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DOES THE MĀDHYAMIKA HAVE A THESIS AND
PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION?¹

Nāgārjuna is recognized as the founder of the Madhyamaka school of philosophy, the chief *śāstra* source of which are his *Mūla-Madhyamakakārikās* otherwise known as the *Madhyamakaśāstra* or *Prajñā-mūla*.

In a work closely related in its doctrine to these *Madhyamakakārikās* and entitled *Vigrahavyāvartanī*--Rejection of Conflict--Nāgārjuna has made what are, for a philosopher, a series of striking statements that have caused perplexity among his followers, the Mādhyamikas, as well as among modern interpreters of his philosophy. Thus we read in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (verse 29): "If I had some *pratijñā* ("thesis") [this] defect [mentioned by an opponent] would as a consequence attach to me, but I have no *pratijñā* so there is no defect for me." This is Nāgārjuna's reply to the objection, set out in verse 4, that the Mādhyamika's statement "All entities (*bhāva*) are empty (*śūnya*) [of self-nature (*svabhāva*)]" is a defective assertion or thesis (*pratijñā*). In addition, as Nāgārjuna's opponent is represented as having argued in verse 1 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*: "If [as you maintain] no self-nature (*svabhāva*) exists for all entities (*bhāva*), then your [own] statement (*vacana*) [that all *bhāvas* are empty of self-nature, which is therefore itself] also without self-nature, cannot controvert self-nature [which I maintain]."

Moreover, Nāgārjuna explains, since according to Madhyamaka philosophy all *bhāvas* are empty of *svabhāva*, any criticism levelled against the Madhyamaka by an opponent will inevitably relate to something not asserted as a thesis in the Madhyamaka (VV 59). In his autocommentary on verse 64 Nāgārjuna then points out that the statement "All *bhāvas* are without self-nature (*niḥsvabhāva*)" is not supposed by the Mādhyamika to *make bhāvas* non-substantial and hence empty (*śūnya*); rather, it simply *makes known* what *bhāvas* really are, namely non-substantial and empty.

Concerning negation (*pratiśedha*) Nāgārjuna says (VV 63): "I negate no thing and there exists no thing to be negated: by saying that I negate [some thing] you therefore make a [false] imputation (*adhīlaya*)."

And in verse 23 he describes the nature of Madhyamaka negation.

In the final analysis, then, the Madhyamaka theory of *niḥsvabhāvatā* and *śūnyatā*, based on the fact that things arise

in dependent conditionship, is not open to criticism and rebuttal (see for example *MMK* iv.8-9 and xxiv.13). This is because the Madhyamaka is not a constructive speculative doctrine made up of a system of propositions that presuppose the existence of entities in the frame of binary conceptualization (*vikalpa*) and the quaternary set of conceivable positions (*catuṣkoṭi*).

Nāgārjuna's disciple Āryadeva mentions in his *Catuḥśataka* the Mādhyamika's disowning of any position with respect to the three extremes of existence, non-existence and both existence and non-existence of a thing, saying (xvi.25): "It is not at all possible to level criticism (*upālabha*) against one who has no position (*pakṣa*) positing [something] existent (*sat*), non-existent (*asat*) and both existent and non-existent (*sada-sat*)." And in another passage of his *Catuḥśataka* (viii.20) Āryadeva explains that if, on occasion, the Buddha has spoken in terms of the four positions--viz. the three just mentioned and the "neither...nor" position that relates to an undefinable entity--this is simply because he employs them in particular cases as counteragents or remedies against specific misapprehensions.

Āryadeva's statements on this subject are explications of Nāgārjuna's own which are to be found in *MMK* xviii.6 and 8 for example. The *Ratnāvalī* (ii.15) also mentions the Buddha's having eschewed any determination in terms of the *catuṣprakāra* based on the pairs *sānta/ananta* and *dvaya/advaya*. And in the *Acintyastava* (verse 23), a hymn ascribed to Nāgārjuna, the Buddha is praised as having stated that *dharma*s are free from the four conceivable positions of the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi-virnirmukta*), unknowable for discursive cognition (*viññāna*) and not with the scope of words.²

The Mādhyamika's rejection of theses, assertions and speculative views about a *bhāva* or a *dharma* possessing a self-nature stems basically from three considerations:

(i) An assertion and proposition--either one stated positively or one that includes negation of the presuppositional and implicative type (*pariyudāsapraṭiśedha*)--gives rise, in the binary structure of conceptual thinking where the principle of bivalence operates, to a counter-assertion and counter-proposition. (See e.g., *MMK* xiii.7 on *śūnya* as the counterpart and contraplete of *aśūnya*; *MMK* xviii.6 on *ātman* as opposed to *anātman* [cf. *Ratnāvalī* ii.3], and xviii.8 on the four positions *tathya*, etc.) The idea has been summed up in Nāgārjuna's *Yuktiśaṣṭikā* (verse 51cd) "How could there be another's [counter-]position for those who have no position," and in the *Ratnāvalī* (ii.4) "What is seen, heard and so forth is said by the Sage [i.e. the Buddha] to be neither true nor false: from a position (*pakṣa*) [holding some thing

to be either true or false] a counter-position (*pratīpakṣa* = *mī mthun phyogs*) may proceed, but neither [holds] in fact." (See also *Ratnāvalī* i.72.)

(ii) Any such assertion or proposition tends to involve its proponents in strife (*vivāda*) and vain conflict; and this is not compatible with the ideal of strifelessness and eirenicism set forth in both *Sūtras* and *Śāstras*. (See e.g., *Yuktiśaṣṭikā* 47 and 51; Āryadeva, *Catuḥśataka* viii.10 [cf. xii.15, and Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvatāra* vi.118].) The Mādhyamika's employment of deconstructive *prasāṅga*-type reasoning (whereby a disputant is brought to understand the impossibility or absurdity of his theses and views) also corresponds to this ideal of strifelessness, for which reason also it is preferable to formal refutation which is, in addition, undesirable since it inevitably gives rise to counter-assertions and counter-refutations as noted under (i) above. (In the case of (i) the issues are essentially logical, ontological and gnoseological, while in (ii) they are ethical as well as psychological and soteriological. It is to be noted that both these points are not exclusive to the Madhyamaka school, and that they have been alluded to, or at least anticipated, in texts of the old canon such as the *Dīghanikāya*, the *Samyuttanikāya* and, especially, the *Suttanipāta* of the Pali canon.)

(iii) On the level of ultimate reality (*paramārtha*)--as distinct from transactional usage (*vyavahāra*) and the surface level of *saṃvṛti*--the Mādhyamikas (like other Mahāyānists) have recognized that only the silence of the Ārya is in the final analysis appropriate. The absence of a *pratījñā* and a *pakṣa* is thus, in a certain sense, the methodological corollary of this silence.

Now these and many other similar statements by Nāgārjuna and his Mādhyamika followers appear to have given credence to the idea that a true Mādhyamika must disown all theses and philosophical theories without exception, and even that Madhyamaka philosophy has been developed in a way calculated to make it immune to criticism and refutation. And this could lead to the charge that the Mādhyamikas have adopted an anti-rational and anti-philosophical stance, or one of philosophical indifferentism; and that, in all their extensive philosophical works devoted to explicating the *niḥsvabhāvatā* and *śūnyatā* of *dharma*s because of the principle of dependent conditionship (*pratītyasamutpāda*)--which they indeed consider to be the authentic teaching of the Buddha--the Mādhyamikas have, at the same time, been inconsistent and unfaithful to their own principle of not entertaining any thesis or philosophical theory.

In the face of such objections against Madhyamaka thought and the Mādhyamikas' procedures it will be worthwhile to examine more closely the logical and semantic implications of Nāgārjuna's statement "I have no *pratijñā*," and to enquire in particular whether this statement really implies that the Madhyamaka has no place for a thesis or philosophical theory.

Taken in the context of the objections voiced in the first part of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* as well as of other statements in this work and elsewhere in the literature of the Madhyamaka, it seems clear that when Nāgārjuna says "I have no *pratijñā*" he means that he asserts no thesis or proposition positing the existence of a *bhāva* (positive, negative, both positive and negative, or indescribable). It does not imply, however, that he has nothing of philosophical significance to say himself, nor that he denies all philosophical content to the *Sūtra* teachings which he proposes to explicate. And least of all is Nāgārjuna a mere quibbler or sophist trying to escape philosophical problems and difficulties.

