

ARGUMENTATION, DIALOGUE AND THE *KATHĀVATTHU*

The *Kathāvatthu* or *Points of Controversy* is a book about method. It describes, for the benefit of adherents to various Buddhist schisms, the proper method to be followed in conducting a critical discussion into an issue of doctrinal conflict. Recent scholarship has largely focussed on the question of the extent to which there is, in the *Kathāvatthu*, an ‘anticipation’ of results in propositional logic (Aung, 1915; Schayer, 1933; Bochenski, 1961; Matilal, 1998). For, while it is true that the formulation of arguments there is term-logic rather than propositional, and true also that the propositional rules are nowhere formulated in the abstract, the codified argumentation clearly exploits manipulations that trade on the definition of material implication, on contraposition, and on at least one of *modus tollens*, *modus ponens* and *reductio ad absurdum*. The preoccupation with this question of anticipation, assumes, however, a methodology for the interpretation of Indian logic that suffers a number of serious disadvantages. For, first, in presupposing that the only matter of interest is the extent to which a given text displays recognition of principles of formal logic, the methodology fails to ask what it was that the authors themselves were trying to do, and in consequence, is closed to the possibility that these texts contribute to logical studies of a different kind. And second, in supposing that arguments have to be evaluated formally, the important idea that there are *informal* criteria for argument evaluation is neglected. In fact, the *Kathāvatthu* offers a particularly clear example of a text whose richness and interest lie elsewhere than in its anticipation of deductive principles and propositional laws. As a meticulous analysis of the argumentation properly to be used in the course of a dialogue of a specific type, its concern is with the pragmatic account of argument evaluation, the idea that arguments have to be evaluated as good or bad with regard to their contribution towards the goals of the dialogue within which they are embedded. The leading concern of the *Kathāvatthu* is with issues of *balance* and *fairness* in the conduct of a dialogue, and it recommends a strategy of argumentation which guarantees that both parties to a point of controversy have their arguments properly weighed and considered.

It is important, in the normative framework of the *Kathāvatthu*, that there is a distinction between the global aim of the dialogue as a whole – here to rehearse in an even-handed manner all the considerations that bear upon an issue of dispute, to clarify what is at stake even if no final resolution is achieved – and the local aim of each participant – to advocate the stance they adopt with regard to that issue by supplying arguments for it and attacking the arguments of the other parties.

A dialogue conducted in accordance with the prescribed method of the *Kathāvatthu* is called a *vādayutti*. The goal of a *vādayutti* is the reasoned examination (*yutti*; Skt. *yukti*) of a controversial point in and through a noneristic dialogue (*vāda*). The dialogue is highly structured, and is to be conducted in accordance with a prescribed format of argumentation. There is a given point at issue, for example, whether ‘a person is known in the sense of a real and ultimate fact’ (i.e. whether persons are conceived of as metaphysically irreducible), whether there are such things as ethically good and bad actions, and so, in general, whether A is B. A dialogue is now divided into either sub-dialogues or ‘openings’ (*aṭṭhamukha*). These correspond to eight attitudes it is possible to adopt with regard to the point at issue. So we have:

- [1] Is A B?
- [2] Is A not B?
- [3] Is A B everywhere?
- [4] Is A B always?
- [5] Is A B in everything?
- [6] Is A not B everywhere?
- [7] Is A not B always?
- [8] Is A not B in everything?

The introduction of an explicit quantification over times, places and objects serves to determine the *attitude* of proponent and respondent to the point of controversy. If the issue in question is, for example, whether lying is immoral, the clarification would be as to whether that proposition is to be maintained or denied, and in either case, whether absolutely, or only as relativised in some way to circumstances, times or agents. So an opening thesis here is by definition a point at issue together with an attitude towards it.

Each such ‘opening’ now proceeds as an independent dialogue, and each is divided into five stages: the way forward (*anuloma*), the way back (*paṭikamma*), the refutation (*niggaha*), the application (*upanayana*) and the conclusion (*niggamana*). In the way forward, the proponent solicits from the respondent the endorsement of a thesis, and then tries

to argue against it. In the way back, the respondent turns the tables, soliciting from the proponent the endorsement of the counter-thesis, and then trying argue against *it*. In the refutation, the respondent, continuing, seeks to refute the argument that the proponent had advanced against the thesis. The application and conclusion repeat and reaffirm that the proponent's argument against the respondent's thesis is unsound, while the respondent's argument against the proponent's counter-thesis is sound.

