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Nāgārjuna's No-Thesis View: A Defence of Bhāvaviveka's Svātantrika
Epistemology

Aditya Guntoori

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Abstract

Nāgārjuna's No-Thesis View: A Defence of Bhāvaviveka's

Svātantrika Epistemology

Aditya Guntoori

In this paper I examine Nāgārjuna's famous *no-thesis view*, which finds
its locus classicus in verse 29 of the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī (VV)*. I discuss
three interpretations of the verse occurring in the literature, which I deem
the *dialetheist*, *ineffable*, and *semantic* readings. I show that these inter-
pretations fail to either (1) *provide a convincing exegesis that is compatible
with the historical background of VV 29* or (2) *lend a greater cohesion to
Nāgārjuna's overall philosophical project*. I show that we must under-
stand the verse in relation to Nyāya epistemology, which the dominant
interpretations have failed to fully take into consideration. I deem this
approach the *epistemic* reading and show that it fulfills (1) and (2). Fi-
nally, drawing on Bhāvaviveka's commentary on Nāgārjuna, I argue for a
positive account of Madhyamaka epistemology. The account of Madhya-
maka epistemology avoids the ontological posits of Nyāya epistemology
while allowing for the possibility of argumentation and the use of infer-
ence.

Contents

1 Introduction

The status of Nāgārjuna's (c. 150 AD) position has been of great interest to scholars of *Madhyamaka (The Middle Way)*, a major school of Buddhist philosophy. The so called *no-thesis view* has remained a puzzling feature of Nāgārjuna's thought. It is characterized by the claim to have no positive view or position.[1] Nāgārjuna, however, appears to put forward arguments in support of the theory of *emptiness*; the view that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature *(svabhāva)*.[2]

We find the most notable example of the *no-thesis view* in the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī (VV)*, a text in which Nāgārjuna poses rebuttals to his own views and replies to them. A hypothetical opponent raises a concern in response to the theory of emptiness. They pose the following dilemma in *VV 1-2*: if the theory of emptiness is itself empty, it bears the fault of *impotence*, and if the theory is not empty, it bears the fault of *inconsistency*. The fault of impotence refers to the inefficacy of the thesis to perform its functional role. If the thesis itself is empty, how is it that it can be true? What is the content of the thesis? How is it that it can convince anyone of anything? On the other hand, the fault of inconsistency is the contradiction we arrive at when we assert that the theory of emptiness is non-empty. The theory of emptiness claims that all things are empty, so it is impossible for there to be anything non-empty, including the thesis itself.

Nāgārjuna replies in *VV 21-24* that the dilemma does not apply to someone who does not share the same assumptions as the opponent. Still, the opponent continues in *VV 3* to spell out the implications of the *impotence* horn. They anticipate that Nāgārjuna will respond that the negation of Nāgārjuna's thesis (the opponent's own thesis) is also impotent, given Nāgārjuna's endorsement of the theory of emptiness. The opponent further claims that Nāgārjuna is begging the question since the opponent is not the one asserting that theses

are empty. They do not have to address the self-defeating implications of the theory of emptiness because they simply do not hold it to be true. Nāgārjuna, similarly, holds that he does not need to address the self defeating implications of the theory of emptiness. The reason that he gives is perhaps the clearest formulation of the no-thesis view:

> If I had any *thesis (pratijñā)*, that fault[3] would apply to me. But I
> do not have a *thesis*, so there is indeed no fault for me.[4]

My aim is to offer an interpretation of Nāgārjuna's no-thesis view in *VV 29*, drawing both from historical and current interpretations of the verse. In particular, I will look at Nyāya debate culture, epistemology and theory of inference to offer a novel interpretation of the no-thesis view. The verse, I hold, should not be understood as an assertion of global skepticism or as a mystical rejection of reason. I will argue that it should instead be viewed as a particular critique of Nyāya epistemology and that *VV 29* should be understood as a denial of Nyāya epistemology, based on the technical role of the term *pratijñā* in the Nyāya theory of inference.

The paper aims to establish the relation to the Nyāya school and the subsequent denial of the dominant epistemology of classical India. In section 2, I will clarify the historical background of the dilemma and provide the proper context for the arguments in the *VV*. In section 3, I will examine how *VV 29* has been taken to support various readings of Nāgārjuna. The readings will be shown inadequate since they do not take Nyāya epistemology into appropriate consideration. In section 4, drawing from Bhāvaviveka, I will offer a rational reconstruction of Madhyamaka epistemology that allows Nāgārjuna to refute Nyāya arguments without having to accept the Nyāya theory of inference. Lastly, section 5 will be a reply to potential objections and will offer some concluding remarks on the *epistemic* reading.

2 The Background of *VV 29*

In this section we will look at Nyāya, a prominent school of Indian philosophy. In particular, I will survey their views on knowledge, language, negation, and inference. These topics form the background of the debate centered around *VV 29* and will provide crucial details to interpret the verse. In addition, I will summarize Nāgārjuna's theory of emptiness and the conventional/ultimate distinction in Buddhist philosophy. These topics will provide a sufficient basis for Nāgārjuna's thought in order to evaluate varying interpretations in section 3. Furthermore, it will serve as the foundation to examine the debate at hand to provide an alternative interpretation and rational reconstruction, the *epistemic reading*, which is the subject of section 4.

2.1 Nyāya

The school of Nyāya was highly influential in the sphere of Classical Indian philosophy.[5] The topics discussed by the Nyāya are numerous; they range from inquiries into philosophical method, debate, the nature of doubt, the self, substance, causation and existence of God. This section will limit the discussion of Nyāya to the topics most relevant to the disagreement at hand. Theory of knowledge, language, and inference are crucial to understand the meaning and function of the Nyāya technical term *pratijñā*.

2.1.1 Epistemic Instruments (*pramāṇa*)

The notion of epistemic instrument, or *pramāṇa*, plays a central role in Nyāya thought. A pramāṇa is best understood as a cognitive process by which an individual gains knowledge. For the Nyāya, knowledge denotes beliefs that are true by means of being generated in the correct way, by the correct pramāṇa.[6] Nyāya accept four pramāṇa; they are stated clearly in the *Nyāya Sūtra*:

The knowledge sources *(pramāṇāni)* are perception, inference, analogy and testimony.[7]

Vātsyāyana (c. 450 AD), author of the *Nyāya Bhāṣya*, further explains the structure of knowledge:

> ...when knowledge sources are connected to an object, so too are the knower, known, and knowledge. Why is this? Because in the absence of any of these, it would be impossible to have knowledge of an object. Of these, the person who acts possessed of desire or aversion is the *knower*. That by which something is known is the *knowledge source*. That which is known is the *object of knowledge*. And veridical cognition produced in the right way is *knowledge*. Truth is fully grasped when these four are in place...[8]

The Nyāya theory of knowledge requires a distinction between the knower, knowledge source, and object of knowledge as well as a reliable connection between them.[9] The Nyāya theory of knowledge requires precise distinctions be made between different classes of entities. We will see that clear distinctions between entities are questioned by the theory of emptiness forwarded by Nāgārjuna.

