

# The art of non asserting : Dialogue with Nāgārjuna

Marie-Hélène Gorisse

University of Lille, France

ICLA 2009, Chennai  
9th January

Introduction

Nāgārjuna on theories of assertion

The dialogical approach

The art of making no assertion

The art of making no negation

Dialogical classes of strategies and Buddhist practice

# Nāgārjuna

## Nāgārjuna

- One of the most influential thinkers of Buddhism,
- Founder of the *Mādhyamika* school, the school of the 'Way of the Middle',
- Second century AC,
- Developed a criticism of all the contemporary Indian theories of knowledge and assertion using the concept of DEPENDENT ORIGINATOR ( *pratītya-samutpāda* ).

## The dependent origination : an all-inclusive version of causation

The dependent origination as taught in the sūtras of the *Prajñā-pāramitā*, the 'Perfection of Wisdom', is a technical Buddhist expression telling us that:

- We have to think of reality as a generalized web of dependencies,
- The task of enunciating these dependencies, which is a condition of knowledge acquisition, is a never-ending task.

## The epistemic level

The question therefore arises concerning everyday life practice:

*How is it that we do talk about the world and that we do have knowledge that governs our practice?*

The Buddhist answer amounts to saying that there is a decision from the knowing subject to carve out in the generalized web of dependencies that she will call 'an object'.

# The facts of the world and the knowledge I have of them are dependent from each other.

Therefore, the knowing subject is always engaged within the choices she has made when she perceived. From this, her own conceptions are always engaged when she knows a fact of the world, this is why things *per se* are said to be '**void**'.

*To say that an object lacks essence, the Madhyamika philosopher will explain, is to say that it does not exist "from its own side" [...] that its existence depends upon us as well.*

*Jay Garfield, in [4] p.220.*

## Every thesis is questionable

**Consequence :** THERE IS NO SUCH CONTEXT AS THE UNIVERSAL ONE, IN WHICH THE PROPOSITION AT STAKE COULD HAVE BEEN FIRMLY (UNIVERSALLY) ESTABLISHED.

In other words, every thesis can be questionable from a different perspective.

In his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārika*, the 'Fundamental Stances of the Middle Way', Nāgārjuna shows for each universally alleged knowledge statement of an other Indian school of thought that it is questionable.

# The Vighraha-vyāvartanī

This very statement :

*Every thesis can be disputable from an other perspective*

is itself disputable.

**This is to avoid this type of criticisms that Nāgārjuna wrote the Vighraha-vyāvartanī, the ‘Treatise to Prevent from Vain Discussions’.**

In these lines, he supplies with an answer far much interesting than the classical problem of self reference.

## Semantic Anti realism (1)

**Now, the fact that my knowledges and the facts of the world are dependent is too a consequence of the anti realist position, according to which there is no transcendent state of affairs.**

From this, both conceptions are committed to the position that:

- If it is possible to give an account for the process of acquisition of knowledge,
- Then this account should be different from the account in terms of adequacy with reality.

## Semantic Anti realism (2)

**Therefore, anti realist philosophers developed a new conception of knowledge according to which**

- **being epistemically guaranteed**

**amounts to**

- **being justifiable.**

Here, the justification of knowledge is a conventional matter, it is a coherentist and not a foundationalist process and allows for a PLURALITY of justified types of knowledge.

## Semantic Anti realism (3)

In terms of assertion, this means that

- ' $\varphi$  is true'

means

- ' $\varphi$  is justifiable'.

And the semantic anti realist position is leading to the recognition of a plurality of ways in which an assertion can be said to be 'justifiable'.

# Semantic Anti realism and Nāgārjuna (1)

Now if, according to Nāgārjuna, it is possible to give an account for the process of acquisition of knowledge

*And this has been argued by Siderits in [9] and by Waldo in [11], when they show that Nāgārjuna does not in the Vighraha-vyāvartanī call into question the possibility but the uniqueness of the pramāṇa account.*

Then, Nāgārjuna is, in the same line than anti realist philosophers, committed to give an account different from the account in terms of adequacy with reality.

