

NAGARJUNA'S EPISTEMOLOGY: ON EPISTEMOLOGY AND ITS LIMITS

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When we try to discuss epistemology of Nagarjuna,¹ we do not really come across a 'position'. Typically of Nagarjuna, his epistemology comes out in refutation to what others affirm.² But in whatever way it is discussed, it is expected that Nagarjuna's epistemology should come up with a way of knowing emptiness. But given his ontological position, it should also turn out that knowledge, even if of emptiness, itself should be empty. Nagarjuna, it would seem, tries to say exactly that. And this he tries to say by trying to show that 'means of knowledge' themselves are empty to provide for knowledge. We find a list of four *pramana* in Nagarjuna's discussion of epistemology, but he is not found interested in discussing their nature. He rather enquires into whether the so called means of knowledge can be established. For if he can show that they cannot be established, he proves that they are empty.

Discussion of Nagarjuna's epistemology begins with opponent saying that problem arises if Nagarjuna is considered as right regarding everything being empty or lacking intrinsic nature. The opponent suggests the epistemological implications of Nagarjuna's ontological position: that all knowledge-claims are devoid of intrinsic nature which would include his own knowledge-claim 'all things are empty'. The argument is apparently valid. But Nagarjuna's knowledge-claim needs to be understood not only against the background of emptiness of all entities but also requires that we keep in mind how and why he made this claim. In the famous 29th verse of *Vyagrahavyavartani* (VV) Nagarjuna says that he does not have any thesis (*pratijna*). He has no thesis to prove. In fact it seems to be the case. 'All things are empty' is not a thesis that Nagarjuna is trying to prove but it is something he has come upon by refutation of other theses. Nagarjuna's knowledge-claim has to be understood against this backdrop.

The first twenty verses of *Vyagrahavyavartani* (VV) consist of attacks on Nagarjuna's views by his opponent. Nagarjuna's replies and counter attacks begin from verse 21. Nagarjuna's epistemological view is also an outcome of his counter attack. In VV.5-6 the opponent points out certain difficulties involved in Nagarjuna's knowledge claim 'all things are empty'. The claim suggests that Nagarjuna has

acquired knowledge about entities as empty. But perception and other means of knowledge do not exist as claimed by Nagarjuna. However, he could have acquired this knowledge about entities only if he has used means of knowledge for its acquisition. As means of knowledge do not exist, in their absence how could Nagarjuna have gained knowledge about objects of knowledge? One cannot make any assertion if one has not apprehended it. On the philosophy of Nagarjuna, there being no entities known, he could not have apprehended them as empty. Thus he should not be making any assertion about entities. His knowledge claim about things or entities 'all things are empty', therefore, does not hold. Again, Nagarjuna himself being empty does not exist. In other words, non-existent Nagarjuna used non-existent means of knowledge to come to certain knowledge about entities.

Nagarjuna replies in VV.30 that he would have made claim about objects only if he had perceived. But as objects with *svabhava* are not there he cannot be criticised for making any assertion or denial about them. Nagarjuna can be interpreted as saying that his knowledge claim is not about an object as understood from opponent's point of view. He does not make claims about any distinct intrinsically existing object. But he is being criticised by the opponent from the standpoint which makes the presupposition that there are intrinsically existing objects.

In this verse Nagarjuna is trying to make clear once again that criticism when made with the presupposition of things existing intrinsically or with *svabhava*, as is done by the opponent, cannot actually be applied to him. The opponent is criticising Nagarjuna under the assumption that there is an object to be known and there are means to know them. Nagarjuna is questioned as how he could have come to know about object of knowledge without means of knowledge. But the fact is that, in Nagarjuna's philosophy, there is no object of knowledge to gain knowledge about which one will have to use means of knowledge. Objects of knowledge, for Nagarjuna, are empty and so are means of knowledge. They are not distinct entities in his philosophy; there is no clear cut division between them for Nagarjuna. Then where is the question of using one for the other?

Nagarjuna's counter attacks begin with VV.31. With these counter attacks Nagarjuna tries to show that there are difficulties that arise when one considers

epistemic tools as absolutely distinct and independent of one another. Nagarjuna tries to achieve this end by showing the problems one faces in establishing validity of means of knowledge.

