctrine essentially means, specially as conceived by the Vedāntins (including Rāmānuja), Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas and even the Yogācāra Buddhists like Diñnāga, is that consciousness (or cognition), which with many of them is a subject (*viśayin*), reveals itself as consciousness (or cognition), but not in the objectifying intentional way in which it reveals an object distinct from itself. In other words, consciousness can never become its own object in the same very act,

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<sup>29</sup> Siderits [1988: 313].

and yet consciousness possesses, to paraphrase these philosophers, a 'natural and immanent' consciousness of itself. (Hence the adjectives *svayamsiddha* or *svaparakāśa* for *ātman* or *cit* in, e.g., Vedānta.) Likewise, a *pramāṇa* or a cognition does not certify its own existence as cognition in the same intentional or *saviśayaka* way as it establishes the existence of an object which stands over against it. And it is because of his failure to understand the real import of the doctrine under reference that Siderits concludes that a *pramāṇa* "cannot establish itself". (Of course, if "cannot establish itself" means "cannot justify or confirm itself", there is no quarrel with Siderits; but that is not denied by realists such as Naiyāyikas either, for they clearly hold that knowledge of a piece of knowledge as knowledge is a result of some other confirmatory evidence.)

Indeed it seems possible to explain the above fact about *pramāṇas* (or light) through a perspective borrowed from Nāgārjuna himself. A pot, a Nāgārjunian pot, comes to acquire its '*kārya-kriyā-sāmarthya*', i.e., its capacity to carry or contain water *only* when it actually contains water and a chariot comes to exhibit its capacity to carry people *only* when it actually carries them. In other words 'pot' and 'chariot' certify their existence *as* (Nāgārjunian) 'pot' and (Nāgārjunian) 'chariot' *only* when they perform their respective functions, which functions are exercised, needless to say, in connection with things — viz. water, people, etc. — which are other than pot or chariot, and which therefore do the same duty which the '*prameyas*' do for *pramāṇas*.

Self-establishment of the *pramāṇas* (or cognitions), in the way we have briefly tried to explain above, may however be questioned, and is questioned, by Nāgārjuna. And if a reply is to be given to his objections, his formulations of them need to be carefully attended to.

1. If the *pramāṇas* are self-established (*yadi svataś ca pramāṇa-siddhiḥ*), then the means of knowing are established for you independently of the 'objects of knowledge' (*prameyas*) (*anapekṣya tava prameyāṇi bhavati pramāṇasiddhiḥ*). For self-establishment does not require another thing (*na parāpeksā svataḥ siddhiḥ*). (VV, k.40)
2. If the *pramāṇas* are established independently of the *prameyas*, then those *pramāṇas* are *pramāṇas* of nothing (VV, k. 41). If, however, the *pramāṇas* are *pramāṇas* of something, they do not

then become *pramāṇas* independently of the 'objects of knowledge' (*prameyas*) (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 41).

Now it seems to us that Nāgārjuna misunderstands and further misconceives the whole notion of *pramāṇas* and their self-establishment. In fact the question-answer game already seems rigged by him in such a way that no answer given by the epistemologist or a friend of the *pramāṇa* doctrine would be acceptable to him. And yet I think one need not despair. Surely, as we tried to show above, self-establishment (*svataḥ siddhiḥ*) of the *pramāṇas* comes to be known only on the occasion of our acquiring knowledge of the objects. But if this be interpreted to mean that *pramāṇas* after all do need objects which they happen to know, to be called *prāmaṇas*, and so compromise their status as independent existents, our answer would be that this relation to objects is not a debilitating limitation or circumstance but rather something that is in-built in the nature of the case and lends the (knowledge-) situation its peculiar character. If the *raison d'être* of the *pramāṇas* is to reveal or apprehend objects, then the objects constitute a (though not the only) necessary condition for the *pramāṇa*-hood of a *pramāṇa* to come into evidence. Again, though knowledge is of the objects (*prameyas*), it is not the objects in question so much as the *knowledge* gained, which certifies its own existence (— even if not necessarily its validity —) as *that* knowledge. Perception of a tree, presuming it to be valid, is surely impossible without the tree; the tree, however, only, albeit not less importantly, determines the specific intentionality of that perception. The object determines the content of the cognition and not the *fact* that the said cognition has taken place. That is why — and this is extremely important — even when a cognition turns out to be erroneous, it is its content, and to that extent its presumed truth, which is sublated or annulled, not its (self-certified) factuality *as* a cognition. An erroneous perception is as much a perception as a veridical one, they being both indistinguishable phenomenologically because of the intrinsic knowledge-claim they make. The sum and substance of the above is that the objects as *prameyas* depend upon *pramāṇas* in respect of their character of bring-known, and not in respect of their existence as entities of the world. The *pramāṇas* apprehend objects or *prameyas*, and do not bring them into existence. The cognitivist, whether a Naiyāyika or someone else, claims that there are knowledge- or