2.1.2 Non-Referring Expressions and Negation

Given the structural link between the knower and object of knowledge, how do the Nyāya conceive of non-referring expressions in our inferences? Is our language still meaningful when it does not correspond to an object of knowledge, whether that is an individual *(vyakti)*, a shape or form *(ākti)* or a universal or class *(jāti)*?[10] What is meant by the expressions "hare's horn", "sky flower", or "son of a barren woman".[11] Is it possible to use these non referring terms meaningfully in our assertions? Can we meaningfully negate these terms?

Shaw gives the Nyāya criteria for forming a significant negative expression:

1. if *'t'* is a meaningful expression, then the expression *'negation of t'* or *'not-t'* would be meaningful if the object t is not a universal property.[12] For the Nyāya, the terms 'existence', 'knowability', and 'nameability' refer to a universal property. If we form a negative expression from a term referring to a universal property, then the negative expression would be meaningless.

2. If *'the negation of t'* is a significant expression, then the term *'t'* must not be an empty term. According to Nyāya the cognition expressed by the term *'the negation of t'* is dependent on the cognition expressed by the term *'t'*.

3. The expression *'the negation of t'* will be meaningful if we know what it is for t to be present somewhere. If we know what it is for t to be present somewhere, then we know the manner of presentation of t.[13]

The dilemma posed in *VV* is shown to be a significant ontological issue for Nyāya. If *'all phenomena are empty of svabhāva'* is a meaningful statement, then the term *'svabhāva'* must be meaningful. Furthermore, it must be possible for us to have a cognition of *svabhāva* somewhere in the world. Nāgarjuna, of course, would deny that we can have such a cognition. In order to avoid the conclusion, he rejects the dilemma altogether by denying Nyāya epistemology and view of negative expressions. He therefore claims to have no *pratijñā* of the sort that would affirm the cognition of *svabhāva*. The Nyāya theory of inference, as we will see, affirms the cognitions involved in the constituent parts of the syllogism. We turn to the structure of inference *(anumāna)* in the next section.

2.1.3 Inference and Dialogue

We can now examine the relations between the given views of knowledge and language and the Nyāya theory of inference. Inference is one of the four epistemic instruments recognized by Nyāya as a valid means of acquiring knowledge.[14] The components of inference are given in the *Nyāya Sūtra*:

> The proposition *(pratijñā)*, reason *(hetu)*, illustration *(udāharaṇa)*, application *(upanaya)*, and conclusion *(nigamana)* are the inferential components *(avayava)*.[15]

Whenever a thesis is put forward, such as '*all entities are empty*', it must be grounded and defended using inferential components. According to the view of language we examined, each of the inferential components themselves must correspond to real entities. We now have a substantial connection between the world, our cognitions of the world, and our expressions; they correspond to our cognitions of the world.

In conclusion, we have covered two major qualities of the Nyāya theory of inference. Firstly, the theory of inference is tied to Nyāya theories of cognition and language, where every member of the syllogism corresponds to a real entity and a cognition of the entity. Secondly, there is a dialogical component to the Nyāya theory of inference, as it is used to persuade and convince interlocutors in a debate. In the next section, we will look at Nāgārjuna and later Mādhyamika commentators. It will become clear that Nāgarjuna contests the first quality; an inextricable link between our language, cognition and the world.

It will only lead to contradiction, however, to contest the second quality of the theory. Nāgārjuna and the Mādhyamikas make use of argumentation to persuade and convince his opponents. I will argue that the Mādhyamika can retain the quality of debate and argumentation while abandoning the qualities

of semantic and epistemic realism inherent in the Nyāya theory of inference. Let us now turn to Nāgārjuna.

2.2 Nāgārjuna

In this section, we will examine Nāgārjuna's (c. 150 AD) main philosophical project. The theory of emptiness (*śunyata*) is crucial to this end, as well as the Buddhist distinction between conventional and ultimate reality.

2.2.1 Emptiness (*śunyata*)

Emptiness is the central topic of Nāgārjuna's major work, the *Mūla-madhya-maka-kārikā (MMK)*. The *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, is a critique of the possibility that any entity could possess intrinsic nature, or *svabhāva*. For an entity to possess svabhāva is for it to have an essence; a quality that makes the entity what it is. Svabhāva is also sometimes referred to as a quality that makes an entity ontologically foundational, in the sense that it does not depend on another entity for its existence. Nāgārjuna rejects a *pratijñā* in *VV 29*, since a *pratijñā*, being embedded in a Nyāya realist epistemology, does not take its dependent nature into account and relies on assumptions of *svabhāva*.

There remains a puzzling feature of the theory of emptiness. In everyday language and philosophical argumentation, we talk about all kinds of entities; tables, chairs, the self, smokeness, fireness, etc. We speak about them as if we were presupposing an essence to these entities. These assumptions allow us to talk coherently about them, and distinguish them from dissimilar entities. If we deny that there is an essence to these entities, is it possible to speak coherently about them? A useful concept in Mādhyamika philosophy for this problem is the conventional/ultimate distinction.

2.2.2 Conventional and Ultimate Truth

The Mādhyamaka distinction between conventional and ultimate truth is complex, and the current section is not meant to settle a definitive reading of the distinction in Madhyamaka. Instead, I provide a reading of conventional truth wherein a theory of inference can be worked out. Due to the skeptical disposition of Madhyamaka arguments as well as their reductio methodology, the notion of conventional truth might be the starting point for any Madhyamaka theory of positive argumentation.

Following Candrakīrti (600 AD), there are three classical readings of conventional truth in Madhyamaka. One reading of conventional *(saṃvṛti)* truth relies on an etymological understanding of the term's verbal root *vṛ*; to conceal or cover. This reading emphasizes the deceptive nature of the conventional and its ability to conceal the ultimate truth. At times, it is also interpreted as that which is true for those whose mind is obscured.[16] I deem this the *concealing* interpretation of conventional truth.

Another reading of conventional truth relies on understanding all phenomena as mutually dependent *(paraspara-saṃbhavana)*. For Candrakīrti, this entails that even ultimate truths such as emptiness are dependent on other phenomena[17] in three major ways: (1) dependence on causes and conditions, (2) mereological dependence, and (3) dependence on a cognizing mind.[18] I deem this the *dependent* interpretation of conventional truth.

Lastly, conventional truth is interpreted as agreements which govern the use of signs *(saṃketa)* and worldly practices *(lokavyavahāra)*. The third reading of conventional truth aligns most with our ordinary understanding of conventions. The conventions included under this definition include mutually agreed upon linguistic expressions *(abhidhāna)* and objects of expressions *(abhidheya)*, as well as cognitions *(jñāna)* and their objects *(jñeya)*.[19] I deem this the *ordinary* interpretation of conventional truth.

I draw mostly from the *ordinary* interpretation of conventional truth. By doing this, I do not deny the *dependent* understanding of conventional truth. The epistemic reading affirms that ultimate truth is dependent on a theory of inference and epistemology. It maintains that conventional tools remain our only access to the world. If ultimate truth were not accessible through these means, then ultimate truth and consequently *nirvāṇa* would be unattainable.

The epistemic reading does not deny the *concealing* interpretation of conventional truth either. If our epistemology and theory of inference is misguided, they will lead us astray and conceal the ultimate truth. It is therefore crucial that we arrive at the *correct* conventions.[20] I propose that a *desubstantialized* inference, which will be introduced in section 4, will be compatible with the Madhyamaka notion of conventional truth. Bhāvaviveka (500 AD), a historical commentator of Nāgārjuna, accepted such a normative view of conventional truth.

