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Nāgārjuna and apoha

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The theory of *apoha* has attracted a fair amount of attention in recent years. Books and articles give access to the relevant texts, and explain the intricacies of the arguments involved. One question does not, however, seem to have attracted the attention it deserves: Why was this theory developed in the first place? What problems was it meant to solve? Among the answers that have been proposed to this question I briefly mention two. According to Erich Frauwallner, the *apoha* theory was created to solve a problem connected with logical theory.[1] However, Frauwallner's own explanations suggest rather that Dignāga's theory of inference served as an example for the *apoha* theory, perhaps that the two had been created together.[2] The latter did not however solve any problem of logical theory. Bimal Krishna Matilal (1990: 38), who echoes here the opinion of various earlier scholars, held the opinion that "[t]he *apoha* doctrine [was] first introduced by Diṅnāga to account for the origin of knowledge of the object in the hearer from hearing the word (*śabda*) without conceding *objective* thing-universals." But was this the only, or even the main reason? Is it conceivable that the *apoha* theory constituted an answer to more pressing problems? It has to be conceded that various factors may have contributed to the creation of the *apoha* theory. I do not, therefore, claim that what I am going to present here is the final and definitive historical explanation of that theory. It may however draw attention to one aspect of the issue which has not so far, as it seems to me, drawn the attention which it may deserve.

The theory of *apoha* was invented (if that is the right term to use) by Dignāga, and presented for the first time in his Pramāṇasamuccaya, probably his last work. The term *apoha* had been used, to be sure, by Bhartṛhari before him, and it is not impossible

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[1] Frauwallner (1959: 101 (777)): "Dignāga's Lehre von der Sonderung von anderem ist also geschaffen, um ein Problem aus dem Gebiet der Schlussfolgerung zu lösen."

[2] See Frauwallner (1959: 103 (779)): "Die Lehre vom Begriff als Sonderung von anderem, wie sie Dignāga im 5. Kapitel des Pramāṇasamuccaya vorträgt, wurzelt in seiner Auffassung der Schlussfolgerung und ist von ihr aus entwickelt." P. 104 (780): "Wir kommen also zu dem Ergebnis, dass Dignāga seine Lehre von der Vorstellung im Zusammenhang mit der Lehre von der Schlussfolgerung geschaffen hat."

that he was indeed Dignāga's source.[3] The *apoha* theory, on the other hand, is Dignāga's. Why did he develop it?

The name of Bhartṛhari has just been mentioned, and there is no doubt that this Brahmanical author has exerted a major influence on Dignāga's thought. This is particularly evident in what may have been Dignāga's earliest work, the Traikālyaparīkṣā (or Trikālaparīkṣā). This work, as is well-known to scholars, is hardly more than a copy of part of Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya, of a section of the Sambandhasamuddeśa, to be precise. This proves, if proof was needed,[4] that Dignāga was intimately acquainted with the Vākyapadīya, and that there were parts of this work (or at least one part) with which he agreed to the extent of being willing to lend his own name to it, with hardly any modifications.

The part of the Vākyapadīya which Dignāga copied in the Traikālyaparīkṣā, contains some verses which refer to a problem that occupied Bhartṛhari also elsewhere in the same work. Verses 61 and 62 of the Sambandhasamuddeśa, in particular, which correspond to Traikālyaparīkṣā 10 and 11, state that something non-existing cannot come into being, and that something existing does not disappear. The cause of something non-existent, moreover, is ineffective, precisely because that something does not exist. The cause of something that does exist, on the other hand, has no function, because that something is already there.[5]

These kinds of arguments are referred to elsewhere in the Vākyapadīya, too. They are the kinds of arguments that had been formulated and systematically used, perhaps for the first time, by Nāgārjuna, the founder of Madhyamaka. Bhartṛhari was obviously very concerned about these arguments, because he offers at least three solutions to them, which I have dealt with elsewhere. Bhartṛhari's solutions are not immediately relevant to the present paper, so I will not discuss them here. The important thing to be noted is that these kinds of arguments are so characteristic of the style of reasoning of Nāgārjuna that it seems to me completely safe to state that Bhartṛhari had been influenced, directly or indirectly, by Nāgārjuna.