mind-independent things in the world which are or can be correctly apprehended (and so become *prameyas*) by *pramāṇas* or knowledge-episodes.

That this is so can be shown by means of another consideration. An object is an object whether it is perceived or inferred. But how do we know in a particular case whether the *pramāṇa* or the cognition which establishes its existence is perception or inference. Is it the object (of that cognition) which testifies to the character of that cognition? And if indeed it does, wouldn't that mean that it is the object, any object, which serves as a signpost of the *pramāṇa* of which it becomes an object? That the suggestion is vain on the face of it is shown by the mere thought that an object, say a fire, which is an object of inference for (say) X who being away only sees smoke and so can only infer it on that ground, may well be at the same time an object of perception for Y who stands sufficiently close to it. Is it fire here which intimates to us both that while in one case it is being inferred, in another case it is being perceived? The whole proposition would seem to be preposterous, besides being counter-intuitive. Nor can the question be settled by seeking adjudication by a third person who has neither perceived nor inferred the said fire. We conclude then that it must be the cognition concerned which apart from revealing or knowing an 'other', also knows itself as a perception or an inference, as the case may be. In inference, especially, the inferred object is not around to testify to the inferential nature of the *pramāṇa* (or cognition).

It seems then possible to hold *both* that a *pramāṇa* itself certifies its existence as a means of knowledge and that it does so when certain conditions are fulfilled, these conditions being inclusive of the objects which happen to be known by it. In fact, the same holds for the object too. If a certain assumption be right, then the epistemologist would say (as noted above), the object too does not depend on a *pramāṇa* for its existence, but only for its existence (or character) of *being known*. After all, a *pramāṇa* as a knowledge-episode is always intentional or object-directed (*saviṣayaka*), and an object as *prameya* is always the object of a knowledge-episode. The notion of knowledge without something known, and of something known without knowledge of it is scarcely conceivable. And it is because Nāgārjuna construes self-establishment or self-certification in his own rather peculiar way that he finds the notion of *pramāṇas* so very problematic and question-

begging. The same considerations apply to Nāgārjuna's second formulation above. As for Nāgārjuna's other contentions on the question, we need not discuss them here if only because there can perhaps be no takers of those strategies as plausible responses.