2.3   Bhāvaviveka's Commentary on the *MMK*

Bhāvaviveka (500 AD) wrote an important commentary on the *MMK* entitled the *Prajñā-pradīpa (PP)*. In the text Bhāvaviveka critiques Buddhapālita (470 AD), another important commentator on the *MMK*, for failing to expound Nāgārjuna's ideas through autonomous syllogisms *(prayoga-vākya)*. Buddhapālita instead opts for reductio arguments *(prasaṅga)*. Bhāvaviveka argues that Buddhapālita's method leads to confusion when interpreting the theory of emptiness; he leaves the conclusion of Madhyamaka arguments ambiguous.[21] He shows that a reader of Nāgārjuna could mistakenly negate the entire proposition that entities do not originate from themselves. They would then arrive at the false conclusion that entities originate from other entities. He remarks:

The negation, 'not from themselves,' *(na svataḥ)* should be regarded as having the meaning of a simple negation *(prasajya-pratiṣedha)*, because it is predominantly negation. [This is so] because [Nāgārjuna's] intention is to establish non-conceptual wisdom *(nirvikalpaka-jñāna)* which is endowed with all cognizable objects *(jñeya-viṣaya)*, by negating the net of all conceptual constructions *(kalpanā)*. If it is taken to be an implicative negation *(paryudāsa-pratiṣedha)*, [then] because that is predominantly affirmation *(vidhi)*, it would be distinct from [our] doctrine *(kṛtānta)*. This is so because [that implicative negation] would teach non-origination by affirming that dharmas are un-originated.[22]

Bhāvaviveka explains that Nāgārjuna is prone to misunderstanding if positive argumentation is not put forward to defend his ideas. To avoid misinterpretation of Nāgārjuna, Bhāvaviveka adopts the formal syllogism. He argues for the importance of the epistemic instruments in debate and argumentation, and critiques his fellow Mādhyamikas who refuse to utilize them.[23] The demand to engage interlocutors with formal tools of argumentation is explained in detail by Bhāvaviveka. The precision and clarity that comes with using these tools of argumentation as well as the pragmatic concerns involved with convincing opponents of one's view supports the adoption of Nyāya methods.

Yet there appears to be a conflict between this approach to the epistemic instruments and Nāgārjuna's claim to have no thesis in *VV 29*. A refusal to put forward a thesis appears to entail a refusal to adopt epistemic methods. The purpose of the epistemic instruments, at least partially, is to defend these kinds of theses. How is it that Bhāvaviveka can posit a thesis and argue that Nāgārjuna held one too, all the while the latter claims to have none? Bhāvaviveka's view appears then as a straightforward contradiction. Let us take a brief interlude on paradox to parse out the problem.

2.4   Quine on Paradox

Three kinds of a paradox are distinguished by Quine in his work, *The Ways of Paradox and other essays.* There are *veridical* paradoxes, which seem at first to be paradoxical but are revealed by careful reasoning to be entirely consistent. The example given by Quine is a man who is 21 years old but has only had 5 birthdays. The case is puzzling at first but once it is revealed that he was born on a leap day, we see that one's elapsed time alive does not necessarily correspond to the number of birthdays one has had.[24]

There are also *falsidical* paradoxes. These are similarly puzzling. but with careful examination, the proposition meant to be established by the paradox is revealed to be false. Quine gives the example of Zeno's paradoxes of motion, which claim that a person can never outrun an infinite series of intervals, and can therefore never outrun a slower opponent that is in front of them. Once we see that an infinite series of intervals can converge on a finite distance, we can show the falsity of the proposition.[25]

The hypothetical opponent in *VV* claims that the theory of emptiness is falsidical. There are two options for the theory of emptiness, it is either empty or non-empty. If it is empty, the opponent argues that the theory is meaningless. The *nihilistic* reading[26] takes precisely this horn to argue that the theory is meaningless. On the contrary, if the theory is non-empty, the opponent argues that the theory renders itself false since there is now at least one non-empty entity. This horn of the dilemma implies that the apparent paradox resolves into a false statement. We can conclude that if the dilemma is accepted, the theory of emptiness is either meaningless or false.

Nāgārjuna, however, denies both horns of the dilemma and claims to have no thesis whatsoever in *VV 29*. This leads us to Quine's third classification of paradoxes, antinomies. He points to Russell's antinomy; is the class of all classes that are not members of themselves a member of itself or not a member

of itself? If it is a member of itself, then it should not be a member of itself. If it is not a member of itself, then it should be a member of itself.[27] The *dialetheist* reading takes Nāgārjuna as expressing an antinomy. When Nāgārjuna posits a thesis and lack of a thesis, he is pointing to the paradox of expressibility at the limits of thought. I will examine the dialethiest reading further in section 3.1.

The *epistemic* reading aims to show that Nāgārjuna's statement in *VV 29* is a veridical paradox. We only have to make some qualifications as to what kind of *pratijñā* Nāgārjuna does not hold and what kind of *pratijñā* he does hold. The *pratijñā* he does hold is *empty*; it may only be defended by the *desubstantialized* theory of inference I will put forward in section 4. In order to first situate the *epistemic* reading, let us first assess the various readings of the no-thesis view in the literature on Nāgārjuna.

3   VV 29: The No-Thesis View

The no-thesis view has its clearest formulation in verse 29 of the *Vigrahā-vyavartanī (VV)*. In this section, I will discuss three main interpretations of *VV 29*: *dialethiest*, *ineffable*, and *semantic*.[28] The readings have at least some textual support, but I argue that none of them capture the intention and scope of *VV 29*.

3.1   Dialetheist Reading

In *Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought*, Garfield and Priest argue that Nāgārjuna reveals a semantic and ontological paradox inherent in our language/thought, and the world, respectively. The semantic paradox, or paradox of expressibility, is characterized by Nāgārjuna's commitment to relinquishing all views regarding ultimate reality while simultaneously putting forward views regarding ultimate reality. Garfield and Priest point out that the paradox of

expressibility has been examined by Western philosophers including Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Derrida. The ontological paradox on the other hand, is Nāgārjuna's original contribution to the tradition.

The ontological paradox results from the claim that all entities lack an essence, and are thus *empty*. However, if it is the case that all entities are empty, then their essence is *emptiness*. Therefore, entities both possess and lack an essence.[29] Priest and Garfield refer to *VV 29* as support for the view that Nāgārjuna endorses the semantic and ontological paradox.

They briefly consider a way out of the paradox for Nāgārjuna. If we were to construe the claim to have no-thesis in *VV 29* to be a denial of a semantic theory by which words correspond to essence-imbued entities, there would be no paradox that comes along with this denial. Westerhoff argues, with the *semantic* reading, that *VV 29* is best construed in this manner.[30]

Garfield and Priest conclude that there is not much textual evidence to support the *semantic* reading, but do not elaborate further.[31] I will discuss the textual evidence in the section on the semantic interpretation. For now, let us look closer at Madhyamaka and paradox.

