

Nagarjuna's Arguments for Relativism in Cognitive Matters

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Introduction

Nagarjuna's philosophical enterprise often is abstruse as well as seminal in many respects. This character of his philosophy leads to very many interpretations, among which a skeptical coloring of his philosophy floats at the surface. The same is ascribed on his dealings with matters of cognition, when he is engaged in refuting the essentialist picture of them, supposed to be led by Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. The context has been taken up by the scholars, some of which argue that it is a case of Cognitive Skepticism, Nagarjuna's arguments in this context, of course, lead in this direction. But, is the skeptical interpretation appropriate with Nagarjuna's Philosophy. If his philosophy is rescued from the ascription of Skepticism in another context, 'why not the same can happen in this context? With this objective it is humbly attempted to argue here that from the point of view of his overall philosophy this context can also safely be considered as relativism, the present context can alternatively be considered as relativism in cognitive or epistemic matters in Nagarjuna. Relativism makes the ground of his philosophy. From the point of view of his spiritual lineage also his philosophical enterprise only preaches non-essentialism of empirical realities and it is achieved

through relativistic and *prasangapādāna* arguments. The same has been done in the context of his disprove of *pramānas*.

Nagarjunian Relativism

Relativism, of any variety, vouchsafes relative value or judgment of certain contexts. According to it relating to some conditions or parameters something is meaningful, true or good. For example, cultural relativism holds certain things as meaningful or good relating to a certain culture, and the same may not be equally and absolutely be good. The truth value of a sentence is relative to its comprising factors and the contexts; moral values of anything is relative to the culture, context, etc. Relativism draws a relative finality. This sort of relativism, according to which values are essentially relative, raises in opposition to absolutism that advances unique value of things universally and objectively. Nagarjuniana relativism, if one is permitted to say so, is of different genre in the sense that while other relativism makes a relation between something in relation to some other thing, Nagarjuna's relativism is based upon the relation of the things with causes and conditions or qualifiers. It is derived from the phenomenal principle of *pratītyasamutpāda*. It means everything arises or comes into existence by depending upon something other. Everything phenomenal is relative to its causes and conditions, but in its existential form, it cannot be traced back to the causes and conditions. There cannot be any immutable thing-hood or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of the arising or existing thing, as it is not found in the individual causes and conditions or in them taken together; it is also not found in the something else. Hence, things are devoid of immutable intrinsic nature (*svabhavaśūnya*). Things are *niḥsvabhāva* or *svabhāva śūnya* or simply *śūnya*. This analysis and contemplation on this may lead to insight (*prajñā*) and spiritual gains, but the dependence or *paraṣparaprekṣā* is the matter of empirical realm (*vyāvahārika*) as it plays within the boundary of phenomenal or empirical (*vyāvahārika*) level. This relativism in Nagarjuna, However, is not applicable to the perennial moral or spiritual values and actions, because they play great roles within and beyond the *vyāvahārika* realm.

There is a consistent reason for thinking of such relativism in Nagarjuna in relation to his philosophical enterprise. His philosophy, arguably, has certain primordial aims of discarding essentialist intrinsic nature (*svabhāva-vāda*) in empirical; and demolishing the tendency of metaphysical speculative viewing (*sarvadṛṣṭi praraṇa*), in order to pave the path for the *tattva* to be realized intuitively.

Along with this type of discarding and demolition of metaphysical in empirical, he verily honors the status of empirical for itself. For example, while declaring that everything empirical is lacking its intrinsic nature (*svabhāvaśūnya*), he accepts the respective empirical value and efficacy of the empirical things, like, pot, cloths, etc. Similarly, when he argues against the Naiyayikas that the *pramāṇas* are not established (to be discussed in the forthcoming section), he doesn't deny their respective empirical functions. The relativism here is a methodological discourse, because it is not the end of thesis, rather a useful apparatus for making the point clear that the *pramāṇas* are relative, so also, are their *prameyas*, and thinking of each of them as a separate category in essentialist picturization amounts to their non-establishment.