But if this is true, also Dignāga was acquainted with the arguments of Nāgārjuna, or at least with certain among them. This is in itself hardly surprising. What is surprising is that Dignāga at some point of his life, probably in his youth, had been so

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[3] Vkp 3.1.100, 3.14.102. Cp. Hattori, 1977: 50. Also Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣya 6.4 uses the term; see van Bijlert, 1992: 601.

[4] Verses from the Vākyapadīya are also cited in the Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti; see Hattori, 1968: 6 with n. 33.

[5] Vkp 3.3.61ab, 62: *nābhāvo jāyate bhāvo naiti bhāvo 'nupākhyatām/ ...// abhāvasyānupākhyatvāt kāraṇaṃ na prasādhakam/ sopākhyasya tu bhāvasya kāraṇaṃ kiṃ kariṣyati//* . See, on these verses and on the Sambandhasamuddeśa as a whole, Houben, 1995, esp. p. 283 f. Houben translates: "Neither is *abhāva* 'something non-existent' born as *bhāva* 'something existent', nor does *bhāva* 'something existent' go to a state beyond specification (i.e. become *abhāva* 'non-existence'). ... Because *abhāva* 'non-existence or a non-existent thing' is beyond specification, a cause cannot be effective [towards it]; but what can a cause do to *bhāva* 'existence or an existent thing' that has specific designations?"

impressed by these arguments that he published some of them in a work, the Traikālyaparīkṣā, of which he himself assumed the authorship. This is surprising, because none of his later works appear ever to present these same or similar arguments again. What is more, Richard Hayes, probably the most recent scholar who has published a full-length book on Dignāga's Pramāṇasamuccaya (1988), has claimed, in an even more recent paper (1994: 299), that "Nāgārjuna's writings had relatively little effect on the course of subsequent Indian Buddhist philosophy". He also states there: "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, ... without any explicit attempt to answer Nāgārjuna's criticism o[n] their agenda." Elsewhere Hayes (1988: 13) observes that "we find in [Dignāga's] Pramāṇasamuccaya no explicit references to Mādhyamaka (sic!) notions, and we certainly find no systematic attempt to come to terms with arguments delivered by Nāgārjuna or subsequent M[a]dhyamaka authors." What then happened to Dignāga's interest in Nāgārjuna's arguments after his early years? Do we have to agree with Hayes, who claims that "Nāgārjuna's arguments, when examined closely, turn out to be fallacious and therefore not very convincing to a logically astute reader"? Did Dignāga, after the Traikālyaparīkṣā, discover the fallaciousness of Nāgārjuna's arguments and decide to ignore them henceforth?

I believe it is possible to maintain that Hayes is mistaken on both counts: not all of Nāgārjuna's arguments are logically fallacious; and Nāgārjuna was not ignored by all who came after him — even if the interest in him seems to have declined dramatically after Dignāga, for very good reasons, as I shall try to show below.[6] A number of texts, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, most of them from the period between Nāgārjuna and Dignāga, show in my opinion that Nāgārjuna was not ignored during that time. I cannot present all the evidence here. I will however mention once again Bhartṛhari who, as I pointed out earlier, was very concerned with some of Nāgārjuna's arguments. I also devoted an article to an analysis of a major part of Nāgārjuna's arguments in which I have tried to show that this part of Nāgārjuna's arguments can be understood, and becomes logically sound, on the assumption that Nāgārjuna believed (consciously or unconsciously) in the close correspondence between words and things. His belief can be formulated more precisely, but still tentatively, as follows: "the words of a statement correspond, one by one, to the things that constitute together the situation described by

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[6] Eli Franco, in a lecture delivered in October 1997 at the The International Institute for Buddhist Studies in Tokyo, has drawn attention to the peculiar views of the 9th century commentator Prajñākaragupta (author of the Pramāṇavārttika-bhāṣya or -alaṅkāra, commenting on Dharmakīrti's Pramāṇavārttika) who maintained that a future thing can exert a causal influence on a present event, and who support his position by referring to phrases like "The sprout arises" and "He makes a pot" (*aṅkuro jāyate, ghaṭaṃ karoti*; PrvBh p. 68, on verse 2.50), precisely the kind of phrases that troubled pre-Dignāga thinkers so much. I thank Eli Franco for drawing my attention to this.

