

Epistemological Skepticism of Nāgārjuna

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Abstract—Skepticism has been appeared as a threat to epistemology from the time of Greek Philosophy. It claims that no certain or absolute knowledge can be attained by man. This position was advanced by such Greek schools as the sophists and the pyrrhonists. The story is not very different in Indian philosophical discourse. In Indian philosophical realm skeptics are mainly known as Vaitaṇḍikas. In the names of Sarvasūnyavādīns and Vaitaṇḍikas here the skeptics have tried their best to disprove the claim of knowledge. In Indian philosophical literature knowledge or valid knowledge has been described as *Pramā*, and the instrument of valid knowledge as *Pramāṇa*. The Vaitaṇḍikas and Sarvasūnyavādīns tried to point out that there is inconsistency in the notion of *pramā* and *pramāṇa*. Sarvasūnyavādīn like Nāgārjuna used a typical technique to refute the Nyāya categories. In his work like *Vigrahavyavartanī* and *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*. Nāgārjuna is mainly concerned with the refutation of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* dichotomy. In this present paper I will try to emphasized the argument which given by Nāgārjuna in his famous treatise *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* try to establish confusion between *pramāṇa* and *prameya* dichotomy, which accept by the Naiyāyikas.

Keynotes: Skepticism, Nāgārjuna, *pramā*, *pramāṇa*, Sarvasūnyavādīn.

Skepticism appeared as a threat to epistemology from the time of Greek Philosophy. It claims that no certain or absolute knowledge can be attained by man. This position was advanced by such Greek schools as the sophists and the pyrrhonists. The story is not very different in Indian philosophical discourse. In Indian philosophical realm skeptics are mainly known as Vaitaṇḍikas. Sarvasūnyavādīn and Vaitaṇḍika skeptics have tried their best to disprove the claim of knowledge. In Indian philosophical literature knowledge or valid knowledge has been described as *pramā*, and the instrument of valid knowledge as *pramāṇa*. The Vaitaṇḍikas and Sarvasūnyavādīns tried to point out that there is inconsistency in the notion of *pramā* and *pramāṇa*. Sarvasūnyavādīn like Nāgārjuna used a typical technique to refute the Nyāya categories. In his works like *Vigrahavyavartanī* and *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* Nāgārjuna is mainly concerned with the refutation of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* dichotomy. In *Vaidalyasūtra* Nāgārjuna devoted 20 verses for refuting the validity of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. Nāgārjuna also refuted validity of *pramāṇa* in *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, verses from 31 to 51. But in *Vaidalyasūtra* he has refuted all the sixteen category one by one. In the refutation of *pramāṇa* in *Vigrahavyāvartanī* he has used the same argument as he mentioned in his *Vaidalyasūtra*.

The Nyāya Philosophy of Gautama admits a set of sixteen categories as real. Gautama in the very first aphorism of his Treatise on Logic (Nyāya) states that the right cognition of the sixteen knowables leads to emancipation. Among the sixteen categories *pramāṇa* is the first and *prameya* is the second. *Pramāṇa* is the causal instrument of knowing and *prameya* is the object of knowing. In the Treatise of Tearing (*Vaidalyasūtra*) Nāgārjuna refutes the claims made by *pramāṇavādīn* philosophers. Nāgārjuna is engaged to refute any kind of absolute claim about knowledge. Nāgārjuna has applied dialectics to tear the Nyāya assumption of the sixteen independent categories to pieces. So the main aim of *Vaidalyasūtra* is to demolish or the Nyāya philosophy of Gautama. However Nāgārjuna did not mention the name of Akṣapāda Gautama in this Treatise of Tearing. Yet from the close reading of the text it is evident that it is Gautama's sixteen categories that are subjected to tearing into pieces one by one. In this present paper I will analyze the argument given by Nāgārjuna in his *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* against the *pramāṇa/prameya* dichotomy accepted by the Naiyāyikas.