Tillemans gives three reasons to reject the view that Nāgārjuna embraces paradox: the prohibition against contradiction in the Indian tradition, the Buddhist theory of two truths, and the stylistic tendency for provocation amongst classical Indian philosophers.[32]

The prohibition against contradiction *(virodha)* is seen in Nāgārjuna's most famous work. In the *MMK*, he writes:

> On the one hand it does not hold that an entity that exists is undergoing cessation, for one thing cannot be both existent and nonexistent.[33]

We can also turn to the theory of two truths to explain seemingly paradoxical claims in Nāgārjuna's writings, which is the route taken by many traditional commentators. By qualifying the perspective from which a statement is asserted, such as "from an ultimate or conventional perspective", the contradictions are nullified.[34]

There is, furthermore, a stylistic choice exhibited among some philosophers in the classical Indian tradition to have their statements appear contradictory at first glance, but to be later revealed not to be so. Tillemans cites examples of the approach taken by Vasubandhu, Maitreya and Bhartṛhari.

We should additionally note that Nāgārjuna, excluding his auto-commentaries, wrote in verse form and not prose form. Siderits and Katsura write that the original expectation of the verse form was for the student to commit the verses to memory, recite them to the teacher to demonstrate mastery, and then receive an account from the teacher that fully explained the content of each verse.[35] Understanding the function of the verse form allows us to see that the commentaries are perfectly within their bounds to add qualifications to Nāgārjuna's terse statements. The qualifications clarify the original intention and resolve any contradiction that is present in Nāgārjuna's work. This paper is working within those bounds to resolve the supposed paradox at the heart of *VV 29*.

3.2 Ineffable Reading

In Matilal's classic work, *Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*, he argues that Nāgārjuna demonstrates that we cannot say anything about ultimate reality. We must remain skeptical about what theory best represents reality as it is true of any theory that it will lead to contradiction. Matilal represents the schema with the following principle:

[Any particular theory] X is inconsistent because if we can assert *'p'* in X we can also assert *'not p'* there.[36]

The reading explains why Nāgārjuna is wary of establishing his own theory. If X is the theory of emptiness, and *'p'* is the proposition that the theory of emptiness is true, then according to Nāgārjuna we can find an argument for *'not p'* in X. In other words, according to X: the theory of emptiness, we can establish *'not p'*; that the theory of emptiness is false. The reason given for the principle is that as soon as we begin theorizing, we become caught up in the process of conceptual imputation. Our use of concepts is such that, when we begin deconstructing them, we inevitable arrive at incoherence and inconsistency. Therefore, Nāgārjuna's claim to have no thesis is a method of avoiding contradiction.

An illustration of this method is found in the first chapter of the *MMK*. Nāgārjuna examines methods in which we might conceptualize cause and effect: as distinct, identical, both and neither. He argues that contradictions arise with envisioning cause and effect relating to each other in any of the four possible ways. Thus, cause and effect cannot be said to exist with svabhāva.[37] The method is then repeated in his analysis of motion, the aggregates, objects, subject, time, etc. This would initially suggest that Nāgārjuna rejects theorizing altogether, which is Matilal's position.

If Matilal's reading is correct, it appears that there are no better or worse theories for Nāgārjuna, as all theories arrive at equally absurd conclusions. Should we then conclude that there are no ways of understanding reality that are more accurate than others? It is unlikely that Nāgārjuna would endorse this kind of global skepticism. Otherwise, he would not put forth arguments and attempt to persuade his opponents in his writings.

It is crucial to note that Nāgārjuna does not deny that phenomena such as causation, motion and time exist at all. He is careful to avoid the 'nihilistic'

conclusion with respect to these phenomena, so it is unlikely that he would reject argumentation and debate altogether. As we note in the analysis of *svabhāva*, he argues that positing intrinsic nature precludes the possibility of alteration, which is both, according to him, an evident quality of reality and a key assumption of dependent origination.[38] Following this pattern of reasoning, Nāgārjuna appears to reject *svabhāva*, or theories that include *svabhāva*, not theorizing itself.

Nāgārjuna's rejection of svabhāva as a possible posit of any theory, I argue, *extends to theories themselves.* I suggest that Nāgārjuna does not hold that *any* theory X is inconsistent because we can assert both *'p'* and *'not p'*. Rather, the theory in consideration must have certain epistemological and ontological presuppositions. Our epistemic instruments must exist with *svabhāva*, and our epistemic access should be of a world with *svabhāva*. We can update the principle accordingly:

> A *svabhāva*-imbued theory is inconsistent because if we can assert *'p'* in the theory we can also assert *'not p'*.

As long as our theorizing takes into consideration the emptiness of *svabhāva*, then we can proceed with argumentation and debate. Naturally, we can ask what it means for a theory to be devoid of *svabhāva*. That will be the focus of section 4 on the epistemic reading.

3.3 Semantic Reading

In *The No-Thesis View: Making Sense of Verse 29 of Nāgārjuna's Vigraha-vyāvartanī*, Westerhoff argues that Nāgarjuna's denial of a thesis should be interpreted as a denial of a set of two interrelated claims: (1) that assertions should be taken to refer to a ready-made world of mind-independent objects and (2) that there is a structural similarity mapping our words to the world in

a manner independent of conceptual imputation. He refers to these two claims together as the 'standard view' of semantics.[39]

In defending the semantic interpretation, Westerhoff appeals to the prominence of the standard view in the Classical Indian context of Nāgārjuna as well as the arguments made by the imagined opponent in *VV 1-4* that presuppose the standard view. After having dealt with the dilemma posed by the opponent in *VV 1-3* subsequently in *VV 21-28*, Westerhoff proposes that Nāgārjuna has shifted away from the dilemma posed to the theory of emptiness. *VV 29* is, rather, a denial of the standard view of language which initially gives rise to the dilemma.[40]

The *semantic* reading is a near complete understanding of *VV 29*. It provides a sound textual basis for interpreting *VV 29* as a general claim about the implicit assumptions present in the opponent's dilemma. My aim, however, is to show that *VV 29* is not just a refutation of an incompatible view of language to the view put forward by Madhyamaka, but also a refutation of a fundamentally different epistemology.

The central points of the *semantic* reading will not be contested, but I will show that the reading does not sufficiently consider Nyāya epistemology to the degree that it considers Nyāya philosophy of language. Taking note of the technical nature of the term *pratijñā* lends us an important insight into the claim made in *VV 29*. Additionally, the *epistemic* reading appears to entail the *semantic* reading but the former is not entailed by the latter.

4   Epistemic Reading

In the following section, I will give an account of *VV 29* that is compatible with the historical background of *VV 29* and lends a greater coherence to the overall Mādhyamika project. The account, which I deem the *epistemic* reading

aims to fill in the gaps left by the existing interpretations in the literature.[41] The epistemic reading is furthermore devoted to reconstructing Bhāvaviveka's interpretation of Nāgārjuna and his use of the epistemic instruments.

The term *pratijñā* is the first step in the Nyāya theory of inference, and starting point of the epistemic reading. I argue that *VV 29* should be understood as a critique of the Nyāya theory of inference in particular and Nyāya epistemology more generally.[42] The reading fits well with the historical context as well as the place of *VV 29* in the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*. Additionally, the reading provides a greater coherence to the overall Mādhyamaka project.