that statement". I have called this the 'correspondence principle'. I cannot repeat here the arguments that led me to formulate this principle and I have to refer to the articles concerned for further details.[7] I must however emphasize that I do not claim that Nāgārjuna's arguments are about language. They are not; they are, without a shade of doubt, about the phenomenal world, which they try to prove to be self-contradictory. For the remainder of this paper I will take my earlier conclusions for granted and proceed on the assumption that indeed for Nāgārjuna the words of a statement correspond to the things that together constitute the situation described by that statement. Once the correctness of the correspondence principle is accepted, Nāgārjuna-like contradictions come up almost of their own. The statement "Devadatta makes a jar", for example, requires, on that assumption, there to be Devadatta, the act of making, and the jar, just as the words of the less problematic sentence "Devadatta reads a book" correspond to the three items Devadatta, reading and a book. However, when Devadatta makes a jar there is no jar. If there were one it wouldn't have to be made.

Let us be clear about it that *logically* there is nothing wrong with this last argument. The problem lies not with logic but with the correspondence principle. One might simply reject it and state that no one-to-one correspondence between the words of a statement and the things that constitute the situation described is required. Judging by the early Indian authors whose reactions to this problem I am acquainted with there was a tendency not to reject the principle. Rather, thinkers would claim, for example, that future or past objects exist, so that words would refer to existing things even in the case of statements like "Devadatta makes a jar". Others, whose ontological views allowed such a solution, would indicate that, to stick to our example, the word 'jar' in "Devadatta makes a jar" denotes not the individual jar that does not yet exist but the universal ('jar-ness' or the like) that inheres in all jars and that is always present. The solution to Nāgārjuna's arguments, or at least to the arguments that are based on the correspondence principle, lies therefore, or can lie, in semantics. The central question is: what exactly do words denote? If they denote individuals, Nāgārjuna's arguments stand. If we don't like Nāgārjuna's conclusions, the question presents itself: what then do they refer to?

I have already indicated that Nāgārjuna's arguments were not so catastrophic for the Brahmanical thinkers belonging to the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools of thought. They accepted the existence of universals, and we have already seen how convenient that could be. Let me observe in passing that the threat of Nāgārjuna for the Sarvāstivādins wasn't all that terrible either. They maintained that a future jar (more precisely: future dharmas; for ease of exposition I'll ignore the difference at this

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[7] Bronkhorst, 1996; 1997.

moment) exists, so the problem connected with the statement "Devadatta makes a jar" was practically non-existent for them: the word 'jar' refers to the existing jar which finds itself as yet in the future. The Yoga Sūtra and its Bhāṣya accept exactly the same solution, whereas the Sāṃkhya school of thought accepted the closely similar doctrine of *satkāryavāda*, which, too, allowed for the existence of objects before their coming into being. By and large one can say that two types of answers found most favour with the different schools of thought: either they admitted that words refer to individuals but stipulated that individuals exist already before they come into being; or they claimed that there is such a thing as a universal, which then constitutes the denoted object of a word. Both these answers have in common that they allow the correspondence principle to remain valid. Let me further point out here that both the Nyāya Sūtra and its Bhāṣya, where they introduce the notion that words refer to universals along with forms and individuals, mention the example "he makes a mat" as an example to show the impossibility to maintain that words denote individuals only.

The problem was however far more serious for those who neither accepted the existence of universals nor the position that future things exist. Many Buddhists found themselves in this situation. What could they do?

It is here, I believe, that Dignāga's *apoha* theory provided an answer. Words do not refer to individuals, he points out at the beginning of the chapter concerned, which is chapter 5 of the Pramāṇasamuccaya. Universals, on the other hand, do not exist. However, the *apoha* theory creates something which is as good as the universals of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools but without ontological implications. The problems posed by Nāgārjuna's arguments (i.e., the ones based on the correspondence principle) are therefore now solved, also for these Buddhists. It has to be admitted, of course, that strictly speaking Dignāga abandons the correspondence principle. In his *apoha* theory there is nothing in the situation described by a sentence that corresponds to the words of that sentence. The *apoha* theory signifies therefore a departure from the correspondence principle. This departure is justified by pointing at the close similarity — Dignāga might say: essential identity — between the process of denotation and logical inference. Both are based on exclusion, according to Dignāga.

