

Śrīharṣa on Knowledge and Justification

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Abstract In this paper I explore the extent to which the dialectical approach of Śrīharṣa can be identified as skeptical, and whether or how his approach resembles that of the first century Mādhyamika philosopher Nāgārjuna. In so doing, I will be primarily reading the first argument found in Śrīharṣa's masterpiece, the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍa-khādyā* (KhKh). This argument grounds the position that the system of justification (*pramāṇa*) that validates our cognition to be true is not outside of inquiry. Closely adopting Śrīharṣa's polemical style, I am neither proposing a thesis in this paper that Śrīharṣa is a skeptic, nor am I denying such a possibility. I believe we can pursue our arguments on a neutral ground and let the facts speak for themselves. I will outline salient features that define skepticism in the mainstream philosophical discourse so that analyzing Śrīharṣa's first argument becomes easier. In so doing, I will introduce some of the arguments of Nāgārjuna in light of Śrīharṣa's position. This comparison, however, is restricted only to the salient features relevant to further the central argument of this paper and is therefore not aimed to encompass the overall positions of these two giants.

Keywords Śrīharṣa · Nāgārjuna · Skepticism · Indian philosophy · Advaita · Judgment · Justification

Preliminary Remarks

Śrīharṣa is one of the most prominent Advaita philosophers of classical India. He is known at home and in the West in two different ways: traditionally, he follows the Advaita system and his arguments are read to buttress the non-dualism of Brahman,

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rejecting the Nyāya realist categories that include both metaphysical categories and the epistemic system that validates these categories. While he is hardly a prominent figure in the West, whatever marginal study has emerged has assigned him a position of skepticism or non-realism. While his approach broadly resembles that of Nāgārjuna, and his work is highly regarded in the Advaita circle, his contribution to philosophical inquiry is yet to be fully explored. And this is a generational project, impossible to articulate in this small chapter. I have therefore limited myself to examination of only the first argument¹ that primarily relates to the issue of virtue argumentation, and I will briefly mention some other arguments to make a broader comparative analysis.

Scholars have demonstrated a great hesitation to align the philosophy of Śrīharṣa with skepticism, and this is partly due to the opaqueness of the term itself. ‘Skepticism’ is invoked to prove or reject all kinds of arguments, and to label different types of philosophies. Although we are not living in the era of Giordano Bruno, most of us would still not prefer to wear the hat of skepticism. Many of the arguments of Śrīharṣa, and for that matter his Buddhist predecessor Nāgārjuna, can be identified as skeptical, particularly their approach to reasoning and their openness to question not just beliefs but also the very system of justification.² In essence, the very rationality that grounds truth also leads to the suspension of all forms of judgment, including the very reliance on the system that establishes the sense of validity. Just like semantic or epistemic externalism responds to some of the skeptical arguments in the West, the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā schools developed their epistemology and philosophy of language to counter many of the arguments of Nāgārjuna or Śrīharṣa.

If skepticism is a thesis, Śrīharṣa is certainly not interested in establishing it. And if a precondition for one to be a skeptic is to maintain that knowledge is not possible, Śrīharṣa does not fall in this category either. He is simply interested in openness, not just about the categories for their reliance on system of justification, but also in the very system that confirms the existence of those categories and establishes truth claims. This radical openness is by no means original to Śrīharṣa, as he comes in a chain of philosophers such as Nāgārjuna or Jayarāṣi. Śrīharṣa does not initiate his discourse with the premise of doubt, and although he questions not just beliefs but also the system of judgment that justifies beliefs, he does not conclude that knowledge is impossible.

It does not take a skeptic to make the claim that our cognition does not always correspond to truth, or that our epistemic system is not free of flaws. If propositions are verified by our knowledge, an issue emerges, what is it that verifies knowledge? The fundamental divide in the Western tradition regarding knowledge is summed up in the tendencies that our knowledge is based on experience (empiricism), or on

¹ Ram-Prasad (1993, 2002, pp. 133–200) has examined this argument in the context of analyzing *sattā* and *bhāva*. Also read Granoff 1978.

² *Pramāṇa* stands for the means of cognition, or the instruments that make a cognitive event possible. *Pramāṇas* are also the systems by which we validate certain knowledge claims. The project at hand is not epistemic one in analyzing how we cognize but rather how a certain knowledge claim is justified. Therefore I have understood *pramāṇa* in this paper as a system of justification. For further discussion on *pramāṇa*, see Mohanty (1966).

reason (rationalism). Some of the skeptical questions of our times are a direct consequence of the exchange between these two traditions with the issue at the center being whether reason or experience or both in some shared way give us veridical knowledge. Indian philosophical systems have never faced a serious chasm between empirical and rational analytical tendencies. For this reason, the ways skeptical arguments have evolved in the contemporary West have a very limited relevance, if our quest is to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the classical India. This is to say that the skeptical arguments derived from the central premise that impressions may not sufficiently explain our experience (Carneade or Hume) or the premise that epistemic systems beg their own justification (Sextus Empiricus) do not divide Indian philosophical schools. If we use the label of skepticism for describing the philosophies of these two giants, we need to keep these central premises in mind.

