

# From Logical Pluralism *via* Metaphysical Monism to Active Ethics: Nagarjuna's Voyage from Logic to Religion

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## Introduction

It is a general notion that Logic and Religion are two disciplines on logger heads to each other. Anything logical cannot have theistic aspects in it, and worse, anything theistic is least logical. Therefore, placing them together in one single box looks a bit strange, to say the least. However, this hostility prevailing between these disciplines in the West, nurtured since modernity, is something unheard of in the Indian philosophical tradition. For an Indian philosopher, logic as a discipline could happily co-exist with religious philosophies, be it that of Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. In fact, as Tagore said, in India disciplines were raised in a joint family. Here grammar and mathematics were considered as disciplines closely aligned. Though *Anvikshiki*, the science of reasoning did develop independently, and functioned as a common resource from where everyone borrowed methods/techniques, it has had only instrumental value, for *Darsana*, the conceptual grasp of reality along with the methods to attain it reigned supreme. Goutama, for instance, in the very first sutra affirms that the sixteen methods enlisted by him are meant to

take the practitioner to *nisreyas*, liberation<sup>1</sup>. This conceptual transition from logic to religion *via* metaphysics has been differently worked out by different schools here in India. This interesting journey from a metaphysically strengthened logic to an active religion that transforms the self altogether is probably something unknown to the western world. A prominent instance of such a move can be found in the logico – metaphysical theory propounded by Nāgārjuna, which culminates in religion. In what follows we shall examine Nāgārjuna's voyage from logical pluralism *via* metaphysical monism to religious conduct, where a practitioner matures himself as one entitled for enlightenment.

Logical pluralism is a view which holds that there could be more than one correct Logic that takes many forms, but a philosophically interesting version of it holds that while logics  $L_1$  and  $L_2$  can disagree about which arguments are valid, both can be getting things right. Interest in the contemporary debate on the matter has also led to a re-examination of some ancient thoughts, especially those non-western in origin. The present paper would bring to light an ancient form of logical pluralism proposed by Nāgārjuna, an Indian philosopher of second century ACE, highlighting a journey in which he takes us from logical pluralism *via* metaphysical monism to Religious conduct, in which a practitioner matures himself as one entitled for the pursuit of enlightenment. The paper would also examine contemporary scholarship on pluralistic logic and will juxtapose the Mādhyamaka version of it to see what it worth in current discussions on the theme.

The paper gets divided into three sections: the first section deals with the logical part of his philosophy, while the second speaks of how this logic helps in framing his famous metaphysical position called *Sūnyavada* and in the third, the religious resonance of this metaphysics, how the abstract concept of *Sūnya* leads to the praxis of benevolence, friendship, empathy and renunciation.

## I

In *Mūlamadhayamaka Kārika* Nāgārjuna points out that the non-dual absolute, which is *sūnya* appears as diverse only on account of illusion. This led him to propose a two tier system of reality - the conventional and the ultimate (*samvrta satya* and *paramārtha satya*). On the conventional level we can speak of a pluralistic world of things, where the law of causation and the laws of logic are operative. But this phenomenal world has no substantive existence, since it has arisen dependently. In other words, it is *pratītyasamutpanna*, which literally means

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1 See Goutama's Nyayasutra, 1.1.1

having the status of being produced apparently, (this being that originates: *asmin satī idam bhavati*), and has not arisen substantially (*svabhāvatah*). Hence from the perspective of the ultimate truth it is empty in that nothing possesses any kind of essence. Declining the phenomenal world the status of ultimate reality Nāgārjuna proposes that reality from an absolute standpoint is *sūnya*, void of any substantiality. In order to define the nature of this absolute reality he brings in the principle of *catuṣkoṭi*. Countering the principle of *tertium non datur* that everything is either true, or false, *catuṣkoṭi* speaks of four mutually exclusive possibilities for any proposition: (1) either it holds, (2) it does not hold, (3) it both holds and does not hold, (4) it neither holds nor does not hold –the four corners, which reality transcends.

