Nāgārjuna's No-Thesis Statement
(*Vigraha-vyāvartanī* 29)
as an Absurd Consequence Revisited

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Abstract: Made in *Vigraha-vyāvartanī* verse 29, Nāgārjuna's claim that he does not have any thesis has long perplexed scholars as to both its meaning and the very reasonableness of its employment. In this paper I offer an alternative to the scholarly interpretations which assume that this claim can be abstracted from the context of the fictitious debate presented in the treatise. Rather than taking it to signal an actual standpoint of Nāgārjuna, I propose to read the no-thesis statement as an absurd consequence, part of an elaborate exchange which showcases the irrationality of a realist-antirealist debate.

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Recently, in his modestly titled paper "Reading notes on the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*", Eli Franco has brought much novelty to the study of Nāgārjuna's (ca. 150–250 CE) *Vigraha-vyāvartanī* (henceforth VV, with VVV used specifically to the prose *svavṛtti*[1]). Most crucially, Franco (2022: 125–128) has made a case for the exclusion of the Naiyāyikas from among the suspected opponents of the Mādhyamika in the VV, and argued for the possibility of assigning the second objection (verses 5–6) – concerned with epistemology and formulated from the position of one who appears to embrace four *pramāṇa*s – to a Buddhist (of an obscure affiliation). In the modern research of the VV, it has been generally assumed that the objections against the *śūnyatā-vāda*, which comprise the opening twenty-verse part of the text, are levelled by at least two adversaries, namely, an Ābhidharmika and a Naiyāyika.[2] In my previous publications concerned with this text, I considered Nāgārjuna to be dealing with a generalised opponent, specifically with an Ābhidharmika and – indeed – a Naiyāyika (and perhaps some other adversary of the Madhyamaka school, too) conflated into a single realist.[3] Before Franco, the Naiyāyika-*qua*-opponent was rejected by Christian Lindtner (who posited that Nāgārjuna engages with a single, Ābhidharmika opponent), albeit on rather weak grounds, i.e., that in the second objection, the opponent refers to the *pramāṇa* of reliable testimony with the term *āgama*, rather than with the Naiyāyika-used *śabda*.[4] Positing a single opponent (of a specific, although unknown, affiliation, and not a result

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[1]   The Sanskrit text is quoted after the edition by E.H. Johnston and A. Kunst printed in Bhattacharya (1998). Also consulted were Y. Yonezawa's transliteration of the Zha lu ms. and edition of the Tibetan translation (Yonezawa 2008).

[2]   See, e.g., Westerhoff (2010: 8 *et passim*).

[3]   Kania (2014: 17–18), Kania (2015: 137–138). This conflation would, per this interpretation, serve to highlight the effectiveness of Nāgārjuna's dialectical method to deconstruct every realist attempt to establish an ontology.

[4]   This observation serves as one of Lindtner's five "main" arguments for the identification of the Ābhidharmika as the sole opponent. For these arguments, see Lindtner (1982: 71). I shall not reproduce Lindtner's arguments here, but in passing, I shall propose an additional one, namely, that not only does the manner in which the exchange is presented in the text never suggest that the Mādhyamika is rebutting criticism from multiple parties, one at a time, but also the wording of selected objections and answers, and of the references to the opponent is such that it lends to the impression that the *uttara-pakṣin* debates the same *pūrva-pakṣin* throughout the whole text. Cf. first and foremost the consistent use of unqualified *bhavat* by the *uttara-pakṣin* when addressing the *pūrva-pakṣin*; also cf., e.g., VVV 55,1 ad VV 21: *atrôcyate | yat tāvad bhavatôktam*, which immediately follows the *ninth* objection (thus closing the *pūrva-pakṣa*) and introduces the answer to the *first* objection (thus opening the *uttara-pakṣa*), or the conjunctive use of *tāvat* introducing the second objection in verse 5 (VV 5ab: *pratyakṣeṇa hi tāvad yady upalabhya vinivartayasi bhāvān |* – "Now, if you reject [something] having apprehended [it] through perception [...]"), or the similar use of *ca* in verses 9 and 18 conjoining different objections. Moreover, in VV 59, which belongs to the reply to the fifth objection (VV 9), the proponent states that emptiness has been explained earlier – this has been done in VV 22, which belongs to the reply to the first objection (VV 1–4).

of a conflation of various adversaries) in the VV certainly makes the structure of the text appear much less curious. Per the multiple opponents interpretation, Nāgārjuna proceeds to counter the objections only having collected them into an uninterrupted list (despite their varying provenance), which appears, at least *prima facie*, to needlessly disrupt the flow of the debate, making it more complicated to follow the exchange, as the Mādhyamika proponent engages in a disputative simultaneous exhibition of a sort. With the number of opponents reduced to one, the *pūrva-pakṣa*, however long and complex content-wise, transforms into a single utterance, thus following, together with the *uttara-pakṣa*, an easily understandable dialectical narrative not uncommon in Indian philosophical literature. Also, and perhaps more importantly (especially hermeneutically), the number of *dialogues* in which Nāgārjuna is engaged is reduced to one, thereby making the objections much more interconnected. The same holds true with regard to the answers, as – to put it briefly – even though these are (obviously) put forth by a single proponent, a point made in response to one of the objections is a point made to the author of *all* of the objections.

