

Equivocation in Nāgārjuna

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11 November 1994*

1 Introductory remarks

Among the incidental features of Nāgārjuna's philosophy that have captured my attention over the years, there are two in particular that I wish to discuss in this paper. The first observation is that his philosophical writings seem to have fascinated a large number of modern scholars of Buddhism; this hardly requires demonstration. The second observation is that Nāgārjuna's writings had relatively little effect on the course of subsequent Indian Buddhist philosophy. Despite his apparent attempts to discredit some of the most fundamental concepts of abhidharma, abhidharma continued to flourish for centuries, without any appreciable attempt on the part of ābhidharmikas to defend their methods of analysis against Nāgārjuna's criticisms. And despite Nāgārjuna's radical critique of the very possibility of having grounded knowledge (*pramāṇa*), the epistemological school of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti dominated Indian Buddhist intellectual circles, again without any explicit attempt to answer Nāgārjuna's criticisms of their agenda. Aside from a few commentators on Nāgārjuna's works, who identified themselves as Mādhyamikas, Indian Buddhist intellectual life continued almost as if Nāgārjuna had never existed.

Taken together, these two observations may suggest that the interest that modern scholars of Buddhism have in Nāgārjuna may be out of proportion to the influence that Nāgārjuna had on Buddhists themselves. On first consideration, the observation that Nāgārjuna had little impact on classical Buddhists may seem unrelated to the observation that he has had a good deal of impact on modern Buddhologists. On further reflection, however, it seems that a common reason can be found to explain these two observations; the reason could be simply that Nāgārjuna's arguments, when examined closely, turn out to be fallacious and therefore not very convincing to a logically astute reader. By using faulty argumentation, Nāgārjuna was able to arrive at some spectacularly counterintuitive conclusions. The fallaciousness of his arguments would explain why many generations of Indian Buddhists after Nāgārjuna's time ignored much of what he had to say; the Indian Buddhist tradition was for the most part quite insistent on sound argumentation. And the counterintuitive conclusions would help explain why some modern readers have assumed that since Nāgārjuna's conclusions do not follow

*This paper, made up of excerpts from "Nāgārjuna's appeal" was prepared to read at University of Chicago.

from his arguments, he was not trying to conform to the canons of standard logic at all but was instead presenting a radical critique of standard logic, or was at least working within the framework of some kind of so-called deviant logic.

The principal object of this paper is to examine some of Nāgārjuna's arguments in order to determine exactly what type of fallacy he most often employs. In order to reach that object, I shall first try to determine the purpose behind Nāgārjuna's argumentation by looking not only at the conclusions he claimed to have reached but also at the reasons why he may have found it important to arrive at those conclusions. The next step will be to examine the actual fallacies upon which his conclusions rest.

2 Nāgārjuna's philosophical goal

Probably more has been written about Nāgārjuna, in English at least, than has been written about any other Buddhist philosopher. As is to be expected, the more scholars investigate and write about Nāgārjuna, the less agreement there is as to what his principal goals were in setting down his ideas in the way he did. Depending on what one reads about Nāgārjuna in secondary sources, one can come away with the impression either that he was a mystic, or a radical critic of the forms of Buddhism that preceded him, or a conservative trying to get back to certain basic principles that had somehow gotten lost in the scholastic developments that took place between the time of the historical Buddha and his own time. Of course these different interpretations are not necessarily incompatible, but they do give us somewhat different pictures of the type of world view and the kinds of religious practices one might expect to find associated with a person who expressed himself in the ways that Nāgārjuna did. I cannot hope to solve the problem of which of the competing views of Nāgārjuna is the most accurate, but I think it is possible at least to reject some interpretations of his thought that are not well-supported by a close examination of his writings. Before doing so, however, let me offer a quick recapitulation of what I take to be the most important tenets in his system of ideas.

During the course of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, Nāgārjuna provides arguments for a number of theorems that bear on the general conclusion that nothing has a self. Two of these subsidiary theorems that will come up for discussion in the course of this paper are the following:

Theorem 1 No beings at all exist anywhere. (*na jātu kecana bhāvāḥ kvacana vidyante*)

Theorem 2 Nothing can undergo the process of change. (*kasya anyathātvaṃ bhaviṣyati*)

The reasoning that Nāgārjuna presents in support of these theorems will be examined later in this paper; for the present, the principal task is simply to understand what these theorems mean, and what they imply.