I will draw from Dutilh Novaes' work on dialogical logic in formulating a Mādhyamaka theory of inference without any of the ontological posits of the Nyāya theory of inference. The main claim will be that the Mādhyamaka do indeed have a positive epistemology, but it is an 'empty' epistemology. That is, it must be a theory of knowledge empty of *svabhāva*. The rejection of *svabhāva*, however, differs across domains. On the level of ontology, we might reject essence and substance. With respect to language, we might reject the 'standard view' of semantics. The aim of this section will be to articulate what a rejection of svabhāva amounts to at an epistemic level.

The section will begin with Nāgārjuna's critique of Nyāya epistemology in the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī* and his particular critique of the Nyāya theory of inference. If we are to preserve a theory of knowledge for Madhyamaka, that is, to admit that we can know anything, we must forward a theory compatible with these critiques. The next section will be on the role of the example in the Nyāya theory of inference so that we can take further note of the disagreements. Then we will be ready to forward a Mādhyamaka theory of inference.

4.1 Nāgārjuna's Critique of Nyāya Epistemology

In *VV 5-6*, the opponent argues that Nāgārjuna cannot establish the thesis, *"all things are empty"*, if he does not accept the epistemic instruments. Without the epistemic instruments, and a subject of knowledge, there can be no apprehension of the epistemic objects. Consequently, without an apprehension of the epistemic objects, there can be no 'thesis' regarding the nature of reality.

> "...To this extent there is no thing apprehended by perception, the epistemic instrument. The negation of something unperceived fails to be established. In that context, the statement "all things are empty" fails to be established...[43]

Nāgārjuna does not proclaim, in agreement with the opponent, that he indeed has no thesis; he has already stated this in *VV 29*. Instead, in *VV 30-51*, he launches a critique of the epistemic instruments.[44] The intention of the critique is to expose the epistemic instruments as empty, thereby showing that the Nyāya opponent has no thesis themself. The emptiness of epistemic instruments entails the impossibility of finding a 'thesis' anywhere forwarded by anyone. Let us delve into the details of the critique.

He divides proofs of the epistemic instruments into intrinsic and extrinsic kinds. A proof without appeal to the epistemic objects is an intrinsic proof, and a proof with appeal to the epistemic objects are extrinsic proofs. The intrinsic proofs are further subdivided.

Firstly, an epistemic instrument can be proven by another epistemic instrument. This can happen when an *instance* of perception is proven by another *instance* of perception, when an *instance* of perception is proven by an *instance* of another epistemic instrument such as inference or testimony, or when an *instrument* of perception is proven by the *instrument* of inference. Secondly, one can argue that the epistemic proofs are not amenable to proof as they are in-

stead what we *use* to establish the epistemic objects. Lastly, one can argue that the epistemic instruments are self-validating; the instruments make themselves known as well as the epistemic objects, like a self-illuminating light.[45] The epistemic instruments can also be extrinsically proven. The epistemic instruments might be said to be dependent on our knowledge of the epistemic objects, which themselves are real. The epistemic instruments and objects can also be mutually established, depending on each other.

In the *VV*, Nāgārjuna argues against the coherence of all options in defence of epistemic instruments. Yet there must be a sense in which the Madhyamaka use epistemic instruments. Nāgārjuna reasons throughout his argumentative works, surely attempting to convince us of emptiness of all phenomena, among other theses. A cohesive epistemology is presupposed in his arguments, and I will show what form it takes in the following sections. Considering Nāgārjuna's critique of the Nyāya theory of inference will be instructive.

4.2 Nāgārjuna's Critique of Nyāya Inference

Nāgārjuna's *VP* is a work targeted at the Nyāya categories *(padārthas).*[46] His aim is to show that the Nyāya categories cannot exist with intrinsic nature *(svabhāva).* Verses 33-49 of the *VP*, in particular, target Nyāya Inference. They aim to show the absurd consequences that arise from understanding inference as possessing *svabhāva*. Let us look at two major arguments that arise in the text, which I will deem the *mereological* argument and the *argument from unestablished parts*.

4.2.1 Mereological Argument

Nāgārjuna begins his critique by examining the relationship between the components of the syllogism and the syllogism as a whole. The critique consists

of several ways of conceiving of this relationship.[47] Nāgārjuna argues that none of the ways of conceiving of the parts-whole relationship are sufficient in showing how the *probative force*[48] of the argument emerges in the whole when it does not already exist in the parts. The objections themselves are piecemeal but converge on a single point: the existence of wholes leads to absurd consequences. For example, he asks us to imagine that the whole of the syllogism exists either in each individual part or in the composite of the parts:

> Moreover, because the whole is one there is the faulty consequence
> that all the parts are one. There is this defect when it is not different.
> Or else, if one is different from the five parts, it follows absurdly that
> there are six.[49]

The whole syllogism is one entity, and if we say that it is located in each part of the syllogism, then we have the consequence that the parts are altogether one entity, but this is absurd, since there are five. We might instead reply that the whole syllogism is distinct from the parts, but then it follows that there are six entities altogether, the syllogism and the five parts of the syllogism. The Nyāya posit five entities, which means that they would simultaneously posit both five and six entities, another contradiction. We might respond that the Nyāya do indeed admit of six entities, the whole being referred to as the components of inference *(avayava)* separately from the parts. The worry is then replaced by how these six entities might be related to each other, without positing a second order whole, and thus seven entities in total. We are led to an infinite regress when we argue for the existence of the whole.

Nāgārjuna then turns to language. Since the parts of the syllogism are asserted sequentially, he argues that they all cannot exist at once. If the parts, being temporally separated, cannot coexist to form the syllogism, then an agent must superimpose a whole, lending cohesion to the parts of the syllogism and

their role in argumentation. The syllogism must also depend on both a person and the conditions required to utter the thesis.[50]

In both critiques of the existence of the whole syllogism, it is implicit that Nāgārjuna views the syllogism as a token and not an abstract type. We can then re-envision the critique as being against the syllogism as an abstract *type* that bears its properties intrinsically. We will see that the dialogical conception can shed light on the syllogism when it is understood, instead, as a *token*.

4.2.2 Argument from Unestablished Parts

Nāgārjuna begins another critique of the Nyāya syllogism by examining the role of each part of the syllogism in establishing the conclusion. The argument consists in conceiving of the parts as either (1) established by other establishers or (2) unestablished.[51] The parts, at least the ones that represent the premises, should be established in order to do the proper work in establishing the syllogism. Nāgārjuna, however, argues that conceiving of the parts of the syllogism as established by other establishers leads to a vicious regress. For example, we would have to posit a second order part in order to establish a part of the syllogism, a third order part to establish the second, and so on. The problem becomes apparent when Nāgārjuna substitutes the second part of the syllogism, the reason *(hetu)*, in place of the general argument:

> Because there is in turn no reason for the reason. No thing is "established by a reason." For a reason, another reason is obtained in turn, and for that again another. There is an infinite regress. Well then, if it is not asserted for a reason that another reason exists in turn, then there is no reason. Or, as in the case of the [unestablished] reason, everything would also be established without a reason.[52]

He poses a dilemma, either further reasons are given for the reasons that operate to establish the conclusion *ad infinitum*, or there are no such further reasons, in which case we allow unestablished reasons into our argumentation. Once we do this, what would prevent us from using any unestablished reason whatsoever as a premise? We could then defend any conclusion we wanted with an unestablished reason, no matter how absurd it was.[53]

Nāgārjuna also considers the option that the parts are not established by other establishers:

> Well then, if for those also another one [establisher] does not exist, regarding the assertion that the whole is established by the parts, 'the difference and the impairment of thesis' should be replied.[54]

Nāgārjuna does not provide much of an argument as to why the thesis is impaired when the parts do not themselves have establishers.[55] However, there might be two conceivable options. Either the parts are (1) unestablished or (2) self-established.

