

## THE CONCEPT OF PRAMĀNA AND THE SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS OF NĀGĀRJUNA

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### **Preamble :**

There is enough doubt among the interpreters of Indian Philosophy about the applicability of the term 'scepticism' to any thorough-going system of Indian Philosophy and the term 'sceptic' to any individual philosopher with the solitary exception of Jayarāśibhaṭṭa. Naturally it is debatable how far Nāgārjuna, a devoted Buddhist can be called a sceptic. However, scepticism is a wide term which comprises two broad types of argumentations. In the widest sense it means arguments that suspend the claim for cognitive possibility and in this sense a sceptic carries doubt and 'seeks nothing beyond uncertainty'. But there is a special type of sceptical arguments through which we can dispute the validity of so called cognitive claim in all its aspects. This type of scepticism is called cognitive scepticism. In philosophical circle a thinker may be called a 'cognitive sceptic' in the sense that he questions or raises doubt, about the validity of the cognitive claims of others. Cognitive scepticism may be taken thus for a philosophical attitude which suspends the possibility of making conclusive statements concerning valid cognition (pramā) for want of sufficiently warranted grounds or pramānas. A cognitive sceptic, does not go for 'theory-making'. Amidst the opposing claims he finds no better ground for his choice for one claim than its contra-claim. In the words of A.J. Ayer, the cognitive sceptic's "charge against our standards of proof is not that they work badly, he does not suggest that there are others which work better. The ground on which he attacks them is that they are logically defective or if not defective, at any rate logically questionable".<sup>1</sup> If we bear in mind this general characterization when we read Nāgārjuna's philosophical treatises like *Vigraha-vyāvartanī* and *Mulamadhymaka Kārikā*, we would be convinced that there is no logical or

psychological obstruction or hardship to make an extension of the applicability of the term 'cognitive sceptic' to Nāgārjuna. In his philosophical works Nāgārjuna questions the prospect of man's capacity to attain rationally warranted convictions regarding factual matters. He subjects the 'knowledge claims' made by the Naiyāyikas and others to severe dialectical criticism and shows that these claims are not supported by sufficient justification.

The philosophical opponents of the sceptic may be called 'cognitivists'. In Indian Philosophy they are mostly Naiyāyikas who claim that with the help of justificatory grounds (pramāṇas) we can have the cognition of the objects of the knowledge (Prameyas). These pramāṇas or justificatory grounds are employed to demonstrate the reality of both mundane objects like 'a pot' and transmundane reality, like 'God'. In Akṣapāda Goutama's 'Nyāyasūtra' knowledge is considered as something that leads to attainment of the highest good (*tattvajñānāniḥśreyasādhigamaḥ*). In Nyāya system cognition is taken as something which always points beyond itself. All the furnitures of the world are classified under several sets of knowables (prameyas). A piece of cognition is valid if it gives us indubitably true awareness of a knowable. In the epistemic situation the justificatory grounds or instruments for knowing the knowables is called pramāṇa in Nyāya terminology. A cognitivist like the Nyāya makes the knowledge-claim and advocates a system or theory of valid cognition on the basis of its concept of justificatory ground or pramāṇas. In other words, an account of 'knowledge-proper' (pramā) can be claimed on the basis of the concept of pramāṇa as its logical ground. This is precisely the reason why Nāgārjuna devoted 20 verses from 31st to 51st in 'Vigraha-vyāvartanī' in order to refute the Nyāya concept of Pramāṇa.<sup>2</sup> And a critical assessment of Nāgārjuna's dialectical arguments against the very basis of cognitivists' claim for valid knowledge (pramā) is the objective of our discussion here. Nāgārjuna's main concern here is not to say that what we know about the world is false, rather he maintains that the knowledge claims made by the cognitivists (Naiyāyikas and others) are not supported by adequate logical grounds. It is thus interesting to see how Nāgārjuna advances arguments after arguments in 'Vigrahavyāvartanī' to dismantle the Nyāya concept of pramāṇas without caring to frame an alternative theory. He in 'Vigrahavyāvartanī' verse 29, clearly declares "*nāsti ca mama pratijñā* (I have no thesis to put forward)". It is equally interesting to see how far Nāgārjuna's arguments against the concept of pramāṇa

be replied from cognitivists' standpoints. This paper is an humble attempt in this direction. The paper is broadly divided into two sections, the first comprises mainly the exposition of Nāgārjunian charges against the concept of pramāṇa and the second critically evaluates the charges. In course of our discussion, we shall see that the cognitivist is also a foundationalist who claims to propound a satisfactory account of basic knowables and the justificatory grounds for them. But the main contention of Nāgārjunian scepticism is to set a limitation to cognitive claim, it is rather a critique to the soteriological claims on the basis of empirical foundation of cognitivists' theory of knowledge. It is a scepticism about the justification or pramāṇa. We shall also see that theoretically Nāgārjunian scepticism is irrefutable but practically 'non-sensical'.