## Semantic Anti realism and Nāgārjuna (2)

CLAIM:

- Nāgārjuna speaks in terms of **justification** too  
and
- what he is saying, though different in nature, is governed by the same rules that govern semantic anti realism,  
namely:

## Semantic Anti realism and Nāgārjuna (3)

- The fact that the signification of a proposition cannot be specified independently from the subject who enunciates this proposition,
- **A switch from a referentialist semantics to a semantics in terms of conditions of assertability.** This is a consequence of Nāgārjuna's position on dependencies.
- **A conception of the act of assertion in which 'to assert  $\varphi$ ' means 'to commit oneself to give justifications for  $\varphi$ '. Here, the notion of justification becomes basic.**

# Dialogical Logic (Presentation)

The approach of dialogical logic:

- Developed by Rahman [8],
- Is a modified version of the CONSTRUCTIVIST approach of Lorenz and Lorenzen (Erlangen school) [7],
- Enhanced with a PRAGMATIST orientation,
- This semantic anti realism measures the **signification of a sentence** by means of its conditions of assertability, that is to say by means of **the set of all the possible strategies when discussing the proposition** expressed by the sentence in question.

## Dialogical Logic (What is at stake)

Non-formally speaking, what is at stake by means of a **formal proof** is to establish the **validity** of a sentence (which content is a proposition). A Formal Proof :

- Is a game between two players, respectively called the **Proponent** and the **Opponent**,
- That ends when all the justifications of the sentence at issue are given or when no further move is allowed.

The mark of the validity of a sentence is the presence of a **winning strategy**. THERE IS A WINNING STRATEGY WHEN THE PROPONENT WINS THE DIALOGUE WHATEVER THE CHOICES OF THE OPPONENT MAY BE.

# Dialogical Logic (An important asymmetry)

**Only the Proponent is performing genuine assertions.**

This is due to the '*formal restriction rule*' according to which **only the Opponent can assert** atomic formulas or, to put it in a different way, can assert **elementary justifications**.

- Asserting them by presupposing them would be but *justifying a proposition within a particular case* and we here deal with **validity** and the dialogues are formal dialogues.
- The Dialogical proposal is therefore to allow the use of such an elementary justification *if and only if* the Opponent has conceded it.

## Dialogical Logic (Classes of strategies)

**Now, as the Opponent's role is to defeat the Proponent's assertion, he will perform as few concessions as he can.**

*Testing the formal justification of a proposition within this type of dialogue is thus like convincing the most acute interlocutor.*

Hence, when the Proponent wins, the set of plays of the Opponent represents:

- The construction of the minimal set of presuppositions needed in order to prove the validity of the sentence (in order to assert that a given proposition holds in all situations),
- They do not represent the moves of a 'real' player.

# Dialogical Logic (What means asserting?)

- **Propositions are the forms of an achieved dialogue.**
- This conception is shared by linear logic and ludic logic as developed by Girard and associates, [5].
- **Hence, asserting a proposition amounts to asserting the entire dialogue that was used to assert it.**

# Dialogical Logic (What means non-asserting?)

Now, if a proposition is a dialogue brought to fruition, then any dialogue whose initial thesis is defective **does not contain any proposition in that very sense**. Because:

- *To assert is to commit oneself to provide with justifications*

And

- This, in a formal game, means to provide with justifications *in any situation*.

# Nāgārjuna and the unending enumeration of the conditions

This universality seems to be exactly what Nāgārjuna refutes when he says:

मदीयमपि वचनाम् प्रतीत्यसमुत्पन्नत्वान् निःस्वभावं ।

*mādīyam-api vacanam pratītya-samutpannatvān niḥsvabhāvaṃ*

**[VV, v.22]**

(Nāgārjuna's self commentary on the verse 22.)