It is not clear how a part of the syllogism can be unestablished and still do the work required to prove the conclusion. Westerhoff points out that we might understand unestablished parts as axioms, which is certainly compatible with Nyāya epistemology. He argues, though, that this interpretation of the parts of the syllogism is not generalizable since we do not always infer from axioms.[56] An additional worry is claiming that a part of the syllogism such as the conclusion could be an axiom.

The other option is to claim that the parts are self-established. The worry here is that we would not want to claim that the conclusion is self-established as the syllogism would become hopelessly circular. Moreover, the conclusion is defined as 'something to be established'[57] by Nyāya. The thesis would then have the property of being both self-established and 'something to be established'

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by other establishers. If the parts of the syllogism possess their properties intrinsically, the contradiction cannot be avoided.

4.2.3 Summary

In summary, the arguments above give rise to three main problems: (1) We must show how probative force emerges from an argument when the constituent parts do not individually possess probative force. (2) We must show how it is that some parts can be self-established, such as the premises. (3) We must show how the parts of the syllogism can be variously established. For example, how is it that the premises can be self established and the conclusion established by other establishers? The Nyāya answer to these questions relies on assumptions of *svabhāva*. I will show that if we can provide answers to these problems without those assumptions, we can vindicate Bhāvaviveka's use of the epistemic instruments and show that Nāgārjuna does not succumb to paradox. Besides *svabhāva*, the Nyāya theory of inference requires what is referred to as an 'example' *(dṛṣṭānta)*. The example serves to pose more problems for a potential theory of Madhyamaka inference. Let us turn to these problems next.

4.3 The Role of Example in Nyāya Inference

The illustration *(udāharaṇa)* step in the Nyāya theory of inference requires the proponent to put forward an *'agreeing example' (sādharmya-dṛṣṭānta)* of the statement of invariable concomitance *(vyāpti)*,[58] and a *'disagreeing example' (vaidharmya-dṛṣṭānta)* of the statement's contrapositive.[59] Let the statement of invariable concomitance be the following, *'wherever there is smoke, there is fire'*. An agreeing example would be a kitchen, where we observe both smoke and fire. A disagreeing example would be an instance of the contrapositive of the illustration, *'wherever there is no fire, there is no smoke'*. A disagreeing example would then be a lake, where we observe neither fire nor smoke.

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If we attempt to defend the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness with this schema, we run into some problems. With a statement of invariable concomitance such as *'whatever exists is momentary'*, we might easily find an agreeing example, maybe a medium sized object like a table that is subject to cessation. On the other hand, the contrapositive of the statement is *'whatever is not momentary does not exist'*. Since an example must be something that exists according to Nyāya, we cannot find such an example in the class of non-existent entities.[60]

Although we observe a similar problem when the Nyāya tries to prove a proposition such as, *'the hare's horn cannot be an example, since it does not exist'*. We would require the following statement of invariable concomitance, *'everything that does not exist cannot be used as an example'*. The example to ground the statement of invariable concomitance would have to be a nonexistent object, which is impossible according to the Nyāya. They would then face self-refutation, being unable to provide an inference to ground a statement about the very structure of inference. In order to avoid self-refutation, the Madhyamaka claim that we can say something meaningful about non-existent objects. According to them, we are only mistaken if we assume that these non-existent objects do indeed exist. This is referred to as the *asatkhyāti* theory of error. The Nyāya claims instead that we are mistaken when we wrongly attribute a property to a subject. The property and subject must be real entities as otherwise the statement would be meaningless. This is referred to as the *anyathākhyāti* theory of error.[61]

If the Madhyamaka allow non-existent objects in the content of their inferences, they face their share of challenges. They must explain how the expressions of non-referring terms are meaningful, such as the terms *'emptiness'* and *'svabhāva'*. They must further explain how these terms are distinguished from each other, since they are not distinguished by their distinct referents. Lastly,

they must be able to explain what it is we are doing when we make inferences, if our reasoning is not grounded in the structure of reality.

Understanding inference dialogically will resolve Nāgārjuna's critique of the Nyāya syllogism, lending to a theory of inference that is compatible with the Madhyamaka project. Additionally, the dialogical nature of inference will resolve the difficulties posed by the Nyāya concerning the role of the example, so that they no longer apply to the Madhyamaka theory of inference.

4.4 Nyāya Inference as Dialogical

In Dutilh Novaes' work on dialogical logic, she introduces the concept of a Prover-Skeptic dialogue. She describes a dialogue between a Prover and a Skeptic working together to produce a proof. The Prover formulates a proof and the Skeptic acts as a "proof-checker". She details three minimal conditions that must be met for the Skeptic to be persuaded of the proof. (1) The Skeptic must accept the premises, even if this acceptance is only in a conditional sense. (2) The Skeptic must not be in possession of either global or local counterexamples. (3) The Skeptic must deem each individual step to be perspicuous and convincing.[62] With this rough sketch of the Prover-Skeptic Dialogue, let us examine the problems with the Nyāya syllogism set forth by Nāgārjuna.

4.4.1 Problem of Probative Force

The problem of probative force concerns how the syllogism as a whole can convince us of anything if the parts individually do not have any probative force. We might understand Nāgārjuna's concern using our stock example: the lone reason that there is smoke on the mountain does not convince us of the thesis that there is fire on the mountain. We also need the relationship of invariable concomitance *(vyāpti)*, that wherever there is smoke, there is fire. We might

say that Nyāya begin with both the reason and the relationship of invariable concomitance as premises.

Nāgārjuna's main philosophical aim is to undermine the notion that any phenomena can exist with intrinsic nature. In his critique, he is pointing out that the syllogism does not have probative force intrinsically; it is not an inherent quality of the syllogism. Instead, the probative force of an argument depends on agents in a dialogical encounter. The five parts of the Nyāya syllogism display a series of inferential steps that are not necessarily ideally perspicuous. We might instead posit ten steps, or twenty, where the logical leaps are even more transparent. The the probative force might emerge from a twenty step syllogism for an agent who was not convinced by the five step syllogism. The dialogical nature of probative force shows us that it emerges from a dynamic process between dialogical agents. The probative force is not a quality of the syllogism, but is rather an indicator of the satisfaction of the agents involved in the persuasiveness of the argument conveyed by the syllogism.

4.4.2 Problem of Self-Established Parts

The problem of self-established parts concerns how it is that some premises can establish both themselves and the conclusion, without requiring a proof derived from other premises. If we hold that some premises can be self-established, then we must show how some statements have this foundational quality, but others do not. We would not want to admit that any statement whatsoever can be self-established. It would result in the syllogism becoming pointless and render every statement trivially true.