In order to understand the standard interpretation of Theorem 1, it may be helpful to bear in mind that it is made in the context of an examination of the basic postulates of Buddhist ābhidharmika scholasticism. According to the scholastics, a being is that

which has an identity (*svabhāva*), that is, a characteristic by which it can be distinguished from beings that have different identities. One can make a theoretical distinction between two types of being. Simple beings are those that cannot be broken up or analysed into smaller components, while complex beings are organized aggregations of simple beings. The ontological position taken within most schools of classical Buddhist abhidharma is that complex beings do not exist as beings above and beyond the simple beings of which they are composed. Insofar as a complex being has any identity, its identity is derivative, being a product of the identities of its elementary parts; a being whose identity is derivative is said to be empty (*śūnya*). Simple beings, on the other hand, do have distinct identities, according to the scholastics, and can therefore be said to exist in their own right. Simple beings are basic properties (*dharma*). They may be physical properties, such as resistance, cohesion, and motility; or basic psychological properties such as attraction, aversion, indifference, joy, sadness, equanimity, understanding, misunderstanding and so forth. When it is said that a person has no self (*ātman*), what is meant is that a person is a complex being whose identity is a product of all the many physical and mental properties that are organized into a single system. Now in stating Theorem 1, Nāgārjuna is making the claim that not only do complex beings lack an identity and therefore an ultimate reality, but so do simple beings. In the final analysis, then, there are no beings of either kind that exist anywhere.

Theorem 2 is also related to scholastic ways of thinking. According to the metaphysical principles followed by the ābhidharmikas, complex beings are prone to undergo change, because anything that is composite is liable eventually to undergo total decomposition. And before decomposing altogether, a complex being is prone to losing some of its parts and acquiring new parts to replace those that have been lost. A person, for example, may lose the psychological property of attraction for a particular object and replace it with the property of indifference towards that object. The process of losing and substituting their elementary parts is the mechanism by which complex beings undergo change, and eventually death or destruction. Since such change is inevitable, people who become fond of complex beings are bound to feel the unpleasant psychological properties of sadness and so forth that attend the experience of a change or loss of an object of affection. According to classical Buddhist theory, the best strategy for breaking the habit of becoming fond of complex objects is to focus the attention on the simple properties of which they are composed, and to recognize that even these simple properties are transient.

Credit must be given to the ābhidharmikas for providing a cogent theory of change and for recognizing that all complex beings are liable to undergo change. The ābhidharmikas also deserve credit for realizing that the notion of change in a complex being is, like the notion of such a being's identity, a derivative idea. In the same way that a complex being's identity is the product of the identities of the parts of which it is made, a complex being's change of state is a product of the relative locations of its elementary parts. Thus, in the technical language of Buddhist abhidharma, the change that complex beings are said to undergo is also empty. The main shortcoming of the ābhidharmikas' account of change is that it fails to provide any account for how simple beings can undergo change. Complex beings lose their existence by losing their integrity; that is, their components become scattered to such an extent that the parts no longer hang together as a single aggregation. But how does a simple being lose its

existence? It could be said that a simple being has only one part and therefore loses its existence by losing its one part, but the question still remains: how does a simple being lose its only part? Since the being is identical to its sole component, the being cannot be separated from its single property; the part of a simple being cannot be scattered in the same way as the parts of a complex being. The only way a simple being can go out of existence is if its single part goes out of existence, but there is no account for how its single part loses its existence.

Recognizing that a simple being can neither lose its integrity, nor can it go out of existence, Nāgārjuna observed that a being that has an identity (*prakṛti, svabhāva*) cannot undergo change. Add this to the ābhīdharmika conclusion that the change of complex beings is a derivative idea rather than a primitive fact of the world, and one arrives at Theorem 2: nothing can undergo the process of change.

Nāgārjuna's view of the Buddha's teaching was that it served to help people achieve happiness by dispelling all opinions (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇa*). Presumably, Nāgārjuna saw his own task as helping his readers achieve the same goal by the same means. Since most opinions are in some way or another about beings and the changes they undergo, Nāgārjuna's strategy seems to be to dispel opinions by showing that in the final analysis opinions have no subject matters. Showing the insubstantiality of the subject matters of opinions is, in other words, a way of trying to starve opinions out. According to Buddhist theory, the sensual appetites can be starved by withdrawing the attention from sensible objects; recognizing the intrinsic unattractiveness of sensible objects helps one to be willing to withdraw that attention. Similarly, curiosity and the other intellectual appetites can be starved by withdrawing the attention from intellectible objects, namely, the properties (*dharma*) cognized by the intellectual faculty (*mano-vijñāna*). Realizing that all properties are insubstantial helps one to be willing to withdraw attention from them. Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, I suggest, is a method of helping one attain that realization. What remains to be investigated now is the soundness of the argumentation by which Nāgārjuna tries to prompt that realization.