*My speech, because it is dependent on conditions, is 'without a self-sufficient nature'*

# Interpreting Nāgārjuna

This verse can be understood this way:

- The validity of any assertion does always depend on the chosen focus within which I assert.
- And these conditions are such that we have never finished asserting them.

From this:

- **A formal dialogue can never be finished**
- Therefore **there are no proposition in that very sense.**
- We have to be aware of this fact to prevent oneself from an illusory universal assertion.

## Nāgārjuna's verse 29

This provides us with a means to understand the famous:

यदि काचन प्रतिज्ञा स्यान्मे तत एष मे भवेद्दोषः ।  
नास्ति च मम प्रतिज्ञा ॥

*yadi kācana pratijñā syān me tata eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ |*  
*nāsti ca mama pratijñā ||*

**[VV, v.29]**

*If I had asserted any proposition, this fault would be mine,  
but I do not assert any proposition.*

# To negate is to assert a proposition in the negative form

Now, in verses 61 to 63, Nāgārjuna explains that negating a thing involves the very propositional attitude he wants to get rid of because the act of negating is but the act of asserting the negated thesis:

- If the negation of a proposition is the assertion of the negated proposition,
- Then this problem also affects the act of negating: **the negation of a proposition is always questionable.**

The problem here is that Nāgārjuna can not firmly establish his criticisms if they are in the negative form.

## Nāgārjuna's verse 63

Hence, he has to say:

प्रतिषेधयामि नाहाम् ।  
प्रतिषेधयासीत्यधिलय एष त्वया क्रियते ॥

*pratiṣedhayāmi nāham |*  
*pratiṣedhayāsi ity adhilaya eṣa tvayā kriyate ||*

**[VV, v.63]**

*I do not negate anything,  
You foolishly calumniate me when you say 'you negate'.*

# The art of non-negating

Now the question remains: what is Nāgārjuna doing then? The verse 64 provides us with the beginning of an answer:

अत्र ज्ञापयते वागसदिति तन्न प्रतिहन्ति ॥

*atra jñāpayate vāg asad iti tan na pratihanti ||*

**[VV, v.64]**

*Here, the speech makes it known as false, it does not negate.*

# Interpreting Nāgārjuna

In other words,

- The attack of a given thesis does not lead to the assertion of the negated thesis,
- But leads to show that the assertion of the thesis is faulty.

WHAT NĀGĀRJUNA PERFORMS HERE IS AN OTHER TYPE OF SPEECH ACT WHICH DOES NOT IMPLY A PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDE AS THE ASSERTION DOES. We will call this act a **denegation**.

## A constructivist negation...

In the Dialogical approach of logic as introduced above, Keiff developed in [6] a negation which encodes a very similar process. First of all,

What is at stake is to understand a type of **negative speech act** as **the indication of the failure of an act of assertion**.

As such, this is a constructivist-like negation according to which 'non  $A$ ' is to be read

- 'there is no correct proof of  $A$ '
- and not 'there is a correct proof of non  $A$ '.

## ...and the operator of denegation

*What is more, unhappy with the standard way to encode this reading in a formal proof, that is to say unhappy with the interpretation of 'non A' as 'A entails a contradiction', Keiff makes a step that will help us here.*

More precisely, he develops another reading in which

- 'non A' behaves like an **operator of denegation**
- And has to be read **'if you assert A, I will show you that your formal proof of A is not sufficient'**.

## Everything is refutable

AND THIS STICKS TO WHAT IS AT STAKE IN NĀGĀRJUNA'S APPROACH ON THEORY OF ASSERTION WHEN HE POINTS OUT THE FACT THAT THE SIGNIFICATION OF AN ASSERTION IS NEVER UNCHALLENGING DATA.

Here, it is worth mentioning that Nāgārjuna makes use of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments:

- To show that the attacked thesis is no a justified thesis and that it does not hold (he takes one by one every metaphysical thesis in order to show how they can each be disputed).
- But never uses them in order to establish the opposed thesis.
- Nor, in the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārika*, to develop a whole meta theory about the fact that every thesis can be questionable.