According to Nāgārjuna *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are inextricably connected with each other. The means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and the knowable object (*prameya*) cannot be distinguished, since the existence of *pramāṇa* can be established if and only if *prameya* exists¹. If there is no *prameya*, the existence *pramāṇa* is not possible. For, one is related to the other, just as a father exists in relation to his son and a son in relation to his father. Hence both *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are described as *bhāvasādhana* of each other. When *prameya* is established by *pramāṇa*, *prameya* is called 'sādhya' and *pramāṇa* is called

¹ Trans by Tola Fernando and Dragonetti Carmen. *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, p.58

'sādhana'. Similarly, when *pramāṇa* is established by *prameya*, *pramāṇa* is called 'sādhyā' and *prameya* is called 'sādhana'². Secondly, if *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are taken as relative to each other as shown above, they cannot be self-existent. For, one's existence the other becomes essential. If it is presupposed that *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are really existent or have their own being then one can exist independent of the other. But it has already been shown that they are related with each other - a *pramāṇa* is produced out of *prameya* and vice-versa. It is contradictory to say that *pramāṇa*, though having its existence, is produced out of something else (*prameya*). Such is the case with *prameya* as well. Due to such unwanted consequences like mutual causality and contradiction the existence *pramāṇa* and *prameya* cannot be admitted³.

Pramāṇa and *prameya* that are stated to be mutually related are neither existent nor non-existent nor existent and non-existent. a) If something really exists, it cannot depend on something else. For example, if a pot really exists then it does not depend on its constituents like clay, water etc. Hence, *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are not exist because they are dependent to each other. b) If something is really non-existent like hare's horn then it cannot have any relation to something else. *Pramāṇa* and *prameya* are non-existent because they are related to each other. c) If something is endowed existence depending on something else, it cannot be admitted existent, nor non-existent nor existent and non-existent. Because both concept of existent and non-existent are self-contradictory in nature. Hence, due to mutually dependency of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*, it is not possible that they are both existent and non-existent at the same time⁴.

Here the opponent *Pramāṇavādīns* can argued that *pramāṇa* has to be admitted as an existent category in order to establish *prameya*. Nāgārjuna's way of rejection would be as follows. If a *pramāṇa* is to be established as really existing, there would be a necessity of another *pramāṇa* (*pramāṇāntara*) in order to distinguish a *pramāṇa* from a *pramāṇabhāsa*. But this would lead to the defect of infinite regress (*anavasthā*)⁵.

In response to Nāgārjuna here opponent *Pramāṇavādīns* could argue that the *pramāṇas* are self-evident (*svayamsiddha*) just as a lamp. A lamp can illumine itself as well as the things around. Similarly, the *pramāṇas* illumine themselves and the *prameyas*. Hence, there is no question of infinite regress⁶.

Nāgārjuna further opines that the analogy of lamp and *pramāṇa* drawn by the *Pramāṇavādīns* is not correct. For, the lamp cannot illumine darkness due to the lack of connection between them. Darkness, which covers all objects, is to be removed for the revelation of the objects. But the lamp cannot remove it. Either the lamp gets in contact with darkness or it does not. The first possibility is ruled out due to the fact that the lamp and darkness are contradictory in nature. If light is not connected with darkness, it cannot affect darkness just as a sword cannot cut a body untouched by it.

In order to save his thesis of self-evidence of *pramāṇa* (*svayamsiddhi*) the *pramāṇavādīns* would like to argue that without getting into contact with darkness the lamp can affect it, just as planets have influence on men without being connected to them. Nāgārjuna argues that this analogy is not fit for this context. Because in case of planets there is certainly contact with the body of a man like Devadatta. That which is affected by planets, must have a body. But in case of a lamp there is no such contact, as darkness does not have a body. Here the comparison does not match. If it is admitted that the lamp can illumine darkness without being connected to it, it would lead to an absurd consequence contrary to fact. It would happen that the lamp would illumine the darkness existing in far places⁷.

Moreover, to Nāgārjuna darkness does not exist and hence it cannot be illuminated or dispelled. Hence the example provided by the opponent is not valid. Darkness is taken to be an absence of light (*ālokābhāva*). The lamp cannot illumine or dispel a non-existing thing like darkness or a hare's horn. Hence by this analogy the *Pramāṇavādīns* cannot say that the *pramāṇas* establish themselves and other existing objects. Further, the lamp cannot illumine itself either due to the absence of darkness in it. In order to illumine itself the light needs some darkness; since without the existence of darkness there is no question of the illumination of light. But the existence of darkness in light is not at all possible due to their opposite nature⁸.