Graham Priest argues that Nāgārjuna’s main import in proposing *catuṣkoṭi* is to indicate the ineffability factor of reality. According to him, the ineffable becomes a fifth possibility<sup>2</sup>. This position has, however been challenged; the Indian version of *catuṣkoṭi* conceives ineffability as one of the possible outcomes of declining the four possible kotis, or corners of logic. The Tibetan version of *catuṣkoṭi*, however, subscribes to the above position maintained by Priest. Interestingly, among the ontological categories Nāgārjuna enlists, it appears that some can take more than one of the four / five values. Now this might look strange for a logician, but note that some modern non classical logic like plurivalent logic permit things to take more than one value. Currently attempts have been made by scholars like Priest to draw parallels between the *catuṣkoṭi* and First degree entailment (FDE), a four valued system of logic, whose values exactly correspond to those of *catuṣkoṭi*<sup>3</sup>. This is a system of logic developed during 60s and 70s of the bygone century as a branch of relevant logic, which speaks of four truth values written as true only, both true and false, neither true nor false and false only ( represented with *t*, *b*, *n* and *f*).

Now *Tetralemma* can be made functional only by drawing a distinction between two kinds of negation: *prasajya pratishedha* and *paryudāsa pratishedha*, the former refers to the presuppositionless negation and the latter the negation that involves presupposition. Of course, this kind of a division between negations is not something unfamiliar to contemporary philosophers, we do distinguish

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2 Graham Priest, ‘Speaking of the Ineffable, East and West’, *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 11 (2015), p.8.

3 Graham Priest, “ The Logic of Catuskoti” *Comparative Philosophy* Volume 1, No. 2 (2010): 24-54 Open Access / ISSN 2151-6014 [www.comparativephilosophy.org](http://www.comparativephilosophy.org) , P.44.

between choice negation and exclusion negation<sup>4</sup>. As we know in choice negation the predicate as applicable to the subject has been negated, like say, ‘The apple on the table is not red’, presupposing that the apple has to have some colour or the other. In other words, by negating one we are affirming its alternatives. Exclusion negation on the other, is to reject what is denied without making any presupposition. For instance, if we deny that the apple is something divisible by three, we do not presuppose that it is the kind of thing, which could be divided by any other number. In philosophical circles we identify this in terms of *category mistake*. However, *prasajya pratisedha* cannot be conceived as a category mistake, for if we were to identify the negation as suggesting category mistake we end up retaining it at the propositional level<sup>5</sup>.

Nāgārjuna now proceeds to demonstrate the deficiency of some of the key concepts of our conceptual scheme, like say the principle of causation, motion, identity and so on, using the method he has devised. The fallacy occurs according to him, due to the failures of presuppositions involved in all these. For instance, causation as normally used is found deficient because it presupposes the existence of objects with *svabhāva*, the independent existence of objects, a presupposition that cannot be fulfilled<sup>6</sup>. So is the case with the conception of identity. Nāgārjuna defines identity as the relation everything bears to itself and nothing to any other object. Formally it can be represented thus: “For all x which come into being depending on some particular object, it is not the case that either it is [identical -to- a (x)] or [not- identical -to- a (x)].” Applying De Morgan’s law and double negation elimination, we may reformulate it thus: “For all x (which come into being depending on some particular object) it is both [not identical- to-a (x)] and [ identical- to -a(x)].”<sup>7</sup> Now this is a contradiction. Matilal suggests that if we read the first negation as *prasajya* i.e., a presupposition cancelling negation, and the second as a *pariyudāsa* negation, a presupposition preserving negation, the contradiction can be avoided, for what have been negated are two mutually exclusive alternatives<sup>8</sup>.