The three philosophers from classical India often cited for maintaining some form of skepticism, Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrīharṣa, come from three different schools: Madhyamaka Buddhism, Cārvāka materialism, and Advaita Vedanta. These philosophers have developed unique methods of their own for a dialectical practice. The *prasaṅga* or *reductio ad absurdum* arguments of Nāgārjuna lead his opponents to absurdity in accepting any of the possible alternatives. While he questions both the epistemic system and the categories themselves when adopting the reductive arguments, his philosophy is always grounded on the emptiness of the essential nature (*śūnyatā*). Jayarāśi questions both the categories and the system of justification, with an intent to support some form of hedonism. Śrīharṣa's skepticism also has similar limits, with him questioning all the categories to eventually return to the foundational consciousness identical to the self or the Brahman. Although these philosophers have different motives, this does not preclude them from sharing similar argumentation. If the objective of skepticism is to demonstrate that knowledge is impossible, then surely these are not the philosophers to be in this camp. These philosophers, however, question our epistemic system and the dialectical process that examines the categories from different angles. Rather than abandoning reason altogether, these philosophers demand that reason itself deserves the same scrutiny that it applies to examining the categories.

Śrīharṣa on the Scope of Reasoning

With regard to the establishment of categories, a generally agreed-upon maxim is that 'validity of something can be established [P1] not by a mere proposition but by [P2a] providing definition and [P2b] evidence in its confirmation.'³ I am analyzing this maxim in two sections, with the second having two clauses. The first one negates the possibility of establishing a category by mere conviction or a simple proposition. In a dialectical practice, a thesis cannot confirm itself, and one cannot

³ *lakṣaṇapramāṇābhyām vastusiddhir [na hi pratijñāmātreṇa]* | The first part of this maxim is cited in the *Mīmāṃsākośa* (p. 3339). While this text should have a much earlier reference, the one easily available is in *Jaiminīyanīyamālā Vistara* of Sāyaṇa-Mādhava. The exact text there is: *mānādhīnā meyasiddhir mānasiddhiś ca lakṣaṇāt* (*Jaiminīyanīyamālāvistara* I.1.37, commentary thereon).

present another thesis (P2) in affirmation of the first thesis (P1), as long as P2 is not confirmed. Śrīharṣa is explicit in saying that ‘the establishment of a category is contingent upon its definition.’⁴ This maxim instantaneously leads to circularity and absurdity: definition itself needs to be further defined. A definition can either rest on already defined categories (which cannot be the case) or on undefined categories, and in either case, an unacceptable consequence results.

The issue of justification leads to the same circularity. Something unjustified cannot justify something else, and something cannot justify itself, as in that case, justification is irrelevant. Now the issue is, most philosophers are open to questioning the categories but are not open in the same way to question the system of justification. How is a dialectical approach possible, one can argue, if the assumption is that a dialectical approach does not result in establishing the truth? Also a virtue argument ensues: what could possibly be the virtue in demolishing the system that justifies our truth claims? At this point, the argument sounds alarmingly similar to the one we often hear: are the anarchists subject to the same justice system? Unwilling to be labeled a polemical anarchist, Śrīharṣa initiates his discourse with virtue argumentation, first laying out that it is not upon him to justify the system to dialectically engage with his opponents.

Virtue argumentation shifts the focus from epistemology to the argumentation theory itself, and what becomes important is what can and cannot be questioned in a dialectical setting.⁵ Śrīharṣa identifies this dialectical process as a ‘conversation’ (*kathā*) and maintains that this process can be meaningful only with a ‘contract of agreements’ (*samayabandha*). His focus here is on the agreed-upon rules prior to engaging in a debate. If what is agreed is that everything is arguable, is it virtuous to argue on the very rules that are supposedly agreeable? If the rules are the most basic and shall never be challenged, a conversation with a skeptic is not feasible. On the other hand, if the rules are themselves questionable, how can they grant the unquestionable truth with a total certainty? The Nyāya opponents of Śrīharṣa may ponder why anyone would want to destabilize the ‘system,’ and not want to have a thesis. However, the question stands, if all questions are fair game, why would a question regarding the validity of the system itself be wrong? While the Nyāya school looks for a dialectical closure, Śrīharṣa unravels those conclusions: after all, every conclusion is a thesis on its own, open to a new set of questions. Classical Hindu and Buddhist discourse on the nature and scope of debate, highlighted in texts such as *Vādanyāya*, outline the limits of this dialectical approach, providing sufficient materials to read virtue argumentation. The dogmatic school of Nyāya has attempted to define the parameters of rules since its earliest texts, such as the *Nyāyasūtra* of Gotama. The challenge for Śrīharṣa is to establish himself in the dialectic circle without utilizing the basic virtue argumentation.⁶ It would be a shame to be one of the best bowlers and be disqualified for the game. He therefore rejects the thesis that the means of justification are intrinsically confirmed (*siddha*) and therefore are not subject to investigation.

⁴ KhKh, Yogindrananda edition, 126: 2: *lakṣaṇādhīnā tāvāl lakṣavyavasthitiḥ* ।

⁵ For some contemporary readings on virtue argumentation, see Annas (2011) and Cohen (2013).

⁶ For a study of the classical rules of debate, see Chinchore (1988).