That a *pratijñā* "thesis" and a *pakṣa* "position" are not always, and necessarily, avoided and rejected by the true Mādhyamika is shown by Candrakīrti's usage in his commentary on the *Madhyamakakārikās*, the *Prasannapādā*.

Thus, in Candrakīrti's commentary on *MMK* i.1--"Nowhere are any entities whatever ever produced from self, an other, both and from no cause"--Nāgārjuna's four points are explicitly described as *pratijñās* (p. 13.3). Nāgārjuna's two points in *MMK* viii.1--"A real agent does not effect a real action, nor does an unreal agent bring about an unreal action"--are also described by Candrakīrti as *pratijñās* (p. 181.1-2). And in commenting on *MMK* xxi.2 --"How indeed without coming into existence (*sambhava*) will there be destruction (*vibhava*), [for then] without birth precisely [there would be] death; there is [then] no destruction without birth"--Candrakīrti identifies a *pratijñā* in addition to a *nigamana* "conclusion" and a *prasaṅgāpādana* "reductio ad absurdum." Candrakīrti speaks moreover of the position (*pakṣa*) of the Mādhyamikas in the *avatara-nikā* to xxiv.15 (p. 501.10). In none of these cases, of course, is a thesis postulating the existence of any kind of *bhāva* or *dharma* possessing a *svabhāva* being asserted by Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti.

It thus appears that not only a (*Svātantrika*) Mādhyamika like Bhāvaviveka (6th century)--who employs constructive, independent inferences (*svatantrānumāna*) and "syllogisms" (*svatantraprayogavākya*) to establish Madhyamaka doctrine--but also a (Prāsaṅgika) Mādhyamika like Candrakīrti (7th century)--who has rejected the use of such constructive, independent inferences and "syllogisms" and has confined himself to a kind of deconstructive reasoning that brings a disputant to recognize the impossibility or absurdity of his theses and

views (*prasaṅga*)--has allowed a place in Madhyamaka thought to both a *pratijñā* and a *pakṣa* in specific senses of these terms.

What the Mādhyamika has disowned, then, is any thesis, assertion or view (*dṛṣṭi*) that posits the existence of some kind of *bhāva* or *dharma* possessing a *svabhāva*, and not all philosophical statements, doctrines and theories (*darśana*) without distinction.

There does, however, exist a tension between two currents of thought within the Madhyamaka school concerning the question whether a true Mādhyamika may legitimately entertain a thesis and philosophical theory. And since this point has not been fully elucidated in our Indian sources, we have now to turn for a more complete treatment of the problem to the Tibetan sources, where it has been discussed in considerable detail.

Several Tibetan masters--evidently following some Indian teachers who introduced them to Madhyamaka thought--considered that, in the authentic (Prāsaṅgika) Madhyamaka, there is place neither for a thesis (*dam bca' = pratijñā*) nor, more generally, for a philosophical tenet (*khas len = abhyupagama*) or theory (*lta ba = darśana*). This interpretation of Nāgārjuna's, Āryadeva's and Candrakīrti's writings has, however, been subjected to searching analysis and penetrating criticism by Tsoṅ kha pa (1357-1419), in whose *Lam rim chen mo* it is recorded as a *pūrvapakṣa* which is then rejected.

Tsoṅ kha pa has, moreover, sought to show in his *Dran nes legs bsad shīn po* that the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika not only employs a logical reason and inference to negate the substantial self-nature of *bhāvas*, but that he employs them also to establish the non-substantiality and *śūnyatā* of *dharms*. In fact, for the comprehension of non-substantiality and *śūnyatā*, we require a positive determination (*pariccheda*) of negation (i.e., *niḥsvabhāvatā*) alongside the negative determination (*vyavaccheda*) of the negandum (i.e., *svabhāva*), these two aspects of negation arising inseparably in the conscious stream of the philosopher-exercitant in the process of comprehending reality. Tsoṅ kha pa in this way combined Madhyamaka philosophy with the current of logico-epistemological thought descending from Dharmakīrti (in whose *Hetubindu* the correlation between *pariccheda* and *vyavaccheda* is brought out in the discussion of the *anupalabdhihetu*). Tsoṅ kha pa has thus sought to demonstrate that Candrakīrti's Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka does not differ from Bhāvaviveka's Svātantrika-Madhyamaka by not entertaining a *pratijñā*, an *abhyupagama* and a *darśana*, as had been mistakenly supposed by many of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Tsoṅ kha pa's disciple mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzañ (po) (1385-1438) has devoted an important section of his *sToṅ thun chen mo*--an exposition of the topics treated in his teacher's

Drah nes legs bśad śhīh po --to the problem as to whether the Mādhyamika may legitimately entertain a thesis, a tenet and a philosophical theory. In doing this he has largely followed Tsoñ kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo*, but adding some points of considerable interest drawn from other works by Tsoñ kha pa and from other sources.

