

Contingent Axioms of Language: A Comparison between Nāgārjuna and Derrida

J.D.A. Kumara¹

Abstract

One of the central teachings of Nāgārjuna is Śūnyatā, which is a doctrine that asserts the transcendental nature of Ultimate Reality. Nāgārjuna's thinking paves the way to reject structuralistic and logocentric view of language; putting signs or words as the center of a system is inherently flawed as there is no universal truth to a signifier, no meaning outside of the signs and their perceived meaning by the user or context. Jacques Derrida who developed a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstruction, rejected the binary structure of language. Views of both Derrida and Nāgārjuna are not logocentric, not absolute.

Keywords: *Nāgārjuna, Jacques Derrida, Language, Relative Knowledge, Śūnyatā, Deconstruction.*

Introduction: Derrida's Deconstruction and Nāgārjuna's Sunyata

Claims about the life of Nāgārjuna have resulted many contradictory conclusions among different scholars. Some scholars claim that he lived in the second century, sometimes specifying the latter half of it. K. R. Subramanian who conducted serious archaeological research concluded in his 1932 publication that Nāgārjuna flourished within the period A.D. 50-120. At the same time, David Kalupahana assigns Nāgārjuna to A.D. 150-250 (Kalupahana, 1992).

It is believed that Nāgārjuna was born in the ancient kingdom of *Vidarbha* in the southern part of India (Murty, 1978). Upon being presented with the newborn baby, the Soothsayer observed auspicious signs of a holy being but also made an ominous prediction that the baby would not live past the seventh day. However, he added that the parents could prolong the baby's life by up to 7 years if they made offerings to a hundred Buddhist monks. Naturally, the parents obliged and the young Nagarjuna lived to seven years

¹ Postgraduate Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (PGIHS), University of Peradeniya

of age with his parents. During his seventh year, Nagarjuna's parents feared for his life and they decided to send him to the renowned Nalanda Monastery, where he met the great master Saraha (or Rahulabhadra). Tibetan sources also confirm that Nagarjuna had to leave his home as his parents feared his premature death. Accordingly, Nagarjuna entered to the Buddhist order and practiced the *aramitayurdharani* under the guidance of his teacher Saraha (Raman, 1987).

Nāgārjuna philosophical interpretation on the *Pratītyasamutpāda* of early Buddhism led to the development of the concept called *Śūnyatā*; it explicated that all phenomena are free from eternal substance and created by a natural consequence of dependent origination. Nagarjuna in his magnum opus, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, describes about dependent origination which leads to emptiness or *Śūnyatā*.

Whatever arises dependently
Is explained as empty.
Thus dependent attribution
Is the middle way.

Since there is nothing whatever
That is not dependently existent,
For that reason there is nothing
Whatsoever that is not empty. (Rinchen, 2006: 21)

Jackie Élie Derrida or Jacques Derrida (July 15, 1930 – October 9, 2004), a well-known twentieth century philosopher, is renowned for being the father-figure of the strategy called "deconstruction" in 1960s. He was born in El Biar, French Algeria (Glendinning, 2011). Derrida made himself a key thinker of modern times who made ground-breaking explorations into the subtexts, as his theory of deconstruction, particularly, granted the philosophy scholarship some new insights. He has revolutionized Western thought in many disciplines including Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, structuralism, linguistics with his deconstruction strategy – that examined Philosophy, literature, and the human sciences in a fresh way. Derrida defined an originality as compared to his predecessors (Bennington and Derrida, 1999). Almost every part of humanistic scholarship of the last century wanted Derrida's contribution to re-read their long-held conceptions. Derrida challenged the Western thought as a "metaphysics of presence" and pointed out that being has been mistakenly assumed as presence in the Western thought; being as the objectivity present to the sight or to subject's mind; being as self-presence and self-proximity of

cogito, consciousness, subjectivity (Taylor and Winqvist, 2003). Looking for a definitive foundation or meaning or rather truth is linked with the Western acceptance of substance, essence, origin, identity, truth, or eventually "Being."