In verse 51 of *Vyagrahavyavartani*, we come across the summarisation by Nagarjuna himself of the possible ways of establishing means of knowledge which are rejected by him. The summarisation reveals three possible ways for establishing means of knowledge. They can be put as follows: 1. A certain means of knowledge is established by another means. Let us say, perception can be established by inference or comparison or testimony. For example if I have doubts about the tree I am seeing I can ask someone whether I am correct or not. Or in fact perception can be established by another perception. If I have doubt about the tree I can go near it and check. 2. Means of knowledge establish themselves. Means of knowledge do not require anything to establish them but themselves. That is, they are self-validating. 3. The object of knowledge establishes the means of knowledge. Or while means of knowledge establishes the object, the object establishes the means. For example, I see a table and know it as such which in turn tells me that I must have perceived it.

In VV.31, Nagarjuna questions his opponent how the means of knowledge, which establish the objects, themselves get established. Nagarjuna points out that for the opponent any object is established by means of knowledge. Now, means of knowledge by virtue of this claim need to be established. And as the claim goes, they need to be established by means of knowledge. This is the first alternative suggested of establishing means of knowledge. But, if this alternative is accepted, there would arise the problem of infinite regress. A means of knowledge is established by another means of knowledge; this second means of knowledge now needs to be established by a third one which will require a fourth and so on ad infinitum (VV.32). The Nayayikas do have a way to stop the regress. The Nayayikas do not deny the possibility of the regress in theory. But in practice, they claim, what happens is that when someone has doubt about something perceived, he or she would test it out by a second means. For example, if I doubt that what I see is a glass of water I can test whether it is so or not by drinking the stuff in the glass and when find it quenching my thirst I say that it is a glass of water. Or if I have doubt that I am seeing a tree, I can ask someone and remove my doubt. However, such ending of the regress does

not serve the purpose set out to be achieved with regard to validation of means of knowledge. The means that establishes the previous one remains invalidated.

It can be however claimed that instruments though establish other objects being instruments do not require themselves to be established. In that case, they cannot be claimed as epistemic objects. One can, however, say that they are epistemic objects but still they do not need to be established. In that case the opponent would be actually saying that while some objects need to be established others do not need to be. In other words, it would be false that all objects are established by means of knowledge. Further, it would make the opponent guilty of ascribing special status to epistemic instruments (VV.33). The opponent here suggests the second alternative—means of knowledge are self-validated: “As fire illuminates itself and others, the epistemic instruments illumine both itself and others”. If this claims that means of knowledge are self-validated is proved, then it would solve the problem of infinite regress. Moreover, it also would reply to Nagarjuna’s criticism that means of knowledge are treated especially by the opponent without giving good reason why they are treated so if they say that means do not require establishment. If self-validation is accepted, then one need not hold that they do not need to be proved. They will get established themselves just the way they establish objects.³

Nagarjuna does not straightaway attack self-validation of means of knowledge. He rather begins by attacking the metaphor of fire the opponent is using to illustrate the self-illuminative character of means of knowledge. Nagarjuna seems to have taken refutation of fire example seriously. The reason can be attributed to the fact that this example was prevalent in ancient India to demonstrate the self-illuminative capacity of knowledge. Nagarjuna has probably in mind that by refuting the example of fire as self-illuminating, he can have a strong case against self-illumination of knowledge.⁴

Nagarjuna starts by saying that fire does not illumine itself (VV.34). His proceeds in his argument in the following way: For anything to be illuminated, first that thing has to be in darkness. For example, the pot first is in darkness to be illuminated later. Now if we say that fire illumines itself, it would follow that fire is in darkness to be illuminated later. But one cannot find a fire hidden in darkness

waiting to be illumined. Thus, the argument of opponent falls. For Nayayikas, just as for Nagarjuna, darkness is absence of light. Where there is light, there is no darkness and where there is darkness there is no light. Understood this way, fire cannot be hidden by darkness to be illumined later. Any talk of darkness hiding the light can arise only if darkness is thought as an entity.

