

## The no-thesis view

### Making sense of verse 29 of Nāgārjuna's

#### *Vigrahavyāvartanī*

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## 1. Introduction

The so-called 'no-thesis' view is without a doubt one of the most immediately puzzling philosophical features of Nāgārjuna's thought and also largely responsible for ascribing to him either sceptical or mystical leanings (or indeed both). The *locus classicus* for this view is found in verse 29 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*:<sup>1</sup>

“If I had some thesis the defect [just mentioned] would as a

consequence attach to me. But I have no thesis, so this defect is not applicable to me.”<sup>2</sup>

That this absence of a thesis is to be regarded as a positive feature is stressed in a passage from the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, where Nāgārjuna remarks about the Buddhas:

“For these great beings there is no position, no dispute. How could there be another's [opposing] position for those who have no position?”<sup>3</sup>

Now it is important to observe that when considered in isolation it is very hard to make any coherent sense of these passages. For even if we assume that the Buddhas do not hold any philosophical position anymore (having perhaps passed beyond all conceptual thinking), how are we to make sense of the first quotation which, in the middle of a work full of philosophical theses claims that there is no such thesis asserted at all?

In fact this first statement is even more difficult to interpret than the famous last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which is preceded by the equally famous ladder-metaphor.<sup>4</sup> Although Wittgenstein here denies that his

preceding statements are of anything  
but instrumental value, that they turn out to be nonsensical  
*after* they have fulfilled their instrumental rôle and that  
there is something outside of the grasp of these statements, at least  
he does not deny making any statements at all!

## 2. Verse 29 in context

In order to get a clearer understanding of what these passages might mean, it is important to consider them in the argumentative context in which they occur. The *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, which contains the first passage given above is a work of seventy verses, accompanied by Nāgārjuna's autocommentary.<sup>5</sup> As its title, which translates as 'dispelling of debates', suggests its main aim is to answer objections which had been advanced concerning Nāgārjuna's theses. Its rather technical and specific nature makes it plausible to assume that the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* was written later than his main work, the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, and was meant to deal with particular problems arising from the arguments set out there.<sup>6</sup> The first twenty verses and their commentaries contain criticisms of Nāgārjuna's position, which are answered in the remaining verses and their commentaries. Verse 29

given above specifically addresses the problem raised by the opponent in verse 4.

The principal point the opponent makes at the beginning of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* concerns the status of Nāgārjuna's claim of universal emptiness. The opponent argues that Nāgārjuna faces a dilemma the horns of which are *inconsistency* and *impotence*. If he assumes his claim not to be empty he has contradicted his thesis of universal emptiness (because there is now at least one thing which is not empty). If on the other hand Nāgārjuna takes his claim to be empty too, the opponent argues, the claim is then unable to deny the existence of independently existing phenomena which the opponent asserts. As becomes clear later in verse 22, Nāgārjuna accepts the second horn of the dilemma: everything is empty, and his claim that everything is empty is empty too. As explained in the following verse this, however, does not entail that the claim cannot carry out its philosophical function. A key can open a door in a film even though it is only a key in the film, not a real key.<sup>7</sup> Verse 4 considers a specific comeback Nāgārjuna could make in reply to the difficulty arising from accepting this second alternative, i.e. the charge of argumentational impotence of his claim of universal emptiness. Nāgārjuna could argue that if universal emptiness renders his own claim

impotent, the opponent's claims, being also subsumed under the universal statement of everything being empty, are similarly impotent and therefore cannot act as a refutation of Nāgārjuna's claim either. But as the opponent is quick to point out, this involves a blatant *petitio principii*: only if we already accept that everything is empty will the opponent's arguments be rendered empty and impotent. But this is exactly the thesis the opponent denies. For him at least some things are not empty, and in particular his own statements are not subject to Nāgārjuna's claim of universal emptiness. The difficulty the opponent raises is a difficulty which arises because of the specific character (*lakṣaṇa*) of Nāgārjuna's system, namely the claim that everything is empty. It does not apply to someone who does not make that assumption.

Verse 29 is then made in reply to this supposed counter-argument and its rejection as a *petitio*. There Nāgārjuna claims that the particular defect (of his thesis of universal emptiness rendering his own philosophical assertions impotent) would indeed apply *if he had any position*. But given that he has no position, the difficulty therefore does not apply to him.