Philosophers of language have been endeavoring to examine the relation of language and meaning to truth and the world. According to philosophers of language, for example, Donald Davidson's idea of "intrinsic nature" of language need to be dropped, instead we have to encounter the contingency of the language (Malpas, 1992). The truth is subject to vary in accordance with the user of the language or the language itself. Truth is different from language to language or speaker to speaker, hence, contingency is a feature enshrined in the language.

An axiom or postulate is a statement or proposition which is regarded as being established, accepted, or self-evidently true. It works as a premise or starting point in reasoning or arguments. It is argued here that the axioms used to create knowledge is contingent due the nature of language as it is open to many truths and lead to relativism. Deconstruction; the strategy introduced by Derrida and *Śūnyatā* by Nāgārjuna serves to investigate contingent axioms of knowledge generated by language.

Nāgārjuna's Philosophy of *Śūnyatā* and Relativism Taught in *Mādhyamika* Tradition

Nāgārjuna's major thematic focus is the concept of *Śūnyatā*, which brings together other key Buddhist doctrines, particularly *Anātman* "not-self" and *Pratītyasamutpāda* "dependent origination", to refute the metaphysics of some of his contemporaries. For Nāgārjuna, as for the Buddha in the early texts, it is not merely sentient beings that are "selfless" or non-substantial; all phenomena are without any *Svabhāva* (Sebastian, 2016).

Different terms have been used to translate the term "*Svabhāva*" into English: "inherent existence" and "intrinsic nature" have been selected by many translators so far, "substance" and "essence" have also been proposed (Westerhoff, 2009). The full complexity of the term has not been comprehended by any terminology given in translations, nevertheless.

Meaning given to *Svabhāva* in orthodox Indian texts is far different from the meaning found in Nāgārjuna's teaching: the meaning found in orthodox literature is closer to "own-being" or "own-becoming" -- the intrinsic nature, essential nature or essence of living beings. An epistemological examination of the term *Svabhāva* gives it a sense of something self-

subsisting and independent of external conditions -- *Svabhāva* is something which bears its own (Sva) existence (bhāva) (Schalow, 2011). *Svabhāva* is a concept that can be found both in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, for example *Avadhūta Gītā* of Advaita Vedanta, *Uttaratantraśāstra* or *Ratnagotravibhāga* of *Tathāgatagarbha* literature of Mahayana Buddhism, Dzogchen of Tibetan Buddhism, etc. Technically, all of the traditions prior to Nāgārjuna conceived *Svabhāva* in absolute sense, where it was considered as the essence of living beings.

Svabhāva, in terms of essence, has to be considered a property an object that cannot be lost without ceasing to be that very object: the *Svabhāva* of fire is to be hot, the *Svabhāva* of water to be wet: whatever ceases to be hot is no longer fire, whatever ceases to be wet is no longer water (Westerhoff, 2009). But, Nāgārjuna's mission was to prove non-existence of substance; as all phenomena is subject to conditionality in their momentary nature that leads to continuous evolution. The average cognitive process of the people erroneously speculates *Svabhāva* as part of human experience or something with substance. Nāgārjuna destructs metaphysics of substance or essence in phenomena. Some Buddhist schools, for instance, *Sarvāstivāda* believed in some elementary factors that can be identified with *Svabhāva*; according to them *Svabhāva* is the metaphysical foundation of all beings that make beings intelligible (Liu and Berger, 2014).

Language and Śūnyatā

If *Svabhāva* is not a substance that exists in the world nothing intrinsic can also exist in the world, it becomes a being empty of essential nature (Gowans, 2014). Nāgārjuna in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* points out that all is possible when emptiness is possible and nothing is possible when emptiness is impossible.

sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate
sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyam yasya na yujyate (Kalupahana, 1999: 337)

In Nāgārjuna's interpretation nothing can hold a structure that is intrinsic to it; so, language itself would not have an intrinsic nature. Moreover, the *Mādhyamika*, the school which was formed by Nāgārjuna gives a different interpretation to the Theory of the Two Truths that was practiced by many ancient Indian philosophers. In Theory of the Two Truths, two levels of satya of truth are recognized. The two truths labeled as conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). In these Mahayanic traditions a fixed view of emptiness or existence was upheld. The Mahayanists related the two truths to two different objects of knowledge.