By employing *catuskoṭi* Nāgārjuna tries to exhibit the *svabhāva sūnyata* of all major concepts, including emptiness. On emptiness, he says, “Emptiness should

4 J. Westerhoff, “Nagarjuna’s Catuskoti,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (2006) 34: P.369.

5 Ibid. P. 370.

6 Ibid. P. 372

7 Ibid. P. 371

8 B. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971, P.69.

not be asserted. Non emptiness should not be asserted, both or neither should not be asserted, as these are only names.”<sup>9</sup> We may translate this to a formal structure in the following manner:

“If A stands for the proposition, ‘Emptiness should be asserted’, Nāgārjuna wants the following four alternatives to be rejected:

1. A
2.  $\neg A$
3.  $(A \wedge \neg A)$
4.  $\neg (A \vee \neg A)$ <sup>10</sup>

This, as evident, challenges the Aristotelian logic, for Aristotle excludes the latter two alternatives,  $(A \wedge \neg A)$  by the law of non-contradiction, and  $\neg (A \vee \neg A)$  by the law of excluded middle. This anti - Aristotelian position may best be viewed as anti-nominalist position, reminding us that things are never quite what they seem or that they cannot be classified<sup>11</sup>. Also it has been criticized that since the latter two alternatives are logically equivalent, Nāgārjuna in fact, is not dealing with four possibilities rather with three possibilities. This impasse will be over if we take the negation in the fourth alternative in the *prasajya* manner. Following this we may read its negation as  $(\textit{prasajya}) \neg (\textit{prasajya}) \neg (A \vee \neg A)$ <sup>12</sup>. Again, if we assume that *prasajya* negation obeyed double negation elimination this would amount to saying  $(A \vee \neg A)$ , which is not what Nagarjuna wants to say. Hence we need to infer that  $\neg \neg A \equiv A$  *does not* hold when the negation is taken in the *prasajya* model<sup>13</sup>. Further, while it is sensible to argue that *prasajya* negation does not obey  $\neg \neg A \equiv A$  this does not entail that Nāgārjuna rejected the law of excluded middle<sup>14</sup>. J. Westerhoff points out that a more elegant way to dissolve the difficulty would be by adopting the alternate notion of illocutionary negation. The primary benefit of adopting an illocutionary sense would be that when we employ illocutionary negation, the negation operator does not fall within the scope of it. Yet another privilege of illocutionary negation would be that it helps indicate the

9 Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna, 22 -11.

10 J. Westerhoff, op.cit, P. 375.

11 Avi Sion, Buddhist Illogic: A critical Analysis of Nagarjuna’s Arguments, Published by Avi Sion, Geneva, 2002, P. 15.

12 J. Westerhoff, op.cit, P. 376.

13 Ibid. P. 377

14 Ibid. P.378.

lack of evidence either way. A third, and particularly significant benefit in this case would be, that by its use we may suggest that A is not part of our language and we have no way of presenting it<sup>15</sup>. Finding illocutionary negation privilegeous we may restructure Tetralemma thus:

1. A
2.  $\neg A$
3.  $A \wedge \neg A$
4. I do not assert  $(A \vee \neg A)$ <sup>16</sup>

We may keep in mind that in *Vigrahavayvartini* Nāgārjuna highlights this non assertion factor as the key operator of his whole theory, while defending his position from the attack of Naiyyāyikās.

Among the later Mādhyamakas, Bhāvaviveka, who initiated the Svātantrika tradition, seems to have insisted on the syllogistic formula of *sūnyata* to demonstrate the insight it carries, in contrast to the Prāsarngikas, who exclusively advocated the *prasanga* method (i. e., reductio-ad-absurdum argument). It is believed that Bhāvaviveka seems to have explicitly maintained that Mādhyamakas should resort to syllogistic demonstration equipped with thesis, reason and example (*pratijñā*, *hetu* and *udāharana*) to debate with other schools<sup>17</sup>. In his famous work *Karatala-ratna* he provides two model arguments to demonstrate the insight of *sūnyata*: In one he chooses an empirical thing, which has been represented formally, and in the other the subject term is a variable of trans-empirical dharmas. Through arguments he shows that the predicates applicable to both these categories are identical in terms of *sūnyata*<sup>18</sup>.

