



The Silent Edge of Reason: Nagarjuna's Dialectical Method

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ABSTRACT

Nagarjuna's dialectical method, foundational to the Madhyamika tradition, represents a radical critique of ontological essentialism within Indian Philosophy. Central to his strategy is the employment of 'Prasanga' (reductio ad absurdum) a negative dialectical technique that refrains from positing independent propositions. Instead, it demonstrates the untenability of interlocutors' claims by exposing their internal contradictions and regressions. This methodological non-assertion is consistent with Nagarjuna's rejection of svabhava (intrinsic existence), a concept he systematically deconstructs to reveal the dependent origination (pratitya samutpada) of all phenomena. Through this analysis, Nagarjuna avoids both ontological reification (sasvatavada), eternalism and nihilistic reduction (ucchedavada), thereby articulating the middle way (Madhyama pratipada). His dialectics culminate in the doctrine of shunyata (emptiness), not as a metaphysical absolute but as a heuristic pointing to the cognigent, relational and non-substantial character of reality.

KEY WORDS

Dialectic Method, Dwandnyaya, Eternalism, Nihilism, Middle Path, Emptiness.

Dialectic is the art of conversation. In conversation, we generally use arguments to refute the opponents' theory. Those arguments in which the opponent gets stuck and can neither say yes nor no came to be known as dialectic. Nagarjuna calls it *Dwandnyaya*.

Due to the multiplicity of purpose and method of use dialectic can be of many types like:

1. It can be used for examining and refuting logical arguments.
2. It can be identified as a cultural method of reasoning.
3. It is a type of formal logic or it could be a method of arriving at a general conclusion by reasoning from some specific notion or hypotheses.
4. *Dwandnyaya* or Dialectic is the annual discussion or symposium on generally accepted pledges.
5. *Dwanda Nyaya* is also the criticism of fallacious reasoning.
6. Dialectic shows the contradictions in reasoning that rises above practicality and establishes the spiritual entity.

Among these Nagarjuna's dialectic method is of the first type. He examines all the previously accepted vows and refutes them by showing contradictions within them.

Although Nagarjuna's dialectic is original but we can find its seeds in Buddhist philosophy before this. When we see the original teachings of Gautam Buddha, we find the indications of a situation of conflict there too. Buddha declared some questions unanswerable and remained silent. He did not express any opinion in the answer. These unanswered questions are fourteen in number They are as follows:

1. Is the world eternal, non-eternal; eternal-non-eternal or neither eternal nor non-eternal?
2. Is the world finite, infinite; finite-infinite or neither finite nor infinite?
3. After death, does the *Tathagata* exist, not exist; exists and does not exist or neither exists nor does not exist?
4. Is the living being the body, or is the living being something else and the body something else?

The first, second and the third questions have four options each and the fourth question has two options. Thus, there are a total of fourteen questions which Gautam Buddha did not answer. These are called the "*Chaturdash Avyakrit*". Each question has two opposing options: affirmation and negation. Taking both together gives the third option and negating both the options can give the fourth option. It's impossible to have more options regarding a question.

Why did Buddha not give the answers of "*Avyakrit*"? What was his intention behind this? These questions led Nagarjuna to his theory of *Dwand-Nyaya* or dialectic method.

Gautam Buddha had understood the secret of dialectic in his inner vision. He had realized the limitations of logic very well. Logic can support or oppose different views. That is the reason he did not answer the "*Avyakrit*". If he had said yes or no to any of those options, he would have also been trapped in some traditional views like his predecessors.

As the power of opposing philosophical schools which were critical of British philosophy increased, the logical and dialectic within Buddhist philosophy became sharper and began to defend itself. Nagarjuna developed his dialectic method on this platform. In fact, dialectic approach reaches its youthful stage in Nagarjuna's philosophy.

Gautam Buddha himself showed the four contradictions. Through his silence he also expressed that truth is beyond thought. Nagarjuna gave a systematic and theoretical form to these four contradictions and applied them to all orthodox views. He applied this method on The Four Noble Truths, Twelve *Nidaanas*, *Nirvana* and *Tathagata* and showed that by thinking through the dialectic method. The intellect recalls from the world and enters into the field of '*Pragyana*' (wisdom) and then the truth is seen.

The main aim of Nagarjuna's dialectic or *Dwanda-Nyaya* is to prove that when logic tries to understand the real truth beyond the visible world, it faces failure:

“On a more careful study of his dialectic it will appear that he is, in his soberness, only trying to show up the inevitable conflict in which reason gets involved when it goes beyond its legitimate province of comprehending phenomena, and enters the forbidden land of Noumena.”¹

Therefore, the meaning of dialectic is to consider the positive and negative aspects of a question and find out those contradictions in which logic gets stuck and is unable to reach the goal, but it indicates that there is a level above logic where truth is seen. Generally, it is used on the theory of a rival philosopher and it is shown through his own theory that he is self-contradictory. As a result, he does not get any opportunity to escape from any corner and he has to accept his own theory as baseless and meaningless. Thus, the purpose of dialectic is to prove a belief meaningless by showing contradiction in it. This is called ‘*Prasanga*’.