The issue is, why shall the interlocutor accept the hypothesis that the means of justification are not subject to questioning? Śrīharṣa gives four possibilities and rejects all the options.⁷ In what follows, the four arguments in sequence demonstrate four types of relationships, generally used in classical Hindu-Buddhist debates. These arguments of concomitance are based on:

- A. Concomitance due to pervasion (*vyāpya-vyāpaka-bhāva*): If x is a mango tree, x is a tree. This can be introduced in the form of categorical syllogism (all x are y, no x is y, some x are y, some x are not y).
- B. Concomitance due to causal relation (*kārya-kāraṇa-bhāva*): If x is an effect, it must have a cause. The argument Śrīharṣa provides can be introduced both in the forms of modes ponens ($p \rightarrow q, p \neg q$) and modes tollens ($p \text{ or } q, \sim p \neg q$).
- C. Concomitance due to the existence of R indicating the existence of S (*gamya-gamaka-bhāva*): If a person with a shaved head who is wearing ochre garments is an indicator of a monk and if Caitra fits the description, he is a monk.
- D. Reductio ad absurdum (*atiprasaṅga*): if cause and effect are identical, everything will be eternally nascent; if they are different, anything can cause anything.

By questioning all forms of relationships between a dialectical process and the means of justification, Śrīharṣa intends to demonstrate that there really is no logical necessity for one to be confined within the given parameters of the system of justification as a precondition to engage in a dialogue. As a consequence, Śrīharṣa has not just produced four arguments in rejection of the hypothesis that one should accept the system for entering a dialectic circle, but also has provided four different ways of argumentation. Following are his arguments against the parameters for questioning the system:

1. Is it because the system of justification is intrinsically inseparable from the dialectical practice (or is it because the system of justification permeates the dialectical practice, just like the entities that we can see are always the entities that we can also touch)?
2. Or is it because a dialogue is an effect of its cause, resulting in the acceptance of the justification system?
3. Or is because it is a common practice to accept the system of justification in a dialectical practice?
4. Or is it because an over-implication (*ati-prasaṅga*) is a consequence necessary for an interlocutor to win over a debate without accepting the system of justification?

Śrīharṣa rejects the first objection by demonstrating that the dialectical process is adopted even by those who do not accept the system of justification. For instance, Nāgārjuna in his *Madhyamaka* dialectics or Jayarāsi in his *Tattvopaplava* each utilizes the dialectic system without any commitment to the system of justification. Śrīharṣa retorts, ‘if those very conversations (*tasya*) are not established, even your

⁷ Ram-Prasad (2002, pp. 138–157) has extensively addressed these possibilities within the context of analyzing being and existence.

effort to refute their statements (*tat*) cannot be reasonably justified.⁸ With this premise, it can be argued that, if there is no virtue in arguing without the established norms, what virtue could there possibly be in rejecting those arguments [of Nāgārjuna, for instance]?

After demonstrating how the concomitance based on pervasion is not tenable between the methods of judgment and a dialectical practice, Śrīharṣa argues that the concomitance based on cause and effect relation is also not tenable. Although what Śrīharṣa is actually saying is that a dialectical process is an effect and not a cause of the system of justification, this argument extends to the causal relation between justification and truth. This relates to the realists' contention that *pramāṇa* stands for an inextricably essential cause for the origins of veridical knowledge (*pramāyāḥ karaṇam*). The implications of this 'causality' of the means of justification are much wider than that can be addressed here, and the examples can be found in both Indian and Western philosophical discourse. For instance, this issue relates to the broader theory of knowledge, and the classical discourse on *prāmāṇya* is one of its most disputed topics. At the heart of this problem are the issues of Pyrrhonian skepticism, and examples can be found in the writings of Sextus Empiricus to the contemporary fallibilism of Karl Popper and Charles Peirce.

The system of justification raises further questions and leads to the following consequences:

- A. Circularity: P needs to be a *pramāṇa* in order to ground S, but only by grounding S, does P become a *pramāṇa*. In Śrīharṣa's own terms, 'you establish the means of justification by it being the cause of the speech act of the interlocutor, and due to the existence of the means of justification, the affirmation of what is being affirmed.'⁹ There is also circularity between the dialectical process and the system of justification, as an opponent likes to show, so that the interlocutor moves to affirm the system of justification as a hypothesis.
- B. Hypothesis: P does not need an external means of justification to ground S: this is intrinsically justified. This issue is generally addressed as *svataḥ prāmāṇya*, or that the justification system does not require extrinsic grounding. As Śrīharṣa puts it, 'one presenting a hypothesis has to follow the means of justification and reasoning. Also the interlocutor has to demonstrate the limits [of reasoning] such as the contradiction with the thesis or contradictory evidence as part of the dialectical process of knowing the truth.'¹⁰
- C. Infinite regress: P grounds S and O grounds P *ad infinitum*.

Eventually, this stream of argument evolves around conviction or belief argument: the realists tend to argue that this is a conviction and therefore does not require further justification. And this relates to the third argument that the system of justification is confirmed due to conviction. The problem, however, is

⁸ KhKh 7:4: *tasyaiva vāniṣpattau bhavatas tannirāsaprayāsānupapatteḥ* |

⁹ KhKh 15:2-3: *kathāyāṃ kathakavāgvyavahāraṃ prati hetuvāt pramāṇādīnāṃ sattvaṃ satvāc cābhyupagamo bhavatā prasādhyah* |

¹⁰ KhKh 15:7-16:1: *pramāṇena tarkeṇa ca vyavahartavyaṃ vādinā | prativādināpi kathāṅgatattva-jñānaviparyayalinga-pratijñāhānyādy anyatamanigrahasthānaṃ tasya darśanīyam* |

whether this conventional affirmation of the system of justification is tantamount of accepting the system as true in the absolute sense or is a mere convention. If someone asks me how much I owe him, if I supposedly borrowed a million dollars and paid only half of it, and I say, another half a million, that does not mean that I am actually going to pay him that sum. Although this issue does not seem trivial, the classical Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika discourse on negation that evolved as a consequence of reading the philosophy of Nāgārjuna has much to offer over this issue.

