

SKEPTICISM OF NĀGĀRJUNA: REVISITED

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Skepticism occupies a central place in the area of Philosophy in general and epistemology in particular. In *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “it is defined as a critical philosophical attitude that questions the reliability of knowledge claims made by philosophers and others.”¹

Prima facie, it appears that Skepticism can have no role in Philosophical arena but it must be admitted that skepticism has played a crucial role in development of Philosophical thinking. Defining Skepticism or determining its logical geography is indeed a difficult task. Particularly the term skepticism is used very loosely in our daily life. A person giving up his faith in all accepted norms and courses of action is often termed a skeptic in his society. Etymologically the term skeptic or skepticism is claimed to derive from root word skeptikos meaning ‘enquirer’ or ‘investigator’. Skepticism is often considered as a critical philosophical attitude, which is opposed to dogmatism. A dogmatist without questioning takes for granted that it is possible to have the proper cognition of a thing through one or more ways of knowing. Skeptic on the other hand, is a person who raises questions in every step. This questioning attitude however may centre round a particular issue or it may be extended to all sorts of knowledge claim. Those who, disbelieve all accepted sources of knowledge like perception, inference, testimony etc. are considered as a philosophical skeptic. A responsible philosophical skeptic does not cast doubt only for the sake of doubt what a cynic does rather he is in constant search for truth. This thing has been highlighted by Prof. Matilal. He points out, “A philosophical skeptic is not an iconoclast or an aggressor into the Temple of Truth but because of his extreme concern for truth- a concern which may be sometimes out of

¹ Edwards, Paul. (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol- VII, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1967, p.449.

proportion - he is reluctant to accept anything less.”² In this particular work, Skepticism is taken in the sense of a position that questions all knowledge claims and withholds or suspends all judgements concerning ultimate reality.

Taking skepticism in this stipulated sense, we can claim Nāgārjuna to have advocated skepticism. This research work is a humble attempt to revisit Skepticism of Nāgārjuna through interpretation of his works and thereby unveiling its nature. There are, undoubtedly, many works in the field of skepticism in general and Nāgārjunian Skepticism in particular, however this ensuing work has its own novelty. Here the researcher has attempted not only to depict the nature of Nāgārjunian skepticism but also endeavoured to show that his skeptical approach is not inconsistent with his moral outlook, advocated in many of his writings like *Ratnāvalī* etc., and the devotional mentality which is expressed through his Collection of hymns. The researcher has also tried to reveal that Nāgārjuna’s skepticism can be viewed as an alternative methodology in attaining Well-being and thereby makes it clear that scepticism is not an impediment in achieving well-being. In this work, attempt has been made to find answers to these questions:

- How far is it justified to call Nāgārjuna a skeptic?
- What is the nature of Nāgārjuna’s Skepticism?
- Was it possible for Nāgārjuna to uphold moral standpoints and pay homage to Buddha keeping his skeptical attitude intact?
- What is the goal of Nāgārjuna’s skepticism? Is Nāgārjuna’s Skepticism directed to wellbeing?

² Matilal, Bimal Krishna, “Scepticism” in *Logical and Ethical Issues: An Essays on Indian Philosophy of Religion* (2nd ed.), India : Orient Blackswan, 2004,P. 52

- Is there any similarity in Nāgārjuna's attitude and thought with other philosophers and thinkers?

This work is divided into five main chapters apart from the Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter discusses about the development of skepticism as witnessed in Western tradition. Here the researcher has discussed about skepticism and some of its overlapping concepts like Cynicism, nihilism, etc. Different forms of skepticism have been considered in the first chapter. This chapter includes a survey of Greek skepticism along with discussion regarding the emergence of skepticism in modern western philosophy. The second chapter focuses on the development of Indian Skepticism in pre and post Nāgārjunian era. Here Skeptical roots in Vedic-upanisadic age have been traced. Further skepticism present in Early Buddhist era has also been recorded. The researcher has discussed the skeptical arguments of Jayarāśi and Śrīharṣa and also highlighted the views of J.Krishnamurti, a modern skeptic, in this chapter. In the third chapter, the general philosophy of Nāgārjuna has been highlighted. Here the theories of *pratītyasamutpāda*, *nairātmya*, and *śūnyatā*, which are cores of his dialectical philosophy, have been discussed. Two-truth theory as discussed in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* has also been considered here. Moreover, this chapter focusses on two important texts written by Nāgārjuna: *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* where we find his arguments in refuting the *pramāṇa-prameya* dichotomy. The fourth chapter of this work is an attempt to uphold Nāgārjuna's moral philosophy. In this regard portions of *Ratnāvalī* and *Suḥrillekha* have been analysed. It is supposed that holding skepticism in one hand and restoring morality on the other is quite impossible. The researcher begs to differ from this popular notion and endeavours to establish that there is no incompatibility in restoring