According to mkhas grub rje, the Mādhyamika's refraining from asserting a thesis or philosophical tenet is not to be interpreted (i) as a total rejection of all philosophical and ethical praxis, nor of all philosophical positions in surface-level pragmatic usage. (ii) Nor, on the contrary, is this rejection to be understood as a quasi-thesis, which would amount in effect to position IV of the *catuṣkoṭi* where an indeterminate or undefinable entity "x" is posited and defined as being without the predicates "A" and "Ā" (either in a logic which is not two-valued and based on the principle of bivalence, or in some putative "logic of mysticism" postulating an ineffable entity). (iii) The disowning of a thesis, assertion and tenet cannot, moreover, represent the essential philosophical and ethical outlook of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika as one who--in contradistinction to the Svātantrika--would entertain no philosophical position of any kind whatever. For, according to mkhas grub rje and his school, whereas the Prāsaṅgika does indeed differ from the Svātantrika by not employing an independent inference let alone a full, independent "syllogism" to establish the theory (*lta ba*) and understanding (*rtogs pa*) of the Madhyamaka, he nevertheless does have a philosophical theory--the *śūnyatādarśana* and *niḥsvabhāvavāda*--which he upholds both by means of philosophical investigation and by *prasaṅga*-type reasoning which deconstructs and dissolves any thesis or assertion positing a *bhāva* of any kind. The difference between the Prāsaṅgika and the Svātantrika cannot, therefore, lie in the latter's having a philosophical position while the former does not, contrary to what had been supposed by several authorities.

For Tsoñ kha pa and his school the question whether the Mādhyamika entertains a *pratijñā*, a tenet and a theory is accordingly not mainly a logical and methodological problem. It has acquired an epistemological--or rather gnoseological--significance which is of fundamental importance for the Mādhyamika.

Given the two distinct uses of the word *pratijñā* identified above in Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*, Nāgārjuna's statement "I have no *pratijñā*" may be interpreted in accordance with the more specific meaning "thesis/assertion positing an entity" rather than in accordance with the wider meaning of philosophical thesis (= doctrine or position). And it is then possible to understand it as a metaphilosophical statement by which Nāgārjuna stipulated that none of the Madhyamaka

doctrines is to be taken as asserting the substantial existence of an entity. The Madhyamaka philosophy is rather a non-speculative and non-constructive discourse relating to non-substantial factors (*dharma*) originating in the structured conditionship of *pratītyasamutpāda*.

Regarding the second question raised above as to whether the notion that the Madhyamaka statements are proof against attack and refutation is antirational and antiphilosophical, it is to be observed that the Mādhyamikas have evidently not set out deliberately to develop a theory, and to frame their statements, in a manner calculated to make them immune to objections and refutations. Their unassailability is rather a corollary of the theory of *śūnyatā*, which does not posit *bhāvas* or *dharms* possessing a *svabhāva* and therefore does not make assertions or propositions referring to such entities, and also of the Mādhyamika's method of deconstructive *prasaṅga*-type reasoning in which assertions and propositions are neutralized ontologically (since they do not refer to substantial entities) and logically (since they do not give rise to counter-assertions and counter-propositions). This particular kind of unfalsifiability cannot, then, substantiate the charge that the Mādhyamika avoids rational thinking and takes up a stance of philosophical indifferentism or facile agnosticism.

In sum, the Mādhyamika's approach to the question of the *pratijñā* and *pakṣa* stems from his rejection of epistemic commitment to any proposition--positive or negative--that presupposes the existence of a *bhāva* or *dharma* possessing a *svabhāva* and posits such an entity in terms of the binary structure of *vikalpa* and the quaternary structure of the *catuṣkoṭi*.