They also taught that Buddha preached *saṃvṛti-satya* for pedagogical purposes and believed that the two-truths have been divided only by human cognition. Hence, the division of the truths cannot be grounded ontologically. Accordingly, someone needs to transcend the phenomenal truth to realize the ultimate truth. Hence, conventional truth only exists for pedagogical necessity (Thakchoe, 2007).

But in *Mādhyamika* of Nāgārjuna tradition structured existence of *saṃvṛti-satya* is refuted, as reality is not revealed by linguistic expressions. Nāgārjuna describes in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that “the Dharma taught by the Buddha is precisely based on the two truths: a truth of mundane conventions and a truth of the ultimate” (Cowherds, 2015). He also explains that those who do not understand the distinction between the two truths do not understand the Buddha’s teaching too. As Nāgārjuna sees without using the conventional truth, the meaning of ultimate cannot be taught. Hence, the theory of two truths plays a pivotal role in Buddha’s teaching as per the *Mādhyamika* tradition. *Saṃvṛti-satya* or conventional truth would serve as the mirror that reflects the meaning of the Buddha’s teachings. Therefore, the two truths serve as epistemological truths. The phenomenal world is accorded a provisional existence. The character of the phenomenal world is declared to be neither real nor unreal, but logically indeterminable. Ultimately, phenomena are empty (*Śūnyatā*) of an inherent self or essence but exist depending on other phenomena (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) (Matilal, 2002). The Buddha’s ever poignant existential and soteriological concerns about the reality of things and of life are interpreted with the two truths. *Mādhyamika* tradition rejects any absolutism with the two truths where nothing is ultimate, unchanging or absolute. All the truths come under the relative realms. *Mādhyamika* philosophers debunk metaphysical assumption of the truths. Nāgārjuna’s seminal works, for instance, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Śūnyatāsaptati*, *Vigrahvyāvartanī* and *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* attack foundationalism of conventional truth where pride of place was accorded to conventional ontological structures in case of revealing the ultimate truth.

Ancient Hindu teachings like *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṃkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mīmāṃsā*, *Vedānta* supported some foundationalism that is needed to realize ultimate reality. But, Nāgārjuna refuted *Dravya* that is the foundation that holds the conventional ontological structures where the ultimate reality is speculated as a fixed or irreducible entity which is independent of the conventions. But as Nāgārjuna has argued in detail the causal relation itself is conceptually constructed. But if causation cannot be regarded as a relation that functions objectively, independent of the concepts we employ, then it can hardly be

regarded as a mind-independent way of founding the relationship between language and the world (Thakchoe, 2007).

This brings the idea of Nāgārjuna's view on language which rejects the atomistic or structuralist view of language and also rejects objectively existent structural similarities of sentences or mere words. Nāgārjuna has argued in detail the causal relation itself is conceptually constructed (Mansueto, 2010).

Nagarjuna explains that a word or sentence is linked with past and present and will also evolve in the future. Hence, one-to-one existence between individual word and pieces of reality cannot be expected; it can only be realized in a relativistic structure. According to Dissanayake (2007) Nagarjuna categorically demonstrates that there is no reality prior to language; reality has to be understood as a linguistic construct. This thought can be inclined to post-structuralism where reality is considered as a linguistic construct and not a fixed and irreducible reality. In conventional truths of the two truths theory of India and Saussurean linguistics posit language as an instrument, very often transparent, that makes communication possible. Dissanayake (2007) further explains that this approach to verbal communication promotes the idea that what language does is to transport thoughts and ideas that have already been formed from the communicator to the receiver. He says Nāgārjuna challenges this view of language, maintaining that thoughts and ideas are conceived and take shape only within language; in other words, he rejects the transportational model of communication in order to foreground a constitutive one.