*Tattvatah samskrta sūnya mayavāt pratyayodbhavat*

Thesis: In ultimate truth, whatever is empirical is devoid of its existence,

Reason: Because its origination depends upon causes and conditions,

Example: Like a magical apparition (that is devoid of real existence).

*Asamskrtastvasvabhūtah khapuspavat*

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15 Ibid. P.379.

16 Ibid. P.380.

17 Shohei Ichimura, "Nagarjuna's Dialectic and Buddhist Logic," Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies, Vol. 47, No. 2, March 1999, P.6..

18 AiyaswamSiaster: Karatalaratna of Bhavaviveka, Visva-Bharati Anuals II (1949), i-xvi, 1-124

Thesis: [In ultimate truth,] whatever is transcendent has no existential reality,

Reason: Because it is devoid of [empirical] origination.

Example: Like sky-flowers [that is devoid of existential reality].

## II

Evidently Buddhists, never took up logic for its own sake as contemporary logicians do<sup>19</sup>. In the *Kārika* Nāgārjuna takes up different concepts, and employing *catuṣkoṭi* establishes that they cannot possibly be defined. The same argumentative pattern has been adopted for the rejection of permanence and finitude concerning Buddha, the existence of *Nirvāna*, existence of persons in the past, the permanence of the world and so on. Rejecting all these he arrives at one single valid position that all things are empty of self-being: there is nothing that exists with *svabhāva*<sup>20</sup>. If everything has the same ontological status, in what way do things have their being? To answer this Nāgārjuna borrows the popular Buddhist theory of *pratītya samutpannatva*: Things exist in relation to other things. To give a mundane example, consider the year 2022, and self critically examine how you credit it in your phenomenal experience. According to Newton's classical Physics, the time is independent of the events in time, but for Leibniz, the year 2022 has no self-standing reality of this kind. The year 2022 is merely a locus in a set of events ordered by the before / after relation. In brief, 2022 has its being only in relationship to other things. Likewise everything has its being in a relational way<sup>21</sup>. The Mādhyamaka network of part-whole relation does not, however, emphasize parts at the cost of the whole or *vice versa*. Both have exactly the same kind of reality, i.e., relational. The interdependence of all things is illustrated by the beautiful metaphor of the Net of Indra<sup>22</sup>. It is presumed that far away in the heavenly abode of the great God Indra, there is a wonderful net which stretches out indefinitely in all directions. A single glittering jewel has been placed at net's every node. Since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels ought to be infinite in number as well.

19 T.R.V Murty, *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, Ruskin House, Museum Street, London, 1955, P. 55.

20 T.E Wood, *Nāgārjunian Disputations. A Philosophical Journey through an Indian Looking-glass*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii press, 1994, P.124.

21 Priest, G. & Garfield, J. 'Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought.' *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, p. 259.

22 Graham Priest, "Compassion and the Net of Indra", Cowherds (eds.), *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness*, Oxford University Press, 2015. p. 221.

Now, if we try to inspect any one of the jewels, we will discover that in it all the other jewels are reflected. Thus, all the jewels in the net encode each other. Each one, as it were, contains the whole. As is evident, in the metaphor, the jewels represent the objects of phenomenal reality; and the infinite reflections represent their mutual dependence<sup>23</sup>. With the help of this metaphor of Indra's Net we may proceed to the core of Buddhist philosophy, namely religion.

### III

Interestingly for Nāgārjuna this serious exercise in Metaphysics and Logic is only a prelude to the religious path, the magga that redeems one from eternal sorrow. It isn't enough to discover the nature of reality, our minds must assimilate the implications of this discovery, and our lives must change accordingly. The pragmatic orientation of the thought is vivid: our realization that the absolute is svabhāvasūnya and the empirical is pratīyasamutpanna would fill in us an irresistible compassion to all beings — a compassion that radically transforms our existence. The intellectual analysis thus, culminates in a new way of looking at things and behaving. We pass directly from knowledge to inner accomplishment and finally to active ethics.