It may strike the reader that this is a rather curious reply

to make. It is evident that the opponent's criticisms formulated in verse 4 as well as in the preceding verses rest on a misunderstanding of the central term 'emptiness'. What exactly this misunderstanding amounts to is less clear. In fact the above set of arguments would make sense if we assumed that the opponent understood 'empty' to mean 'false', or 'meaningless', or even 'non-existent'.<sup>8</sup> But as a reply to a criticism based on a misunderstanding of this kind Nāgārjuna's reply in verse 29 seems a little extreme, given that it would have been perfectly sufficient and far less controversial for him to point out that emptiness entailed neither falsity, nor meaninglessness, nor non-existence and that he thereby could both claim that his statements are empty *and* simultaneously able to refute the opponent's objections (in fact he makes exactly these points in verse 21 and 22). Even if we agree with Mabbett that

“it may be the case that the objection addressed by a given verse has already been essentially refuted, but in turning to each new objection Nāgārjuna seeks to make a fresh rebuttal in order to administer the *coup de grâce*,”<sup>9</sup>

Nāgārjuna here seems to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Why deny holding any proposition whatsoever if it would have been perfectly sufficient to

point out that since 'empty' does not mean 'non-existent' it is completely unproblematic to claim that one's own position is as empty as everything else?

We can distinguish at least three different ways in which Nāgārjuna's crucial statement that he has no position can be interpreted. I will refer to these as the *semantic*, *argumentational*, and *transcendent* interpretations. According to the semantic interpretation, Nāgārjuna does not claim to hold no proposition whatsoever, but only claims to accept no statements which are taken to have a particular semantics. If we follow the argumentational interpretation, Nāgārjuna makes a claim about how one should proceed in debates, namely by always refuting opponents via *reductio* arguments, without ever adopting any thesis oneself. The transcendent interpretation finally reads Nāgārjuna's statement as asserting the existence of an inexpressible reality beyond concepts and language.

All three of these interpretations have historical predecessors in the commentarial tradition. The semantic and argumentational interpretation can be found in works of the dGe lugs tradition, in particular those of Tsong kha pa<sup>10</sup> and mKhas grub rje,<sup>11</sup> while a variety of views which can all be regarded as some kind of transcendental

interpretation can be found in the writings of scholars such as rNgog blo ldan shes rab,<sup>12</sup> Go rams pa,<sup>13</sup> and dGe 'dun chos 'phel.<sup>14</sup>

In the following I will restrict myself to an exposition of the semantic interpretation. This is primarily due to the fact that this appears to give us the clearest understanding of the rôle of verse 29 in the context of Nāgārjuna's arguments. The argumentational and transcendent interpretations tend to use Nāgārjuna's denial of theses as a textual peg on which to hang an argument concerned with quite different matters from those dealt with in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Tsong kha pa, for example, refers to this verse in the context of expounding the distinction between Svātantrikas and Prāsaṅgikas;<sup>15</sup> Sa skya paṇḍita<sup>16</sup> offers the transcendent interpretation in the context of a debating manual (advising the reader on how to debate with somebody who does not put forward a position); dGe 'dun chos 'phel's work is, despite its title, not a study of Nāgārjuna's thought in particular, but is mainly concerned with criticizing the then prevalent dGe lugs interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy more generally.

This is of course not to say that the argumentational and transcendent interpretations are for this reason deficient or



lacking interest in the contexts in which they are presented.

However, it is important to be aware that these contexts were not Nāgārjuna's context. There is certainly no reason for suspicion towards later Indian or indeed non-Indian works as not giving a valid interpretation of Nāgārjuna's thought. Nevertheless, the most interesting of these, for the present purposes of a philosophical analysis of Nāgārjuna's thought, are those which allow us to understand passages from his works in their argumentative context, rather than using them as starting points for presenting the interpreter's ideas on a particular topic.

### **3. The semantic interpretation**

If we consider the major dGe lug pa commentaries referring to verse 29 it becomes evident that these usually regard Nāgārjuna's statement as elliptical. What Nāgārjuna *really* means when he says that he has no position, these commentaries claim, is that he has no positions which are non-empty.<sup>17</sup>

The key to understanding the point made in these commentaries lies of course in a precise understanding of what it means for a position or statement to be empty. An object is empty if it does not exist from its own side and is therefore dependent on other objects, so that its existence is not grounded in its 'own-nature' (*svabhāva, rang bzhin*). The Buddhist commentarial tradition considers a variety of dependence relations in which objects stand and which prevent them from existing in a non-empty way. These dependence relations include causal dependence, dependence of a whole on its parts, as well as dependence on a cognizing subject.<sup>18</sup> While in the case of certain objects their independent existence seems at least a *prima facie* plausibility which the Mādhyamika then attempts to refute by appropriate arguments, the emptiness of statements appears to be entirely uncontroversial. Material objects might be considered to exist in causal and mereological dependence, but independent of a cognizing subject; abstract objects, platonistically conceived, will be assumed to be independent in all three ways. Statements, however, can hardly be taken to 'exist from their own side' in any of the three senses.

As even Nāgārjuna's opponent affirms in verse 1 *token* utterances are events, which arise in dependence on causes and conditions like all other events. When considering utterances as *types* it is equally clear that,

assuming a compositional semantics, these are mereologically dependent on their parts, since the meaning of the sentence type is a function of the meanings of its constituents or parts.