For both Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa, the dialectical process is possible in a conventional level, but that does not mean that this conventionality bears any truth in the absolute sense. Nāgārjuna proclaims:

“Buddha’s teaching regarding what exists (*dharma*) rests on two truths: The truth as such and the truth limited to conventions” (MMK 24.8).

Furthermore:

“Just as direct perception is empty [of self-nature], for the reason that all the entities are empty [of self-nature], so also are inference, analogy, and testimony empty [of self-nature], for the [same] reason that all the entities are devoid of self-nature.”¹¹

The thesis that linguistic transaction can convey meaning even if there is no corresponding reality, pivotal to understanding the philosophy of Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa, takes language outside of representation or picture theory to a theory similar to the ‘language game’ of later Wittgenstein. Having a meaningful conversation, accordingly, does not rely on the ability to map the world as it is, but instead, it rests on the ability to use conventionally defined terms, and a sentence becomes meaningful not in it being the picture of reality but in it following the normative conversational conventions. It is the totality of the states of affairs, both actual and possible, that constitute the ‘world’ in Wittgenstein’s ‘language game.’ The convention of Nāgārjuna or Śrīharṣa can be compared with this ‘possible’ world of Wittgenstein. This, however, is not to identify the soteriological positions of Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa. The rejection of conventionality in the absolute level for Nāgārjuna is not to demonstrate that there is something factual, a real world beyond convention, something that really exists in the absolute sense, but that, the convention is to accept the reality in the conventional level while in reality, there really is no substantiality, no reality of any sort, that is possible either intrinsically, or extrinsically, or by both, or by any external reason. Śrīharṣa, on the contrary, accepts something to be the foundation, a penetrating reality of the Brahman, that transcends everyday conventionality. Along these lines, although Śrīharṣa initiates the discourse as a loyal student of Nāgārjuna, he deserts ‘Camp Nāgārjuna’ without compromising the epistemic framework of Nāgārjuna or even his philosophy of language.

Exchange of meaningful words, a precondition for a dialectical process, does not necessarily translate into describing reality. The scope of language is the conceptual world, as Bhartṛhari proclaims: ‘There exists no such a concept that stands in

¹¹ *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 46.22-47.1: *yathā hi pratyakṣaṃ pramāṇaṃ śūnyaṃ sarvabhāvānāṃ śūnyatvād evaṃ anumānopamānāgamā api śūnyāḥ sarvabhāvānāṃ śūnyatvāt.*

isolation of corresponding to a word, as words articulate all that is cognized, as if cognition is penetrated [by words]' (*Vākyapadīya* I.115). This is the case that words encase every concept we have. A chain of order can be conceived along these lines, as the semantic world permeates the epistemic process and thus also the system of justification, where the categories occupy only a marginal space. This makes 'knowable' (*jñeya*) a common property shared by all entities, both phenomenally existing and merely conceptual. Accordingly, an entity here also stands for something that does not exist, with 'absence' (*abhāva*) being one of the categories. All these are nonetheless the entities of our conventional transaction. This is what is meant by *prapañca*, a mere verbal expression without any corresponding reality. The argument based on conventions actually serves Śrīharṣa in demonstrating that there is no justification for the system of justification itself.

This leads to the final option, that it is absurd for the interlocutor to proclaim victory without accepting the validity of the system of justification. The absurdity embedded with this argument is, if the system of justification gives rise to veridical knowledge where the system does not exist or does not have its own independent existence but nonetheless gives rise to the knowledge that exists, it would be similar to a barren woman giving birth to a child. Śrīharṣa counters this argument by saying that "even we who are neutral regarding the existence or lack thereof of the system of justification follow its procedure."¹² He goes one step further and counter-argues: the consequence is the same even for you, if you consider the consequence in acquiring the results without a prior confirmation of the system.¹³ What is embedded with this argument is that someone who accepts the system of justification is accepting it without it actually producing any knowledge. And this is similar to considering someone a mother, without her actually giving birth to a child. The tricky situation here is, these arguments of Śrīharṣa are not to be interpreted that he is actively rejecting, or proposing a rejection of the system of justification. On the contrary, he is only rejecting the positive confirmation of such a system without any external verification. For Śrīharṣa the system of justification is a useful mechanism that is not just helpful in deconstructing the categories but also the very process of deconstruction.

Śrīharṣa's arguments rely on two central premises:

- a. He accepts a provisional existence of the system of justification for a mere conventional use,
- b. He can use the system even without affirming the system.

At this juncture, it is clear that Śrīharṣa is not conceding his central premise even when accepting the conventional reality of the system of justification. His arguments thus force his opponents to uphold the position that 'even to just initiate a dialectical process, conventional existence [of the system] needs to be

¹² KhKh 18:9: *tasyaiva pramāṇādīsattvāsattvānusaraṇodāsīnair asmābhir apy avalambanāt* |

¹³ KhKh 19:1: *tasya yadi māṃ prati phalātiprasaṅjakatvaṃ tadā tvāṃ praty api samānaḥ prasaṅgaḥ* |

approved.’¹⁴ The opponent’s claim comes on the ground of action philosophy: ‘what it means to act is to accomplish something, that is, to bring something to existence that did not exist before.’¹⁵ Accordingly, for an act to be an act, it needs to bring about something, something that was not already there. And what the realist expects to achieve of this argument is, if knowledge is a consequence of the means of justification, then there is a causal relation between these two, and hence, the system exists as a cause: a cause is what precedes its effect (*kāryaniyatapūrvakatva*).