The dialogical approach can offer an elegant solution. The self-establishedness of a part is not an intrinsic quality of the part. The parts are, rather, simply considered self-established when the Skeptic grants the premises. It is due to

the premises being self-evident to both Prover and Skeptic,[63] but not because
the premises themselves are intrinsically self-evident.

The notion of a self-established part is only problematic if it is accompanied
by another claim, that the Nyāya categories possess *svabhāva*. The dialogi-
cal approach shows that the problems that arise from Nāgārjuna's critique are
avoided by showing that the parts of a syllogism can be self-established without
appeal to the intrinsic nature of a premise; a property that makes it axiomatic
or foundational.

4.4.3   Problem of Variously Established Parts

The problem of variously established parts concerns how it is that some parts
of the syllogism can be differently established. For example, how is it that some
parts of the syllogism can be self-established such as the premises, and others
can be established by other establishers, such as the conclusion? Nāgārjuna's
critique seems to apply to the Nyāya syllogism only when we conceive of it as
an abstract type, existing atemporally. We might instead view the syllogism
dialogically, and imagine the parts being established across time. If we let:

U $=$ *Unestablished*

S $=$ *Self-Established*

E $=$ *Established by Other Establishers*

$t_1 =$ *Prior to the Dialogical Encounter*

$t_2 =$ *Beginning of the Dialogical Encounter*

$t_3 =$ *After the First Inferential Step*

$t_4 =$ *After the Dialogical Encounter*

	$t_1 = \text{Prior}$	$t_2 = \text{Beginning}$	$t_3 = \text{Middle}$	$t_4 = \text{End}$
Thesis *(pratijñā)*	U	U	U	E
Reason *(hetu)*	U	S	S	S
Illustration *(udāharana)*	U	S	S	S
Application *(upanaya)*	U	U	E	E
Conclusion *(nigamana)*	U	U	U	E

At t_1, prior to the dialogical encounter, every premise of the syllogism is unestablished as there is no context in which they could be established. At t_2, beginning the dialogical encounter, premises must be agreed upon between Prover and Skeptic, so the two premises; the reason and the illustration, become self-established.[64] At t_3, the application is established by applying the general case to the particular case, i.e. the mountain is one such place described by the universal relation where smoke is present. At t_4, the end of the dialogical encounter, the thesis/conclusion is established, the joint nature of them further emphasizing the temporal aspect of the syllogism.

After the temporal nature of the dialogical encounter is noted, the problem of variously established parts ceases to be a problem. We have seen that an appeal to the dialogical conception of logic can show how it possible to use inference without assumptions of svabhāva.

4.5 The No-*Pratijñā* View

To summarize, the epistemic reading is a defence of Bhāvaviveka's interpretation of Nāgārjuna and an affirmation of a *No-Pratijñā View*. It is not the case that Nāgārjuna has no thesis whatsoever. *VV 29* should rather be understood as a denial of Nyāya epistemology given the role of the technical term *pratijñā* in the Nyāya theory of inference.

The theory of emptiness put forward by Nāgārjuna need not refer to any real entity as Nyāya suppose it does. The Madhyamaka theory of inference is not an abstract and certain method of proof. Instead, it is a template for argumentation *dependent* on agents in a dialogical encounter, their presuppositions, cultural context, usage of signs, and the passage of time. Once we take the codependent nature of inference into account, it is entirely consistent for the Mādhyamika to put forward a thesis that takes into account these considerations. The claim is just that a *pratijñā*, being embedded in Nyāya epistemology, relies on an ontology of *svabhāva*. The Madhyamaka theory of inference eschews assumptions of *svabhāva* in favour of a dialogical conception of reasoning.

5 Potential Objections and Final Remarks

There are some potential objections to the epistemic reading. Nāgārjuna seems reluctant to put forward a positive thesis of *any* kind, not just one supported by Nyāya epistemology. While it is true that he is wary of putting forward any positive thesis, there are two things to note. Firstly, he does on occasion put forth positive claims that do not conform to the structure of his reductio arguments. These claims, additionally, are never supported with the standard Nyāya account of inference. Secondly, it is crucial to still explain how the reductio method is functioning in Nāgārjuna's arguments. Why is it the case that reductio arguments are seen as unproblematic for Nāgārjuna? Is it the case that reductio arguments are free from the problematic assumptions of *svabhāva*? If we focus on what is problematic about the Nyāya account of inference and what is unproblematic about the reductio arguments, is it possible to sketch an acceptable account of inference for Madhyamaka? I believe that these questions are also at the root of the Svātantrika-Prāsangika split in Madhyamaka. Offering a theory of inference without assumptions of *svabhāva* allows us to bridge the gap between the schools.

Another objection to the epistemic approach is the fallacy of reification; the problem of positing entities which do not really exist. Reification is a common concern of Madhyamaka as well as other Buddhists. The issue with the epistemic approach is that, after it is fully articulated, it could bring in *svabhāva* through the back-door by providing a precise account of the qualities of the syllogism and how they arise from the interdependence of causes and conditions, dialogical agents, time, etc. The response is that the epistemic approach is not intended to give an exhaustive account of the properties of the syllogism. The intention is, instead, to sketch an account of Madhyamaka usage of inference without violating any of their epistemological or ontological posits. The dialogical conception of logic gives us a model to understand how inference functions for the Madhyamaka, but it does not provide a full list of steps and their properties like the Nyāya account of inference. The difference in explanatory power is due to the codependent, relational nature of inference in the Madhyamaka account. I argue that the difference allows us to provide a Madhyamaka template of inference, without committing the fallacy of listing an exhaustive list of properties, and thereby smuggling in *svabhāva*.

One last concern is the relevance of the claim; why is it important for philosophy in general? I argue that the dilemma posed to Nāgārjuna is a universal one. The relativist, anti-realist and skeptic alike must address the self defeating nature of their arguments. Are their claims ultimately true or not? If they are true, their own claims are contradicted since there is at least one ultimately true claim. If they are not true, then why should we believe their claim amongst a variety of other claims? Must language and logic be either hopelessly ineffective or nonsensical according to these views? The historical debate between the Nyāya and Madhyamaka can shed light on the dilemma. Here we find a method to avoid the pitfalls of both horns of the *VV* dilemma. The Madhyamaka, with the sketch of inference I propose need not accept the futility of epistemology, language, logic, and argumentation in conventional usage.

Notes

1. The debate has its roots in the classical commentators, and is one of the major reasons along with the usage of Nyāya logical methods, for the historical split between the Svātantrika Madhyamaka and the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. The Svātantrika are influenced by Dignāga, who adopts and develops Nyāya logical methods, to put forward positive theses, while the Prāsaṅgika do not put forward positive theses. See William L. Ames, "Bhāvaviveka's Own View of His Differences with Buddhapālita," in *Svatantrika-Prasangika Distinction: What Difference Does a Difference Make?*, ed. Georges B. J. Dreyfus and Sara L. McClintock (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

2. *Svabhāva* may be understood as *essence* or *substance*.