One might think that the link between Nāgārjuna's arguments and Dignāga's *apoha* theory is not all that obvious. And indeed, Dignāga does not present his theory as a solution to the problems posed by Nāgārjuna. But then he does not seem to present it as a solution to any particular problem at all. Yet historical scholarship should always try to determine the problem-situation of the thinker it studies. In the case of Dignāga we are extremely fortunate, for his Traikālyaparīkṣā shows that he was, or had been, concerned with the problems evoked by Nāgārjuna. It may very well be that his *apoha* theory solved, or was meant to solve, other questions than the one to which I have

drawn attention. It seems however inconceivable that a thinker of Dignāga's stature should not have realized that this theory would answer Nāgārjuna's arguments. And it is very tempting to think that his earlier involvement with these arguments explains to at least some extent his creation of the *apoha* theory.

A final possible objection has to be dealt with here.[8] Were the correspondence principle and the problems it evoked still an issue among Buddhist thinkers at the time of Dignāga? Isn't the Traikālyaparīkṣā an exception, perhaps difficult to explain but not at all typical for Buddhist thought at that time? Had the correspondence principle and its supposed consequences not been discarded by earlier Buddhist thinkers, among them Vasubandhu the author of the Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya? In order answer this question, we have to consider that the Buddhist thinkers who did concern themselves with this principle and its consequences did so in the context of everyday reality. Nāgārjuna had done so and concluded from it that everyday reality does not exist. If we want to find out whether the correspondence principle was still relevant for Vasubandhu we must primarily pay attention to passages in his Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya that deal with everyday reality. Such passages are not frequent, for this work deals primarily with the higher reality of dharmas where the correspondence theory does not apply in its usual manner. However, one passage, which criticizes the position of a grammarian (at least according to the commentator Yaśomitra), speaks about the everyday world and uses in this context arguments that show that for Vasubandhu the correspondence principle was still very much a factor that applied to this level of reality. The grammarian criticizes Vasubandhu's interpretation of the expression *pratītyasamutpāda*, according to which it means "appearance having reached". The grammarian protests, pointing out that the absolutive *pratītya* "having reached" indicates that the action of reaching precedes that of appearing, i.e. of coming into being, which is absurd. No, replies Vasubandhu, for at the level at which the grammarian argues the problem is not confined to the expression *pratītyasamutpāda*. In fact, nothing can come into being at that level. A solution is only possible at the level of the dharma-theory, for there there is no distinction between an agent and the action it performs. The relevant part of the discussion reads:[9]

> There is nothing wrong [with our position]. The grammarian (*śābdika*) should be asked in what state, present or future, something comes into being. If something that is present comes into being, how can it be present without having come into being? Alternatively, if something comes into being that has already come into being, this would lead to an infinite regress. And if something future comes into

[9] Abhidh-k-bh(P) p. 138 l. 10-13: *naiṣa doṣaḥ/ idaṃ tāvad ayaṃ praṣṭavyaḥ śābdikaḥ/ kimavastho dharmaḥ utpadyate vartamāna utāho 'nāgata iti/ kiṃ cātaḥ/ yadi vartamāna utpadyate/ kathaṃ vartamāno yadi notpannaḥ/ utpannasya vā punar utpattāv anavasthāprasaṅgaḥ/ athānāgata utpadyate katham asataḥ kartṛtvaṃ sidhyati (*the edition has* siddhaty) akartṛkā vā kriyeti/.

being, how can something non-existent be the agent [of the action of coming into being] or how can there be the action [of coming into being] without agent?

This is a clear example of reasoning based on the correspondence theory. Indeed, Vasubandhu insists that there has to be something corresponding to the agent/subject in a phrase like "the jar comes into being". It is true that he has a way to avoid these difficulties (as do practically all thinkers of the period preceding Dignāga who are confronted with these contradictions), which it is not necessary to discuss here in detail. The main thing is clear: the correspondence principle was still considered valid by Vasubandhu, and it is not until Dignāga that the principle is deprived of its sting.

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Abbreviations:

Abhidh-k-bh(P)	Vasubandhu, Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya, ed. P. Pradhan, rev. 2nd ed. Aruna Haldar, Patna 1975 (TSWS 8)
JIP	Journal of Indian Philosophy
PrvBh	Prajñākaragupta, Pramāṇavārttikabhāṣya
TSWS	Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series, Patna
Vkp	Bhartṛhari, Vākyapadīya, ed. W. Rau, Wiesbaden 1977