3 Nāgārjuna's appeal to reason: examining his argumentation

The form of argument that Nāgārjuna uses throughout his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* is exemplified by the ones adduced in his discussion of causal relations, which is the topic of the first chapter of the work. The strategy of argumentation in the first chapter of that work is one that he uses repeatedly, without significant variation, throughout his philosophical writing. Therefore, it is worth examining Nāgārjuna's arguments on the topic of causal relations in some detail.

3.1 Arguments in MMK 1: pratyāya-parīkṣā

It is no accident that Nāgārjuna begins his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* with an examination of causal relations. There is probably no concept more central to formal Buddhist doctrine than that of causality. The notion of cause and effect is the very backbone of

the Four Noble Truths, which are in turn regarded as the very essence of the Buddha's teaching. Taken as a whole, the Four Noble Truths state that discontent has an identifiable cause, and if this cause can be eliminated, then so can its effect. In other words, the very goal of Buddhist theory and practice is to achieve lasting contentment, which is said to be possible only through the elimination of the ultimate causes of discontent. Without a concept of causality, therefore, there could be no Four Noble Truths, and without these truths there would be no teaching identifiable as Buddhism.

Nāgārjuna's close examination (*parīkṣā*) of the notion of causality begins with this assertion in MMK 1:3:

na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ |
 utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kvacana kecana | |

There are absolutely no beings anywhere that have arisen from themselves, nor are there any that have arisen from something other than themselves, nor are there any that have arisen from both, nor are there any that have arisen from no cause at all.

The reasoning behind these assertions could be summarized as follows:

1. It cannot be thought that a being comes into being from itself. If a being comes into being at one moment out of itself at a previous moment, then there is no change in that being from one moment to another. If there is no change, then it is not appropriate to say that anything new has "come into being." Rather, it would be appropriate to say that something has remained static. And even if one is talking about the same moment, there is a fundamental contradiction involved in saying that two things are identical: if there is identity, there is only one thing. Therefore, we cannot say, for example, that a single self comes into being from the plurality of properties belonging to the five groups (*skandhas*) and that the self is identical with those properties.
2. It also cannot be said that a being comes into being from something other than itself. If a being is said to be capable of coming into being from what is absolutely different from itself, then it should be possible to say that anything can arise from anything else without restraint, and there should be no constraints on what can be regarded as a cause of a particular effect. It should be possible to say, for example, that a pumpkin seed causes an oak tree to grow. But this is not what people mean when they talk of causes, and especially this is not what the Buddha meant in articulating the Four Noble Truths. He did not say that dissatisfaction comes into being owing to just anything chosen at random, but rather he specified that it comes into being owing to particular kinds of desire and certain specific misconceptions.
3. Given that one cannot say that a thing comes into being from what is absolutely identical, and one cannot say that it comes into being from what is absolutely distinct, perhaps one can say that a being comes into being from that which is in some respects the same and in some other respects different from itself. Although this suggestion appears to make sense, Nāgārjuna argues that one cannot in fact

say that a being comes into being from something that is both the same as itself and other than itself. The only way that something can be in some ways identical and in some ways different from a second thing is if both things are complex beings, that is, beings that are composed of many aspects. But this is not the sort of being that the Buddha was talking about when he discussed causality; he was talking about dharmas, which are not composite beings made up of more simple parts. Since dharmas are simple, there can be no question of two dharmas being in some respects the same and in some respects different. It cannot, therefore, be said that one dharma arises from another dharma that is partially the same and partially different.

4. Finally, it cannot be said that beings arise from no causes whatsoever. There is, of course, no internal contradiction in this statement, but it is incompatible with the basic assumption of the Four Noble Truths. So, while one can hold to this view as a possible view, one cannot pass this view off as a possible interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha.

What is characteristic of his strategy is that Nāgārjuna first sets out all the logically possible relationships between the two items under examination, and then he tries to show that none of the apparently possible relationships is actually possible. This leads him to conclude that, since there is no possible relationship between the two would-be relata, the relata themselves do not really exist. Hence the heart of the first chapter of *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* is the conclusion stated in MMK 1:3: “No beings at all exist anywhere.” This is the content of Theorem 1 discussed earlier.

