

Naagaarjuna's philosophy of language as described in the Vigrahavyaavartanii

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Abstract

The Vigrahavyaavartanii, a short text in question-and-answer form which was conceived as a supplement to Naagaarjuna's Muulamadhyamakakaarika contains his most extensive discussion of the philosophy of language. In this work Nagarjuna attempts to formulate a Madhyamaka view of language which he contrasts with the then prevalent Nyaaya understanding of the relationship between word and world.

I argue that Naagaarjuna's famous assertion in verse 29 that he does not hold any thesis whatsoever is best understood as the rejection of a particular kind of semantics, a semantics which links words to objectively existent properties in the world, and which conceives of the link between language and the world in terms of some kind of structural similarity.

Such a straightforward semantics is, however, not consistent with the theory of emptiness conceived as the denial of intrinsically existent objects (that is, objects existing with svabhaava) since it implies the existence of intrinsically existent properties as well as that of an intrinsically existent structural linkage between word and world. As the theory of emptiness is universal and thus includes its own emptiness the Madhyamaka has to reject the straightforward semantics for the interpretation of his own statements.

This interpretation also lets us understand other prima facie puzzling assertions such as the one made in verse 63, where Naagaarjuna claims that he does not negate anything. We might wonder why Naagaarjuna makes this radical claim when he could simply have replied to the Nyaaya criticism that a meaningful negation must imply the existence of the object negated by stating that "intrinsic nature" (svabhaava) does not work like a name but like a definite description, so that the usage of the term does not commit him to assuming the existence of a corresponding object. Although this would have allowed Naagaarjuna to explicate his theory of emptiness within the "straightforward" framework of Nyaaya semantics such a semantics is not acceptable to the Madhyamaka because it clashes with his theory of universal emptiness. If we understand negation along Nyaaya lines then indeed Naagaarjuna does not deny anything whatsoever.

Even though Naagaarjuna makes it very clear what kind of semantics he rejects he is not very explicit when it comes to describing the possible alternative. The paper concludes by considering what such a Madhyamaka-compatible semantics could look like.

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