Some recent work in semantics, logic and speech-act theory can perhaps help to cast light on our problem. In the second volume of his book *Semantics*, John Lyons has proposed distinguishing three components in a categorical statement or assertion: (i) the propositional content or phrastic component, (ii) the modal or it-is-so tropic component, and (iii) the performative I-say-so neustic component or sign of subscription, the last two components being classified in speech-act theory as illocutionary. Negation in its turn may then relate to any of these three components, so that the semiotic and logician will take into account (at least) three distinct kinds of negation: (i) propositional, i.e., negation of the phrastic, (ii) modal, i.e. negation of the tropic, and (iii) performative, i.e. negation of the neustic. Here the first kind of negation corresponds to what is termed internal negation, and the last two are kinds of external negation.³

Now it seems especially appropriate to consider the statement "I have no *pratijñā*" in the light of the concept of performative negation. Such an interpretation will indeed fit in well with the Madhyamaka school's concern with

philosophical pragmatics and transactional usage (*vyavahāra*). This approach to the question is also pertinent to the ethical aspect of the Mādhyamika's eirenic refraining from taking up contentious positions and eschewing vain conflict.

It has, at the same time, to be recognized that in the middle period of its history⁴ the Madhyamaka school's concern with the pragmatics of transactional usage became overshadowed by the more specifically logical and epistemological problems into which the Mādhyamika was obliged to enter in the course of his exchanges with other schools of philosophy, and that from the time of Bhāvaviveka (6th century) in particular Madhyamaka philosophy was deflected from a consideration of pragmatics towards a preoccupation with the proposition and the logical problems arising from the Svātantrika Mādhyamika's use of constructive, independent inferences and "syllogisms" in the understanding of reality. And the question of the *pratijñā* and the *pakṣa* then tended to be treated above all in terms of the thesis in an *anumāna* or *prayogavākya*, rather than in the broader context of statements and speech-acts.

The historian of the Madhyamaka--and of Indian and Buddhist philosophy in general--has besides to beware of anachronistically transposing and unsystematically imposing the concepts of modern semantics and philosophy, which have originated in the course of particular historical developments, on modes of thought that evolved in quite different historical circumstances, and which have therefore to be interpreted in the first place in the context of their own concerns and the ideas they themselves developed. Still, in studying Indian and Tibetan thought, the importance of religious and philosophical praxis deserves attention. Recent work in semiology and pragmatics may then provide us if not with precise parallels at least with useful heuristic instruments, and serve as an aid in explicating what the Mādhyamikas have had to say on the *pratijñā* and related topics.

ABBREVIATIONS

MMK = *Mūla-Madhyamakakārikās* by Nāgārjuna, edited together with the *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛttiḥ* by L. de La Vallée Poussin, Bibliotheca Buddhica IV (St. Petersburg, 1903-13); verses alone edited by J. W. de Jong (Adyar, 1977).

VV = *Vigrahavyāvartanī* by Nāgārjuna, edited together with the author's own commentary by E. H. Johnston and A. Kunst, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 9 (1948-51):99-152.

NOTES

1. This paper is a summary of points of philosophical interest to which attention has been called in another article of a more historical and philological nature in *Contributions on Tibetan and Buddhist Religion and Philosophy*, edited by E. Steinkellner and H. Tauscher (Vienna, 1983), pp. 205-41.
On the literary sources mentioned below see our *Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* History of Indian Literature, volume VII/1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981). And for the chronology see also our article "Towards a Chronology of the Madhyamaka School," in *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honor of Professor J. W. de Jong on His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by L. A. Hercus et al. (Canberra: [Australian National University], Faculty of Asian Studies, 1981), pp. 505-30.
2. On the *catuṣkoṭi* or "tetralemma" see our article in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 5 (1977):1-71.
3. See J. Lyons, *Semantics*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 749 f., 768 f., and 802 f. In addition to concepts developed by Austin, Searle and others who have developed speech-act philosophy, Lyons makes use of ideas and terms used by R. M. Hare in his article "Meaning and Speech Acts" in *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), reprinted in his book *Practical Inferences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 74-93, where the tropic is defined as the sign of mood and the neustic as the sign of subscription.
4. For this periodization of the Madhyamaka school, see *Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, p. 58 ff.