Now before this conclusion can be reached, it must be firmly established that none of the apparently possible relationships between a being and what preceded it is in fact possible. Of these four apparently possible relations between a cause and its effect, three are fairly obviously impossible. Given the reasons stated above, one is not likely to want to argue that an effect arises out of a cause that is identical to the effect itself, nor that an effect arises out of a simple cause from which it is in some respects identical and in some respects different, nor that an effect arises out of no cause at all. It may be the case that a simple being cannot come into being out of another simple being, for the reasons stated above. It is, however, by no means obvious that a complex being does not come into being from another complex being or from a collocation of simple beings. In fact, this is precisely the relationship between cause and effect that intuitively seems most correct: the cause is a different thing from its effect. Even if one would want to add the qualification that an effect arises from a cause that is the same *kind* of thing as the effect itself, one would intuitively want to say that the cause is one thing and the effect another. So Nāgārjuna’s reasons for dismissing this possibility require a closer examination.

It is important to note that the position that Nāgārjuna examines is the common Buddhist view based upon the notion that each simple property (*dharma*) is distinguished from every other simple property in virtue of possessing its own distinct nature, called its *svabhāva* or its own nature, which is a nature that no other simple property has. Each property’s own nature is in effect its identity, in the sense of that by which it is differentiated from others. In his criticism of this view, Nāgārjuna plays on an ambiguity in “svabhāva,” the word for own nature. The word “sva-bhāva” means a nature

(*bhāva*) that belongs to the thing itself (*svasya*); it refers, in other words, to a thing's identity. But Nāgārjuna takes advantage of the fact that the word "svabhāva" could also be interpreted to mean the fact that a thing comes into being (*bhavati*) from itself (*svataḥ*) or by itself (*svena*); on this interpretation, the term would refer to a thing's independence. Assuming this latter analysis of the word, rather than the one that most Buddhists actually held, Nāgārjuna then points out that whatever comes into being from conditions is not coming into being from itself; and if a thing does not come into being from itself, then it has no *svabhāva*. But if a thing has no *svabhāva*, he says, it also has no *parabhāva*. Here, too, Nāgārjuna takes advantage of an ambiguity in the key word he is examining. The word "para-bhāva" can be analysed to mean either 1) that which has the nature (*bhāva*) of another thing (*parasya*), that is, a difference, or 2) the fact of coming into being (*bhavati*) from another thing (*parataḥ*), that is a dependence.

When one reads Nāgārjuna's argument in Sanskrit, it is not immediately obvious that the argument has taken advantage of an ambiguity in the key term. But when one tries to translate his argument into some other language, such as English or Tibetan, one finds that it is almost impossible to translate his argument in a way that makes sense in translation. This is because the terms in the language of translation do not have precisely the same range of ambiguities as the words in the original Sanskrit. In English, we are forced to disambiguate, and in disambiguating, we end up spoiling the apparent integrity of the argument.

Let's look at the phrasing of Nāgārjuna's argument in the original Sanskrit and see why it looks plausible. The original argument as stated in MMK 1:5 reads:

na hi svabhāvo bhāvānāṃ pratyayādiṣu vidyate |
avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate | |

Surely beings have no *svabhāva* when they have causal conditions. And if there is no *svabhāva*, there is no *parabhāva*.

As we have seen above, the word "svabhāva" can be interpreted in two different ways. It can be rendered either as **identity** (which I shall call *svabhāva*₁) or as **causal independence** (*svabhāva*₂). Similarly, the word "parabhāva" can be interpreted in two ways. It can be rendered as **difference** (*parabhāva*₁), or as **dependence** (*parabhāva*₂).

Now the sentence in MMK 1:5ab makes perfectly good sense if it is understood as employing *svabhāva*₂.

Statement 1 Surely beings have no **causal independence** when they have causal conditions. (na hi svabhāvaḥ bhāvānāṃ pratyaya-ādiṣu vidyate |)

Statement 1 makes sense at face value, because it is obviously true that if something is dependent upon causal conditions, it is not independent of causal conditions. The sentence in MMK 1:5cd, on the other hand, makes better sense if it is understood as employing *svabhāva*₁ and *parabhāva*₁.

Statement 2 And if there is no **identity**, then there is no **difference**. (avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvaḥ na vidyate |)

Statement 2 also makes sense at face value, because a thing's identity is understood as a feature that distinguishes the thing from things other than itself; if a thing has no such features, then it has no identity and is therefore not distinguishable or different from other things.