“The dialectic was thus a rejection of views by reduction ‘ad abs urdum’ argument. Technically, this was known as ‘*Prasanga*’.”²

The main objective of Nagarjuna’s *Dwand-Nyaya* (Dialectic) is to bring out the relativity, naturelessness and voidness of perception. *Dwanda-Nyaya* is basically a critique of logic, which cannot be used without knowing the positive and negative aspects of opposition. At least two view points should be opposed to each other. One side should support one view and the other side should support the counterview. This does not mean that the ‘ambivalent bond’ of logic is ‘*Dwanda-Nyaya*’. These two concepts are quite different. Ambivalent bond is seen only in one situation. It cannot be used widely. On the contrary *Dwanda-Nyaya* is used everywhere. Almost a complete philosophical system can be created by using it.

To understand Nagarjuna’s dialectical method it’s necessary to differentiate it from Jain and Hegel’s dialectic method. Jains are realists and Hegel is an absolute idealist. According to Jain philosophy, other philosophical schools like *Samkhya*, *Nyaya*, etc. reveal only one side of the truth. Reality has infinite aspects; no single view point captures the whole truth. Every perspective reveals only one part of reality just like a group of blind men describing an elephant. Each gives a partial inference which in his frame of reference represents the truth but cannot however be said to surmise the whole of the elephant’s reality (one says it is like a rope; another calls it’s a pillar, etc.) The whole elephant is a bundle of integrated thoughts of the blind men. Similarly, if the accepted truths of the philosophical schools are given a coordinated form, then shall be near to the real form of the truth.

Hegel’s dialectic method is a way of understanding how ideas and reality develop through contradictions and their resolutions. It works in three main stages:

1. **Thesis:** An initial idea or position
2. **Antithesis:** Its opposite or contradiction
3. **Synthesis:** A higher unity that resolves the conflict between thesis and antithesis, but also has elements of both.

Nagarjuna’s dialectic method or *Dwandnyaya* is different from both of them in nature. It considers any cognitive or conceptual process as a personal mentality. Like Jain or Hegel, a person cannot reach the truth by establishing balance through the thoughts of his mind. Therefore, Nagarjuna considers this type of *Dwandnyaya* to be ineffective. It refutes both the sides positive and negative. These two are neither true separately nor are they true together:

“Rejection of all views is the rejection of the competence of reason to comprehend reality: the truth is transcendent to thought: rejection of views is not based on any positive grounds of the acceptance of another view; it is solely based on the inner contradiction implicit in each view.”³

Apart from various methods of *Dwandnyaya*, Nagarjuna’s theory can be called “*Catuskoti Dwandnyaya*”. We have already considered the four alternatives of each question in Gautam Buddha’s four

Ávyakrit'. Taking inspiration from them Nagarjuna presents four-fold logic (*Catuskoti*) to deconstruct conceptual extremes. “

For any proposition 'X':

- (i) X exists(*asti*).
- (ii) X does not exist(*nasti*).
- (iii) Both exists and does not exist.
- (iv) Neither exists nor does not exist.

Nagarjuna used these four aspects while examining any proposition and came to the conclusion that none of these four alternatives can ultimately stand. This can be better understood by examination of the following illustration :

Illustration

Step 1: The opponent's assumption

An effect (*karya*) arises from a cause (*karana*).

Step 2: The four alternatives (*Catuskoti*)

Nagarjuna tests this with four logical possibilities:

- (I) Self-causation (from itself)
 - **Claim:** The effect comes from its own self
 - **Refutation:** If it already exists in itself, why would it need to be produced? Production would be meaningless
- (II) Other Causation (from another)
 - **Claim:** The effect comes from something entirely different.
 - **Refutation:** If cause and effect are totally unrelated, then anything could produce anything (a pot could come from a cloth)
- (III) Both self and other
 - **Claim:** The effect comes from both itself and another
 - **Refutation:** This just combines the contradictions of the first two meaninglessness and randomness.
- (IV) Neither self nor other (acausal)
 - **Claim:** The effect arises without any cause
 - **Refutation:** In such a scenario the world would be chaotic, anything could arise at any time without conditions

Step 3: The dialectical conclusion

Since all the four possibilities fail, the notion of an independent 'cause-effect' relation collapses.