A late Mahāyana thinker Śāntideva, arguably the greatest of all Mahāyana ethicists, takes this intricate metaphysics of the Mādhyamakās to the realm of religion. In his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* we find an argument explicating how one's metaphysical awareness leads him to be compassionate. He says<sup>24</sup>:

“A continuum and a Collection

just like such things as a series or an army, are unreal.

The one for whom there is suffering does not exist.

Therefore for whom will that suffering become their own?”

He continues,

“Since all ownerless sufferings are without distinction, [they] should be alleviated just because of being suffering, What restriction is made in that case?”

The argument presented in these verses can be put up in the following manner:

23 Ibid. P. 6.

24 Bodhicaryāvatāra of Santideva, VIII: 101-102

1. It is good to get rid of one's own, suffering.
2. To sustain this thought, one needs to suppose that pains have possessors,
3. But there are no persons, but only skandhas.
4. If there are really no people to possess them, then a desire to get rid of any of them is a desire to get rid of all of them<sup>25</sup>.

But a closer look at the argument would reveal that it is a bit strained: don't I have a unique relationship with my own pain, like the famous toothache of Wittgenstein? Nor, does it help to point out that the person has no ultimate reality, for neither do the painful states. It appears therefore, that Śāntideva's this thesis does not work from a Mādhyamaka perspective. Graham Priest views that if one is in search for an acceptable metaphysical justification of compassion, the notion of emptiness is the right place to look for it<sup>26</sup>. After all Mahayana system occasioned two important theoretical developments in Buddhism, the principles of emptiness and *karuna*, and they should not be isolated from each other<sup>27</sup>. To link these two, he contrasts it with the Hobbesean ethics: In Hobbesean ethics one thinks of individuals as atomic existences, where individuals are asked to look after their own interests<sup>28</sup>. This is precisely not the case with emptiness. My nature is not self-standing, but depends for what it is on other things, with whom I causally interact. By the very order of things, then, there is an interconnectedness and interdependence between things, and people. This inter-being is what makes the Hobbesean pill difficult to swallow, and provides ground for Buddhist theory of compassion. The fact that "my" interest and well-being are inseparable from the interest and well-being of others means that not only can my interests not trump "your" interest, but that no individual's interest can trump any other individual's interest. What remains is to act in the interest of all.<sup>29</sup> Priest seems to share the idea of King ( King 2005, p. 160) that this basic Buddhist worldview of interdependence has implications to universal responsibility. First, we must realize that in this universe of interconnectedness, our every action bears an implication for the other. There is a 'universal dimension of every act' since each of our action creates a ripple effect<sup>30</sup>.

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25 Graham Priest, "*Compassion and the Net of Indra*", P. 7.

26 Ibid. P.8.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. P.9

30 Ibid.

However, sheer interdependence seems an insufficient ground to support benevolence. For instance, take the interdependency that exist between a slave and his owner: the fact that the slave and the slave-owner are mutually dependent does not make it that the owner shows any moral obligation to look after the interests of the slaves. Probably a better metaphor of Śāntideva might be of help: He says, the universe and the beings in it are like body and its limbs. Since the well-being of the body depends on the wellness of its limbs, it is taken for granted that each limb takes care to protect other limbs. Just so, the world, though divided, is undivided in the nature of suffering and happiness. But this analogy of part – whole interdependence as in our body doesn't take us much far<sup>31</sup>. The parts of the body look after each other, because they are all part of one conscious organism, which looks after its parts. This is not the case with the totality of sentient beings. Moreover, even in the bodily case, it is not true that each part will look after the well- being of each other part. When a part becomes a threat for the survival of the body, it willingly gives up the part. In brief, if there is a connection between emptiness and compassion, then, there must be more to the matter.