It would be much more difficult to get a true statement out of the sentence in MMK 1:5cd if it were understood as employing svabhāva₂ and parabhāva₂.

Statement 3 And if [beings have] no **independence**, then they have no **dependence**.
(avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvaḥ na vidyate |)

Indeed statement 3 seems to be quite false at face value. So if one gives Nāgārjuna the benefit of the doubt by assuming that he was trying to write sentences that were true (or at least appeared to be true at face value), one is likely to reject statement 3 as the correct interpretation of MMK 1:5cd and to adopt statement 2.

The problem that now arises is this: no matter how much sense statement 2 may make as an independent statement, it does not at all follow from statement 1. It only appears to follow in the original Sanskrit because of the ambiguity of the expressions involved. A careful logician would not be deceived by Nāgārjuna's argument, but it is phrased in such a way that it might very well take the unwary reader off guard.

Sprung, in order to make MMK 1:5 even appear convincing in English translation, has to coin a new English expression. He comes up with this (Sprung, 1979, p. 66):

If there are conditions, things are not **self-existent**; if there is no **self-existence** there is no **other-existence**.

Sprung's translation has the obvious advantage of preserving the prima facie plausibility of the original Sanskrit, but it has the equally obvious disadvantage of using a neologism that does not readily convey any meaning to a speaker of the English language. Whereas the word "self-existence" occurs as a standard English word with the meaning of independence, "other-existence" is merely a calque that avoids the task of offering a real translation. Inada's translation also employs calques rather than real interpretations (Inada, 1970, p. 40):

In these relational conditions the **self-nature** of the entities cannot exist.
From the non-existence of **self-nature**, **other-nature** too cannot exist.

Kalupahana's translation of this verse makes use of the same calques as Inada's (Kalupahana, 1986, p. 107):

The **self-nature** of existents is not evident in the conditions, etc. In the absence of **self-nature**, **other-nature** too is not evident.

3.2 Arguments in MMK 15:1–11

Nāgārjuna's use of equivocation is nowhere more evident than in the arguments in which the term "svabhāva" occurs. The ways in which Nāgārjuna glides from one meaning of that term to another merits a closer examination. It was suggested above

that the word “svabhāva” is capable of being interpreted either as identity (svabhāva₁) or independence (svabhāva₂), and that “parabhāva” can be interpreted either as difference (parabhāva₁) or dependence (parabhāva₂). In fact, the form of these words naturally allows for a richer interpretation than that. The word “bhāva” is a verbal noun formed by adding the primary suffix (*kr̥t-pratyaya*) known in the Pāṇinīyan system as GHaÑ to the root √BHŪ. According to Pāṇini the suffix GHaÑ forms verbal nouns that have one of three senses: 1) the simple name of the action named by the verbal root itself, 2) the instrument by which an action is carried out or through which a state of affairs arises, or 3) the location in which an action is performed. These three senses that a verbal noun (VN) formed with GHaÑ can have will be symbolized in the discussions that follow as VN_(P), VN_(I) and VN_(L) respectively. Given the possibility of verbal nouns of this form to express more than one factor in a situation, the family of words used in MMK 15 that have “bhāva” as the principal feature can be analysed as having the range of meanings indicated in section 2 of the handout. The effect that Nāgārjuna achieves by switching from one sense of these key terms to another can be illustrated by examining the argument of the fifteenth chapter of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, in which all but one of the eleven verses in the chapter contains at least one of the terms listed above. The chapter opens with this verse (MMK 15:1):

na saṃbhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ |
hetupratyayasambhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ kṛtako bhavet | |

Birth of an independent thing from causes and conditions is not reasonable. An independent thing born from causes and conditions would be a fabrication.

This statement is indisputably true, because it follows from the definition of the notion of independence; it would be a logical impossibility for a thing that is causally independent to be dependent on causes. For this first statement to be indisputably true, then, the term “svabhāva” must be understood as **svabhāva**_{2(L)}. The use of “svabhāva” in the sense of **svabhāva**_{2(L)} continues into the next verse (MMK 15:2):

svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham |
akṛtimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca | |

But how could an independent thing be called a fabrication, given that an independent thing is not a fabrication and is independent of anything else?

