

THE DIALECTICAL METHOD  
OF NĀGĀRJUNA

*Vigrahavyāvartanī*

Second Edition (Revised and Enlarged)

*Translated from the original Sanskrit with  
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If there is an infinite series, the beginning cannot be established. — Why? — Because those *pramāṇas* are established through other *pramāṇas*, and those others again through other *pramāṇas*. Thus there is no beginning. [And] if there is no beginning, how can there be a middle? how can there be an end?

Consequently, the statement that those *pramāṇas* are established through other *pramāṇas* is not valid<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Nyāyasūtra* II, 1, 17, with Vātsyāyana's *Bhāṣya*, Uddyotakara's *Vārttika* and Viśvanātha's *Vṛtti*.

**XXXIII.** Now, if [you think that] those *pramāṇas* are established without *pramāṇas* (*pramāṇair vinā*), then your philosophic position is abandoned (*vihīyate vādaḥ*). There is a discordance, and you should state the special reason for that.

Now, if you think: those *pramāṇas* are established without *pramāṇas*; the objects to be cognized (*prameyāṇām arthānām*), however, are established through the *pramāṇas*, then your position that [all] objects are established through *pramāṇas* (*pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhir arthānām*) is abandoned. There is, moreover, a discordance, namely that some objects are established through *pramāṇas*, while some others are not (*keṣāṃcid arthānām pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiḥ keṣāṃcin neti*). And you should state the special reason why some objects are established through *pramāṇas*, while some others are not. But you have not stated that. Thus this assumption, too, is not valid (*tasmād iyam api kalpanā nopapanneti*)<sup>1</sup>.

The opponent replies: The *pramāṇas* establish themselves as well as other things. As it is said:

'Fire illuminates itself as well as other things. Likewise, the *pramāṇas* establish themselves as well as other things'<sup>2</sup>.

(The commentary on this verse is just a paraphrase.)

<sup>1</sup> After having refuted the charge of 'discordance' (*vaiśamikatva*; v. II) brought against him by his opponent, Nāgārjuna here returns the same charge to his opponent. — In *Nyāyasūtra* II, 1, 18, the following objection is raised: If the *pramāṇas* are established without *pramāṇas*, then the *prameyas* also should be established without *pramāṇas*: *tadviniṣṭter vā pramāṇasiddhivat prameyasiddhiḥ*. In other words, it would be vain to talk about *pramāṇas*: *evaṃ ca sarvopramāṇavilopaḥ* (Vātsyāyana).

<sup>2</sup> *dyotayati svātmānaṃ yathā hutāśas tathā parātmānaṃ | svaparātmānāv evaṃ prasādhayanti pramāṇāni |*

The view put forward in this verse is in accord with *Nyāyasūtra* II, 1, 19: *na, pradīpaprakāśa (siddhi)vat tatsiddheḥ*. This seems, at least, to have been the view of

Gautama and of some of his followers. Vātsyāyana's interpretation is different. See on this question my paper entitled 'On the Relationship between Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavivartanī* and the *Nyāyasūtras*', in *Journal of Indo-European Studies* (USA) 5, 3 (Fall 1977), pp. 265-73.

Here we observe:

**XXXIV.** This is a defective proposition (*viśamopanyāsa*)<sup>1</sup>. Fire does not illuminate itself, for its non-perception is not seen to be comparable to that of a pot in darkness (*na hi tasyānuṣalabdhir dṛṣṭā tamastva kumbhāsa*).

Your proposition that the *pramāṇas* establish themselves as well as other things like fire [that illuminates itself as well as other things] is defective. For fire does not illuminate itself. A pot, not illuminated by fire, is first not perceived in darkness. Then, being illuminated by fire, it is perceived. If, in the same manner, fire, not being illuminated, first existed in darkness and then were illuminated, it would be possible to say: it illuminates itself (*evam eva yady aprakāśitaḥ prāg agnis tamasi syād uttarakālam agneḥ prakāśanaṃ syāt, ataḥ svātmānaṃ prakāśayet*). This, however, is not the case. Thus this assumption, too, is not valid.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *supra*, p.98, commentary on v. III.