# Dialogical Conclusions and the everyday life strategies

To summarize, Nāgārjuna is saying that:

- We are performing only **unfulfilled assertions** (respectively negations).
- Speech acts are never assertions (negations) in the strict sense but **positions** (denegations).

Because:

- To assert a proposition in a philosophical discussion is **to commit oneself to give the justifications for this proposition in such a manner that it will be unquestionable whoever the interlocutor may be**

While:

- AN ASSERTION (NEGATION) IS ALWAYS STILL DEPENDENT ON A HYPOTHESIS THAT IS NOT YET JUSTIFIED.

## A trivial Logic

If one is to take seriously Nāgārjuna's claim that no assertion is possible, then one cannot escape the conclusion that the logic he advocates is trivial in a dual sense, i.e. nothing can successfully be defended against all possible criticisms, not even logical truths for there is not any.

More formally, let us consider a consequence relation  $\models$  (extension to a syntactic derivability relation is straightforward).

To say that  $\models$  is trivial usually amounts to say that:

- For any well formed formula  $\varphi$  and  $\psi$ ,  $\varphi \models \psi$
- Equivalently, if  $\varphi$  is  $\top$  ('top'), this means that any  $\psi$  is valid.

But one could also define a dual concept of triviality, namely that for any  $\varphi$  and  $\psi$ ,  $\varphi \not\models \psi$ .

## Take a Fragment of it

While the whole logic does not seem to allow for a lot of fruitful developments, a fragment of it, namely the fragment in which the Opponent choses to play within a **sub class of models (a focus)**, will do.

More precisely, we here deal with a sub system in which there are validities. One can even play within classical rules.

The only restriction here is that there are no ultimate validity, that is to say, a Proponent can never have a winning strategy *against an Opponent who plays the best possible moves*.

# Dialogical Strategies

From this Dialogical perspective, Nāgārjuna's claim amounts to the following claim:

'EVERYTHING IS FALSIFIABLE'.

More precisely,

- The Proponent can never have a winning strategy, whether she asserts or denies something.
- Only the Opponent can have a winning strategy and he always has = There is no achieved dialogue, no more is there a proposition because there is no form of an achieved proof.

## Everyday life Strategies

But he can perfectly win against a not acute or comprehensive one. This is why we do learn and communicate in everyday life (*vyavahāra*). The Proponent can win, but he will manage to do so only against an Opponent that grants him concessions. These restrictions are *ad-hoc* (conventional) and they do define a certain type of Opponent. Nāgārjuna does not develop this, but the Jains will do in their *naya-vāda*, their 'theory on perspectives', in which each set of restrictions of the Opponent will represent a given Indian school of thought.

# The art of making indications

We have been until now explaining Nāgārjuna's position, but we have not yet come to the defense he performed against the ones who argue that the position that everything is disputable is itself disputable. In order to have another approach to this criticism, I would like to come back to the asymmetry between the Proponent and the Opponent in the Dialogical approach. The Proponent is the only one to have COMMITMENTS when asserting a proposition. Everything 'asserted' by the Opponent, is 'asserted' at the meta theoretical level. More precisely, the status of his pseudo-assertions and pseudo-commitments is nothing else that the indication of what the Proponent needs to justify what he is asserting.

## The art of making indications (2)

But this is important to keep in mind that doing so Nāgārjuna is playing at the 'object language level' in a very poor sense: he only takes the pseudo-interlocutor role of the Opponent and, in each situation, shows how to falsify a sentence (which is certainly not the same thing as trying to establish a negative sentence!). I said 'in a very poor sense' because this role is but the indication of a metalanguage position. The same way, in his *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna stays at the level of the metalanguage to indicate that he will not go at the level of the language object for any (positive or negative) sentence<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup>Here we can think about Tarski's work in which he explains that the object language is strictly included within the metalanguage precisely because of such situations, [10].