Strategies of Deconstruction:

Derrida Against Absolutism

Derrida paid profound attention to speech and writing. According to Derrida, thinkers as different as Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, and Levi-Strauss, have all denigrated the written word and valorised speech, by contrast, as some type of pure conduit of meaning. Their argument is that while spoken words are the symbols of mental experience, written words are the symbols of that already existing symbol (Reynolds, 2004).

Ferdinand de Saussure tried to restrict the science of linguistics to the phonetic and audible word only. In the course of his inquiry, Saussure goes as far as to argue that "language and writing are two distinct systems of signs: the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first". Language, Saussure insists, has an oral tradition that is independent of writing, and it is this independence that makes a pure science of speech

possible (Holdcroft, 1991). Derrida vehemently disagrees with this hierarchy and instead argues that all that can be claimed of writing - eg. that it is derivative and merely refers to other signs - is equally true of speech. But as well as criticizing such a position for certain unjustifiable presuppositions, including the idea that we are self-identical with ourselves in 'hearing' ourselves think, Derrida also makes explicit the manner in which such a hierarchy is rendered untenable from within Saussure's own text.

Derrida argued that the binary oppositions, for example, Reason/Passion, Man/Woman, Inside/Outside, Presence/Absence, Speech/Writing, etc. were arbitrary and inherently unstable. The structures themselves begin to overlap and clash and ultimately these structures of the text dismantle themselves from within the text. In this sense deconstruction is regarded as a forum of anti-structuralism. Deconstruction rejects most of the assumptions of structuralism and more vehemently "binary opposition" on the grounds that such oppositions always privilege one term over the other, that is, signified over the signifier (Coward, 1990).

Derrida wanted to deconstruct all binary oppositions. He gives a prominent place to language in the deconstruction strategy: he inquires basically the relationship between text and meaning. Deconstruction is meant to reveal the structural "fault lines" of texts. The purpose of deconstruction is to expose that the object of language, and that which any text is founded upon, is irreducibly complex, unstable, or impossible (Grenz, 1996). Derrida's critique on the oppositions or violent hierarchies has been inherent in Western philosophy since the time of the ancient Greeks. Derrida saw that the hierarchies are still present with Saussurean structuralism and he put forward the poststructuralist approach. Structuralist theory has passed down a whole current of logocentric (speech-centred) thought that originated in the time of Plato (Guillemette and Cossette, 2007). Derrida takes an example from classical Greek literature of Plato with the view of revealing logocentricism that prevailed in the Western thought. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida deconstructs Socrates' condemnation of the written word. Derrida throws light on Plato's Phaedrus by placing questioning the attribution of an essential "undecidability" to the word "Pharmakon (Kakoliris, 2013). Pharmakon, serves as a drug, a poison and a cure. Derrida does this by reinterpreting the myth of the origin of writing as described in The Phaedrus. Derrida understands Pharmakon is something like writing which is far from governed by Plato's hierarchical oppositions (McCance, 2014). In his most celebrated work, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida endeavors to point out that the structure of writing

and grammatology are more important and even 'older' than the supposedly pure structure of presence-to-self that is characterized as typical of speech (Reynolds, 2004). Derrida coined a new term: difference. It was meant to give the idea of both difference and an act of deferring. Derrida explained that meaning is shaped by the production of differences amid words. Since the sense of a word is at all times a function of differences with the meanings of other words, and because the meanings of those words are in turn dependent on contrasts with the meanings of still other words (and so on), it follows that the meaning of a word is not something that is fully present to us; it is endlessly deferred in an infinitely long chain of meanings, each of which contains the "traces" of the meanings on which it depends. Derrida thought that the disagreement between speech and writing is an indicator of "logocentrism" of Western value system. He saw the logocentric conception of reality as inherent preconception in Western thought, which he identified as the "metaphysics of presence".