On another note, Franco hypothesises that the VV is inspired by an actual debate. He notes that he cannot prove this, but he does offer certain remarks to account for this impression. One of these is that the misunderstanding of emptiness manifested in the *pūrva-pakṣa* is likely a genuine misunderstanding by a real adversary of the Mādhyamika, and not one merely ascribed by Nāgārjuna to an imagined opponent (Franco 2022: 123). My own previous impression, in turn, had been that the VV constitutes a record of a fictitious debate, and that the realist-antirealist exchange (an idealised one, what with the multitude of suppositions made for the sake of the dispute) serves as a vehicle for demonstrating the futility of rational dispute (marred with the problem of incommensurability of philosophical theories) and the indefensibility of propositions assertoric of reality (as displayed by the destructive force of *prasaṅga* argumentation), guiding the Mahāyānist practitioner towards the experience of the ineffability of *paramârtha-satya*. The positing of a single opponent (and of a Buddhist one), reduces, I admit, the degree of idealisation. Nāgārjuna may have both recorded actual criticism levelled against the *śūnyatā-vāda* within the Buddhist monastic circles, and anticipated other objections (or at least designed some for the sake of argument), so that his treatise serves both to defend the *śūnyatā-vāda* and to further elaborate on what has been taught in the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*. Whether one of these aims is subordinate to the other I could not say.

The paper by Franco has sparked anew my own interest in the VV, in particular in that it has necessitated a reconsideration of some of my assumptions and arguments. In this essay, I specifically wish to revisit my reading of the famous verse 29. The verse in translation is as follows:

VV 29. If I had some thesis (*pratijñā*), then this fault (*doṣa*) would be mine. But I do not have a thesis, thus there is no fault of mine.[5]

The third *pāda* contains the so-called no-thesis statement, or no-thesis view, which has perplexed Mādhyamika commentators[6] and modern scholars as to its meaning and – perhaps more profoundly – the questionable reasonableness of its employment (a sledgehammer used to crack a nut, as Jan WESTERHOFF [2009: 27] sees it). FRANCO (2022: 124) refers to it as "one of the most productive statements in modern hermeneutics of Madhyamaka". Indeed, for decades, verse 29 has attracted significant attention and at times spurred scholarly exchanges spanning years. However, even though much has been said on verse 29 (and even more on that which has been said on verse 29), the interpretations put forward have not been all that multifarious. In fact, generally, they can be put into two baskets: either Nāgārjuna declares he does not have a thesis *of a certain sort* (i.e., one that would posit the real existence of entities;[7] I shall refer to this as the no-such-thesis interpretation), or he declares the thesis to be ultimately non-existent (on the *paramârtha* level;[8] henceforth no-real-thesis interpretation). The no-thesis statement has been largely understood against the backdrop of the Madhyamaka philosophical enterprise, with less attention being paid to (the possibility of restricting) the context of the statement to the VV alone. To support the no-such-thesis interpretation, Candrakīrti's (ca. 600–650) differentiation between different sorts of *pratijñā*s in the *Prasanna-padā*[9] has often been cited, while the no-real-thesis interpretation is, obviously, rooted in the *dve satye* theory, the backbone of the *śūnyatā-vāda*.[10]

In a 2014-published concise essay concerned with VV 29, I argued that Nāgārjuna does not actually make a claim (one that could or should be abstracted from the context of the debate) that he puts forward no thesis, rather, he merely presents to his opponent an absurd consequence which follows from the acknowledging of the opponent's interpretation of the thesis of universal emptiness. In that essay, I highlighted the problem of the irrationality of a debate between an antirealist and a realist who employ mutually incommensurable linguistic frameworks

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[5]   VV 29: *yadi kācana pratijñā syān me tata eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ | nâsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naîvâsti me doṣaḥ ||*

[6]   For selected Tibetan interpretations see RUEGG (1983) and LOPEZ (1994). See also WESTERHOFF (2009: 26–33).

[7]   See, e.g., RUEGG (1986).

[8]   See, e.g., OETKE (1991).

[9]   RUEGG (1983: 213–214), RUEGG (1986: 232–233), WESTERHOFF (2009: 35–36). Westerhoff argues also for a connection between the no-thesis statement and the equation of *śūnyatā* in the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* with rejection of *dṛṣṭi*s, views.

[10] Not falling under the two categories is the arguably obsolete reading by T.R.V. Murti, who understood Nāgārjuna's denial of having a thesis quite literally, on the *saṃvṛti* level, viz., that Nāgārjuna has no proposition to make, and no arguments to put forth (MURTI 1955: 131–132).

(as the definition of "to be" – to be applied in every other notion – remains an unresolved issue for the two). My argument, however, relied partly on my assessment of the peculiar structuring of the text as being a *conditio sine qua non* for the carrying out of the entire debate, with the alternative (a sequence of objection – answer – objection, etc.) assumed to be inevitably leading the exchange to a dead end following Nāgārjuna's reply to the first objection (Kania 2014: 20–21). While the structure remains the same and can thus act as *a condition* for the debate, the loss of its peculiarity weakens the argument from structure. I do maintain that, to borrow from the title of my previous essay, Nāgārjuna does not really mean it when he says he does not have a thesis, and below I offer a revision of my proposition to read the verse in this way. In doing so, I follow or take into account some remarks and analyses by Franco, but in the end, my interpretation of verse 29 considerably differs from the no-real-thesis interpretation endorsed by Franco. I do not, however, enter into polemics with Franco with regard to the no-thesis statement, nor with other scholars. I do not seek to weigh in much on the validity of the no-such-thesis or the no-real-thesis interpretations, as I take a significantly divergent approach to the issue. And even though I have a major problem with both of them, I do not consider this problem to render them indefensible.