## I

### ***No Criterion Argument :***

The Nyāya system advocates a 'descriptive' metaphysics on the basis of empirical foundations of its epistemological framework. Not only the Nyāyas, other systems as well propound different metaphysical theories and in epistemological enterprise they claim that it is possible to have indubitable true knowledge on the basis of pramāṇas. A pramāṇa is usually defined as the instrumental cause of an indubitable and unerring piece of presentational knowledge. The number of such pramāṇas varies from system to system. But whatever may be their number, at least some pramāṇas or justificatory grounds are employed to demonstrate the reality both in the sense of mundane and transmundane. To put it otherwise, all cognitivists in Indian Philosophy would agree that the acceptance of pramāṇas is something exclusively indispensable for any philosophical investigation, because if some 'rules of games' (as Wittgenstien in his *Philosophical Investigations* compares a philosophical enquiry to a form of linguistic game) are not accepted at the very outset a player would be putting himself out of the court before the game begins.<sup>3</sup> Philosophers made various knowledge-claims regarding ethical, religious matters in Indian tradition from very old days. There were also thinkers like Sañjaya who questioned vehemently about the metaphysical and ethical truth-claims.<sup>4</sup> To meet such challenges in different phases of time various cognitivist accounts or 'Pramāṇa-theories' have come into being. Gradually the very tradition of questioning the truth-claims with regard to metaphysical and moral matters leads

to development of sceptical arguments against the possibility of any 'knowledge-claim'. Among the cognitivists the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas are bold enough to claim that 'what is existent is knowable', even 'nameable' with only a few exceptions. In order to know it, you will have to admit apriorily a *pramāṇa* or various *pramāṇas*. They are like axioms for a logical system and their validity is not questionable within this system. So if you admit this once, you can have knowledge-claim with certitude. It is here a Nāgārjunian philosopher would object that your very programme is defective. If you say that *prameyas* or knowables are justified because of *pramāṇas* (grounds) and *pramāṇas* are not questionable, then you are acting as a dogmatic in philosophising. If you accept the reality of *pramāṇas* without any justification, your very acceptance is an exercise of dogmatism. All the accounts of the cognitivists may be broadly classified under two heads : (a) the *pramāṇas* are self-validating (*svataḥ prasiddhiḥ*), that is to say they are intrinsically valid. (b) Their validity is established on the basis of some other *pramāṇas* (*parataḥ prasiddhiḥ*). Both these possible alternatives have been examined by Nāgārjuna. The charge of no criterion centres the question : How is a cognitivist going to validate his standard or criterion (*pramāṇa*) itself? If it is said that *pramāṇa* is valid on its own ground in terms of itself, that is no more than just begging the question and is a case of dogmatic enterprise.

If it is said that *pramāṇa* is validated in terms of another, that would immediately leave room for the charge of infinite regress. Now either way, according to a Nāgārjunian sceptic, a cognitivist cannot have adequate means to support the established status or truth-criterionship of *pramāṇas* which lies at the foundation of cognitivists' truth-claims. It is an admitted fact of the cognitivists themselves that if something is to be acceptable, it must be free from circularity and its justificatory claim must be finite. A Nāgārjunian sceptic would be interested to remind the cognitivist only to follow strictly what they prescribe for others. He is rather interested in pointing out the logical antinomies in the arguments of the cognitivists themselves. Let us elaborate the arguments.

a) Charges of inner inconsistency and dogmatism explained : The point Nāgārjuna elaborates is this that dogmatism and inconsistency of arguments would be automatic outcome if we admit *pramāṇas* are self-validating. Nāgārjuna further argues that if we admit that *pramāṇas* are required for the justificatory grounds as well as instrumental cause for the establishing knowables (*prameyas*)

but the pramāṇas themselves belong to a self validating class, then we also accept that pramāṇas are placed in a 'privileged sacrosanct class' that is to say, a clearcut dichotomy is introduced between pramāṇas and prameyas. But a philosopher must explain the justificatory grounds for such preferential treatment; he should not merely state the dichotomy, but must explain the reason behind such dichotomy. This is what exactly Nāgārjuna demands :