I now proceed to attempt to place Nāgārjuna vis-a-vis the epistemological enterprise as such. In this connection, some writers strongly suggest that Nāgārjuna's aim in repudiating the *pramāṇa* theory is not so much to call into question the possibility of knowledge itself as to show that the *pramāṇas* are by themselves insufficient to prove what they are taken to be proving — namely metaphysical realism. Now while I do not wish to deny that this latter hunch has a grain of truth in it, I do want to suggest that Nāgārjuna's rebuttal of the *pramāṇa* theory is, as a matter of fact, much more pervasive, even sweeping in intentions. In support of this contention of mine, I invite attention to the origins of the polemic. The opponent protests that Nāgārjuna's assertion that all things are 'empty' can be valid or successful only if it has been ascertained by means of the *pramāṇas* like *pratyakṣa* etc. (VV, k. 5 and *vṛtti* thereon). Nāgārjuna's reply to this objection is that the question of his affirming or denying something would arise only if he cognized anything through the *pramāṇas*. The *pramāṇas*, however, he emphasizes without mincing words, do not exist (*tadabhāvāt*) and so nothing is known: *yathārtham evāhaṃ kaṃcin nopalabhe, tasmān na pravartayāmi na nivartayāmi* (VV, *vṛtti*, k. 30; cf. also k. 5). Now if Nāgārjuna's meaning was just to deny the efficacy of the *pramāṇas* as (traditionally) accepted by their upholders in having us acquire some knowledge, then he could as well have thought of some alternative epistemic strategy to drive his point home; to point out, in other words, the grounds (other than the traditional *pramāṇas*) on the basis of which he was declaring things to be empty. He however does nothing of the kind; with him there is no question of preferring this or that epistemological enterprise. No alternatives are envisioned by him, nor any improvements suggested. He neither trusts that there can be any dependable means of knowledge nor perhaps that anything remains to be known (!) through such means. A critique of knowledge which stops short of this conclusion must, according to him, remain half-hearted and incomplete. The contention therefore, as e.g., is voiced by Mark Siderits, that "there is little reason to suppose that Nāgārjuna means to deny the possibility of there being *pramāṇas* in any sense of the

term"<sup>30</sup> is open to correction. Also, Siderits' further contention, expressed elsewhere, that Nāgārjuna's "disagreement with the Nyāya is not over the possibility of knowledge, but over the uses to which a theory of knowledge may be put"<sup>31</sup> — which use according to him consists in the Nyāya's attempt to vindicate metaphysical realism — seems debatable, at least partly, in the light of what we have said above. As we have sought to emphasize, Nāgārjuna's programme is to show, not indeed that certain knowledge-claims are at times questionable (which exercise any philosopher or even ordinary person for that matter may feel called upon to undertake), but that *all* knowledge-talk is inherently unstable in that such talk wholly fails to justify its credentials as knowledge. If Nāgārjuna's main interest is to show the vulnerability of 'metaphysical realism' as a theory about the nature of the world or objects, then it is surely open to him to question the epistemologist's claim (assuming that this is the latter's claim) that this is the only thesis to which his enterprise inevitably leads, rather than challenge him to justify his conviction that knowledge is indeed possible. Nāgārjuna's own statement to the effect that (to repeat) he has acquired no knowledge (for no knowledge in his view exists or is possible) on the basis of which to assert or deny anything about the world, should, I think, suffice to put the issue beyond the shadow of doubt. Within Buddhism itself, as we know, there are philosophers who reject 'metaphysical realism' of the sort advocated by Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, etc., and yet explicitly take their stand on the *pramāṇa* doctrine, thereby affirming knowledge's credentials vis-a-vis the world.<sup>32</sup> Nāgārjuna's overall stance then as reflected in his wholesale rejection of the *pramāṇa* doctrine, and by implication, its equivalent — knowledge — smacks of scepticism, as the term is ordinarily understood.<sup>33</sup>

Whether such scepticism — specially when it is radical or absolute as some like Bimal Matilal<sup>34</sup> seem to attribute to Nāgārjuna

30 Siderits [1980: 320].

31 Siderits [1988: 316].

32 One here thinks of Dīṇāga school of Buddhist philosophy.

33 Scholars like Burton however argue on the basis of some of the passages in the *MMK* and other works that Nāgārjuna's standpoint cannot be branded scepticism. See Burton [1999: ch. 2, especially pp. 30-41]. Burton instead urges that Nagarjuna's philosophy, understood as an assertion of universal absence of *svabhāva*, is tantamount to nihilism, Nāgārjuna's advocacy of the Middle Path notwithstanding. See Burton [1999: ch. 4].