It is significant to note that there is here no *pro-argumentation*, either by the respondent for the thesis or by the proponent for the counter-thesis. There is only *contra-argumentation*, and that in two varieties. The respondent, in the 'way back', supplies an argument against the proponent's counter-thesis, and in the refutation stage, against the proponent's alleged argument against the thesis. So we see where a sharp distinction between three types of argumentation – *pro* argumentation, argumentation that adduces reasons in support of one's thesis, *counter* argumentation – argumentation that adduces reasons against counter-arguments directed against one's thesis. The respondent, having been 'attacked' in the first phase, 'counter-attacks' in the second phase, 'defends' against the initial attack in the third, and 'consolidates' the counter-attack and the defence in the fourth and fifth. The whole pattern of argumentation, it would seem, is best thought of as presumptive, that is, as an attempt to switch a burden of proof that is initially evenly distributed between the two parties. The respondent tries to put the burden of proof firmly onto the proponent, by arguing against the proponent while countering any argument against himself. The fact that the respondent does not offer any *pro* argumentation in direct support of the thesis means that the whole pattern of argumentation is technically *ab ignorantium*; that is, argumentation of the form "I am right because not proved wrong". But *ab ignorantium* reasoning is not always fallacious; indeed, it is often of critical importance in swinging the argument in one's favour in the course of a dialogue.

In the first stage, the way forward, the proponent elicits from the respondent an endorsement of a thesis, and then sets out to reason against it. Not any form of reasoning is allowed; indeed the *Kathāvatthu* prescribes a very specific method of counter-argumentation. Thus:

I. The Way Forward

Theravādin: Is the soul (*puggala*) known as a real and ultimate fact?

[1] *Puygalavādin*: Yes.

Theravādin: Is the soul known in the same way as a real and ultimate fact is known?

[2] *Puygalavādin*: No, that cannot be truly said.

Theravādin: Acknowledge your refutation (*niggaha*):

- [3] If the soul be known as a real and ultimate fact, then indeed, good sir, you should also say, the soul is known in the same way as any other real and ultimate is known.
- [4] That which you say here is false, namely, that we *should say*, “the soul is known as a real and ultimate fact”, but *we should not say*, “the soul is known in the same way as any other real and ultimate fact is known.”
- [5] If the later statement cannot be admitted, then indeed the former statement should not be admitted either.
- [6] In affirming the former, while denying the latter, you are wrong.¹

The respondent, here a *puggalavādin* or believer in the existence of personal souls, is asked to endorse the thesis. The proponent then attempts to draw out an implication of that thesis, an implication moreover to which the *puggalavādin* will not be willing to give his consent. Here the thesis that persons are thought of as metaphysically irreducible elements of the world is held to imply that knowledge of persons is knowledge of the same kind as that of other types of things. The *puggalavādin* will perhaps want to draw an epistemological distinction between empirical knowledge of external objects and self-knowledge, and so will not endorse this derived proposition. And now the proponent, in a fresh wave of argumentation, demonstrates that it is inconsistent for the *puggalavādin* to endorse the thesis but not the derived consequence. So a counter-argument has three components: the initial thesis or *thapanā* (Skt. *sthāpanā*), the derived implication or *pāpanā*, and the demonstration of inconsistency or *ropanā*.

It is in the *ropanā* that there seems to be an ‘anticipation’ of propositional logic. Of the four steps of the *ropanā*, the first, from [3] to [4], looks like an application of the definition of material implication or its term-logical equivalent:

$$(A \text{ is } B) \rightarrow (C \text{ is } D) =_{\text{defin}} \neg ((A \text{ is } B) \ \& \ \neg (C \text{ is } D)).$$

Notice here that an effect of soliciting from the respondent a ‘no’ in answer to the proponent’s second question is that the negation is external and not internal. Thus, we have ‘ $\neg(C \text{ is } D)$ ’ rather than ‘ $(C \text{ is } \neg D)$ ’. This is what one needs in the correct definition of material implication.