“If you suppose that they (pramāṇas) are self established, then your philosophical position is abandoned. There is discordance and the special reason for that should be stated”.<sup>5</sup> To say that it is the nature of one type of things and that of other to be established cannot be accepted, because it will only beg the question instead of answering it. Among the cognitivists in Indian Philosophy early Nyāya views that any enquiry is to be initiated by a doubt (samśaya) and doubt ends as soon as the certitude (nirṇaya) is reached through the employment of evidential grounds (pramāṇas). But according to a cognitive sceptic like Nāgārjuna, a similar state of doubt could *ipso facto* be entertained with regard to the pramāṇas themselves. If it is said that the pramāṇas are not subject to this procedure then the cognitivist instead of simply stating the privilege enjoyed by pramāṇas must state the ground for this, otherwise he is committed to the possibility of universal doubt. For any cognitivist, the doubt that initiates the enquiry is removed only when there is a justificatory ground for its eradication and by this valid cognition of knowables is established. Now the question is : Why these justificatory grounds should not be certified in a similar way? If without assigning any reason pramāṇas are claimed to be self-validating then a sense of arbitrariness would be introduced and this acceptance without any justificatory certification is a clear case of dogmatic enterprise. This is also a case of internal inconsistency and disaccord in cognitivist's arguments.

### ***The Charge of Infinite Regress Revisited :***

Now if in order to avoid the charge of non-accordance and dogmatism, the cognitivist adopts the second alternative that is a pramāṇa may derive its validity on authority from another pramāṇa of the same type or of different type this would, according to Nāgārjuna, instead of giving any justification for the acceptance of pramāṇa, simply invite the blemish of infinite regress (anavasthādoṣa).<sup>6</sup> For example, of the first alternative we may say that a perception say P<sub>1</sub> is established through another perception say P<sub>2</sub> and for the

second, a perception say P, is established through an inference say *f*. But in either case of the theory of extrinsic validity, the blemish of 'infinite regress' would be inevitable.<sup>7</sup> These are the techniques about which the cognitivists themselves highly speak of that is if something is to be acceptable, there must be inner logical consistency between the justification and the claim and a justification must not be vitiated by the blemishes of by circularity and infinite regress. The sceptic here is just reminding the cognitivist that by claiming *pramāṇas* as self-certified you are committing logical inconsistency and by claiming them as established by others you are either inviting the blemish of circularity or the blemish of infinite regress.

Jayantabhaṭṭa in his '*Nyāya-manjiri*' like other cognitivists holds that valid cognition (*pramā*) is something which possesses truth (*Yathārthatva*) and indubitableness (*asandigdhatva*). It may be noted in the passing that 'indubitableness' can be used in both psychological sense and logical sense in the context of valid cognition. For Nyāya, the psychological factor is satisfied by pragmatic success (*arthakriyākāritva*), whereas logical factor for the validity of cognition is to be satisfied by introducing justificatory grounds namely *pramāṇa*. When the term 'indubitable' is taken in the psychological sense, it by implication means that one is subjectively convinced that 'P'. But the term 'indubitability' in the 'logical sense' imputes to contingent propositions 'inherent' 'dubitableness'. A Nāgārjunian sceptic seems to capitalise mostly on the second alternative and thus brings the charge of infinite regress.

Vātsāyana however, tries to meet the sceptical challenge of infinite regress taking to psychological persuasion. He argues that when we prove A by B and B by C, it does not invite the blemish of infinite regress, because at certain level, say at C, the further question of validity (regarding C) becomes irrelevant. Where there is no query, there cannot be any necessity of searching for a ground. Gautama in the, *Nāyasūtra* also employs analogy of a lamp (*pradīpa*) to meet charge of infinite regress.<sup>8</sup> He says that as a lamp reveals objects as well as itself, so the *pramāṇas* (supportive grounds) reveal *prameyas* (knowables) as well as them-selves.