To explain, my problem with the no-such-thesis and the no-real-thesis interpretations is that both of them entail that the *uttara-pakṣin* fails to offer an *effective* response to the objection by the *pūrva-pakṣin*. To analyse verse 29 from the perspective of the whole of the Madhyamaka project is to deprive it of the dialectical narrative in which it is embedded. Namely, to whatever extent the VV may be a vehicle for a *śūnyatā-vāda* exposition hidden under the façade of a philosophical dispute (and however idealised this dispute may be), the text remains a record of a dispute. This dispute is held on the *saṃvṛti* level, and on this level Nāgārjuna comes to be accused of contradicting his own words. The crux of verse 29 is not the no-thesis statement, but its consequent, i.e., the statement of not being guilty of committing a fault (*doṣa*), or, shall we say, the no-fault statement. Nāgārjuna's denial of having a thesis (whether one of a specific kind, or a really existent one) compares, in my opinion, not to the use of a sledgehammer, but rather to the drawing of a wild card – technically, it works, but it is hardly impressive. The weakness of denying having a thesis of a specific kind is that this argument is not immediately understandable to the opponent and audience. The VV is not only a record of an exchange in which Nāgārjuna is supposed to dispel criticism (dispel, not dodge it), as the title of the treatise says, it is also a text *elaborated upon* by Nāgārjuna in an auto-commentary which serves to clarify the import of the verses (and which often does so by means of tedious paraphrasing as if for the sake of putting forward any commentary at all). Here, for some reason, the auto-commentary offers no hint whatsoever regarding the special use of the term *pratijñā*.

It is certainly curious that one of the most puzzling passages by Nāgārjuna to have come down to us, if not the most puzzling, is found in a text which is accompanied by a *svavṛtti*. In the debate presented in the VV, the opponent is not given the chance to raise the obvious questions: "What do you mean?" and "How does this lift the accusation of said fault?" In an actual debate, those questions would have been raised. Next, as per the no-real-thesis interpretation, Nāgārjuna catapults himself to the *paramârtha* level (in truth, he seems to be free to do so almost anytime during the debate), which, again, would not work in an actual confrontation. The denial of having a thesis on the *paramârtha* level after having been accused of committing a fault on the *saṃvṛti* level, the level of the debate, is similar to not acknowledging one's own defeat in a debate and declaring that debates are not really existent, hence none really took place. I cannot, however, reject the no-such-thesis and the no-real-thesis interpretations on this basis, as I cannot assume that Nāgārjuna could not have simply put forth a flimsy argument. I therefore mostly abstain from making further remarks on these interpretations, not to mention undertaking a detailed investigation of their specific formulations. Below, I set forth my revised, and enlarged, commentary on *nâsti ca mama pratijñā*, offering, first, some initial observations and discussions, and then tracing the debate's winding path leading to the no-thesis (and the no-fault) statement(s). I provide the Sanskrit text and accompany it with my English translation only when I deem it necessary and/or relevant[11] (the reason I pay relatively more attention to the beginning of the text is that it is in those first verses and *svavṛtti* that the stage is set for Nāgārjuna's puzzling claims).

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In the VV, the Mādhyamika proponent defends the *śūnyatā-vāda* against criticism put forward in the *pūrva-pakṣa* by an opponent who, as Franco (2022: 123) has observed, engages in the destructive, *vitaṇḍā* mode of debate, that is, they seek to dismantle the proponent's position without making a case for an alternative one. Indeed, not only is the opponent not identified by Nāgārjuna, but also their position (assuming they have one) can hardly be reconstructed from the objections alone. Among the bits that we do learn of the opponent is that they rely on a realist conceptual framework to *interpret* the implications of the *śūnyatā-vāda*. For the opponent, to be devoid of own-being (*svabhāva*) is to be devoid of real existence; an empty thing is not different from an unreal, imagined thing.

The very first objection (VV 1–4) is at its outset directed against *stating* that all things are empty of own-being. The opening verse of the VV says:

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[11]   Omitted, among other things, is the six-pointed controversy from VVV *ad* VV 2, as even though it glaringly showcases the disputants' reliance on suppositions and anticipatory strategy, it does not introduce any new context for the analysis of VV 29.

> VV 1. If the own-being of all entities is nowhere to be found, [then] your statement is devoid of own-being [and] is unable to refute own-being.[12]

The content of the statement is supplied in the *svavṛtti*: "All entities are empty."[13] The word for "statement" used in VV(V) 1 is *vacana*. Although this word is used throughout the whole of the VV,[14] its referent is not exclusively denoted by it. The Sanskrit *vākya* and *vacas* are also employed a few times to refer to the statement,[15] and since these two are found not only in the verses, but also in the *svavṛtti*, the interchangeable use of *vacana*, *vākya* and *vacas* is hardly *metri causa*. These are not special terms; they simply denote speech, the *act* of it, and not specifically its *content*.[16] This is made all too clear in the *svavṛtti* on VV 1, wherein the opponent identifies the operation of the chest, the throat, the mouth, the tongue and so on among the entities to be posited as conditions for the arising of the statement. Needless to say, the *idea* that is expressed in the words of the statement is not the product of one's chest etc. And what is expressed in the statement is a *thesis*, specifically, the proposition that all entities are empty. The statement and the thesis are substantially different. This is explicitly conveyed in the text itself. The core of the first objection is the ostensibly hopeless dilemma the proponent has to face. Either the statement itself is empty (VV 1), or it is not (VV 2, see below). If the first, then there is no statement at all (it is empty of own-being, which equals being non-existent). If the second, then the *thesis* put forth is not true insofar as not all things are empty (the statement remains a real entity, the abstract thesis it communicates becomes invalidated):