Reason for his Argument against the Essentialist

Pramāṇa of *Nyāya*

The Arguments that Nagarjuna advances against the essentialist epistemology of Nyāya is called *prasaṅga pādānām* or *reductio ad absurdum* argument. It is a special type of argument that only takes up the opponents' thesis and demolishes it by showing absurdity in it. Often, there may not be any antithesis or alternative to be established in replacing the opponents' thesis in order to prove exactly whatever the opponent was viewing. Nagarjuna says, 'I have no thesis or *pratijñā* (*nāsti mama pratijñā*). This specific standpoint of Nagarjuna' shows his consistency of supposing no essentialist view or destroying the essentialist views (*sarvadr̥ṣṭi praharaṇa*) in the context of the argument. It should not be extended beyond the context to say that Nagarjuna has no philosophical position and nothing to say at all. There is a difference between saying 'someone has no alternative or counter thesis against or in place of the rejected thesis' and 'someone has no purpose in the argument or no business at all'. A person or a strong wind sweeps away all dry leaves, not for putting other alternative dry leaves, but maybe, only to sweep away and clean. Why is there sweeping clean? The person may have some purpose, or the wind has some cause. Similar is the case of Nagarjuna declaring that he has no thesis or antithesis (*pratijñā*) against the refuted ones, but still he might have some purpose. Thus, looking internally within the debate he has no counter-thesis, but looking externally on the purpose of the debate he can be assigned with a position, and this position is characterized as cognitive relativism

in the sense of relativism in cognitive matters, in consistence with his relativistic position throughout and that in the context of cognition.

To assume relativism in Nagarjuna means to denounce Skepticism for him. There is a little difference between relativism and Skepticism for which a relativist may look like skeptic. Skepticism generally (a) raises the reasons for something impossible, (b) it does not advance the solution or alternative about the issue. Relativism has neither 'a' nor 'b'. However, both 'a' and 'b' are seen in Nagarjuna's case, which other Mādhyamikas have accepted as it is their *vaitaṇḍika* method, and for this reason, he is judged as skeptic at this level, and no relativism can be advanced at this level. Now, ask any skeptic, 'what is his purpose of advancing the skeptical arguments?' 'No purpose except exposing the issue' would be the answer from the skeptic. For Nagarjuna, however, there is a purpose, that is, to point out non-establishment of knowledge by which he exposes that there cannot be any essential immutable intrinsic nature in the phenomena. For this reason, Nagarjuna cannot be a skeptic in all levels, through a *vaitaṇḍika*. He is a *vaitaṇḍika* at the level of the arguments – level 1, but has philosophical and spiritual purpose at a meta-level – level 2, which is relativity and *niḥsvabhāvata*.

Now, if anybody can suppose for a relativist position for cognitivism, one can happen to assume a cognitive relativism. This can be assumed for Nagarjuna. The only difficulty here is that Nagarjuna has dismissed the establishment of *pramāṇa* by relating to the other or mutual establishment. One may fairly refer to this for rejecting any assumption of cognitive relativism. In this respect, it can be understood that the actions of level -1 may not be applicable to the ascription of a level 2. A soldier kills the attackers and plunders moved by benevolence and his duty towards saving people. Here, the soldier is a killer in one level, and at the same time, in another level, is a kind and dutiful savior. Similarly, Nagarjuna's exhibition of destructive dialectic arguments that lead to the action of cognitive Skepticism in one level may still not conflict with the ascription of cognitive relativism upon him in another level.

Consider the purpose of Nagarjuna that can make a room for the possibility of cognitive relativism in the context. While advancing the destructive dialectic against the Nyāya essentialist realist epistemology, Nagarjuna mentions why is going to criticize the *pramāṇas*. He says, 'If you [i.e., essentialists and realists] think that things as *prameya* are established through the *pramāṇa*, then how is the *pramāṇas* (i.e., perception, inference, verbal testimony, and comparison) are

established? Thus, criticism of *pramāṇa* was conditional for the context of eradication of essentialist conception or *svabhāva* of *prameya*. Such conditionality may not be taken for ascribing septicism. Rather the purpose of Nagarjuna behind the necessity of criticism of *pramāṇa* may be taken, and that is the exposition of *niḥsvabhāvatā* and relativity. Thus, the ascription of cognitive relativism of Nagarjuna in the context of debates on *pramāṇa* is well supported by his Mādhyamika position. A Madhyamika always takes the middle paths avoiding the extremes. It may be understood here that Nagarjuna's philosophical enterprise aims at *sarva drṣṭi praharaṇa*, and for this reason, any 'ism' is not proper as a final characterization for his philosophy. The 'ism' is a provisional use as required for us accustomed with such languages in order to understand, and therefore his position as well.