#### **Analogical Arguments Refuted :**

It is here that Nāgārjuna tries to point out faults and in '*Vigrahavyāvartanī*' he devotes six verses in order to show that the analogy of

light or fire is quite incapable of serving as a 'sapakṣa' in the cognitivists' argument.<sup>9</sup> In 'Vigrahavyāvartanī' verse 35, Nāgārjuna argues that if pramānas were like light or fire which reveals itself as well as the presence of other objects simultaneously then there would be no logical as well practical difficulty in claiming that fire would also burn itself as it can burn other things.<sup>10</sup> But this is a contradiction in thinkings as well as in the actual happenings. In view of this, the cognitivists' assumption that fire reveals itself as well as other objects becomes doubtful and remains unestablished. It is further contended that if 'fire reveals itself, as well as other objects' is true, then the proposition that 'darkness conceals the existence of itself as well as other things would also be true.<sup>11</sup> It is an admitted fact that although darkness conceals the presence of other things, it does not conceal the presence of itself. (*Na caitatā drṣṭami tatra yaduktam/svaparātmānau prakāśāyatyagniriti tanna*).<sup>12</sup> What is evident here is that in contrast with the cognitivists' light analogy, Nāgārjuna constructs just contrary analogical argument to disprove the cognitivists' claim.

### ***Blemishes of Interdependence and Circularity Detected***

Nāgārjuna further argues that if for the sake of argument we admit that pramānas are self-established, then it would imply that they are established even independent of prameyas (knowables).<sup>13</sup> If they were not independent of prameyas then pramānas would qualify to be established intrinsically. But this cannot be the case, because if a kind of pramāna were established without reference to prameyas, then this particular type of pramāna ceases to be worthy of the name pramāna. If it is argued that pramānas are independent of prameyas, then these pramānas become 'pramānas of nothing'. As pramāna has always a relational character with prameya in cognitive situation, the thesis that 'pramānas are independently established' becomes refuted. If it is said that pramānas are established through prameyas and prameyas through pramānas, then a Nāgārjunian sceptic would at once point out that neither of them have a self-nature (svabhāva), of their own and therefore, should be treated as śūnya (vacuous).<sup>14</sup> Again, it would be a case of proving what is already proved (siddha-sādhana), because the tacit assumption is this, that prameyas are already established.<sup>15</sup> If prameyas were regarded as already established, the necessity of pramāna itself for the establishment of prameyas becomes superfluous. If it is said that the validity of pramānas is prameya dependent and the validity or establishment of pramānas is pramāna dependent, then if validity or

establishment of prameya is pramāṇa dependent, then it amounts to committing the blemishes of interdependence and circularity. In view of this, Nāgārjuna, would argue that cognitivists' view about cognitive episode leads to more muddle and misunderstanding about pramāṇa, prameya and pramā (causal and justificatory grounds, knowables and valid knowledge). Nāgārjuna laughs at the cognitivists and says that if the validity of pramāṇas would be admitted inspite of all these visible and obvious defects, then there would not be any difficulty to assume that son is produced by the father and that father is produced by that son. But in this case who is it that gives birth and who is that is born".<sup>16</sup> Therefore, pramāṇas do not lead us to establish anything (nirṇaya), a possibility of doubt always remains. Pramāṇa and prameya cannot validate each other. The criterion of mutual dependence rather shows that both pramāṇas and prameyas are devoid of any essence of their own (Śūnya). Since there is neither established pramāṇa nor established prameya the so called 'valid knowledge claim' of the cognitivists become unwarranted.<sup>17</sup> All views (dr̥ṣṭi) about the world, for Nāgārjuna, become systematically misleading and therefore, they are to be eschewed.

## II

### A Cognitivist Critique of the Nāgārjunian Critique of Pramaṇa Considered:

It has been seen that a cognitivist claims that it is possible on our part to know something with certitude and we can justify our claims by adequate supportive grounds. A Nāgārjunian sceptic only gives caution to these claims and shows flaws of antinomies in cognitivist's 'reasonings'. Let us now see how far the sceptical charges be answered from the cognitivistic viewpoint.