> VV 2ab. Suppose that this statement is possessed of own-being. [In this case,] the aforesaid thesis (*pratijñā*) of yours is abandoned (*hata*).[17]

Specifically, in this case, the thesis is to be charged with the fault of inconsistency (*vaiṣamikatva*), as is explained in the *svavṛtti*:

> You may even think: "Let there not be this fault (*doṣa*)!",[18] [and say:] "This statement is possessed of own-being, and is thus not empty, from which it follows that it [is able to] negate the own-being of all entities." To this we say: If it is so, then the aforesaid thesis of yours that all entities are empty is abandoned. What is more, your statement is included in all

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[12] VV 1: *sarveṣāṃ bhāvānāṃ sarvatra na vidyate svabhāvaś cet | tvad-vacanam asvabhāvaṃ na nivartayituṃ svabhāvam alam ||*

[13] VVV 42,15 *ad* VV 1: *[ś]ūnyāḥ sarva-bhāvā[ḥ]*.

[14] In VVV 2.

[15] The former in VV 4 and VVV thereon, the latter in VV 21 and VVV thereon.

[16] Bʜᴀᴛᴛᴀᴄʜᴀʀʏᴀ (1998: 95 *et passim*) rightly renders the three words with "statement". Wᴇsᴛᴇʀʜᴏғғ (2010: 19 *et passim*) renders them with semantically charged "assertion".

[17] VV 2ab: *atha sasvabhāvam etad vākyaṃ pūrvā hatā pratijñā te |*

[18] See the first horn of the dilemma (VV 1).

entities. When all entities are empty, why would your statement be not empty, so that, due to not being empty it could negate the own-being of all entities? [...][19]

The term *pratijñā* makes here its first appearance in the VV. It is clearly differentiated from the statement (which is the vehicle for the thesis). As mentioned earlier, much has been said on the meaning behind this term, however, the authors of modern interpretations (myself included, I must confess) have not paid enough attention to the use of the terms *pakṣa* and *vāda* in the VV, and their relation with *pratijñā*. I shall return to this issue later on.

A line of defence is next suggested to the proponent in verse 3:

VV 3. You may think that [the statement] is similar to "[Do] not [make] a sound!"[20], but this is not tenable, because in this case, an existing (or present, *sat*) sound would prevent a future [one].[21]

The *svavṛtti* elaborates:

You may think that by saying: "Do not make a sound!", someone would themselves produce a sound, and by means of that sound would prevent [a different] sound [from being produced, and that] in the same way the empty statement: "All entities are empty" would prevent own-being of all entities. To this we say: This, too, is untenable. Why? Because in this case, an existing sound would prevent a future sound. [And] here, it is not that an existing statement of yours negates own-being of all entities. Because, on your view (*tava matena*), the statement is non-existent, and own-being of all entities is non-existent, too. Therefore, [to say that] this [statement] is like "[Do] not [make] a sound!" is a defective proposition.[22]

The opponent advances a ready-made reply to an anticipated objection by the proponent. This reply cannot work, as the opponent's supposition is grounded

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[19] VVV 43,11–17 *ad* VV 2: *athâpi manyase mā bhūd eṣa doṣa iti sasvabhāvam etad vākyaṃ sasvabhāvatvāc câśūnyaṃ tasmād anena sarva-bhāva-svabhāvaḥ pratiṣiddha ity atra brūmaḥ | yady evaṃ yā te pūrvā pratijñā śūnyāḥ sarva-bhāvā iti hatā sā | kiṃ cânyat | sarva-bhāvântar-gataṃ ca tvad-vacanam | kasmāc chūnyeṣu sarva-bhāveṣu tvad-vacanam aśūnyaṃ yenâśūnyatvāt sarva-bhāva-svabhāvaḥ pratiṣiddhaḥ | [...].*

[20] See Franco (2022: 122) for the identification of the likely source of this example.

[21] VV 3: *mā śabda-vad ity etat syāt te buddhir na caîtad upapannam | śabdena hy atra satā bhaviṣyato vāraṇaṃ tasya ||*

[22] VVV 45,3–9 *ad* VV 3: *syāt te buddhiḥ yathā nāma kaścid brūyān mā śabdaṃ kārṣīr iti svayam eva śabdaṃ kuryāt tena ca śabdena tasya śabdasya vyāvartanaṃ kriyetaîvam eva śūnyāḥ sarva-bhāvā iti śūnyena vacanena sarva-bhāva-svabhāvasya vyāvartanaṃ kriyata iti | atra vayaṃ brūmaḥ | etad apy anupapannam | kiṃ kāraṇam | satā hy atra śabdena bhaviṣyataḥ śabdasya pratiṣedhaḥ kriyate | na punar iha bhavataḥ satā vacanena sarva-bhāva-svabhāva-pratiṣedhaḥ kriyate | tava hi matena vacanam apy asat sarva-bhāva-svabhāvo 'py asat* (read after Yonezawa 2008: 224. Ed.: *asan*) *| tasmād ayaṃ mā śabda-vad iti viṣamôpanyāsaḥ |*

in an erroneous notion of the opposite party's position. Emptiness entails non-existence on the view of the *opponent*, not of the proponent. Still, this passage makes even clearer the distinction between the statement and the thesis. To explain, the statement "Do not make a sound!" is an utterance – a physical object in the shape of a sequence of *sounds* – with the meaning of prohibition which can be understood by those hearing it, thereby preventing them from making a sound. According to the opponent, the proponent may see the statement "All entities are empty" as an utterance that is also performative, i.e., one that carries out the negation of own-being. This comparison would, thus, serve to eliminate the fault of inconsistency, because there is nothing logically inconsistent in making a sound in order to establish silence. The problem is that, per the doctrine of emptiness *as the opponent understands it*, the statement is empty and thus non-existent – hence it performs nothing. If there was nothing at all, then the thesis that there is nothing at all would be true – but there would be no one to put it forth in a statement.