Śrīharṣa rejects this thesis grounded on a causal relation between the system of justification and truth by arguing that what is required to initiate a dialectical process is only a thesis itself, or a concept that may or may not correspond to reality. It is unreasonable to demand that what exists is affirmed before a dialectical closure. He therefore states: “what is part of the dialectical process {*tatra*} is the knowledge of existence and not the existence itself.”¹⁶ This argument relates to the earlier one where the scope of language had been examined. It is not necessary for entities to exist for a linguistic transaction to occur. In particular, if the interlocutor is merely interested in negation, it is not the case that the entities of negation have an antecedent existence. We do negate the rabbit-horns or the round-squares, and say, a barren woman, by definition, cannot bear a child. Just like Nāgārjuna’s use of the convention is not to affirm any metaphysical claims, so also is Śrīharṣa’s, and he does not see the need for a justification system that exists outside of the verbal exchange.

On the other side of the game of polemics, it is not possible for realists to conclude that the knowledge of the system of justification demands the existence of what has been justified, as this would mean that $kP \rightarrow P$, and there would be no erroneous cognition, as in all those instances, there would also be the existence of an entity, as they are cognized that way. This leads to the question regarding what is meant by existence, and Śrīharṣa responds to both possible options:

- A. A mere acceptance of the categories suffices to initiate a dialectical process. This is tantamount to saying that a conventional acceptance is sufficient for engaging in discourse. This position is not far-reaching for the realists though, as it is not sufficient to affirm reality.
- B. The existence of the categories free from contradiction is a precondition for a dialectical process. Śrīharṣa gives two options to explain this position and categorically rejects both:
 - i. The absence of contradiction cannot refer to the two parties and a witness not experiencing contradiction to the thesis only at the moment of the dialectical conflict. Even though the persons debating over something may not see the contradiction with the thesis for the moment, but some other person or the same people in another time may encounter contradiction. This argument

¹⁴ KhKh 19:2-3: *kathāṃ pravartayatāpi vyavahārasattābhyupagantavyā* |

¹⁵ KhKh 19:3-4: *kriyā hi niṣpādanā, asataḥ sadrūpatāprāṇam iti yāvat* |

¹⁶ KhKh 20:5-6: *yataḥ sattājñānasya tatrāṅgatvaṃ na tu sattāyāḥ* |

resembles ‘The Ten Modes’ of Pyrrhonian skepticism (Mates 1996, pp. 94–110). In essence, this absence of contradiction should be absolute and not relative and impossible to demonstrate. Śrīharṣa further argues, if what is confirmed at the time is only the conventional truth, this will be proving something that is well established (*siddhasādhanatā*). This argument is noteworthy in its premise that can challenge contemporary responses to skepticism, for instance, the brain in a vat argument (Hilary Putnam in Warfield 1999, p. 77). Śrīharṣa’s arguments are not to question the apparent, but are meant only to affirm its conventionality. On the other hand, if the claim is that this confirmation at the moment of dialogue establishes the absolute truth, Śrīharṣa argues, this contradicts with the fact that even the entities well-established after a thorough examination can turn out to be false in a later examination.¹⁷ One can derive a basis for doubt on the ground of this argument. Śrīharṣa, however, does not make a positive claim regarding doubt.

- ii. It is not possible to have the knowledge of the absolute lack of contradiction, and the dialectical process therefore stands on a mere assumption that no contradiction is found at the time of inquiry. Bhartṛhari is aware of this dilemma that ‘even the entities that are logically inferred by some skilled logicians are established otherwise by some other more skilled [people]’ (VP I.34). Although where Bhartṛhari wants to lead this discourse, that there are limits to reasoning and therefore we should accept the testimony, is different from the one acceptable to Nāgārjuna or Śrīharṣa, the problem remains the same that some of the well-established facts turn out to be false. It leaves us in a compromised position that we accept something to be the case as long as contradictory evidence to our thesis is not found. This is what conventionality represents.

Śrīharṣa brings this conversation to a closure with the final statement that the ‘dialectical process starts by accepting the conventional existence of the system of justification, [the categories being examined,] and so on.’¹⁸ In this entire conversation, Śrīharṣa is hardly interested in making any metaphysical claims regarding the being or non-being of entities, or even in affirming or negating the system of justification. His sole concern is to justify his engagement in a dialectical process without a prior acceptance that the system is outside of the scope of justification. His is thus a conversation upon virtue argumentation, and along these lines, he is raising only the transcendental questions that surround the dialectical process. It is not accepting the system as a precondition for a dialogue, Śrīharṣa argues, against the parameters in which the opponents have made virtue argument. On the contrary, it is about not rigging the system or not transgressing the rules of debate that have been agreed upon by both the sides.¹⁹

¹⁷ Vidyāsāgarī on KhKh 21:18-19: *prātīkasattvasādhane siddhasādhanam, arthasattvasādhane bādhavirodha ity arthaḥ* |