The second step, from [4] to [5], looks like a derivation of the contraposed version of the conditional, a derivation that depends on the stated definition of the conditional. From that definition, and assuming that ‘&’ is commutative, it follows that

$$(A \text{ is } B) \rightarrow (C \text{ is } D) \text{ iff } \neg (C \text{ is } D) \rightarrow \neg (A \text{ is } B).$$

The final step now is an application of *modus ponens*. So what we have is:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| [1] (A is B) | premise |
| [2] \neg (C is D) | premise |
| [3] (A is B) \rightarrow (C is D) | additional premise? |
| [4] \neg ((A is B) & \neg (C is D)) | 3, defn. of \rightarrow |
| [5] \neg (C is D) \rightarrow \neg (A is B) | 4, defn. of \rightarrow |
| [6] \neg (A is B) | 2, 5, MP |

This is how Matilal (1998: 33–37) reconstructs the *ropanā* stage of argumentation. Earlier, Bochenski (1961: 423) recommended a variant in which steps [3] and [4] “together constitute a kind of law contradiction or rather a *modus tollendo tollens* in a term-logical version”. Still another alternative is to see step [3] as a piece of enthymematic reasoning from the premise already given, rather than as the introduction of an additional premise. In other words, the ‘if . . . then’ in [3] is to be understood to signify the logical consequence relation rather than material implication. Then step [4] negates the premise in an application of *reductio ad absurdum*. That is:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| [1, 2] (A is B) & \neg (C is D) | premise |
| [3] (C is D) | 1+2, enthymematic derivation |
| [4] \neg ((A is B) & \neg (C is D)) | 1+2, 3; RAA |
| [5] \neg (C is D) \rightarrow \neg (A is B) | 4, defn. of \rightarrow |
| [6] \neg ((A is B) & \neg (C is D)) | 5, defn. of \rightarrow |

This reconstruction seems more in keeping with the overall pattern of argumentation – to take the respondent’s thesis and derive from it consequences the respondent will not endorse, and thereby to argue against the thesis (and it preserves the repetition of the original). Here again we see that the form of argumentation in the *Kathāvattu* is better understood if we bear in mind the function it is intended to serve within a dialogue context.

The same dialogue context is normative, in the sense that it gives the grounds for evaluating any actual instance of such argumentation as good or bad. It seems possible to understand the ‘way forward’ in terms of certain concepts from the theory of argumentation. Hamblin (1970) introduced the idea that each participant in a dialogue has a ‘commitment store’, a set of propositions to which they commit themselves in the course of the dialogue, primarily by asserting them directly. In Hamblin’s model, the commitments of each party are on public display, known to every participant in the dialogue. In order to represent the fact that this is very often *not* the case, Walton (1998:

50–51) employs a distinction between open or ‘light-side’ commitments, and veiled or ‘dark-side’ commitments. The veiled commitments of a participant are not on public view, and might not be known even to that participant themselves: but perhaps the participant trades on them in making certain of dialogue move. Indeed, it is part of what Walton (1998: 58, 1999: 34) calls the ‘maieutic’ role of dialogue to make explicit the veiled commitments of the participants, a process of clarification that is valuable even if it does not lead to the issue at stake being decided in favour of one party or the other.²

Something of this sort is what is being described in the initial stages of the ‘way forward’. Steps [1] and [2] elicit from the respondent an explicit and open commitment to the propositions ‘A is B’ and ‘ \neg (C is D)’. From the respective assertion and denial, these become parts of an explicit commitment store. But next, though the enthymematic argumentation that constitutes the *pāpanā* or stage [3], it is made clear that the respondent has a veiled commitment to the proposition ‘C is D’. For this is shown to follow from propositions in the explicit commitment store of the respondent. Finally, the *ropanā* stage of reasoning reveals this newly exposed commitment to be inconsistent with the respondent’s other explicit commitments. The overall effect is to force the respondent into a position where he must retract at least one of the propositions to which he has committed himself. Indeed, we can say that such a retraction is the primary goal of the way forward. The primary aim is not to *disprove* the thesis, but to force a *retraction* of commitment. So when we evaluate the argumentation used in this part of the dialogue, it is to be evaluated as good or bad with reference to how well it succeeds in forcing such a retraction, and not simply or only or even in terms of its deductive or inductive soundness. The strategic problem here is how to persuade the respondent to accept some proposition that is meant ultimately to be used to force a retraction, and the type of strategy being recommended is the one Walton calls that of “separating”, where “two or more propositions are proved separately and then eventually put together in an argument structure that is used to prove one’s own thesis or argue against an opponent’s” (Walton, 1998: 44). In setting out the reasoning in this way, the intention of the author of the *Kathāvatthu* is not to imply that precisely this sequence of arguments is sound. What is being shown is the *form* that any counter-argument should take. It is a description, in generic terms, of the strategic resources open to the proponent, and serves rather as a blue-print for any actual *vādayutti* dialogue.