It is in the next verse (MMK 15:3) that one can find a shift from one sense of “svabhāva” to another as well as from one sense of “parabhāva” to another.

kutaḥ svabhāvasyābhāve parabhāvo bhaviṣyati |
svabhāvaḥ parabhāvasya parabhāvo hi kathyate | |

How, in the absence of an identifiable thing, could there be a difference, given that the identity of a different thing is called a differentia?

The first sentence of this verse makes perfectly good sense when considered in isolation. Difference occurs in relation to a point of reference, and if there is no point of

reference, then difference is unintelligible. But this statement does not follow from anything that has been said in the first two verses. This statement only appears to follow from the previous ones because of the use of the term “svabhāva” in this verse and in the two that precede it; the term is not used, however, in the same sense in the three verses:

1. The birth of a **svabhāva**_{2(L)} from causes and conditions is not reasonable. A **svabhāva**_{2(L)} born from causes and conditions would be a fabrication.
2. But how could a **svabhāva**_{2(L)} be called a fabrication, given that a **svabhāva**_{2(L)} is not a fabrication and is independent of anything else?
3. How, in the absence of a **svabhāva**_{1(L)}, could there be **parabhāva**_{1(P)}, given that the **svabhāva**_{1(I)} of a **parabhāva**_{1(L)} is called a **parabhāva**_{1(I)}?

The next two verses (MMK 15:4–5) also make use of equivocation. In verse 4 the term “svabhāva” appears again in the sense of **svabhāva**_{2(L)}, and “bhāva” also occurs in two different senses.

svabhāvaparabhāvābhyām ṛte bhāvaḥ kutaḥ punaḥ |
svabhāve parabhāve vā sati bhāvo hi sidhyati | |
bhāvasya ced aprasiddhir abhāvo naiva sidhyati |
bhāvasya hy anyathābhāvam abhāvaṃ bruvate janāḥ | |

How can there be existence (**bhāva**_(P)) without either independence (**svabhāva**_{2(P)}) or dependence (**parabhāva**_{2(P)}), given that existence (**bhāva**_(P)) is established when there is either independence or dependence?

If an existent (**bhāva**_(L)) is not established, an absence (**abhāva**_(P)) is certainly not established, given that people call the change of state (*anyathābhāva*) of an existent (**bhāva**_(L)) its ceasing to be present (**abhāva**_(P)).

Verse 4 makes the claim that everything that exists must be either causally independent like ether (*ākāśa*) or dependent on causes and conditions, so there is no existent that is neither independent nor dependent. This claim is not one that anyone is likely to dispute. Making this claim does not, however, really serve the purpose that Nāgārjuna appears to wish for it to serve. His argument in MMK 15:3 was that neither a *svabhāva* nor a *parabhāva* can be established; his claim in MMK 15:4 is that there is no existent unless there is either *svabhāva* or *parabhāva*; and from these two premises the conclusion is supposed to follow in MMK 15:5 that there is no *bhāva*, and if there is no *bhāva* then neither is there *abhāva*. Owing, however, to the fact that the key terms “svabhāva” and “parabhāva” are used in different senses in MMK 15:3 and MMK 15:4, the conclusion that Nāgārjuna asserts does not follow from the premises that he offers as grounds for that conclusion.

It is impossible to determine in which of the possible senses the terms under consideration are used in MMK 15:6–7:

svabhāvaṃ parabhāvaṃ ca bhāvaṃ cābhāvaṃ eva ca |
ye paśyanti na paśyanti te tattvaṃ buddhaśāsane | |

kātyāyanāvavāde cāstīti nāstīti cobhayaṃ |
pratiśiddhaṃ bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhāvinā | | 7 | |

They who perceive **svabhāva**, **parabhāva**, **bhāva** and **abhāva** do not perceive the truth in the Buddha's instruction.

In the *Kātyāyanāvavāda* the Lord, who clearly saw **bhāva** and **abhāva** denied both the view that one exists and the view that one does not exist.

As Kalupahana 1986, p. 7 has observed, the Kātyāyanāvavāda is the only Buddhist text that Nāgārjuna cites by name or even alludes to in the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*. In this text, which was reportedly accepted as canonical by every school of Buddhism, the Buddha is portrayed as explaining to Kātyāyana that the middle path consists in avoiding the two extremes of believing that all things exist (*sarvam asti*) and believing that nothing exists (*sarvam nāsti*). The middle path that avoids these two extremes is the recognition that everything that is experienced comes into being through conditions and fails to come into being when its conditions are absent. It is, according to the sūtra, this correct view (*samyagdr̥ṣṭi*) of conditional arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) that is supposed to replace the incorrect perceptions of existence (*astitva*, *bhāva*) and non-existence (*nāstitva*, *abhāva*) and above all the incorrect perception of a self (*ātman*).