And lastly, verse 4 brings the first objection to a close with what would come to be directly countered with the no-thesis and no-fault statements:

> VV 4. One could think: "A negation of a negation is also [rejected] this way". This is not true. It is your thesis (*pratijñā*) which is thus criticised on account of a special characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*), not mine.[23]

The *svavṛtti* elaborates:

> You may think: "In the same manner, a negation of a negation is also untenable, [and] in that case it is untenable that you negate the statement negating the own-being of all entities". To this we say: That is also not true. Why? Because the special characteristic of a thesis is obtained for you, not for me. You say: "All entities are empty", not I. The aforesaid position (*pakṣa*) is not mine. In that case, what you said is not [tenable], viz., that this being so, a negation of a negation is also untenable.[24]

The conclusion to the first objection has led to some very different readings, which is perhaps partly owing to the text of the *svavṛtti* as provided in Johnston and Kunst's edition being rather problematic; the edition reads: *tava hi pratijñā-lakṣaṇa-prāptaṃ na mama*.[25] Per this reading, the compound does not actually

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[23] *pratiṣedha-pratiṣedho 'py evam iti mataṃ bhavet tad asad eva | evaṃ tava pratijñā lakṣaṇato dūṣyate na mama ||*

[24] VVV 45,14–46,3 *ad* VV 4: *syāt te buddhiḥ pratiṣedha-pratiṣedho 'py anenaiva kalpenânupapannas tatra yad bhavān sarva-bhāva-svabhāva-pratiṣedha-vacanaṃ pratiṣedhayati tad anupapannam iti | atra vayaṃ brūmaḥ | etad apy asad eva | kasmāt | tava hi pratijñā-lakṣaṇaṃ prāptaṃ* (read after Franco 2002: 122; ed.: *pratijñā-lakṣaṇa-prāptaṃ*) *na mama | bhavān bravīti śūnyāḥ sarva-bhāvā iti nâham | pūrvakaḥ pakṣo na mama | tatra yad uktaṃ pratiṣedha-pratiṣedho 'py evaṃ saty anupapanna iti tan na |*

[25] Bhattacharya (1998: 98) offers the following translation of this *lectio*: "Because the

qualify anything within the sentence, and the context of earlier sentences does not immediately suggest a qualificand. The textual situation is further complicated by the *lectiones* of the Zha lu ms. consulted by Yonezawa, and of the Tibetan version edited by Yonezawa. The Zha lu ms. reads: *tava hi pratijñā-lakṣaṇa-prāptam etan na mama* (Yonezawa 2008: 226). Here, the pronoun is clearly the qualificand, but the sentence does not allow for a sensible translation. The Tibetan translation has an equivalent for *etan*, as it reads: *dam bcas pa'i mtshan nyid kyis 'di 'thob* [*kyi...*], but it does not make good sense either.[26] I follow Franco's (2022: 122) emendation to *pratijñā-lakṣaṇaṃ prāptam*. I also follow Franco's proposition to read *lakṣaṇa* as referring here to the special characteristic (Franco: "characteristic mark") of a "formal thesis in a debate" (Franco 2022: 122–123; although, as said earlier, in the end I offer a different interpretation of the problem discussed here).

The objection here is two-layered. First, the proponent's thesis, expressed in the statement "All entities are empty", is defective when considered in terms of a formal thesis to be advanced in a proof. Having been reduced by the opponent to: "Everything is non-existent", it is considered to be formally defective in that it implies its own invalidity, because, as part of "everything", the statement "All entities are empty" is non-existent, and a non-existent statement cannot negate anything. Second, anticipating an objection by the proponent, the opponent observes that the objection is built upon the implications of the doctrine of emptiness, and not on the philosophical stance of the opponent (if they have one). The proponent cannot turn this argument against the opponent – and claim that if the proponent's statement is rendered ineffective due to being non-existent as everything is non-existent, then its negation is ineffective as well, since it, too, belongs to the non-existent "everything" – because the opponent does not hold all entities to be non-existent. The opponent, as they see it, merely showcases the absurdity of such a proposition (I say more on this below).

The reply to the first objection[27] is fairly straightforward up to verse 29[28] and shall be discussed in less detail.

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objection applies [only] to the specific character of your proposition, not to that of mine", while Westerhoff (2010: 21) renders the sentence as: "Since the specific characteristic of the thesis applies to your thesis, not to mine".

26 Yonezawa (2008: 227). Per the apparatus, the pronoun *'di* is found in the Derge, Narthang, and Cone versions, but is missing in the Peking version (and has been omitted in the 1929-published edition of the Tibetan translation by Giuseppe Tucci).

27 Direct replies to specific verses are distributed as follows: in VV 21–23 to VV 1, in VV 24 to VV 2, in VV 25–28 to VV 3, and in VV 29 to VV 4.

28 Even though some of the passages might demand a closer investigation (the *nirmitaka* and *māyā-puruṣa* metaphors in VV[V] 23, in particular), the gist of the argument put forward in verse 21–28 is easily comprehensible.