This does not mean “nothing happens.” Rather, it means all phenomena are dependently originated (*Pratityasamutpada*) they arise not from intrinsic nature (*svabhava*) but through relational conditions. Thus, causation is empty (*sunya*) of inherent essence.

The dialectic thus, works like this:

1. Present the assumption
2. Test it against the four logical corners.
3. Show each collapse into contradiction.
4. Arrive at *sunyata* and *Pratityasamutpada*.

The theory of *Pratityasamutpada* is the central pillar of Buddhist philosophy. According to it, all things and perceptions are relative. They are all dependent on each other. Since none of them have an independent feeling, Nagarjuna calls them 'nature less' (*nirsvabhava*) and void (*shunya*).

Nagarjuna ruthlessly refuted all the philosophical views prevalent in his time. He had no ill will behind this. He did not get any pleasure from refuting other views. Nagarjuna had a well planned and well thought out purpose. By keeping this in mind we can understand sympathetically:

1. Through his dialectic or *Dwandnyaya*, Nagarjuna proved that Truth cannot be measured by standards of critical intelligence. The instrument of intelligence is very small and weak to understand the Truth.
2. *Dwandnyaya* also proved that the visible world or practical truth is not absolute. Every aspect of it is dependent on some other thing or perception (*bhava*). Since it does not have independent existence, it is not the ultimate truth. Ultimate Truth must therefore be something else.
3. If a person wants to know the Truth, he must abandon logic and rise to a higher level of wisdom. Wisdom is the perfection of knowledge and truth is revealed by it alone. As long as a person is trapped in the web of logic, he can neither see the truth nor can he attain *Nirvana*.
4. Truth is *Nirvana* and *Nirvana* cannot be explained as positive (existence) or negative (non-existence), but both these words are relative and Truth is beyond relativity.

After reviewing these objectives of Nagarjuna's dialectic method it wouldn't be right to say that it's just an exercise in falsification. It can be called a 'Critique of Reason' itself. In falsification/refutation, we have the intention of establishing our side by the erosion of the validity of the opposition. In the aforementioned 'Critique', only the object under consideration is analyzed and evaluated. Critique of Reason means determining the scope of the 'reason', its limits and its strengths or weaknesses. The critic has no selfish motive behind this exercise.

In Nagarjuna's *Dwandnyaya* logic itself examines logic. On one side logic is the judge and on the other side it stands accused. Spiritual progress is possible through such logic. The main objective of Nagarjuna's *Dwandnyaya* is to free the human intellect from the trap of corrupt reasoning and make it fit for spiritual progress. Nagarjuna has indicated this great objective by saying '*Prapanchopasham*', '*Shivam*' in the mangal verses of the '*Madhyamikashashtra*'.

It is worth mentioning here that Nagarjuna's *Dwandnyaya* refutes other views but does not establish any of his own in their place. Usually, a philosopher refutes other views and propounds a new one of his own and seeks support or it, but Nagarjuna does not do so because he knows that if he establishes any opinion, it too shall be shattered by its own dual logic and all his prior efforts will amount to naught. In the '*Vigrah-Vyavartani*' he says,

"If there is any pledge of mine, then this fault can be there in it also, but I do not have any pledge, therefor I cannot be blamed for that fault."⁽⁴⁾

By writing an explanation on this verse of his, he himself clarifies that if he has any pledge, then the characteristics of his pledge would also have the same faults as are there in the pledges of others. He does not have any pledge and therefore when all the feelings are proven to be void, the faults arising from the characteristics of the pledge are not with him.

CONCLUSION

Nagarjuna's dialectic method represents one of the most profound and transformative moments in the history of philosophical reasoning. This approach, articulated primarily through the '*Mulamadhyamarika*', does not aim to construct yet another metaphysical system, but rather to reveal the internal contradictions inherent in every dogmatic or essentialist standpoint. Employing the method of '*Prasanga*' – a rigorous form of '*reductio ad absurdum*' – Nagarjuna leads each ontological and epistemological claim to its logical impasse, exposing the dependency of all conceptual thought upon relational and contingent foundations. In doing so, he

neither affirms nor denies the conventional world but situates it within a dynamic field of dependent origination (Pratityasamutpada), where things exist only in mutual reference and not by self-nature (Swabhava).

This dialectical movement is not mere skepticism; rather it is a radical critique of the limits of reason itself. Nagarjuna does not discard reason, but refines it to the point of self-transcendence. His method dismantles the absolutizing tendency of thought revealing that conceptual distinctions – being and non-being subject and object affirmation and negation – are constructs that fail to grasp reality as it is. At the culmination of this analytic process lies what might be called – ‘The Silent Edge of Reason’, a state where discursive intellect recognizes its own boundaries and yields to a non-conceptual insight (Prajna).

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