To 'deconstruct' philosophy, thus, would be to think—in the most faithful, interior way—the structured genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same time to determine—from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy—what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making itself into a history by means of this .motivated repression (Noonan, 2004: 14).

Derrida casts off all metaphysical history with its hierarchies and dichotomies that have survived to the present day. Derrida has rejected structuralism, and as a result, the Saussurean schema (the signifier/signified relationship) has been rethought. He has elaborated a theory of deconstruction (of discourse, and therefore of the world) that challenges the idea of a frozen structure and advances the notion that there is no structure or center, no univocal meaning. The notion of a direct relationship between signifier and signified is no longer tenable, and instead we have infinite shifts in meaning relayed from one signifier to another (Guillemette and Cossette, 2007).

Moreover, Derrida, throughout in his gamut of work, explored the way metaphysics is linked to a specific view of language. The assumption, Derrida contended, is that the spoken word is free of the paradoxes and possibilities of multiple meanings characteristic of written texts. He called this assumed primacy of the spoken word over text "logocentrism," seeing it closely linked to the desire for certainty. His task was to undo metaphysics and its logocentrism. Yet Derrida was also clear that we cannot easily escape metaphysical thought, since thinking outside it is to be

determined by it, and so he did not affirm or oppose metaphysics, but sought to resist it.

"Deconstruction", the word he transformed from a rare French term to a common expression in many languages, became part of the vocabulary not only of philosophers and literary theorists but also of architects, theologians, artists, political theorists, educationists, music critics, filmmakers, lawyers and historians. Resistance to his thinking, too, was widespread and sometimes bitter, as it challenged academic norms and, sometimes, common sense.

Deconstruction is a way of reading any text and thereby exposing the instability of meaning which the text tries to cover up. At the basic level this instability results from the endless chain of meanings which a word is capable of generating all throughout the existence of that word: its archaic meanings, its modern connotations and denotations, and ever-changing implications in changing contexts. Apart from semantics, it also takes one into other aspects of meaning-construction, like phonetics, syntax, grammar, etc. In short, it reveals how the text is always already internally conflicted and is far from the serenity of any definite meaning.

Comparison between Derrida and Nāgārjuna

Comparing the philosophical views on language of Nāgārjuna and Derrida who lived in different ages of the history and different contexts is worthy as both of them were against structuralism and accepted contingencies of knowledge created by language. Nāgārjuna's teaching throws a huge light on the historical background of linguistics in the oriental contexts. This study was basically focused on comparing Western and Eastern thoughts on knowledge and human thinking. Rediscovering thoughts of an ancient teacher like Nāgārjuna is important to form a new scholarship in comparative studies in linguistics. As the Derridean and the Madhyamika theories disagree over language with the idealist form and both of them wanted to demolish the ontotheological interpretations that lead to metaphysics. Derrida rejects a whole range of idealists from Plato to Heidegger who held a made-up notion of language; who invoke the logos, a linguistic sign, as an intermediary between the transcendental and sensible, the divine and the human. Similar to Derrida, Nāgārjuna made an attempt to abolish not only the central opposition of Being and Non-being, but all its duplicities and triplicities (Park, 2006).

By and large, linguistic knowledge that arose in connection with the truth-theoretic semantics have an axiomatic structure, with the axioms specifying

the meanings of the atomic elements of the language which are logically derived from the axioms specifying the meanings of the sentences; an axiom or postulate is a statement that is taken to be true, to serve as a premise or starting point for further reasoning and arguments.

In this study it is argued that knowledge generated by the axioms of language is contingent and which is neither necessarily true nor necessarily false; in accordance with both teachings of Derrida and Nāgārjuna. Their claims of knowledge go against certain cognitivist approaches.