¹⁸ KhKh 22:4: *vyāvahārikīm pramāṇādisattām ādāya vicārārambha iti* |

¹⁹ KhKh 22:4-6: *tasmād yādrgvyavahāranīyamaḥ kṛtas tanmaryādā anena nollaṅghiteti yad vādivāg-vyavahāre madhyasthāvagamaḥ sa vijayate, yasya tu vacasi naivaṃ tasyāvagamaḥ tasya parājayaḥ* |

Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa on Dialectical Closure

If philosophical debate is a game, it is not free from manipulation. The parties involved do not come with just their positions but also with the rules that can shift the game in their favor. *Vitaṇḍā* or frivolous argumentation, for the Nyāya logicians, constitutes a case for disqualification. Vātsyāyana identifies someone adopting this mode of purposeless wrangling as the person who (i) employs destructive criticism with an intent only to destabilize the thesis of the proponent with himself having no thesis to establish, (ii) makes destructive criticism as his thesis, (iii) while he rejects having a thesis but nonetheless makes destructive criticism of his opponent as his mission, or (iv) makes certain positive claims elsewhere while maintaining that he has no thesis of his own.²⁰ While these arguments are apparently directed towards Nāgārjuna, the dialectic of Śrīharṣa suffers the same criticism a millennium later. He would not even like to accept that he has a thesis, for that would require some form of justification. His argument is, just as a category needs the system of justification for it to be confirmed, so also the system of justification needs external verification. Neither Nāgārjuna nor Śrīharṣa are willing to concede the debate in light of this argument though. Both see virtue in their argumentation, not just the virtue of correct insight but also a soteriology embedded with this virtue. Both these are nonetheless in a logical impasse, and the strategy of Śrīharṣa is identical to that of Nāgārjuna in maintaining his position and not being incapacitated. A few instances from Nāgārjuna's writings can help clear the air, although it is not possible for me to fully address this issue here. We can particularly gain insight by reading select passages from the *Viśvavārtanī* (VV), as this will also shed light on Śrīharṣa's arguments.²¹

By adopting Searle's distinction between propositional and illocutionary negations, Matilal (1986, pp. 66–67, 88–89) argues that Nāgārjuna is not simply interested in rejecting the opponent's proposition. Instead, he negates the very act of making a statement. The issue of how to interpret negation in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna is a thorny one, as evidenced by the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika debate in the classical times and Ferraro contra Siderits and Garfield controversy in our time.²² While the objective here is not to analyze negation, even the position that Nāgārjuna does not maintain a proposition (or, negates the possibility of maintaining any proposition) evokes the same issues. Nāgārjuna proclaims:

If I had any thesis, this consequence would be mine. There cannot be a consequence in my [thesis], as I have no thesis (VV 29).²³

The issue is, if the rejection of the intrinsic validity of a system of justification were a thesis (either for Nāgārjuna or for Śrīharṣa), the objections of having one's own unproven thesis, the need for external verification of thesis, a need for something in existence as prerequisite for something to be negated, or similar other objections

²⁰ For discussion, see Ganeri (2001, p. 11) and Matilal (1995, pp. 16–17).

²¹ For a closer analysis of Nāgārjuna's skeptical position, see Berger (1998).

²² See Ferraro (2013a, b) and Siderits and Garfield (2013).

²³ For analysis of this verse, see Westerhoff (2009).

would be valid. However, as Nāgārjuna proclaims and Śrīharṣa silently adopts, the questioning of the system is not equivalent to the premise that a system relies on external justification. What has been discussed above while analyzing Śrīharṣa's arguments against the system of justification, without a doubt, is an elaboration of the following position of Nāgārjuna:

If you [consider] that the establishment of the corresponding objects are by means of the system of justification, please explain, how is your means of justification established? (VV 31).

Nāgārjuna raises reductive arguments for both sides of the issue:

- (i) If the position is that the system of justification does not rely on any system for its establishment, then the thesis that categories are established by means of the system of justification is itself rejected.
- (ii) On the other hand, if any additional system is introduced to justify the system, it leads to infinite regress.²⁴

This chain of arguments directly touches the heart of the classical debate over the scope of the system of justification, with one party arguing that the system that justifies the validity of something also validates itself by the same act of producing veridical knowledge, while the other party making the argument that it is the second mode of justification that confirms the validity of the first mode.²⁵ Presented differently and for different purposes, these two are the most common arguments found in skepticism East and West. The first negative argument of Hume, for instance, that “all knowledge degenerates into probability” (T 180, 1.4.1.1), or “all knowledge resolves itself into probability” (T 181, 1.4.1.4) explores the option of the knowledge system being capable of self-justification. It is not possible to infer something without a prior cognition through perception. This is to say that inference does not support an intrinsically self-justified system. Human reasoning is based on empirical experience. Perception, however, follows the same suit, as it is not free from defects. We have error and hallucination and day-dreaming and many other terms to describe the experiences that are not veridical. To resolve this, even the classical Naiyāyikas developed a two-tiered cognition, with first understanding *pramāṇa* as a means of veridical cognition, and inference used to confirm what is gained through *pramāṇa*, understanding *pramāṇa* as a system of justification. Hume's argument above can be understood along the same lines, and be presented like “knowledge claims become embedded in belief claims” (Owen 1999). Descartes makes a similar observation that we might be making a mistake in demonstrative reasoning. Both Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa cannot agree with a positive claim, as Hume does on this ground, though, that all that could be doubted is to be treated as false. The issue for these philosophers is not to establish falsity but just to reject the validity of knowledge claims based on reasoning and experience.