34 Matilal [1986: ch. 2 ("Skepticism")].

— makes sense and, further, is tenable in itself, is, however, a large issue and requires a separate and elaborate treatment. I cannot resist just remarking, though, that absolute scepticism, while a position amounting to that can be taken, is not something that can be consistently upheld or sustained and must, therefore, collapse because of its own (basic) instability. And this, not because it offends against ordinary experience or common sense but because it calls into question the very possibility of affirming something which provides its own ground. Not only this. As we also sought to show, Nāgārjuna's own twin statements — one, that his own statement, though, like other things, void, can yet legitimately perform the task of proving the emptiness of all existents, and second, that his original statement (though incapable of rendering the world empty) only *makes known* the emptiness of things — not only involve him, ironically enough, in a commitment but also presuppose knowledge (/knowledge-claim) on his part.<sup>35</sup> So if we are right in our observations, then Nāgārjuna's claims or protestations come to be, albeit against his own expectations, drastically compromised, and his arguments in defence of his basic standpoint fail in their objective.

Now whether Nāgārjuna's stance on the themes we have touched upon, and there too specially his (so-called) scepticism, implies a commitment (however veiled) to some Absolute or transcendental noumenal<sup>36</sup> reality behind the shadowy world of 'appearance', or whether his pronouncements are in the nature more of a therapy than philosophy, are questions which do not concern us here, though commentators have passionately and elaborately argued for one or another position.<sup>37</sup> My aim has rather been limited, namely to try to

<sup>35</sup> One may here add the needed codicil that the Indian epistemologists generally regard scepticism in respect of *pramāṇas* as self-refuting, for rejection of all *pramāṇas* in their view willy-nilly implies the acceptance of some kind of means of knowledge after all. This kind of self-refutation is, in other words, in their view, pure or extreme self-refutation and not simply of a pragmatic sort which latter may consist, for example, in someone advancing a thesis while engaging at the same time in a procedure which, according to the thesis, is impossible. As, e.g., Vidyānanda puts it: "They only intend to prove the annihilation of principles: consequently they have to admit a proof. And this proof is nothing but a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) ... If the desired [annihilation] is established even without a means of knowledge, everything would be established for everybody according to one's wish (*teṣāṃ tattvopaplavamātram iṣṭam sādhayitum, tadā sādhanam abhyupagantavyam. tac ca pramāṇam eva bhavati ... pramāṇābhāve 'pīṣṭasiddhau sarvaṃ sarvasya yatheṣṭam siddhyet ...*). Vidyānanda [1914: 62. 15-17], quoted in Franco [1994: 51, note 47].

<sup>36</sup> I use the word 'noumenal' without prejudice to Kant's notion of it.

<sup>37</sup> But even if Nāgārjuna's position stems from some sort of mysticism, I would say, in partial agreement with Karl H. Potter: "Mysticism is irrefutable because the question of refutation cannot

take Nāgārjuna on his own words and examine his arguments and see how far he succeeds in establishing this or that 'position'. I am aware that Nāgārjuna or someone on his behalf might (again) rejoin that he has no proposition either to make or defend, and that therefore my (above) exercise is in the end a grand futility. I will only modestly reply that my endeavour's futility (or otherwise) is perfectly matched by the futility (or otherwise) of Nāgārjuna's own effort. If Nāgārjuna feels justified to speak up his mind and do loud thinking while he could have easily chosen to keep a studied silence — which alone incidentally constitutes, according at least to his worthy commentator Candrakīrti,<sup>38</sup> *paramārtha* or ultimate meaning or truth —, surely his readers who consciously take positions on this or that issue are still more justified in responding to his ('commitmentless') swearings *this* way or *that* way.

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arise; it is thus indistinguishable from skepticism as far as epistemology is concerned." See Potter [1975: 311].

<sup>38</sup> Chandrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* on *MMK* 1.3 (p. 22): *paramārtho hy āryānām tūṣṇīmbhāvah*.

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