Moreover, the *pramāṇa* and *prameya* cannot exist in the present, past and future. To Nāgārjuna the anteriority, posteriority and simultaneity of the *Pramāṇa* in relation to *Prameya* are not logically acceptable. If the *pramāṇa* exist before the corresponding

² Ibid.p.58

³ Ibid.p.59

⁴ Ibid.p.59

⁵ Ibid.p.60

⁶ Ibid.p.60

⁷ Ibid.p.61

⁸ Ibid.p.62

Prameya then it would be assumed that the Prameya does not exist when *pramāṇa* remains in existence. If this be the case, then what would be ascertained by the *pramāṇa*?

If the *pramāṇa* comes into existence after the *prameya* is originated then it is tantamount to saying that a *prameya* is known as such without being connected with *pramāṇa*. To describe an object as 'knowable' is to presuppose its knowledge through some *pramāṇa*. It is also absurd to think about a non-existent *pramāṇa* and *prameya* have come into existence simultaneously, the cause and effect relation between them that links them with each other is not possible, as casual relation is not possible between two horns of a cow⁹.

Here Pramāṇavādīns can say that if the existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* is not granted in past, present and future then the denial of the *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are not logically possible. Because the denial implies the existence of the denied object. If the object really exists in this world, its denial will be possible. But it is not possible to deny an non-existent object. Hence the negation of the *pramāṇa* and *prameya* is not possible¹⁰.

Here Nāgārjuna opines against the position of the Pramāṇavādīns in the following way. He thinks that denial of non-existing things is possible. Because negation is only the rejection of the idea or concept of the non-existent object. If someone says that there is no deep river, he is referring to the concept of 'deep river'. That is, he has in mind 'deep river' as a designation and not as a denotation. It is very much reasonable to deny 'deep river' and the *pramāṇa* and *prameya* have to be denied at the conceptual level even if they do not exist at the ontological level¹¹.

In this context perception is analysed from Pramāṇavādīns perspectives as one of the *pramāṇas*. Initially, there is merely a grasping of the object of perception by the subject. At this level there is nothing that determines truth or falsity of the same. Afterwards through the fulfilment of some pragmatic necessities the knowledge of the object is taken to be correct. The correct knowledge provided by the perception and by the other *pramāṇa* is a proof for the existence of the *pramāṇas*. If *pramāṇa* exists, the existence of *prameyas* automatically follows.

In response to the Pramāṇavādīns Nāgārjuna can state that even the existence of *pramāṇa*, which provides no valid act of knowledge, does not imply the existence of the corresponding *prameyas*. For example, a pot cannot be the Prameya of the *pramāṇa* i.e. perception, since even after perceiving it one can accept that the image of the pot in the mind is a mere fiction. From this one cannot deduce that the perception of a pot is in the mind. From this one cannot deduce that a real external (not internal) pot is the Prameya of perception. As perception is a mental process, its object also must be something mental. This has been further substantiated after bringing the question of inference. In the inferential cognition the existence of fire in the mountain is inferred from smoke. In such a case the inferred object (*anumeya*) is fire, which is nothing but the product of the mind due to its imperceptibility through external sense organ. As *anumeya* (or inferred entity) is not something external to mind, the object of perception (i.e., a pot) is also the same. Ultimately we would not get a *prameya*, which is external to the mind. For this reason it is concluded that from the fact of the existence of *pramāṇa* the existence of *prameya* cannot be deduced¹².

Moreover, a pot is neither the cognition nor cognizable object, but a mere determining condition (*pratyaya*). To Nāgārjuna the idea of pot is not a *pramāṇa*, nor is it a *prameya*. As the idea of pot arises in our mind, it is not *pramāṇa*. Had it been so it would have been the *pramāṇa* of the *prameya* i.e. pot. That is, it could provide us a correct knowledge of the pot, but the pot itself is not the *prameya*. It is one of the determining factors (*pratyaya*) that produces in the mind the idea of pot. The pot itself gives rise to the idea of pot being one of the determining factors. Nāgārjuna has referred to the Nyāya view that the idea is a *prameya* just like self, body, sense organ etc. (NS 1.1.9). In the *Sutra* the Naiyāyika has categorically mentioned that the idea is one among the *prameyas*. If it is so, how can it be described as both *pramāṇa* and *prameya* at the same time¹³? Hence it is concluded that neither *pramāṇas* nor *prameyas* are possible at all as categories.

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⁹ Ibid.p.62

¹⁰ Ibid.p.63

¹¹ Ibid.p.63

¹² Ibid.p.64

¹³ Ibid.p.65

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