²⁴ VV, auto-commentary on verses 31 and 32ab: *yadi tāvan niṣpramāṇānām pramāṇānām syāt prasiddhiḥ, pramāṇato 'rthānām prasiddhir iti hīyate pratijñā | . . . yadi punar manyase pramāṇaiḥ prameyāṇām prasiddhis teṣāṃ pramāṇānām anyaiḥ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddir evam anavasthāprasaṅgaḥ |*

²⁵ For the classical Indian system of *prāmāṇya*, see Mohanty (1966).

If the means by which we make our judgments are extrinsically verified, as Nāgārjuna has pointed out, it leads to infinite regress. Hume's second argument resembles this in him saying that "in every judgment, which we can form concerning probability, as well as concerning knowledge, we ought always to correct the first judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the object, by another judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the understanding" (T 181-82, 1.4.1.5). A general dialectical closure sought, in light of this objection, is that there is no purpose in constantly seeking justification. This, however, hardly resolves the issue.

Classical Hindu and Buddhist philosophical debate provides a platform for a number of justification theories to evolve. Most common among the arguments for intrinsic justification is that a judgment does not rely on another for its verification, but rather, if the knowledge a system has generated is veridical, the system is justified as valid by the same token. The metaphor commonly used is that just as fire illuminates itself while also illuminating other objects, so also do *pramāṇas* justify themselves while validating some other claims. Nāgārjuna finds this argument unintelligible, as he retorts: (i) there is no instance of the fire not being manifest, for one to make a claim that the fire illuminates itself (VV 34), and (ii) if the fire were to manifest itself it should also burn itself (VV 35). P is called a *pramāṇa* on the ground that it confirms Q. Something that justifies and the ground on which something is justified cannot be identical. Examples abound in the classical texts, such as a sword cutting itself or a finger pointing itself. Nāgārjuna raises another question on this ground that if a system of justification does not require anything to be justified, this system does not correspond to something outside of itself, turning into a self-referential system, and in effect collapsing the system itself (VV 41).²⁶ Śrīharṣa's initial statement, 'what does it mean to have a system of justification?,'²⁷ and the subsequent conversation raise the same issue of asking for the meta-categories for a system to exist, upon which a cognition can be considered veridical.

Unlike Hume who returns to 'the ordinary wisdom of nature,' pointing to 'the fallacious deductions of our reason,' Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa describe reality in conventional and absolute terms. Here again, although the two-tier truth theory might look identical, what Śrīharṣa wants to achieve by this, i.e., the singular reality of the Brahman or consciousness-in-itself, is quite different from what Nāgārjuna aims to demonstrate: the absolute truth is that entities are devoid of their self-nature. And it is in this conventional level that a dialectical practice is possible. Two common mistakes people make based on the above presentation are: (1) both Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa are not dedicated to a dialectical process, and (2) both these are mystics, who, while rejecting the phenomenal truth, are pointing to something mystical that cannot be grasped by the mind or explained by language. Needless to say, both these arguments are ludicrous. Both philosophers assume that the absolute position, *śūnyatā* for one and the Brahman for the other, are confirmed through dialectical reasoning. Both maintain their status in a dialogical platform and engage in a hairsplitting argumentation. Their

²⁶ While the conversation in VV 41 is primarily regarding the means of cognition and the objects to be cognized by those means, the same argument applies to the system of justification and therefore I have read this verse along the lines of the system of justification.

²⁷ KhKh 6:1-2: *pramāṇādīnām sattvaṃ yad abhyupeyaṃ kathakena tat kasya hetoḥ?*

texts are composed (of course in language) accepting the norms of arguments, and consider the positions of their opponents, while categorically rejecting their claims. For both these philosophers, truth is constantly revealing and it is well within one's reach to recognize *śūnyatā* or the Brahman. This recognition is not something 'higher' or transcendental in any sense, and the insight one gains is not 'hazy' awareness of some 'mystical' experience. Although this truth may not be justified by reason, or the system of justification may fail to ground it, it is nonetheless confirmed through the dialectical process, and the realization of *Śūnyatā* or the Brahman is not something distinct from dialectical closure. For both, it is the *Śūnyatā* or the Brahman that provide the foundation for a dialogue.