Let's get back to the metaphor of Indra's Net for better assistance. Suppose that a mental state of being disquiet (*duhkha*) manifests as a red fleck in a jewel in the Net. By the very structure of the Net, this will cause a red fleck in every other jewel. That is, a disquiet in any jewel will be coded in every other jewel. What it indicates is that disquiet in any one creature occasions disquiet in other sentient creatures of sufficient awareness<sup>32</sup>. This in fact is an everyday experience of us: Negative emotions of others tend to affect us negatively. Recent studies in empirical psychology spreads sufficient proof to claim that one's observation or even imagination of another person in a particular emotional state automatically activates a representation of that state in the observer.

But it doesn't seem that we invariably empathise with others? Of course not, news about people suffering in a distant continent, for instance, does not move us much. Why is it so? Nāgārjuna would respond to this by pointing out one's lack of self – culture, one's self should be kept so transparent that it reflects everything in Nature. The Buddhist tradition speaks of extensive practices to widen the perspectives of an aspirant, to expand his self to encompass the whole of the universe. In brief, compassion is the consequence of inter-being. It in fact

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31 Ibid. P.10.

32 Ibid.

arises naturally from an enlightened who is aware of the *pratīyasamutpannatva* of events. History of Buddhist literature is replete with instances of Buddhist monks exhibiting *karuna* to thief's, robbers and to women of loose morals. This compassion for people who are conscientiously engaged in immoral acts, arises from one's awareness of the *samvrata satya*, which is dependent in nature. It is pretty different from a tutored morality, on the other, it's a natural outcome of one's awareness of the *svabhāva sūnyatva* of everything. An enlightened, who has escaped from the wheel of *pratīyasamutpada chakra* will have immense compassion for those who are caught up in it, and will always extend a hand to pull out his fellow beings, who are caught up in this wheel and being tormented by it. Their compassion to fellow beings extends from taking care of the physical well- being of fellow men to their metaphysical well- being, the story of the Buddhist monk Upagupta and Vāsavadatta is the best example for this<sup>33</sup>. In fact, their unconditional love and compassion have no limits, it extends to the whole universe, to everything sentient. Every act of theirs would naturally be for the well - being of the whole universe, they in fact, act keeping in mind the well- being of the whole of the universe.

It is criticised that the enlightened becomes compassionate out of self-interest, keeping the expansion of one's own self at the focus. This is footless, the Net of Indra undercuts the very nature of the distinction between self-interest and other-interest. Further it may also be criticised that by this maxim one should be concerned with the well-being of only those with whom one comes into contact, for that alone affects one's self. This again comes from those who are extrinsic to the tradition: The practitioners know how one is gradually elevated from the ground of *samvrata satya*, to the absolute *sūnyatva*, that provide them a more comprehensive view of the world, which in turn make them compassionate to the fellow beings. Small minds like that of ours might wonder how do we know what is best for the whole universe, but these are again doubts that arise in the minds of those who are confined to dry theories (*sūśka tarka*). Practice of austerities prescribed by the tradition will wipe out all such worries.

To sum up, Nāgārjuna's serious exercises in metaphysics and logic were only a prelude to the religious path, the *magga* that redeems one from eternal sorrow. It isn't enough to discover the nature of reality, our minds must assimilate the implications of this discovery, and our lives must change accordingly. The

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33 Kumaranasan, *karuna* ( Malayalam), Poorna Publications, 2017 edition. \_\_\_\_\_

pragmatic orientation of the thought is vivid: our realization that the absolute is *svabhāvasunya* and the empirical is *pratītyasamutpanna* would fill in us an irresistible compassion to all beings, a compassion that radically transforms our existence. The intellectual analysis thus, culminates in a new way of looking at things and behaving. Here we pass from knowledge to an inner accomplishment, and finally to active ethics.