At this point in the sub-dialogue that is the first opening, then, the burden of proof seems to lie squarely with the respondent, the *puggalavādin*, who is being pressured into the uncomfortable position of having to retract his stated thesis. The remaining four phases of the first opening are a summary of the strategic resources open to the respondent to recover his position, and indeed to turn the tables against the proponent. First, the way back. This is a phase of counter-attack, in which the respondent uses parallel reasoning to force the proponent too into a position of retraction with regard to his thesis.

II. The Way Back

Puggalavādin: Is the soul not known as a real and ultimate fact?

[1] *Theravādin*: No, it is now known.

Puggalavādin: Is it not known in the same way as any real and ultimate fact is known?

[2] *Theravādin*: No, that cannot be truly said.

Puggalavādin: Acknowledge the rejoinder (*paṭikamma*):

[3] If the soul is not known as a real and ultimate fact, then indeed, good sir, you should also say: it is not known in the same way as any other real and ultimate fact is known.

[4] That which you say is false, namely, that we *should say* “the soul is not known as a real and ultimate fact”, but we *should not say* “it is not known in the same way as any other real and ultimate fact is known”.

[5] If the latter statement cannot be admitted, then indeed the former statement should not be admitted either.

[6] In affirming the former while denying the latter, you are wrong.³

At the end of the ‘way back’, if the respondent’s arguments have gone well, the proponent has been pressed in the direction of retracting his commitment to the counter-thesis. If the respondent were to leave matters here, however, he would have failed in the global aim of the ‘opening’. The aim of the opening is to shift the burden of proof decisively onto the proponent. After the second stage in the opening, however, the burden of proof is again symmetrically distributed among the parties to the dialogue – both are in a position of being pressed to retract their respective commitment. So, in the third phase, the respondent seeks, in a defensive move, to diffuse the argument of the proponent that is forcing this retraction. Again, the cited reasoning is schematic, it indicates a general strategy the details of which must be worked out differently in each specific case. The distinction being drawn is the one between *counter-argument*, and *defensive repost*, a distinction that makes sense only within the normative framework of a dialogical exchange.

The first opening in the *vādayutti* has rehearsed the best argumentation that is available against someone whose attitude towards the point at issue is one of unqualified affirmation.

Remember, however, the global aim of a *vādayutti* – to be the form of dialogue most conducive to a balanced examination of the best arguments, both for and against. It is the function now of the second opening to rehearse the best argumentation against someone whose attitude towards the point at issue is one of the unqualified denial, and of the subsequent openings to do likewise with respect to attitudes of qualified affirmation and denial. Even at the end of the dialogue, there may be no final resolution, but an important maieutic function has been served – the clarification of the commitments entailed by each position, of their best strategies and forms of argumentation. So, indeed, it is as a rich account of presumptive reasoning in dialogue, and not so much for its ‘anticipations’ of formal logic, that the *Kathāvatthu* is a rewarding object of study.

NOTES

¹ puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti? āmantā. yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti? na h’evaṃ vattabbe. ājānāhi niggaham: hañci puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthena, tena vata re vattabbe “yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti.” yaṃ tattha vadesi “vattabbe kho ‘puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthena,’ no ca vattabbe ‘yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti,’ “micchā. no ce pana vattabbe “yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti,” no ca vata re vattabbe “puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti.” yaṃ tattha vadesi “vattabbe kho ‘puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthena,’ no ca vattabbe ‘yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti,’ “micchā”. KV I.1.1

² The term ‘maieutic’, from *maieutikos* ‘skill in midwifery, is taken from the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates describes himself as a midwife for beautiful boys – helping them to give birth to whatever ideas are in them, and test them for whether they are sound.

³ puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti? āmantā. yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti? na h’evaṃ vattabbe. ājānāhi paṭikammaṃ: hañci puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthena, tena vata re vattabbe “yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti.” yaṃ tattha vadesi “vattabbe kho ‘puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthena,’ no ca vattabbe ‘yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti,’ “micchā. no ce pana vattabbe “yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti,” no ca vata re vattabbe “puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti.” yaṃ tattha vadesi “vattabbe kho ‘puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthena,’ no ca vattabbe ‘yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo n’upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti,’ micchā”. KV I.1.2.

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