Furthermore:

**XXXV.** If, as you say, fire illuminates itself as it illuminates other things, then it will also burn itself.

If, as you say, fire illuminates itself just as it illuminates other things, then it will also burn itself just as it burns other things. This, however, is not the case. In these circumstances, your statement that fire illuminates itself as it illuminates other things, is not valid<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The subject cannot be the object of its own act. Cf. Śāṅkara, *Upadeśasāhasrī, paḍya XVI*, 13 (in *Minor Works of Śrī Śāṅkarācārya* [ed. by H. R. Bhagavat.] = *Poona Oriental Series*, No. 8, second edition, 1952):

*yaddharmā yaḥ padārtho na tasyaiveyāt sa karmatām |  
na hy ātmānaṃ dahaty agnis tathā naiva prakāśayet |*

Śāṅkara criticizes there the Buddhist idealists (Vijñānavādin), who hold that cognition is self-luminous, like a lamp. See also *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* II, 2, 28. On *svātmāni kriyāvirodha* see also *Ātman-Brahman*, p. 52 & n. 7. In his comment on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka - Upaniṣad* IV, 3, 7, Śāṅkara uses arguments which recall those used by Nāgārjuna in the preceding verse: *yat tūcyate, pradīpa ātmānaṃ ghaṭam cāvabhāṣayati*,

tad asat. — kasmāt? — yadātmānaṃ nāvabhāsayati tadā kīḍṣaḥ syāt? na hi tadā pradīpasya svato vā parato vā viśeṣaḥ kaścid upalabhyate. sa hy avabhāsyō bhavati yasyāvabhāśakasam-  
nidhāv asaṃnidhau ca viśeṣa upalabhyate, na hi pradīpasya svātmāsamnidhir asaṃnidhir vā śakyah kalpayitum. asati ca kādācitke viśeṣa ātmānaṃ pradīpaḥ prakāśayati mṛśaivoocyate. (Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series, 15, Poona, second edition, 1902, pp. 568-9).

Besides:

**XXXVI.** If, as you say, fire illuminates both other things and itself, then darkness will cover both other things and itself<sup>1</sup>.

If in your opinion fire illuminates both other things and itself, then its opposite (*atpratīpakṣabhūtaḥ*), darkness, too, would cover both other things and itself. This, however, is not seen. In these circumstances, your statement that fire illuminates both other things and itself is not valid.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. MK VII 12:

pradīpaḥ svaparātmānau samprakāśayate yadi|  
tamo 'pi svaparātmānau chādayiṣyaty asaṃśayam||

And again:

**XXXVII.** There is no darkness in fire nor in something else in which fire stands (*nāsti tamaś ca jvalane yatra ca tiṣṭhati parātmani jvalanaḥ*). How can it [then] illuminate? For illumination is destruction of darkness<sup>1</sup>.

Here, in fire, there is no darkness. Nor is there any darkness where fire is. Now, illumination is obstruction caused to darkness (*tamaś pratighātaḥ*). But since there is no darkness in fire nor where fire is, what is that darkness which is obstructed by fire, and by virtue of whose obstruction it illuminates both other things and itself (*kasya tamaś pratighātam agniḥ karoti, yasya pratighā-  
tād agniḥ svaparātmānau prakāśayati*)?

The opponent replies: But is it not true that fire illuminates both other things and itself, for this very reason that there is no darkness in fire nor where fire is (*nanu yasmād evaṃ nāgnau tamo 'sti nāpi yatrāgnis tatra tamo 'sti, tasmād eva svaparātmānau na prakāśayaty agniḥ kutaḥ*)? For, in the very process of its origination, fire obstructs darkness (*tena hy utpadyamānenaivāgninā tamaś pratighātaḥ*). If there is no darkness in fire nor where fire is, it is because in the very process of its origination fire illuminates both other things and itself

(*tasmān nāgnau tamo 'sti nāpi yatrāgnis tatra tamo 'sti, yasmād utpadyamāna evobhayaṃ prakāśayaty agniḥ svātmānaṃ parātmānaṃ ceti*).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. MK VII, 9:

pradīpe nāndhakāro 'sti yatra cāsau pratiṣṭhitaḥ|  
kim prakāśayati dīpaḥ prakāśo hi tamovadhaḥ||

Here we observe:

**XXXVIII.** It is wrong to say (*asadvāda*) that fire illuminates in the very process of its origination. For, in the very process of its origination, fire does not come in contact with darkness<sup>1</sup>.