Nagarjuna now gives a second argument against fire illuminating itself (VV.35). The argument is: Fire in illumining other things also consumes them. Similarly, fire if illumines itself should consume itself. But fire is not found to be consuming itself. Therefore, the argument that fire illumines itself does not hold. This verse has been taken by Bhattacharya⁵, following Sankaracharya, as meaning that just as subject cannot become an object of its own act, fire cannot act on itself, i.e., illumine itself. Wasterhoff⁶ takes it to mean that as illumination entails consumption of fuel, self-illumination entails self-consumption. And as fire does not consume itself, it does not illumine itself. But I feel it goes more with Nagarjuna's philosophy if we render the following understanding of the verse: It can be understood as meaning that fire consumes or burns that which it illumines. Thus it being self-illuminating also burns or consumes itself. But empirically that is observed as not being so- fire does not burn itself. Therefore, fire does not illumine itself.

In VV.36 Nagarjuna gives the third argument against fire as self-illuminating. He argues: If fire is thought to illumine itself and others, darkness which is its opposite should be considered as something which conceals itself and others. But darkness does not conceal itself. Therefore, light also does not illumine itself. Nagarjuna seems to face some problems here. First, it has been pointed out, and aptly so, by Wasterhoff⁷ and Burton⁸ that it is difficult to understand what is actually meant by 'opposite'. And second, as a corollary to this assumption, Nagarjuna is ascribing opposite qualities of light to darkness. Burton argues that Nagarjuna should not have done it, because darkness is not a substance while light is. Wasterhoff tries to overcome such a criticism, in his commentary to the verse, by saying that he sees no difficulty in ascribing opposite qualities to absence of light though it is an *abhava* and not a substance. This probably would not solve the problem, as for the Nayayikas, *abhava* by definition is the state where attributes cannot be predicated. One can, however, try arguing in the following way: *bhava* is that which is capable of being

predicated and *abhava* is that which cannot be predicated of. Now as *bhava* can be apprehended, *abhava* should be such that it cannot be apprehended. But *abhava* can be apprehended as admitted by the Nayayikas themselves. In other words, *abhava* cannot remain incapable of being apprehended/cannot remain obscure by virtue of being an *abhava*. The *abhava* of fire, that is darkness, also cannot remain obscure as it can be apprehended. And as the *abhava* of light cannot remain hidden/obscure, similarly light, which is its opposite cannot be such that it reveals itself.

The fourth argument against fire being self-illuminating is put as such: The case is such that there is no darkness in fire and no darkness where there is fire. Further, illuminating is nothing but prevention of darkness. If this is the case and which is the case, there arises the question of which darkness fire prevents when it illumines itself (VV.37). The opponent here replies that it is precisely because fire illumines itself and other objects when it arises that one cannot find darkness in fire and where fire is. Nagarjuna shows the problem of holding this position- that fire illumines things and itself at the moment of arising- in the next verse (VV.38). Fire, in order to prevent darkness, has to come in contact with darkness at the moment of arising. But fire cannot come in contact with darkness at the moment of arising.⁹The reason is that such a position implies that there is a moment when fire and darkness co-exist for fire to come in contact with darkness in the next moment. The question that arises on such an assumption is that what keeps them from staying like that for next moment as well.

There is no answer to that. So it cannot be held that fire comes in contact with darkness at the moment of its arising. Nagarjuna advances by saying that as fire does not come in contact with darkness at the moment it arises it cannot dispel darkness. And as darkness is not dispelled or destroyed, there is no illumination.

The opponent can be thought now to reply by saying that fire dispels darkness without coming into contact with it. There is a problem to such a consideration. If it is admitted that fire can dispel without being connected, then why fire/light in one room does not illumine the entire world (VV.39)? There does not really seem to be an answer to that.

Nagarjuna actually disproves the self-illumination of light in two ways: first by disproving that light can illumine itself and second by proving that it can

illumine darkness. By proving both he thinks he proves that light cannot be considered as self-illuminating. Argued from Nagarjuna's empty-position, the question of lamp/fire dispelling darkness may not arise. Nor will arise problem regarding self-illumination. Because, for Nagarjuna fire and darkness are not distinct entities; similarly, self and other are empty to talk about self-illuminated and other-illuminated. However, if fire or light and darkness are regarded as two distinct things problem arises. And this is what Nagarjuna has been trying to show. Light and darkness are not to be treated as distinct.