In MMK 15:8, the word “prakṛti” is introduced and appears to be used as a synonym of “svabhāva”; the term “prakṛti” is evidently being used in the sense of nature or natural disposition:

yady astitvaṃ prakṛtyā syān na bhaved asya nāstitā |
prakṛter anyathābhāvo na hi jatūpapadyate | |

If a thing were to exist by nature, then it could not fail to exist, for the change of state of a nature is certainly not possible.

Saying that it is in the very nature (*prakṛti*) of a thing to be a particular way is equivalent to saying that the thing in question cannot be any other way. Therefore, if it is in the nature of a thing to exist, then it cannot be any other way than existent. In this context, then, “prakṛti” is being used in the sense of unalterability, uniformity and identity; it refers to precisely that characteristic or set of characteristics in a thing that are not subject to change (*anyathābhāva*, *vikāra*). In contexts in which “prakṛti” means essence in contrast to accident (*vikṛti*), it overlaps in meaning with “svabhāva” in the sense of identity, that is, **svabhāva**₁ (I). This sense of the term “prakṛti” is carried into the next verse, MMK 15:10, which reads:

prakṛtau kasya cāsatyām anyathātvam bhaviṣyati |
prakṛtau kasya ca satyām anyathātvam bhaviṣyati | |

And in the absence of a nature, what can undergo the process of change?
On the other hand, if a nature is present, what can undergo the process of change?

The only possible conclusion of this pair of statements is that there is no change. And so to Theorem 1 we can now add the following as one of the claims that Nāgārjuna is unambiguously making: “Nothing can undergo the process of change.” This is the content of Theorem 2 discussed in section 2.

The last two verses of the chapter relate the conclusions arrived at here to the overall themes of the entire *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, namely, that a clever person rejects both the view that the self is perpetual and the view that the self is discontinued after the death of the physical body. MMK 15:10–11 read as follows:

astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstīti ucchedadarśanaṃ |
 tasmād astitvanāstīve nāsrīyeta vicakṣaṇaḥ | |
 asti yaddhi svabhāvena na tan nāstīti śāśvatam |
 nāstīdānīm abhūt pūrvam ity ucchedaḥ prasajyate | |

The notion of perpetuity is that one exists; the notion of destruction is that one fails to exist. Therefore, a wise person should not experience existence or non-existence.

Perpetuity follows from believing that that which exists independently (*svabhāvena*) does not fail to exist; destruction follows from believing that that which existed before no longer exists.

3.3 Summary of Nāgārjuna’s fallacies

Just how well Nāgārjuna used logic has long been a matter of interest to modern scholars. Most of these studies have focussed on his use of the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*) and have sought to discover whether or not this way of framing questions betrays either an ignorance of the law of contradiction or a deliberate use of some kind of non-standard or deviant logic. Studying the tetralemma alone is not likely to shed much light on Nāgārjuna’s knowledge of logic, since the tetralemma was a fairly primitive framework for posing questions that was in use before the time of the Buddha. The Buddha’s use of this framework may have inclined Nāgārjuna to treat it with some respect, even if his own command of logic had advanced beyond the level of sophistication that the tetralemma represents. Given that the conceptual tools at the disposal of intellectuals in India had improved considerably during the half-millennium that separated Nāgārjuna from the Buddha, one can expect that Nāgārjuna’s presentation of certain ideas would be somewhat more clear and precise than the Buddha’s presentation had been. In any event, one must look at much more than his use of the tetralemma to ascertain Nāgārjuna’s command of logical principles, and indeed his whole attitude towards the limits of rational discourse. One scholar who set out to do a more comprehensive study of Nāgārjuna’s argumentation was Richard Robinson. Thirty-five years ago Robinson 1957 provided evidence that Nāgārjuna explicitly knew about and referred to the law of contradiction. To quote just one of the five citations that Robinson gave, Nāgārjuna wrote in MMK 8:7cd

parasparaviruddhaṃ hi sac cāsac caikataḥ kutaḥ |

For how can presence and absence, which are mutually exclusive, occur in the same thing?