The opinion that fire, in the very process of its origination, illuminates both other things and itself, is not tenable. — Why? — Because, in the very process of its origination, fire does not come in contact with darkness; since it does not come in contact with it, it does not destroy it; and since darkness is not destroyed, there is no illumination (*tamaś cānuḥphātān nāsti prakāśaḥ*).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. MK VII, 10:

katham utpadyamānena pradīpena tamo hatam|  
notpadyamāno hi tamaḥ pradīpaḥ prāpnute yadā||

Light and darkness cannot coexist: *ālokāndhakārayor yaugapadyābhāvāt*, Candrakīrti on this verse.

**XXXIX.** Or, if fire destroyed darkness even without coming in contact with it, then this fire, standing here, would destroy darkness in all the worlds<sup>1</sup>.

Or, if you think that fire destroys darkness even without coming in contact with it, then this fire, standing here at this moment, will equally (*tulyam*)<sup>2</sup> destroy the darkness existing in all the worlds, without coming in contact with it. This, however, is not seen to be the case (*na caitad evaṃ dr̥ṣṭam*). Thus, your opinion that fire destroys darkness even without coming in contact with it, is not valid.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. MK VII, 11:

apṛāpyaiva pradīpena yadi vā nihataṃ tamaḥ|  
ihasṭhaḥ sarvalokasthaṃ sa tamo nihaniṣyati||

— Cf. Vātsyāyana on *Nyāyasūtra* V, 1, 7: *nāpṛāptaḥ pradīpaḥ prakāśayati* (similarly Jayantabhaṭṭa, *Nyāyamañjarī*, p. 624; Bhāsarvajña, *Nyāyabhūṣaṇa*, p. 346; *Tarkaśāstra* in Tucci, p. 18). See also Vātsyāyana on *Nyāyasūtra* II, 2, 13, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> I differ here from the editors (see their note, p. 67, n. 5, and Introduction, p. 39).

Furthermore:

**XL.** If the *pramāṇas* are self-established (*yadi svataḥ ca pramāṇasiddhiḥ*), then the 'means of true cognition' are established for you independently of the 'objects of true cognition' (*anapeksya tava prameyāni bhavati pramāṇasiddhiḥ*). For self-establishment does not require another thing (*na parāpekṣā svataḥ siddhiḥ*)<sup>1</sup>.

(The commentary is merely a paraphrase.)

The opponent replies: What defect will ensue (*ko doṣo bhaviṣyati*) if the means of true cognition do not require the objects to be cognized (*prameyān arthān*)?

<sup>1</sup> On this and the following verses cf. *MK* X, 8-12.

Here we observe:

**XLI.** If you think that the 'means of true cognition' (*pramāṇa*) are established independently of the 'objects of true cognition' (*prameyān arthān*), then those *pramāṇas* are [*pramāṇas*] of nothing (*na bhavanti kasyacid evam imāni tāni pramāṇāni*).

If [you think that] the 'means of true cognition' are established independently of the 'objects of true cognition', then those *pramāṇas* are *pramāṇas* of nothing (*evam tānimāni pramāṇāni na kasyacid pramāṇāni bhavanti*). Thus there is a defect (*evam doṣaḥ*). If, however, the *pramāṇas* are *pramāṇas* of something, they do not then become 'means of true cognition' independently of the 'objects of true cognition' (*atha kasyacid bhavanti pramāṇāni naivedānim anapeksya prameyān arthān pramāṇāni bhavanti*).