Nagarjuna's refutation of the example of fire and illumination as an example of knowledge and its illumination can be understood as serving dual purposes. First, it is used to show that the example Nayayikas are using to prove self-illumination of knowledge is defective. And second, though Nagarjuna has not said it explicitly, it can be considered as proving the insufficiency of Comparison or *upamana* as a source of knowledge. Metaphors have their limit. And without putting conditions to qualify metaphors, which may not practically be possible, Comparison actually cannot help one to get knowledge.

After showing the defective character of the example chosen by the opponent to prove the self-validating nature of means of knowledge, Nagarjuna tries to show that means of knowledge by themselves cannot be considered as self-establishing. The problem Nagarjuna points out is this: If the means of knowledge are self-validating then it is implicative of the fact that they do not depend on anything else for their establishment, that is, they are independent, independent particularly of objects of knowledge (VV.40). Opponents argue here that they do not find any problem in regarding means of knowledge as independent of objects of knowledge.

Nagarjuna replies now that if means of knowledge are independent of objects of knowledge, then they cannot remain means of knowledge. And in fact they are considered as means of knowledge precisely because they make the object of knowledge known (VV.41). First part of the argument is aimed at the opponent but the second part of Nagarjuna's argument establishes his own thesis. In his criticism of opponent's view Nagarjuna points out the absurdity of considering the means of knowledge as independent. A means of knowledge if is considered independent, it

would mean that it does not need an object of knowledge. That is, means of knowledge can be there even if object of knowledge is not there. But can there be a means of knowledge without object of knowledge? Can there be perception without a perceived object? Again, can we understand the meaning of means of knowledge without understanding it in relation to object of knowledge? Neither existentially nor conceptually means of knowledge and object of knowledge can be there. This is exactly what Nagarjuna says in the second part of the verse- means of knowledge being dependent on object of knowledge do not have *svabhava*- they are empty.

So far, regarding the question of validation of means of knowledge, Nagarjuna has considered two options: that means of knowledge are mutually validated and that means of knowledge are self-validated. Nagarjuna proves that none of the options are satisfactory. He now takes into consideration the third option: means of knowledge is established by object and/or means and object of knowledge are mutually established. Considered from Nagarjuna's point of view, such dependence of means on object or their mutual dependence is not unacceptable. But, standing on the platform of the opponent it gives rise to problems. Let us see now what the problems are:

First, if it is agreed that means of knowledge are established by objects of knowledge, it commits the fallacy of establishing what is established (VV.42). Explicitly put, the argument may be considered as such: the means of knowledge have established the objects of knowledge. Now these objects which have been established by the means which hence can be assumed as established, are established again by the objects. But that which is already established stands in no need of further establishment.

Second, the means of knowledge which are considered as establishing the objects of knowledge cannot do so if this (objects of knowledge establish means of knowledge) is accepted. If the means of knowledge are in need of being established by the objects, the objects of knowledge cannot be established by means of knowledge. This is for the reason that what needs to be proved, cannot itself prove the one used for proving it (VV.43).

A third problem arises when means and objects are considered as mutually interdependent for validation. But before one comes to this option of mutual validation of means and object Nagarjuna points out another option. It is the alternative of regarding objects of knowledge as independent of means of knowledge. But this alternative has its own problem. If epistemic objects are independent of means of knowledge then one would not need means of knowledge to establish them. The objects being already established are not in need of being established again (VV.44). If objects are viewed as independent, the means of knowledge become vacuous.

Now, if means of knowledge are viewed as establishing objects of knowledge and objects of knowledge as establishing means of knowledge, then means of knowledge become objects of knowledge and objects of knowledge become means of knowledge by reverting their roles (VV.45). But in that case neither can be established by the other (VV.46). This is so because objects are in need of being established by means of knowledge which was to be established by the objects. These objects now not being established cannot establish the means. These unestablished means now definitely cannot establish the objects (VV.47). Again, if means are to be established by objects which are to be established by the means, the objects cannot establish the means (VV.48).