3. The fault refers to the self-defeating nature of the thesis if the *impotence* horn is taken.

4. VV 29. I rely on Westerhoff for this translation.

5. The influence was felt by Nāgārjuna and later Mādhyamikas, who found it necessary to refute the views of Nyāya and those who adhered to them. Nāgārjuna begins the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* by addressing this broad group of philosophers as "those intent on debate" (VP 1). It is not certain whether Nāgārjuna had access to the Nyāya Sūtra in its completed from, but it seems likely he had access to an early version, or was at least familiar with Nyāya ideas through oral debate. The opponent in the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī* is a matter of contention. The claim that it is an Ābhidharmika is argued in Deepak Sarma, *Classical Indian Philosophy: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2011). The claim that the objections in the *VV* come from a variety of schools is forwarded in Jan Westerhoff, *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Matilal claims that it is a Nyāya. See Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1986). Despite the ambiguity of the opponent, I hope to undeniably show that central assumptions of Nyāya are at play in the dilemma found in *VV*.

6. Matthew Dasti and Stephen Phillips, *The Nyāya-sūtra* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 2017), 5.

7. NS 1.1.3. I rely on Phillips and Dasti for this translation. They translate pramāṇa as *knowledge source* while I prefer *epistemic instrument/instrument of knowledge* as it emphasizes the active generative aspect of knowledge for Nyāya.

8. NB to NS 1.1.1. I rely on Dasti and Phillips for the translation.

9. They must be at least notionally distinct, and the distinctions might be collapsed in particular cases. An example is when one has knowledge of oneself, where the self serves both as the knower and object of knowledge. See NS 2.1.16.

10. NS 2.2.59.

11. These are common examples of non-existent objects in the Indian tradition.

12. That is, if *'t'* does not apply to everything in our ontology.

13. Jaysankar Lal Shaw, "The Nyāya on Cognition and Negation," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (1980): 279–302, 284-286.

14. NS 1.1.3

15. NS 1.1.32

16. Guy Newland and Tom J. F. Tillemans, "An Introduction to Conventional Truth," in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. The Cowherds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12-13.

17. It might be stated that there are no ultimate truths at all for Madhyamaka since emptiness itself is dependent and thus conventional. I will argue in my response to the *skeptical* reading, that there should be a way to distinguish the thesis of emptiness from other theses. Of course, this should be done without smuggling in *svabhāva* through the backdoor.

18. Newland and Tillemans, 13.

19. Newland and Tillemans, "An Introduction to Conventional Truth," 13.

20. There is a debate among classical and contemporary scholars on whether conventional truth is descriptive or normative. For the purposes of this paper, I assume a normative component that serves as a bridge to the ultimate.

21. PP 1. I rely on Ames' translation.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Willard Van Orman Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and other essays* (Harvard University Press, 1976), 1-3.

25. Quine, 3-4.

26. I give a brief summary of the reading. See footnote 41.

27. Quine, 10-11.

28. I split the interpretations along these lines as they are distinct enough to warrant different responses. This is not a claim that the interpretations are mutually contradictory or altogether exhaustive. In fact, the epistemic approach is entirely compatible with the *semantic* reading.

29. Jay L. Garfield and Graham Priest, "Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 1 (2003): 1–21, 18-19.

30. I view the *semantic* interpretation as mostly correct, but argue that the denial of Nyāya epistemology is more fundamental in the reading of *VV 29*.

31. Garfield and Priest, 12.

32. Tom Tillemans, *Scripture, Language and Logic: Essays on Dharmakīrti and his Tibetan Successors* (Wisdom Publications, 1999), 195.

33. MMK VII.30. I rely on Siderits and Katsura for the translation. See MMK VIII.7 for another instance of the impossibility of a mutually contradictory entity *(parasparaviruddha)*.

34. Tillemans, *Scripture, Language and Logic: Essays on Dharmakīrti and his Tibetan Successors*, 197. Notably, this is also the method used by Bhāvaviveka to eliminate contradiction in Nāgārjuna.

35. Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way* (Wisdom Publications, 2013), 2.

36. Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, 123.

37. MMK 1.

38. MMK 15.8-9.

39. Jan Westerhoff, "The No-Thesis View: Making Sense of Verse 29 of Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī," in *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Tom J. F. Tillemans Mario D'Amato Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 36-37.

40. Westerhoff, 34-35.

41. In order to limit the scope of this paper, I have not discussed the nihilistic reading, see Thomas Wood, *Nāgārjunian Disputations: A Philosophical Journey Through an Indian Looking-Glass* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994) and David F. Burton, *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy* (Routledge, 1999). Nor have I discussed the argumentational reading, see Matthew D. Williams-Wyant, "Nāgārjuna's no-thesis view revisited: the significance of classical Indian debate culture on verse 29 of the Vigrahavyāvartanī," *Journal of Asian Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2017): 263–277. An omission of the nihilistic reading may be justified on the basis of charitability. I will grant that Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka project is coherent. While the argumentational reading, alternatively, captures the technical nature of the term *pratijñā*. It does not extend the meaning of the term beyond its usage in a debate. In

clarifying the term's significance in Nyāya epistemology, we can get a clearer idea of how the denial in *VV 29* lends to the greater Mādhyamika project.

42. The reading is further supported by the fact that the Vigraha-vyāvartanī delves into an explicit critique of epistemological views held by the Nyāyas in the following verses. See *VV 30-48*.

43. VV 5.

44. The critique of Nyāya epistemology covers almost half of the responses in the *VV*.

45. Mark Siderits, "The Madhyamaka Critique of Epistemology. I," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (1980): 307–335

46. The sixteen categories are listed in the first verse of the *Nyāya-sutra*, the seventh of which are the components of inference *(avayava)*.

47. The analysis of parts and wholes is not unique to the critique of the Nyāya syllogism but rather one in a class of arguments that the Madhyamaka deploys against similar arguments involving parts and wholes.

48. The argumentative force that it possesses in convincingly proving the conclusion.

49. VP 35

50. VP 49

51. VP 40

52. VP 42

53. The Nyāya would turn to the other epistemic instruments to show that the premises are established. Putting aside Nāgārjuna's arguments against the epistemic instruments in the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*, we could still demand that the trustworthiness of the epistemic instruments be defended through inference in certain argumentative contexts. Inference is required to stand alone at least in this context, as a tool to defend the epistemic instruments themselves.

54. VP 40

55. We might infer from Nāgārjuna's other arguments against *svabhāva* what kind of arguments Madhyamaka might have against the feasibility of a self-established part.

56. Jan Westerhoff, *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2018), 167.

57. NS 1.1.33 sādhyanirdeśaḥ pratijñā.

58. While the statement of invariable concomitance *(vyāpti)* was not elaborated upon until about two centuries after Nāgārjuna, we might note that Nāgārjuna and other thinkers of his time were operating as if the statement (and the reason) proved the conclusion deductively. It may not be of particular importance whether they thought the statement was deductively valid or simply an inductive generalization.

59. Some Indian philosophers have viewed the example as superfluous, but it nevertheless plays a role, albeit of varying importance, for the Naiyāyikas.

60. Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Reference and Existence in Nyāya and Buddhist Logic," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1970): 83–110, 88-90.

61. Matilal, 93-94.

62. Catarina Dutilh-Novaes, *The Dialogical Roots of Deduction: Historical, Cognitive, and Philosophical Perspectives on Reasoning* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 51-52.

63. In the case of suppositional reasoning, they at least entertain the possibility of the premises.

64. I consider them to be self-established with respect to the role they play in the dialogical encounter. They could also be considered established by other establishers that are agreed upon by Prover and Skeptic prior to the dialogue.

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