morality and adopting skeptical attitude. In the 5th chapter of this work interpretations of *Dharmadhātustava*, *Lokātītastava* and *Paramārthastava* have been presented. Attempt has been made to show that Nāgārjuna has paid his homage to Buddha keeping intact his skeptical attitude and there is no incompatibility in this case too.

Extensive study has been made to revisit the skepticism of Nāgārjuna. The researcher has claimed in the Introduction of the work that Nāgārjuna is a skeptic. Now, question may arise whether there is any justification behind this claim. The answer has been sought in this work. Regarding the issue of calling Nāgārjuna a skeptic, a lot of heat has been generated in both ends. Some scholars do not accept Nāgārjuna as a skeptic, on the other hand numerous experts like Prof. Matilal, Prof. Gokhale and Prof. Mohanta considered him as a skeptic. It is no denying the fact that the term skeptic is not directly found in Indian context, but here we get the term *vaitaṇḍika* who resembles to a great extent the attitude of the skeptics. As a *vaitaṇḍika*, Nāgārjuna has questioned and refuted opponent's views without establishing his own views. Throughout, the work has revealed that Nāgārjuna is a skeptic. In both *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* has he nullified the *pramāṇa-prameya* dichotomy and talked about the essencelessness of everything. As such no one can be a skeptic in all walks of life. Pyrrho preached skepticism with the intention of reaching *Ataraxia*. Hume, often considered a skeptic in western scenario, talked of professing skepticism but never practised skepticism. His skepticism may be called mitigated skepticism. Nāgārjuna has no proposition of his own, his attitude is towards anti-essentialism but he also has some purpose. Someone is a skeptic does not imply he will have no purpose in mind or he will deny this mundane life and existence altogether. As such there can be no hard

core skeptic. Moreover in calling Nāgārjuna a skeptic, the *svātantrika-prāsaṅgika* distinction becomes relevant. As a *prāsaṅgika mādhyaṃika* Buddhist, Nāgārjuna is aptly designated as a skeptic.

Now taking it for granted that Nāgārjuna is a skeptic, question arises regarding the nature of his skepticism. Some scholars like Prof. Mohanta, are of the opinion that he is a cognitive skeptic. He has nullified *pramāṇa-prameya* dichotomy and making a critique of opponents' views, suspended his own judgements. But the author of this thesis thinks that Nāgārjuna should not be confined only to the periphery of Cognitive skepticism. He may start with cognitive skepticism but goes beyond transcending it. We are not ready to admit him as a mystical skeptic, in the words of Prof. Matilal either. Nāgārjuna's skepticism seems to be of a different sort. The researcher prefers to call his position as involved skepticism or better to coin the term Concerned skepticism following Prof. Pradeep Gokhale³. It is not just a theoretical exercise but it is concerned more with the practical life. Nāgārjuna's skepticism is concerned skepticism in the sense that by showing how things lack their own nature and hence ultimately undecidable, he would at the same time point out how this realization of undecidability itself has emancipating value. Nāgārjuna has tried to provide solution to the problems of human life.

The nature of his skepticism suggests that it is directed to well-being. Buddha was always concerned with the welfare of human-beings. His teachings are all directed towards upliftment of humanity. As an advocator of Buddha, main aim of Nāgārjuna's philosophy is also Well-being of Individual. Now as we are talking of well-being, at the outset we

³ Learnt from Prof. Gokhale while interaction with him also from one of his lectures where he described Nāgārjuna's Skepticism to be Concerned Skepticism.

must provide a general outline of well-being. According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Well-being is most commonly used in philosophy to describe what is instrumentally or ultimately good for a person. Philosophical use is broader, but related and amounts to the notion of how well a person's life is going for that person. A person's well-being is what is 'good for' them.⁴

Well-being is a term with many faceted meaning. It is difficult to find a corresponding term of well-being in Indian context. So if we are to translate well-being into an Indian concept, perhaps the word “*kalyan*” is more apt. In both Western and Indian tradition we get the notion of Well-being.