To the objection that the thesis of emptiness implies its own invalidity because the statement "All entities are empty", belonging to all entities, is empty and thus non-existent (V 1), the proponent replies (VV 21) that the statement is indeed empty, but this does not entail its non-existence (the meaning of emptiness is then elaborated on in VV[V] 22). A non-existent fire cannot burn anything real (VVV 1), to be sure, but the negation of own-being of entities should rather be compared to, e.g., an illusory entity acting on a different illusory entity, both of them being empty (VV 23).

The above reply accordingly serves to reject the second horn of the dilemma (V 2). By admitting that the statement "All entities are empty" is itself empty, the proponent counters the accusation of inconsistency. "All" means "all", the statement is, too, devoid of own-being. Verse 24, which rejects this accusation, contains a most valuable remark:

> Therefore, there is no abandoning of position (*vāda*) on my part.[29]

This verse is a direct reply to VV 2 wherein the opponent states that should the statement "All entities are empty" be declared autonomously existent, the thesis it contains would be abandoned (VV 2b: *pūrvā hatā pratijñā te*). The term *vāda* appears in the VV almost as frequently as the term *pratijñā*. It is used twice in the standard meaning of a controversy,[30] but elsewhere it seems to me to be used interchangeably with *pratijñā*. If the above reference does not immediately point to this interchangeable use, then three other passages certainly do so, beginning with the *svavṛtti* on the above quoted passage. In VVV 58,15–16 *ad* VV 24 we find the following paraphrase of VV 2b with *pratijñā* replaced by *vāda*: *yad bhavatôktaṃ vāda-hānis te* [...] *iti tan na*. Next, in VV 58cd, the proponent says: *yadi hi sato yady asato dvidhâpi te hīyate vādaḥ*, which is paraphrased in VVV 77,9–10 as: *yadi hi satas tan-nāma yady asata ubhayathâpi pratijñā hīyate*. And similarly, in VV 62 the proponent asks: *pratiṣedhaḥ sata iti te nanv eṣa vihīyate vādaḥ*, while in the commentary (VVV 77,13–14) we read: *yā tarhi te pratijñā sataḥ pratiṣedho bhavati nâsata iti sā hīnā.* The (non-)abandoning of a *vāda*/*pratijñā* is not the only context wherein the term *vāda* is used in this meaning. Cf. VV 38ab: *utpadyamāna eva prakāśayaty agnir ity asad-vādaḥ*.[31] Also used synonymously with *pratijñā* and *vāda*, albeit only once, is the term *pakṣa*, as evidenced by the earlier quoted *svavṛtti* on VV 4 (*pūrvakaḥ pakṣo na mama*, said in reference to the thesis of emptiness of all entities). From all this it follows that, first, *pratijñā*, outside of the context of it obtaining (or not) the special characteristic of a formal thesis, is used in reference to a philosophical proposition or stance, whether embraced by one's own party, or ascribed to the opposite party,

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[29]   VV 24b: *tasmān na vāda-hānir me.*

[30]   In VVV *ad* VV 2, and VVV *ad* VV 23.

[31]   See also VV 33 and the *svavṛtti* thereon.

even if only provisionally; and second, that rejecting the accusation of committing the fault of inconsistency, the Mādhyamika proponent acknowledges having a thesis. The no-thesis statement cannot be thus understood to refer to the rejection of a thesis on the *saṃvṛti* level.[32] I opine, moreover, that the no-such-thesis and no-real-thesis interpretations are slightly weakened by this observation, as now the opponent might raise the question of the consistency of the proponent's statements (also, the lack of proper exposition of the proponent's standpoint does not help evade such an attack and is thus doubly perplexing).

Moving to VV 3, the proponent rejects the example suggested by the opponent as to-be-employed in defence of the thesis of emptiness of all entities. As FRANCO (2022: 129) observes, the proponent especially disagrees with the illustration of the act of preventing (Franco: "obstruction").[33] A sound might prevent another sound from arising, whereas the statement "All entities are empty" does not *prevent* autonomous existence of beings – it may, however, destroy another person's notion (*grāha*) of the autonomous existence of beings (VV 27).

We arrive now at the no-thesis and no-fault statements. Nāgārjuna provides the following commentary on verse 29 (quoted above):

> And if I had some thesis, then the aforesaid fault as mentioned by you would be mine, because for me, [the thesis] would obtain the special characteristic of a thesis. [But] I do not have a thesis. Therefore, when all entities are empty, completely extinguished (*atyantôpaśānta*), and devoid of [intrinsic] nature (*prakṛti-vivikta*), whence [would] a thesis [come]?, whence [would] the obtainment of the special characteristic of a thesis [come]?, whence [would] the fault related to the obtainment of the special characteristic of a thesis [come]? In this case, what you have said, [namely]: "Since for you, [the thesis] obtains the special characteristic of a thesis, there is a fault of yours", is not tenable.[34]

This is a curious elaboration insofar as instead of clarifying the import of the verse, it only further complicates its interpretation. Most of the commentary merely rephrases the verse, except for the middle part, which *prima facie* indicates the sudden transference of the analysis to the *paramârtha* level. The way I understand it, however, is that the proponent *invites* the opponent to trace and verify the reasoning, as if the almost rhetorical questions asked here were

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[32]   The interpretation by Murti (mentioned in fn. 14) is thus discarded.

[33]   See also Franco's most valuable remarks on verse 28 (pp. 128–129), which need not be reproduced here.