Methodology

Literature survey has been used as the primary method of the research. Texts of Nāgārjuna and Derrida were used as the primary sources. For instance, *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way), *Śūnyatāsaptati* (Seventy Verses on Emptiness), *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (The End of Disputes), *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* (Pulverizing the Categories), *Vyavahārasiddhi* (Proof of Convention), *Yuktiśāṣṭika* (Sixty Verses on Reasoning), *Catuḥstava* (Hymn to the Absolute Reality), *Ratnāvalī* (Precious Garland), *Pratītyasamutpādahṛdayakārika* (Constituents of Dependent Arising), *Sūtrasamuccaya Bodhicittavivarāṇa* (Exposition of the Enlightened Mind), *Suḥr̥llekha* (Letter to a Good Friend), *Bodhisambhāra* (Requisites of Enlightenment) were used as primary texts for the research in the case of inquiring into the works of Nāgārjuna. *Speech and Phenomena, Of Grammatology, Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars, Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* were used as primary texts for inquiring into Derrida's theories. This research used a method that is basically critical, speculative, and has a significant historical perspective. In both Social Sciences and Physical Sciences, the empirical method is a way of gaining knowledge by means of direct and indirect observation or experience. The methodology of this research which comes under Humanities is not singular and uses conceptual analysis and textual criticism.

Discussion

Nāgārjuna who taught Śūnyatā, declares the phenomenal world to be void of all limitations of particularization and eliminates all concepts of Dualism. As per the Śūnyatā doctrine, no phenomenon has an eternal substance. According to Nāgārjuna's teaching, no objective reality lies outside language. Hence, past, present and future do not operate coevally. Nāgārjuna categorically demonstrated that there is no reality prior to language; reality has to be understood as a linguistic construct. The knowledge people produce should be understood in a relativistic

framework and Nāgārjuna rejects the atomistic view that single words bring pieces of reality.

Nāgārjuna's thinking also paves the way to reject structuralistic and logocentric view of the language; putting signs or words as the centre of a system is inherently flawed as there is no universal truth to a signifier, no meaning outside of the signs and their perceived meaning by the user or context.

Jacques Derrida who developed a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstruction, rejected the binary structure of language, and explained that meaning goes beyond the simple opposition of signifier/signified. It is ostensible that the signified is never identical to the signifier: there is fluidity, adaptability and uncertainty as to the meaning of that which is signified. Jacques Derrida's critical outlook over the relationship between text and meaning claimed that contradictions are neither accidental nor exceptions; they are the exposure of certain "metaphysics of pure presence", an exposure of the "transcendental signified" always-already hidden inside language. Derrida wanted to deconstruct polarities that are derived by language.

Derrida came up with a concept named Différance which is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other, that takes into account the fact that meaning is a question not only of synchrony with all the other terms inside a structure, but also of diachrony, with everything that was said and will be said, in History, difference as structure and deferring as genesis. Différance is a powerful modification of the ordinary notions of identity and difference. Difference intervenes all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics to the extent that they ultimately refer to the presence of something present become non pertinent. Différance does not mean simple differentiation.

Derrida is critiquing Western thought as it is based on a hierarchy of binary oppositions: man/woman, birth/death, good/evil/ speech/writing, etc (Hölbling, 2007). In all such binaries, the left side of the slash Derrida sees as superior, favored, or privileged over the right, which is relegated to an inferior or subordinate position. With the view of deconstructing the inequality, he wanted to destabilize the binary opposition, by causing the entire process of ascribing dominance of one side over the other to become blurred so that it would be impossible for either side of the slash to claim superiority.

Conclusion

Both Derrida and Nāgārjuna pointed out that meaning given by the language is contradictory and does not bring pieces of reality. Views of both Derrida and Nāgārjuna are not logocentric, not 'absolute. All in all, both of them resort to the fact that language is limited to conventional truth and cannot represent ultimate reality.

Rediscovering thoughts of Nāgārjuna would expand the philosophical understanding of the language as his work is paralleling some poststructural claims of language. Nagarjuna's argument on the implications of pratitya-samutpada is applicable to language and the scholars will be able to read the function of language in *Śūnyatāvada* understanding.

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