Robinson 1957, p. 295 also provided textual evidence of three passages in which Nāgārjuna explicitly stated the law of excluded middle. Since adherence to these two laws is the criterion that people usually use in distinguishing between standard and deviant systems of logic, it is unquestionable that Nāgārjuna’s logic was quite standard. This does not mean, however, that he was always correct in his use of logic by modern canons of validity. Robinson found, for example, three passages in which Nāgārjuna clearly committed the formal fallacy of denying the antecedent (p. 297); this is an argument of the form:

$$\frac{p \rightarrow q \quad \neg p}{\neg q}$$

This use of a formally invalid structure may have been quite innocent, says Robinson, since Nāgārjuna’s use of argumentation was in general at about the same level as Plato’s; both seem to have had a good intuitive grasp of basic logical principles, but both also used forms of argumentation that later logicians would come to recognize as fallacious. Denying the antecedent was not recognized as a fallacy in Europe until Aristotle discovered it; there is no clear evidence that it was recognized in India before Nāgārjuna’s time. Given that the state of knowledge of formal logic was much more crude in Nāgārjuna’s time than in later generations, says Robinson, it is not at all surprising that his contemporaries used lines of reasoning that later Indian Buddhists, not to mention people in the twentieth century, would know to avoid. “It’s not that they [*viz.*, Nāgārjuna’s contemporaries] were worse thinkers than the moderns, but simply that they were earlier. It is in this milieu that Nāgārjuna’s reasoning should be appraised” (Robinson, 1957, p. 307).

In another penetrating study of Nāgārjuna’s methods of argumentation, Robinson 1972 compares Nāgārjuna’s presentation to a *trompe-l’œil* or sleight-of-hand trick.

Its elements are few and its operations are simple, though performed at lightning speed and with great dexterity. And the very fact that he cannot quite follow each move reinforces the observer’s conviction that there is a trick somewhere. The objective of this article is to identify the trick and to determine on some points whether or not it is legitimate.

The “trick” that Robinson discovered lay in Nāgārjuna’s definition of the term “svabhāva” in such a way that it was self-contradictory. If the *svabhāva* as defined by Nāgārjuna exists, says Robinson, “it must belong to an existent entity, that is, it must be conditioned, dependent on other entities and possessed of causes. But by definition it is free from conditions, nondependent on others, and not caused. Therefore, it is absurd to maintain that a *svabhāva* exists” (Robinson, 1972, p. 326). Exposing the absurdity of the notion of *svabhāva* as defined by Nāgārjuna only does damage, of course, to those who actually used the term as defined by him. In the remainder of his article, Robinson shows that in fact none of Nāgārjuna’s philosophical rivals did use the term “svabhāva” as he had redefined it, and therefore no one was really refuted by him. In his concluding remark, Robinson says:

The nature of the Mādhyamika trick is now quite clear. It consists of
(a) reading into the opponent’s views a few terms which one defines for

him in a self-contradictory way, and (b) insisting on a small set of axioms which are at variance with common sense and not accepted in their entirety by any known philosophy. It needs no insistence to emphasize that the application of such a critique does not demonstrate the inadequacy of reason and experience to provide intelligible answers to the usual philosophical questions.

To the various fallacies and tricks brought to light by Robinson in his articles, we can now add the informal fallacy of equivocation as outlined above. That is, not only did Nāgārjuna use the term “svabhāva” in ways that none of his opponents did, but he himself used it in several different senses at key points in his argument.

4 Conclusion

What I have attempted to do in the present paper is simply to show that a close look at Nāgārjuna’s work in the context in which it was written reveals that Nāgārjuna put forth a number of fallacious arguments. In particular, I have tried to show that he made frequent use of the fallacy of equivocation. Owing to his use of this and other fallacies, the conclusions he puts forth do not necessarily follow from the evidence he adduces for them. I have suggested that this fallaciousness in Nāgārjuna’s writing has been seen by some modern interpreters not as a vice but as a rather interesting virtue; for it has been seen by some as a clue that Nāgārjuna deliberately rejected standard logic in favour of a deviant logic by which one might simultaneously hold two contradictory views with impunity. I contend that the hypothesis is unlikely to be true. On the contrary, it appears to me on examining the textual evidence that Nāgārjuna had a set of definitely stated doctrines for which he was trying to produce a systematically arranged set of rational arguments. That he failed in this task does not diminish his importance within the history of Buddhist philosophy. It merely shows him to have been a thinker who displayed about the same degree of fallibility as most other human beings. But being an imperfect philosopher need not at all reduce Nāgārjuna’s appeal, either to historians of philosophy or to philosophers themselves.

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