**XLII.** [The opponent may reply:] If it is admitted that they are established in relation [to the objects to be cognized], what defect is there? — [The defect is that] what is [already] established is established [again] (*siddhasya sādhanam syāt*). For something that is not established does not require something else (*nāsiddho 'pekṣate hy anyat*).

If it is admitted that the 'means of true cognition' are established in relation to the 'objects of true cognition', then the four 'means of true cognition', which are [already] established, are established [anew]. — Why? — Because an object that is not established does not require

something else]. For instance, Devadatta, who is not [yet] established, does not require anything whatever. But it is not admissible (*iṣṭa*) that something that is [already] established be established [anew]. One does not do something that is [already] done.

Besides:

**XLIII.** If the *pramāṇas* are at all events (*sarvathā*) established in relation to the *prameyas*, the *prameyas* are not established in relation to the *pramāṇas*.

If the *pramāṇas* are established in relation to the *prameyas*, then the *prameyas* are not established in relation to the *pramāṇas*. — Why? — Because the object to be established (*sādhya*) does not establish the instrument by which it is established (*sādhana*). The *pramāṇas*, however, it is said, are the instruments by which the *prameyas* are established (*sādhanāni ca kila prameyāṇāṃ pramāṇāni*)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This is the ordinary view. But, if it is thought that the *pramāṇas* themselves are established by the *prameyas*, in other words, that they are *sādhyas* in relation to the *prameyas*, which are *sādhana*s, they cannot establish the *prameyas*, for the *sādhya* cannot establish the *sādhana*. — Note the use of the particle *kila* 'it is said'. By this Nāgārjuna reports a view ordinarily accepted in the world. Cf. *MK* I, 5.

**XLIV.** And if the *prameyas* are established even independently of the *pramāṇas*, what do you gain by establishing the *pramāṇas* (*kiṃ te pramāṇasiddhyā*)? That whose purpose they serve is [already] established (*tāni yadartham prasiddham tat*).

(The commentary is just a paraphrase.)

**XLV.** Besides, if you establish the *pramāṇas* in relation to the *prameyas*, then there is certainly an interchange of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* (*vyatyaya evaṃ sati te dhruvaṃ pramāṇaprimeyāṇām*).

Moreover, if you think, in order to avoid the defect stated before<sup>1</sup>, that the 'means of true cognition' exist only in relation to the 'objects of true cognition', then there is an interchange of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas*. Your *pramāṇas* become *prameyas*, because they are established by the *prameyas* (*prameyairiḥ sādhitatvāt*). And the *prameyas* become *pramāṇas*, because they establish the *pramāṇas* (*pramāṇāṇāṃ sādhatvāt*).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. v. XLI.

**XLVI.** Now, if you think that through the establishment of the *pramāṇas* are established the *prameyas*, and that through the establishment of the *prameyas* are established the *pramāṇas*, then neither the *prameyas* nor the *pramāṇas* are established for you.

Now, if you think that through the establishment of the *pramāṇas* are established the *prameyas* — because the *prameyas* require the *pramāṇas* — and that through the establishment of the *prameyas* are established the *pramāṇas* — because the *pramāṇas* require the *prameyas* — then neither the *prameyas* nor the *pramāṇas* are established. — Why? —

**XLVII.** Because, if the *prameyas* owe their establishment to the *pramāṇas*, and if those *pramāṇas* are to be established by those very *prameyas* (*sidhyanti hi pramāṇair yadi prameyāṇi tāni tair eva sādhyāni ca prameyair*), how will the *pramāṇas* establish [the *prameyas*]?

Because, if the *prameyas* owe their establishment to the *pramāṇas*, and if those *pramāṇas* are to be established by those very *prameyas* (*tāni ca pramāṇāni tair eva prameyair sādhyatavyāni*), [we encounter the following difficulty:] the *prameyas* not having been established, the *pramāṇas* are not established, for their cause (*kāraṇa*)<sup>1</sup> is not established. How, then, will the *pramāṇas*<sup>2</sup> establish the *prameyas*?