Empiricus and Śrīharṣa on Methods

Greek philosophers did not recognize skepticism the way we understand it today. It was a way of life that helped its practitioners to suspend judgment in order to achieve an inner tranquility of mind. Skepticism did not arise in Greece as a rejection of the external world, and unlike its contemporaneous counterparts, doubt was not a central piece of skeptical practice in classical Greece (Mates 1996, pp. 5–6). In this regard, the project of Empiricus is not radically different from that of Nāgārjuna or Śrīharṣa. *Śūnyatā* for Nāgārjuna and the Brahman for Śrīharṣa are not some dogmatic constructs that they defend by means of skeptical arguments. On the contrary, by means of suspending beliefs and questioning the epistemic systems, they find the foundational *Śūnyatā* or the Brahman unchallenged. There are parallels with "The Five Modes" of Empiricus and the arguments of Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa. Borrowing from earlier philosophers, Empiricus outlines that (1) we can reach an unresolvable impasse in a dialectical process due to *disagreement*, with both sides having an equally compelling argument. The lack of determining argument on one side, a *vinigamanāviraha*, is a quite common defect in argumentation, used both by Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa to buttress their arguments. Following the second argument, (2) *infinite regress* results when justifying one belief by another, which in turn requires yet another, or one system of justification by another. As has been evident in the previous section, this argument is foundational for both Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa in their dialectical practice. Accordingly, (3) things may appear *relatively* different to different subjects. Although this argument does not come in the sections examined above, it is commonly found in other sections of the works of Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa, that entities appear differently for different subjects. Accordingly, (4) when they failed to demonstrate a convincing argument, dogmatists incline to agree on a *hypothesis* that they deem worthy of accepting without justification. Both Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa categorically reject the self-justification of the system of justification. Nyāya philosophers are inclined to accept the *pramāṇa* system without scrutiny, a hypothesis that is not acceptable to either Nāgārjuna or Śrīharṣa. Eventually, (5) *circularity* ensues when *pramāṇa* requires the very *pramāṇa* for its justification. Śrīharṣa's opening sentence questions the axiomatic argument that rests on accepted precepts, or that claims to be the bedrock assumption. Although the parallels abound, this is not to argue that the presuppositions on which

Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa raise similar objections to those of Empiricus are identical. On the contrary, this is only to demonstrate that their methods are similar in kind.²⁸

If Śrīharṣa's methods are after all skeptical, how would he respond to some of the contemporary criticisms? Hilary Putnam, for example, has given an anti-skeptic argument in his chapter, "Brains in a Vat," which can be paraphrased as:

P1: I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat in an otherwise empty world.

P2: If I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat in an otherwise empty world then I do not know that I am currently drinking water.

C1: So, I do not know that I am currently drinking water (Warfield 1999, p. 77).

To not propose a thesis, for both Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa, does not mean either (i) to maintain doubt, or (ii) to propose a negative thesis. If these two philosophers had to respond to the above arguments, I believe their argument would be something like this:

[Response 1]: I do not have a thesis. [So it is Putnam who is superimposing arguments onto Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa. So, there is neither P1 or P2, nor C1].

[Response 2]: The thesis, 'This is a park,' grounds on our convention or relational reality (*vyavahāra* or *saṃvṛti*). Neither Nāgārjuna nor Śrīharṣa denies that there is such a convention or empirical experience. Nāgārjuna demonstrates that this convention is relational, is a linguistic and cultural construct, and leads to the conclusion that truth is a mere construct, devoid of its own nature. Śrīharṣa, on the other hand, argues that this experience must be grounded on some metaphysical truth, but the way it is experienced and the way it is described cannot be determined by means of justification (*anirvacanīya*).

[Response 3]: If you say that 'you are drinking water' you could not be drinking water, as speaking and drinking are not possible at the same time.

Classical Indian polemics were brutal, and Śrīharṣa could actually say:

[Response 4]: What a moron!

Doubt is not the foundational ground of reasoning for Śrīharṣa. He never says he has a doubt. He is simply demanding justification for the beliefs that his opponents have. His is only the position that 'since there is no reason for presenting a hypothesis, I have no hypothesis.'²⁹ And in this regard, his is not a different position from that of Nāgārjuna. This utter restraint from declaring a position, however, has not deterred Śrīharṣa from entering the ring of debate. The argument that a dialectical practice is not possible in the absence of affirming the system of justification is self-defeating because even this very proposition is used in a dialectical process in order to refute the opponent's rejection of the system.³⁰

²⁸ For the Five Modes, see *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* L15 (Mates 1996, pp. 110–112). For a detailed analysis, see Barnes (1990).

²⁹ Raghunātha's *Khaṇḍanabhūṣaṃaṇi*, 4:17 (see the Dvivedi edition): ... *kathāprayojakābhāvāt kathā mama na saṃbhavātīti tair bodhanīyam* |

³⁰ Vidyāsāgarī on KhKh 12:12-13: *pramāṇādisattānabhyupagame kim iyaṃ kathā nopapadyate? kathāntaram vā? nādyah, ārabdhavād eva | na dvitīyah, vimatāḥ kathāḥ sattānabhyupagamapurassarāḥ kathāvād ārabdhaitatkathāvād iti bhāvah* |

As is well known, adopting a skeptical method does not make one a skeptic, and not all skeptics are alike. In the case of Śrīharṣa, there is a great resemblance in his arguments with those of Nāgārjuna, and for this reason it is tempting to compare further similarities in Śrīharṣa's methods with his Buddhist counterpart in particular and also with the Pyrrhonian skepticism for a broader understanding. Śrīharṣa's project is fundamentally to demonstrate that the world of convention is *not determinable* (*anirvacanīya*, not even that it *is indeterminate*), and for it to be not determinable there is something foundational, *sat* which also is *cit*, that is not challenged by the above arguments, as this does not stand as a thesis to be established but is a consequence of a logical reduction. While there is no doubt that he has exploited all the arguments against Nyāya dogmatism, he does distance himself from the Śūnyatā of Nāgārjuna, here, making emptiness as an unfounded hypothesis. Śrīharṣa's methods, needless to say, are enriched by the insights of Nāgārjuna, and KhKh is filled with instances where he seems more comfortable with the Mādhyamika dialectics than the dogmatic approach of Nyāya. And for this matter, both these philosophers are on the same boat, as far as their methods are concerned.

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