In Western tradition we get a Greek term *eudaimonia* which is commonly translated as “happiness”, but better to be described as well-being or good life. Further we find the idea of *ataraxia*, strongly associated with the Greek philosopher Pyrrho. *Atarāxia* refers to a state of perfect mental tranquility; it is a state of freedom from emotional disturbance and anxiety. It may be equated with well-being.

We witness the notion of wellbeing in the Upanisads. According to Upanisads, the different concepts of happiness and wellbeing are related to different sheaths or self-sense. *Annamaya kosha -trpti* (satisfaction of sensual pleasures). *Prānamaya* and *manomaya kosha - harsha* (excitement associated with some events); *ullāsa* (feeling of pleasantness associated with the experience of natural beauty, a good breeze, etc.); *santoshā* (being pleased by some interpersonal interaction). *Vijnānamaya*

⁴ Crisp, Roger, “Well-being”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Stanford, Stanford University, 2017.

kosha- ānanda (moments of bliss). *Ānandamaya kosha – ānandamaya* (pervaded by bliss).⁵

In *Gītā* and *Dhammapada* also we find notions of Well-being. Belonging to two different traditions—Hindu and Buddhist respectively, both can be called manuals of Human well-being.

The idea of Well-being is vibrant in the Philosophy of Tagore as well. To Tagore, real well-being lies in *Ananda*. To him, the almighty expresses His *Ananda* (Joy or Bliss) in creation and that gets manifested in His created beings as well. Rabindranath believes that individual Joy lies in realization of God within one's soul.

Tai tomar anando amar 'par

Tumi tai esecho niche...

According to Rabindranath Tagore, Sorrows, happiness, smiles, tears- all are part of this life but encompassing all these there is ananda or bliss. We often say that pain (*duḥkha*) is opposite of pleasure but *duḥkha* is not opposite of *Ananda*. Both pain and pleasures are components of *Ananda*. Tagore observed that there is a flow of bliss in this world.

Anando dhara bohiche bhubone...

Now let us get back to Nāgārjuna again. His scepticism is surely directed to *kalyan* i.e well-being. Though a thinker of so early time still his philosophy is relevant even today. His skeptical attitude has practical utility. It aims to alleviate the anxiety, worries and sufferings of mankind. In relation to this, let us quote verses 39 and 73 from *Śūnyatāsaptati*:

“Since ultimately action is empty,

⁵ Kiran kumar,S.K, “An Indian Conception of Wellbeing”, European Positive Psychology Proceedings 2002, ed. Henry,J, Leicester,UK: British Psychological Society, 2003.

If it is understood it is seen to be that way
Since action does not exist
That which arises from action does not exist either.

When One understands that this arises from that
All of the false views are thereby refuted
Hatred, anger, delusion are eliminated.
And undefiled, one achieves Nirvana.”⁶

Nāgārjuna intends to say that action is *śūnya* i.e do not have essences, but they have causal roles nevertheless. So Nāgārjuna denies that the actions we witness in the world have any sort of nature or essence independent of their causal roles. But eternalist view, a type of false view claims that there are such essences and that explaining causal relations requires them. Another sort of false view, the nihilist view holds that there are neither essences nor causal relations. Nāgārjuna's position as we know is middle path refuting both extreme views of eternalism and nihilism. The quotes also reveal a central point of Nāgārjuna's soteriology. Eternalist and Nihilist views are thought to beget hatred, anger and delusion whereas Nāgārjuna's middle way view is thought to be ethically and soteriologically undefiled leading to the soteriological goal- the extinction of suffering. From this it is clear Nāgārjuna's skepticism is soteriologically motivated.

Nāgārjuna has some similarities in thought and outlook with many other philosophers and thinkers. He was of the view that as everything is

⁶ Garfield, Jay.F., *Empty words: Buddhist philosophy and cross cultural Interpretation* , Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.5

śūnya i.e. *catuṣkoṭivinirmukto* nothing can be said conclusively about the ultimate reality. German Philosopher Kant also opined that it is the tendency of human mind to raise questions, all of which are difficult to answer. Human reasoning has limitation it cannot know anything and everything. According to Kant, beyond this phenomenal world everything is unknown and unknowable.