[34]   VVV 61,16–22: *yadi ca kācin mama pratijñā syāt tato mama pratijñā-lakṣaṇa-prāptavāt pūrvako doṣo yathā tvayôktas tathā mama syāt | na mama kācid asti pratijñā | tasmāt sarva-bhāveṣu śūnyeṣv atyantôpaśānteṣu prakṛti-vivikteṣu kutaḥ pratijñā | kutaḥ pratijñā-lakṣaṇa-prāptiḥ | kutaḥ pratijñā-lakṣaṇa-prāpti-kṛto doṣaḥ | tatra yad bhavatôktaṃ tava pratijñā-lakṣaṇa-prāptavāt tavaîva doṣa iti tan na |*

rooted in the opponent's stance ("this being so, whence would a thesis come, correct?"). I claim there is a certain overtone of absurdity about this passage, especially evident when we follow the implication backwards. To explain, there is no fault related to the obtainment of the *lakṣaṇa* of a *pratijñā*, because there is no obtainment of the *lakṣaṇa* of a *pratijñā*, and that is, in turn, because there is no *pratijñā* – and this is because, well, ultimately nothing is really existent. The no-thesis statement thus elaborated seems almost provocative, as – unless we read it as having the said overtone – it appears to attempt to reject the accusation of inconsistency by declaring that there are no inconsistencies in what we say, as we do not say anything at all (apart, obviously, from what we *have* said thus far in the debate, before we have been accused of said fault).

I propose to read the no-thesis statement as merely presenting an absurd consequence of the opponent's interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness (the interpretation upon which the objections are invariably and inevitably built). The use of such a presentation as a dialectical tool would not be an isolated case, even in the scope of the first objection/reply alone. The recorded exchange makes constant use of the provisional incorporation of elements of the opposite party's conceptual system into one's own system, which results either with absurdities, or with easily-countered suppositions, but which is necessary in order to *interpret* the words of the opposite party.

Early in the *uttara-pakṣa*, the proponent accuses the opponent of having misunderstood the doctrine of emptiness (VVV 56,1 *ad* VV 22: *śūnyatârthaṃ ca bhavān bhāvānām anavasāya* [...]) as implying the non-existence of everything, when what is in fact meant by emptiness is the dependent existence (*pratītya-bhāva*) of things, i.e. the dependence of the manifestation of a thing on the manifestation of its causes and conditions.[35] To the proponent, own-being entails autonomous existence, and a thing is never truly autonomous, hence it is not possessed of own-being. To the opponent, on the other hand, a thing either is an autonomous existent possessed of own-being, or it does not exist at all. This is hardly a case of mere misunderstanding. To accuse the *śūnyatā-vāda* of postulating ontological nihilism does not imply that the adversary has carried out a perfunctory or failed investigation into this doctrine. Should the opponent have the chance to respond to the accusation of misunderstanding the *śūnyatā-vāda*, they would likely respond with: "This is what it *means to me*" – just as the proponent responds to the example suggested in VV 3 with "This is not our example", and "To us, this is a non-example."[36]

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[35]   VVV 56,6–7 *ad* VV 22: *yadi hi svabhāvato bhāvā bhaveyuḥ pratyākhyāyâpi hetu-pratyayaṃ ca bhaveyuḥ | na caîvaṃ bhavanti |* – "For if entities would exist based on [their] own-being, they could exist even having removed [their] causes and conditions. And they do not exist this way."

[36]   VVV 59,1 *ad* VV 25: *nâpy ayam asmākaṃ dṛṣṭāntaḥ*, VV 59,19 *ad* VV 26: *adṛṣṭānta evâyam*.

In the very opening of the text, the opponent states that if it follows from the denial that *svabhāva* exists in its causes and conditions or separately from them that entities are empty,[37] then the same holds true for the statement: "All entities are empty", namely, it does not exist in its causes and conditions or separately from them either, and is thus empty.[38] For the opponent, this serves as the basis of a valid objection that the statement cannot negate *svabhāva*, as it is simply not there. This objection, however, is necessarily put forward in the form of a demonstration of an absurd consequence, as the opponent cannot propose that the proponent's statement is unable to negate anything *because it is non-existent* – since from the opponent's perspective it *does* exist. This can be illustrated as follows. The opponent posits that (A) entities really exist based on own-being. The proponent posits that (B) own-being does not exist either in its causes and conditions, or separately from them. The opponent provisionally accepts B into their own conceptual system, and the result of this is, first, that (C) the proponent's statement is not found to exist in its causes and conditions or separately from them; and second, that from C it follows that (D) the proponent's statement is non-existent.

In the *uttara-pakṣa*, the proponent responds by saying that if C is true, then it follows that (E) emptiness is established.[39] The problem is that C is not a position of the opponent. For the opponent, both C and D are absurd as they are true in the opponent's conceptual system if and only if B is provisionally accepted in it, and the provisional acceptance of B has all-pervading repercussions in this system, namely, it follows from it that there are no entities existent anywhere whatsoever.

The dilemma presented in the first objection (either your statement is non-existent, or your thesis is false) is part of an objection which is certainly valid in the conceptual system of the opponent. It is, however, not valid for the proponent, because for the proponent emptiness does not entail non-existence. The example introduced by the opponent in VV 3 as part of an anticipated reply by the proponent does not make good sense in the proponent's system either. Nonetheless, even though the proponent does not need to resort to the employment of such examples, as the dilemma is no dilemma at all, a "correct" example is still put forward (empty negates empty), and it is one that could not possibly work in the opponent's conceptual system.