## The art of making indications (3)

The question is therefore the following: how powerful is the act of Nāgārjuna when he is pseudo-asserting?

To answer this, it is useful to keep in mind the deep thesis of John Woods, in [12], according to which a 'fallacy' is not a fault of reasoning. This is rather a reasoning such that there is no best reasoning for men, that is for rational agents with limited capacities.

Our proposal here is to say that Nāgārjuna, though pseudo-asserting, can indicate for any thesis in a discussion, that this thesis cannot successfully be defended against all possible criticisms, which is the task of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārika*.

## The art of making indications (4)

Language as a mere conventional activity is useful.

In the context of classical Indian theories of knowledge, which are always in relation to a soteriology, i.e. which goal is to emancipate the human being in the path of liberation by means of a better understanding of what he is doing, why he is suffering, etc., 'being useful' means that language can posit the interlocutor within a perspective in which she will be able to experience things helping for her emancipation.

## The Parabol of the Artificial Man

निर्मितकायां यथा स्त्रियां स्त्रीयम् इत्य् असद्ग्राहम् ।  
निर्मितकः प्रतिहन्यात् कस्यचिद् एवं भवेद् एतत् ॥

*nirmitakāyāṃ yathā striyāṃ strīyam ity a-sad-grāham |*  
*nirmitakaḥ pratihanyāt kasyacid evaṃ bhaved etat ||*

**[VV, v.27]** (Nāgārjuna's self commentary of the verse 27.)

*<What I am doing with my speech> is as if an artificial man would prevent from the wrong perception of a man <who would believed> 'this is a woman' where there is an artificial woman*

# Conclusion

In conclusion, our claim is that even if it is not developed, the technical and philosophical consequences of such a position are:

- A theory of assertion as act of commitment ;
- A theory of the forces of the assertion (assertion versus position, and negation versus denegation).
- To redefine the role attributed to logic. More precisely, it seems that what is at stake is a vision in which argumentation has the pragmatic function to validate some inferences *in relation to a given perspective*.

# Bibliography (1)



B.K.Bhattacharya.

*The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna: Vighraha-vyāvartanī.*  
Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1998 (first ed.1978).



R.B.Brandom.

*Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism.*  
Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000.



M.Dummett.

*The Logical Basis of Metaphysics.*  
Harvard's university Press, Cambridge, Massachussets, 1991.



J.L.Garfield.

'Dependent Arising and the Emptiness of Emptiness: Why Did Nagarjuna Start with Causation?'.  
*Philosophy East and West*, vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 219-250, 1994.

## Bibliography (2)



J.Y.Girard.

'Linear Logic'.

In *Theoretical Computer*



L.Keiff.

*Le Pluralisme Dialogique: Approches Dynamiques de l'Argumentation Formelle.*

Phd-Thesis, Lille, December, 2007.



K.Lorenz and P.Lorenzen.

*Dialogische Logik.*

WBG, Darmstadt, 1978.



S.Rahman and L.Keiff.

'On how to be a Dialogician'.

In *D.Vanderveken (ed.), Logic, Thought and Action.* Springer Verlag, Dordrecht, pp.359-408, 2005.

## Bibliography (3)



M.Siderits.

'Nāgārjuna as antirealist'.

In *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol.16, No.4, December, p.311, 1988.



A.Tarski.

*Logic, Semantic, Metamathematics*.

J.Corcoran (ed.), Hackett, 1983 (Second ed.).



I.Waldo.

'Nāgārjuna and analytic philosophy' (2).

In *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 28, No. 3., July. Hawaii's university Press, Hawaii, pp.287-298, 1978.

## Bibliography (4)



J.Woods.

*Paradox and paraconsistency: Conflict resolution in the abstract sciences.*

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.



L.Wittgenstein.

*Philosophical Investigations.*

G.E.M.Ascombe (transl.). Blackwell, Oxford, 1958. *Science*, vol.50, pp.1-101, 1987.