Vātsāyana would meet the sceptical charge of infinite regress by saying that it is not necessary that before functioning as an instrument a thing must be known first. For example, we become visually aware of something in front of us by our eyes, the sense of sight but we can not see the senses itself. We do not question or doubt about reality of our eyes. This shows that in practical experience, the establishment of pramāṇa does not arise and there is no scope for infinite regress, because their truth can be apprehended directly or immediately. A piece of cognition is said to be valid if practice based on the assumption of its truth leads to the attainment of desired end. What Udayana



puts with regard to infinite doubt in another context seems to be relevant here. He is of opinion that "infinite series of doubt in principle is not possible, it could never be carried out, since the activity of doubting is possible only against the background of some area of certainty".<sup>18</sup> Vātsāyana further contends that there is no rigid distinction between prameya and pramāṇa. Both of these have the same source : the root 'mā' (means 'to measure') and both of them are meaningful only in cognitive situation. If we try to understand the significance of different 'case-in- flexions' in Sanskrit language, it would be clear that these Kārikās stand for 'different role-playing' in the linguistic construction.<sup>19</sup> When something is called a pramāṇa we mean that it has the 'instrumental role in generating cognition and in a cognitive situation. With this background, we think a Nyāya cognitivist may say that when something is playing the role of a pramāṇa, psychologically we do not feel the necessity for the pramāṇa's validity or establishment.

But here, I think, a Nāgārjunian sceptic may argue against the cognitivists' persuasion by saying that he does not see any good ground for introducing psychological proof when one is engaged in purely logical debate. Moreover it may lead to a kind of psychologism. Psychologism cannot claim to be an adequate guarantee for objective truth-claims. And it is also true that, a cognitive sceptic's suspension of judgement regarding what is real as a mental act need not disturb his private life. He only exercises his reasoned suspension of judgement about Reality when there is a suitable occasion for it. It may be noted in this connection that a cognitivist like a Naiyāyika himself when claims the valid cognition of knowables, divides all the knowables into certain finite set (say sixteen in the old school of Nyāya and seven in the new school) and speaks of *satlakṣaṇa* as devoid of blemishes like infinite regress, mutual dependence etc. For acceptance of something, a cognitivist asks always for a rational justification for this in order to avoid logical inconsistency. Here a Nāgārjunian sceptic is interested only to ask the cognitivist to follow the same norms for himself. In other words, the sceptic's business is here to show some inner paradoxes in cognitivists own arguments. And this will not bring any difficulty in practical life.

Besides meeting the charge of infinite regress the cognitivists, particularly the Naiyāyikas may level some other fresh charges against a Nāgārjunian sceptic. Long before Strawson who advances arguments against scepticism regarding the

existence of 'other mind' in *'Individuals'* (1959), in Goutama's *'Nyāyasūtra'* a similar type of antiseptic argument can be traced in the subtle form. Here it is argued that the very denial of the validity of all *pramāṇas* proves the validity of *pramāṇas*.<sup>20</sup> It is an admitted view that one can establish a thesis or refute a thesis if and only if there is an adequate supportive ground for his claim. Now if anybody denies the validity of *pramāṇas* he would not be able to establish the denial itself. To put it otherwise, it is impossible to carry out the infinite doubt regarding the validity of *pramāṇas*, because when one denies a thesis say P, as defective, he must have a thesis, it might be a counter thesis, say p, that is not defective. Without involving oneself in theoretical inconsistency, one can not deny the validity of *pramāṇas* as such.

Uddyotkara in the *'Nyāya-vārtika'* carried this charge in a much more straightforward way and brings the charge of self-stultification against a cognitive sceptic.<sup>21</sup> The charge is this : If you deny everything, then you can not deny the fact that 'you are denying'. If you do not deny the fact that 'you are denying' then you are not denying everything. He thus compares a sceptic to "one who wishes to burn others by lighting his own finger. For either he would be able to burn others by burning in the process his own finger or he would not be able to burn anything if he does not first burn his own finger".<sup>22</sup> The trouble with such a person according to a cognitivist like Uddyotkara, is that he is unable to say anything without contradicting himself. As a consequence of this a cognitivist might argue that a sceptic must face the difficulty in stating his position. In other words, a cognitive sceptic like Nāgārjuna cannot successfully communicate with others or convince his philosophical contestants, since he has no sure means to do this. Man is a creature capable both of sayings and doings. And the action of a rational being requires guidance of belief an inherent position that he accepts.

What seems to me convincing here is that a cognitive sceptic like Nāgārjuna would not mind for these charges. As *prima facie* reaction to these, he would welcome such position if it is an adequate ground for refutation of the validity of all *pramāṇas*. He like Sextus Empiricus would answer it by likening his use of the cognitivists' method of proof or *pramāṇas* to our using a ladder to reach a high place-having climbed up, one can through the ladder away.<sup>23</sup> The issue of the debate in other words, seems to centre upon the cognitivists' charge of a theoretical incoherence in Nāgārjuna's sceptical