This problem of validation, arising out of considering means and objects as mutually dependent, is brought out by Nagarjuna with the help of an analogy. He says that it is like telling people that son is to be produced by the father and the father is to be produced by the son (VV.49). Both bear the mark of father by being producers and both bear the mark of sons being produced. Similarly, the means and object both bear the mark of being an instrument by establishing the other and also bear the mark of being object by being established by the other (VV.50).

Nagarjuna's epistemology serves the purpose of establishing his ontology that things are without *svabhava*. Nagarjuna by proving that the means of knowledge cannot be established also proves by implication that objects of knowledge cannot be established. There are no means of knowledge and objects of knowledge as understood by the opponent. However, it is not to be taken that there are no ways of

knowing and nothing can be known. Rather what Nagarjuna wants to say is that the means of knowledge and objects of knowledge are empty. Each cannot be understood without the other. The example of father and son, which he uses in *Vyagrahavivartani* to refute the applicability of mutual dependence, is in fact used in *Sunyatasaptati*¹⁰ to say that things are mutually dependent. He says that “The father is not the son, a son is not the father. Neither exists without being correlative.” It is true a father is not the son just as a son is not the father, that we understand two different beings when we talk about father and son. But it is not to be taken to imply that they are independent beings, existing independently of each other. The second sentence says just that- The son cannot come into being without the father and the father cannot have his being as a father without the son. Someone to be a son has to have parent, which in this example is a father; likewise someone has to have progeny, which in this example is a son, to be father. Both are dependent and thus are empty. Similarly, the means of knowledge and object of knowledge are ‘correlative’ - one cannot be there without the other.

At the acceptance that means of knowledge are empty, the question that arises is how one is to know anything at all. Nagarjuna, certainly cannot be taken to mean that perception etc. do not give us knowledge; that we can know nothing whatsoever. There is perception and we do perceive. But there is not distinct line dividing the source from the perceived object. No distinct line that would divide each source from the other. Mark Siderits has argued that so far as our everyday knowledge is concerned, Nagarjuna should not be taken as denying means of knowledge as giving us knowledge.

Question is raised as how to, however, know that all things are empty. But can such a question be raised at the background of Nagarjuna’s philosophy? First, for Nagarjuna, emptiness- the ultimate state of reality is not such that it exists. He is against the very dichotomy of existence and non-existence.¹¹ Nothing can be picked out by ‘emptiness’. It is a non-denoting term.¹² Second, everything being empty, ‘know’ too in his philosophy cannot be understood as something specific, as something that picks out a specific state of cognition. The problem of knowing emptiness arises because the very question is occurring at the background of considering emptiness as the object to be known by a means. According to Siderits,

considering Nagarjuna's arguments as being successful, they manage to show that theory of *pramanas* cannot be employed to defend any metaphysical thesis if it is not constructed without the presuppositions it comes with. Further, it shows that common-sense intuitions regarding means of knowledge do not help in establishing any metaphysical thesis.¹³

Nagarjuna's epistemological discussion, by showing that ways of knowledge are empty, shows in a way that it is wrong to ask for ways of knowing emptiness. To talk of emptiness and in the same breath to ask for means of knowing it does not really make sense. For one who believes in object of knowledge it is acceptable that he asks for a means of knowledge. But one who sees that things are empty, it is not appropriate. There is no 'ways' of knowing the ultimate nature of reality, for emptiness is not 'object' of knowledge. One can know emptiness in knowing phenomenon and one can know phenomenon by means of knowledge. Just that one is not supposed to look for a distinct object and a distinct means. In seeing that a thing is dependent and thus empty one sees emptiness. One does not need specific way of knowing to see that things are empty. It is the failure to come out of seeing things with *svabhava*-presupposition that gives rise to problems even in epistemological field. To understand emptiness we want a way – we still stick to *svabhava* laden way of thinking. Epistemological concepts are empty and should be treated as such. And it is precisely this that is often forgotten. As Nagarjuna says: "If the adherents of being (*astitavadin*) who keep on clinging to being, go on in the same way, there is nothing strange (*adbhuta*) about that. But it is strange indeed that the exponents of impermanence of everything [who] rely on Buddha's method (*marga*) keep on adhering (*paramars-*) to things (*bhava*) with strife (*vivada*)."¹⁴

References:

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