<sup>1</sup> I.e., the *prameyas*.

<sup>2</sup> Which themselves are not yet established.

**XLVIII.** And if the *pramāṇas* owe their establishment to the *prameyas*, and if those *prameyas* are to be established by those very *pramāṇas*, how will the *prameyas* establish [the *pramāṇas*]?

And if the *pramāṇas* owe their establishment to the *prameyas*, and if those *prameyas* are to be established by those very *pramāṇas*, [we encounter the following difficulty:] the *pramāṇas* not having been established, the *prameyas* are not established, for their cause<sup>1</sup> is not established. How, then, will the *prameyas*<sup>2</sup> establish the *pramāṇas*<sup>3</sup>?

<sup>1</sup> I.e., the *pramāṇas*.

<sup>2</sup> Which themselves are not yet established.

<sup>3</sup> In *MK XXIII*, 10-11, Nāgārjuna argues in a similar way to show the hollowness of the ideas of good and evil :

*anapeksya subhaṃ nāsty asubhaṃ prajñāpayemahi |  
yat pratītya subhaṃ tasmāc chubhaṃ naivopapadyate ||*

*anapeksyāsubhaṃ nāsti subhaṃ prajñāpayemahi |  
yat pratītyāsubhaṃ tasmād asubhaṃ naiva vidyate ||*

**XLIX.** If the son is to be produced (*utpādya*) by the father, and if that father is to be produced by that very son, tell me which of these produces which other (*vada tatropādāyati kaḥ kam*).

Supposing somebody said: the son is to be produced (*utpādaniya*) by the father, and that father is to be produced by that very son, tell me who is to be produced by whom (*kena ka utpādāyitavya iti*). In exactly the same manner you say: the *prameyas* are to be established by the *pramāṇas*, and those very *pramāṇas* in turn are to be established by those very *prameyas*. Now, which of these are to be established for you by which others (*tatredāniṃ te katamair katamāni sādhyatavyāni*)?

**L.** Tell me which of these is the father, and which other the son. Both of them bear, indeed, the mark of a father and that of a son (*tāv ubhāv api ca pitṛputralakṣaṇadharau*), wherefore we have a doubt here (*yato bhavati no 'tra saṃdehaḥ*).

Of that father and that son, mentioned before, which is the son, and which other the father? Both of them, as producers (*utpādakatvāt*), bear the mark of a father, and, as produced (*utpādyatvāt*), the mark of a son. We have a doubt here: which of these is the father, and which other the son? In just the same manner, of these *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* of yours, which are the *pramāṇas*, and which others the *prameyas*? For both of these, as those which establish (*sādhakatvāt*), are *pramāṇas*, and as those which are to be established (*sādhyatvāt*), *prameyas*. We have a doubt here as to which of these are the *pramāṇas*, and which others the *prameyas*<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Pramāṇa* and *prameya* are relative terms. One exists only in relation to the other. They are 'dependently originated', and hence 'void'. In an absolute sense, there is neither any *pramāṇa* nor any *prameya*. The example of the father and the son indicates it. The father exists only in relation to the son, and the son exists only in relation to the father; in an absolute sense, there is neither a father nor a son:

*pitā cen na vinā putrāt kutaḥ putrasya sambhavaḥ |*

*putrābhāve pitā nāsti tathāsattvaṃ tayor dvayoḥ ||* (Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra IX*, 114 [ed. by P. L. Vaidya, Darbhanga, 1960]).

We should not conclude, however, that Nāgārjuna does not recognize any empirical validity of the *pramāṇas* and the *prameyas*, of the ideas of the father and the son, and so on. On the contrary, he would say, in accord with his doctrine of action (*supra*, p. 2; *infra*, vv. LIV-LVI), that it is their 'voidness' which establishes their empirical validity. If 'voidness', i.e. 'dependent origination', is denied, then they become the suprarational Absolute, and thus annul themselves as such. — Cf. Candrakīrti, *MKV*, p. 69.