Nagarjuna's Arguments against Essentialist *Pramāṇa* of Nyāya

Nagarjuna intends to expose the relative status of existing things and therefore their *niḥsvabhāvatā*, i.e., inter-dependent, non-essentialist status of *prameyas*. For this, it is required for him to argue against the supposition of the independent and unique essentialist status of things, which the Naiyayikas claimed based on *pramāṇa*. If *prameyas* are established as independent and essentialist conception by *pramāṇas*, whether *pramāṇas* are so established? Hence, he must examine the independent and essentialist status of *pramāṇas*. Nayayikas have both concepts of *paratha pramāṇa* and *svataḥ pramāṇa* for cognition. in their *prāmāṇyavāda*. Nagarjuna's refutation starts using them for the *pramāṇas*.

Argument- 1. Examination of *pramāṇaḥ* on *Parataḥ Prāmāṇya*:

- a. If a *pramāṇa* is established by another *pramāṇa*, then it will lead to infinite regress or *anāvastha*, where neither there is the establishment of former or of middle or of the latter.
- b. Or if it is said that the *pramāṇas* are established without *pramāṇa*, then it amounts to discordance that something needs to be proved by *pramāṇa*, but *pramāṇas* themselves do not need so.

The arguments then run with pointing out discordance in some minor and ridiculous arguments.

Argument- 2. Examination of *pramāṇa* on *Svataḥ Pramāṇya*:

- l. If *pramāṇa* is established by itself without relating to the *prameya*, then for what it is to be called *pramāṇa*. It cannot be self-established without relating to *prameyas*.
- m. If without relating to or establishing the *prameya*, your (Nayāyika's) *pramāṇa* is established, then none of them is established.

Argument- 3. Examination of establishment of *pramāṇa* by establishment of *prameya*:

- a. If it is said that the *prameyas* are established by *pramāṇa*, it does not establish the *pramāṇa*.
- b. If *prameyas* are established, without *pramāṇas*, then 'what is the necessity of *pramāṇa*?'
- c. Further, if *prameya* establishes the *pramāṇa* and vice versa, it will be like a father is defined by his son and the son is defined by his father. In this *itaretaraśraya*, the roles of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* will be interchanged. It may fall into *chakraḥ doṣa*, insofar as they are uniquely thought of independent.

Therefore, Nagarjuna comes into the conclusion that *pramāṇa* is not established by itself without relating to any (i.e., without any reason, or by other *pramāṇas*, or *pramāṇa* and *prameya* by each other. Thus, it is shown that if the *pramāṇa* or *prameya* are taken exclusively independent in essentialist conceptions, they are not established. This is proved by invoking as well as eradicating the relativity between them. This suggests that, if they are thought of in relation to each other, then they could depict the real picture and could not be disproved. Relativity is the true picture of everything empirical, so also of the *pramāṇa* and *prameya* and all cognitive discourse.

Plausibility of Cognitive Skepticism or Cognitive Relativism?

Nagarjuna's argumentation and adoption of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument exposes the non-establishment of *pramāṇas*. This exercise that leaves *pramāṇa* unestablished is a skeptical exercise - the exercise that he uses as *prasaṅgāpādāna* arguments, use of *prasajya pratiṣedha* and declaration of no (anti)thesis of his own.