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[37] VVV 42,5–7 *ad* VV 1: *yadi sarveṣāṃ bhāvānāṃ hetau pratyayeṣu ca hetu-pratyaya-sāmagryāṃ ca pṛthak ca sarvatra svabhāvo na vidyata iti kṛtvā śūnyāḥ sarva-bhāvā iti |*

[38] VVV 42,14–17: *yady evaṃ tavâpi vacanaṃ yad etac chūnyāḥ sarva-bhāvā iti tad api śūnyam | kiṃ kāraṇam | tad api hetau nâsti mahā-bhūteṣu saṃprayukteṣu viprayukteṣu vā pratyayeṣu nâsti [...].*

[39] VV 21: *hetu-pratyaya-sāmagryāṃ ca pṛthak câpi mad-vaco na yadi | nanu śūnyatvaṃ siddhaṃ bhāvānām asvabhāvatvāt ||*

Now, the opponent's objection in VV 4 is a perfect example of the employment of the method in question. The opponent explicitly states that their objection is built upon the absurd result of a provisional acceptance of the proponent's thesis. To explain, from the provisional acceptance of (A) all entities are empty, it follows in the opponent's system that (B) nothing exists. The opponent then states that (C) a non-existent negation is ineffective. If both B and C are true, then (D) the statement "All entities are empty" is ineffective (because it is non-existent, and because it is a negation). The opponent now supposes that the proponent might use this argument against them, and say that from C it follows that (E) the negation of D is ineffective. This is where the exchange becomes more complex than the one illustrated just above. Indeed, C is always true in the conceptual system of the opponent – if there is no statement of negation, then there is no negation. But for E to be true, it needs to follow from B *and* C, and B is accepted by the opponent only provisionally, as it is not held by the opponent that nothing exists. Things do exist – based on their own-being – including the statement: "All entities are empty". When the opponent says that the thesis of emptiness is not theirs, they wish to emphasise that they are merely presenting an absurd consequence of the provisional acceptance of this thesis.

The proponent's reply in VV(V) 29 may be seen as employing the same method. The opponent accuses the proponent of putting forward a thesis that implies its own contradiction. As a formal thesis, it is defective. The proponent does not need to resort to the transference of the subject to the *paramârtha* level. The proponent does not even need to respond to this objection, as it has been already shown earlier in the *uttara-pakṣa* that there is no contradiction, and the ascribing of the fault stems from the misunderstanding of the *śūnyatā-vāda* (this point, however,[40] obviously cannot be reiterated over and over again). To my understanding, the proponent eventually decides to play the opponent's game. If it follows from (A) all entities being empty that (B) nothing exists, then from B not only follows that (C) the statement "All entities are empty" is non-existent, but also that (D) the thesis of emptiness is non-existent. A chain of consequents is then presented in the *svavṛtti*: all entities are empty, completely extinguished and devoid of intrinsic nature → there is no thesis → there is no obtainment of the special characteristic of a thesis → there is no fault related to the obtainment of the special characteristic of a thesis. Nāgārjuna considers the ascribing of said fault as absurd, and he responds accordingly by demonstrating an absurd consequence.[41]

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[40]   I.e., that the realist opponent does not comprehend what the antirealist actually wishes to convey.

[41]   For a reply made in an exactly the same tone, see VV 63, wherein Nāgārjuna (in response to VV 12) denies that he denies anything. This is too an absurd consequence of the provisional acceptance of emptiness of all entities understood as implying that nothing exists.

If we read the first part of the text (VV 1–20) as constituting a single utterance by a single *pūrva-pakṣin*, then, as said earlier, the replies to the specific objections become more interconnected, as they now, too, belong to a single utterance. Verse 29 is followed by a statement which serves as an introduction to a twenty-two-verse-long direct reply to the second objection (VV 5–6) concerned with the theory of knowledge and the realness of *pramāṇa*s (which, after all, are said to be empty just like everything else). In the initial verse of the reply to the second objection, the proponent elects to follow the path of the earlier verses of the *uttara-pakṣa*, and offers the following reply to the objection that he cannot reject an object having apprehended it through perception, since perception – being empty – is not real (VV 5[42]):

> VV 30. If I apprehended something by means of perception or other [*pramāṇa*], then I would affirm [it] or reject [it]. But because it (i.e., perception) is non-existent, this is a non-objection to me.[43]

The overtone of absurdity carries over to verse 30. Beginning with verse 31, however, Nāgārjuna builds a complex criticism of the different attempts to establish *pramāṇa*s, thus leaving verse 30 as an isolated argument, designed merely to demonstrate the absurdities of a realist-antirealist debate.

Indeed, much of the debate consists in the two parties declaring that they do not claim what the opposite party assumes they claim. Should the debate be a purely fictitious one, Nāgārjuna could be understood as implicitly indicating the irrationality of such a debate. And should it go back to an actual debate, then in the VV, Nāgārjuna would be giving testimony of said irrationality.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

VV[V]   Nāgārjuna: *Vigraha-vyāvartanī[-vṛtti]*. Sanskrit edition by Elgin H. Johnston and Arnold Kunst in: BHATTACHARYA (1998: 33–86).

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[42] VV 5: *pratyakṣeṇa hi tāvad yady upalabhya vinivartayasi bhāvān | tan nâsti pratyakṣaṃ bhāvā yenôpalabhyante ||*

[43] VV 30: *yadi kiṃcid upalabheyaṃ pravartayeyaṃ nivartayeyaṃ vā | pratyakṣâdibhir arthais tad-abhāvān me 'nupālambhaḥ ||*

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