Nāgārjuna also has similarity in attitude with Pyrrho, Wittgenstein and J.Krishnamurti.

Nāgārjuna's skepticism has close parallels with Pyrrhonian skepticism. Kuzminski in his book *Pyrrhonism: How the ancient Greeks reinvented Buddhism* argues that Pyrrho of Elis (ca.365-270 B.C.E) developed his form of skepticism after coming into contact with Indian philosophers on his journey with Alexander, the Great. It is said that during their sojourn in India, Pyrrho and his teacher, Anaxarchus met Indian *Gymnosophists* (naked wise men) and such meeting influenced the development of Pyrrho's philosophy. It seems that Pyrrhonism and the Madhyamaka agree that appearances are mutually related. What Pyrrhonism calls "relativism" may correspond to what the Madhyamaka refer to as "dependent origination." Further, "what Pyrrhonism calls "suspension of judgment" (*epoche*) seems consistent with what the Madhyamaka understand as recognition of 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*), leading to 'the silence of the sages'. The latter can perhaps be correlated with Pyrrhonian *aphasia*, or non-assertion."⁷

Nāgārjuna's thought has some points of similarity with Wittgenstein.

⁷ Kuzminski, Adrian, 2008, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*, U.K: Lexington Books, p.55.

Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* has distinguished between sensical and non-sensical propositions. He has made his distinction with a view to find out the source of Philosophical problems. The problem lies in not understanding the logic of language properly. Now, we have to understand the logic of language for that we have to draw a boundary in regard to our thought process. What is that boundary – To what extent we can think meaningfully and not? But this is not possible. So in case of linguistic process, he has pointed out the boundary of meaningfulness and beyond that all are meaningless. The philosophers never distinguished between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. He is of the opinion that which is meaningful can be expressed in language and that which is meaningless cannot be expressed. That is, he is distinguishing between what can be said and what cannot be said. Here we are reminded of Wittgenstein's famous quote: "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent."⁸

We find similarity in approach of Wittgenstein with that of Nāgārjuna. As it is clear, Wittgenstein has pointed out that we cannot express everything and the attempt to express the inexpressible or to describe the indescribable leads to problems. Similarly, according to Nāgārjuna's dialectical arguments, nothing can be said conclusively about the reality. To him, the reality is *śūnya* (void) i.e. *catuṣkotivinirmutkto* from the ultimate standpoint and so he suspended his own judgements and nullified only the opponents' views regarding matters concerning ultimate reality.

We may find similarity in attitude of Nāgārjuna and Krishnamurti, a 20th century thinker. Nāgārjuna's investigation led him to suspend judgement on various matters. His viewpoint is that nothing can be

⁸ Based on an online Lecture by Prof. Priyambada Sarkar on Wittgenstein's Philosophy.

conclusively said about the reality. Similarly Krishnamurti, may be considered an absolute skeptic, was a true enquirer and investigator. His investigation leads him to un-conditioning of mind and total non-adherence to any theory or view point. According to Krishnamurti all ideologies are utterly idiotic and what is important is not a philosophy of life but to observe what is actually taking place in our daily life, inwardly and outwardly.⁹

By revisiting the Skepticism of Nāgārjuna, we have come to the conclusion that Nāgārjuna's Skepticism is directed to well-being. His notion of emptiness is to make people realize the actual reality. When people will realize that everything is dependently originated, hence essenceless and *śūnya* (*catuṣkoṭivinirmukto*), they will be free from attachments, malices etc. paving their way to empirical good (*abhyudaya*) and then Ultimate good (*Niḥśreyasa*). In Nāgārjuna's philosophy, *Śūnyatā* is not any view rather indicates relinquishing of all views-*Sarvadrṣṭi śūnyatā*. In Nāgārjuna, we witness the employment of skepticism to promote his theory of *śūnyatā* and what the *mādhyamikas* call *Nirvāna* is nothing but the realization of *śūnyatā*. Thus Skepticism is directed towards attainment of *Nirvāna* in *mādhyamika* system. Like, Pyrrhonian Skepticism, in Buddhism too some kind of liberation from suffering is the main goal. Hence we can say that Nāgārjuna's skeptical attitude is not an end in itself rather it can be viewed as an alternative methodology to attain well-being.

⁹ Krishnamurti J, *Freedom from the known*, ed. Mary Lutyens, Chennai:Krishnamurti Foundation India, , 2010,p. 15.

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