All these taken together makes up his method as *vaitaṇḍika*. A *vaitaṇḍika* is a skeptic. However, his is *vaitaṇḍika* in his methods only. Being so, his arguments remain successful since they reject the notion of essentialist view of *pramāṇa*, and its tacit implication of isolated entity-hood or *svabhāva*. The relativity between them is also pointed out where the conception of *svabhāva* has no place. This is the very purpose of Nagarjuna. For this philosophical purpose of explaining relativity, he uses skeptical exercises as a method of *viataṇḍika*. The method and the purpose being taken together constitute the epistemological position, and at this step, some scholars give weight to the method and ascribe skepticism or cognitive skepticism, some give weight to his philosophical motto of relativity and appraise the context of refuting *pramāṇa* as case of cognitive relativism.

Scholars depict his approaches and arguments and philosophy piece by piece ascribing him differently. David J. Kalupahana understands non-absolutist, non-foundationalist and non-essentialist characters of Buddhism and for Nagarjuna as well. He also sometimes says empiricism and analytical approach of Nagarjuna. For the use of reasons, Nagarjuna is seen as rationalist sometimes. Some may also see intuitionism in him for the *prajāparamita sūtra*. T.R.V. Murti takes him as a critical philosopher of the genre of Kant. Considering, thus, any thinker may characterize any aspect of his philosophy in a way and, if possible, extend the same ascription to his total philosophy. There are suggestions for the analytic, anti-metaphysical and therapeutic interpretations of Nagārjuna.

In the context of ascription or characterization of a philosophy or piece of philosophy or the philosopher, it is better to think of a method of appropriating any ascription for any piece of his work. At any section of any philosophy, there must have some action or method and some purpose of being engaged in that action. Evaluating the action or method and purpose, it can easily be said that the purpose has the primacy over the method. The same purpose or philosophical commitment may be established by alternative methods. Hence, any characterization upon method, like Skepticism here, is weaker than the characterization of relativism made on the purpose or philosophical commitment. Over and above, here the method also uses relativism. Hence, it is preferable and more plausible to ascribe that Nagarjuna rejection of *pramāṇa* is a case of cognitive relativism.

Cognitive relativism, like any epistemic consideration, has narratives of the reality of non-essentialism and thereby suggestion for a type of moral and spiritual life. It is a relation between *upāya kauśala* with *kuśala*. This was the reason for

Nagarjuna to advance the destructive dialectic. Such motif and benefits would be defied if Skepticism were advocated in Nagarjuna. He, like any other Indian philosopher belonging to the lineage of morals and spiritual practices, wouldn't be value-neutral, and therefore cannot be skeptical. His value-centric philosophy is sustained by relativism and that he takes as the key philosophical insight and technique, and therefore, it is preferable to ascribe cognitive relativism in the present context.

Concluding Remark

Now, considering on cognitive skepticism and cognitive relativism, 'which one of them is appropriate in the case of Nagarjuna?' Any formal epistemology supposed to be independent or self-dependent may not be seen in Nagarjuna. It is because, he does not advance or define any systematic epistemology by assigning source, process, status, validity, and limitation of knowledge. Despite that, he and his school have an enterprise of knowledge that cannot but have an embedded epistemic stance. The lineage was divided as *Svātantrika* and *Prāsaṅgika*, and there is a traditional ascription of *vaiṭāṇḍika* on Nagarjuna. From these standpoints, as they convey the matter of knowledge without claiming any substantivity of the instrument and process of knowledge (*prajñāptiyartham ti kathyate*), one may prefer an epistemic stance here as cognitive –relativism instead of skepticism. Skepticism, which is ascribed citing that he argues against the establishment of knowledge, its process and instruments, etc., should be revised looking further that he argues actually against **individual and independent status of** establishment of knowledge, its process and instruments etc. He would perhaps expect that all these may be valued with only the understanding that all are relative to cause and conditions and not absolutely independent. Hence, cognitive relativism seems to be more plausible. It can be supported by the fact that relativity or dependent origination rules roost in Nagarjuna's philosophy and in the context of the criticism of the *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* etc. *Pramāṇas* and *prameyas* like other empirical phenomena, especially the process of knowledge and knowledge itself, are interdependent and hence is lacking any individual essence - this is the cognitive relativism of Nagarjuna.

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