Finally, considering a constituent like the expression 'red', we realize that its referring to the colour red is not a property the word 'red' has independently of everything else: the connection of this particular phonetic or typographic object with the property is a convention which holds for speakers of English; for speakers of French the same property is connected (by a different set of conventions) with 'rouge', for speakers of Tibetan with 'dMar po', and so forth. That 'red' refers to the colour red depends on a complex framework of conventions connecting a community of cognizing subjects which share a language. Unless we mistakenly consider 'empty' to mean 'false' or 'meaningless' or 'non-existent' the claim that utterances conceived of as either tokens or types are *not* empty seems to be a position that is hard to make sense of.

Despite the *prima facie* strangeness of its claims, theories of the non-emptiness of language have found their defenders.

Perhaps the most extreme example is the view of language defended by the Mīmāṃsākas.<sup>19</sup> A primary motivation of the Mīmāṃsā theory of language is to provide a

justification of the authoritative status of the Vedas. As opposed to the Naiyāyikas, who justify the Vedas by their divine authorship, the Mīmāṃsākas regard them as authorless (*apauruṣeya*). The elements of the Vedic language are assumed to exist eternally, without the necessity of a speaker. Any particular human utterance of course depends on a phonetic or typographical instantiation of a piece of language, but the types thus instantiated exist *ante rem*, without depending on the tokens instantiating them. The referents of expressions, which the the Mīmāṃsākas take to be eternal and unchanging universals are related to these expressions via a set of objective and necessary relations<sup>20</sup>.

While the Mīmāṃsā view of language attracted plenty of criticism from the Buddhist side (centred around Dignāga's *apoha* theory)<sup>21</sup> there is no good evidence that this is the view Nāgārjuna's opponent in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* wants to defend.<sup>22</sup> There is, however, some interesting evidence that at least some of Nāgārjuna's Indian commentators saw him as opposed to similar conceptions of language. When commenting on *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* 2:8 in his *Prajñāpradīpa* Bhāviveka raises the question why

the verbal root *gam*, 'to go' is used in its *ātmanepada* form “*gacchate*” rather than conjugated in the usual *paraismapada* manner as a “*gacchati*”.<sup>23</sup> Bhāviveka lists a variety of quotations from Indian grammarians illustrating the perils of wrong grammar. When the god Tvaṣṭṛ created a serpent to destroy Indra he exclaimed *indraśatrur vardhasva*, intending to say 'Go, destroyer of Indra!'. As he intended the compound to be a *tatpuruṣa* it should have been stressed on the ultimate syllable. Unfortunately Tvaṣṭṛ stressed it on the first syllable, turning it into a *bahuvrīhi* meaning 'having Indra as a destroyer'. The words did what they meant, rather than what Tvaṣṭṛ intended them to mean, and Indra destroyed the snake, not the other way round.<sup>24</sup> Bhāviveka then continues to observe that Nāgārjuna's irregular use of “*gacchate*” was not only intentional, but served a philosophical purpose. By demonstrating that no disaster would strike if we use the form “*gacchate*” Nāgārjuna was aiming to convince his opponents to give up their attachment to mere words, together with the assumption that there was a substantial nature (*svarūpa*) of words which determined that they could only appear in certain grammatical forms.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, for the purposes of interpreting the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* it makes better exegetical sense to ascribe a different (and less extreme)

theory than that to Nāgārjuna's opponent. According to this theory whether a statement is empty or not does not depend on the mind-independent existence of language in some platonic heaven but focuses on the *semantics* we employ when interpreting the statement. Even if we accept that the link between 'red' and the property of redness is conventional, this does not imply that we also think that the property of redness only has conventional existence as well. It can still be a property which exists in the world independent of human conventions and intentions. Moreover, even if the linkage of *particular words* to their referents should prove to be conventional, the linkage of entire sentences to the world might not be. For example we might suppose that the statement 'The apple is red' is linked to the state of affairs it refers to by a relation of structural similarity, by their sharing of a common logical form, which in turn is not a product of convention. Once we have linked up the simple signs of our language with the simple objects in the world we then do not need a *further* set of conventions to link up the complex signs (the sentences) with the complex objects (facts or states of affairs), in the same way as once we have settled by convention how the different chessmen are to move we do not have to bring in further conventions to decide whether a particular distribution of chessmen on the board will allow white to mate in five moves. This can be decided just by reference to the

initial conventions In the same way the truth-conditions of a sentence like 'the apple is red' can be worked out by considering the simple signs it is made up of and how these are put together in the sentence.

In fact both the assumptions behind this picture of the non-emptiness of statements - that there is a 'ready-made world', to borrow a phrase of Putnam's - and the assumption of a structural link between language and the world are extremely widespread, so widespread indeed that we might refer to them jointly as the 'standard picture'.

It is evident that the standard picture does not sit well with the thesis of universal emptiness. Neither the existence of a world sliced up 'at the joints' into particulars and properties nor the existence of an objective structural similarity between sentences and the world would be acceptable for the Mādhyamika. A Mādhyamika-compatible semantics would deny the existence of a world differentiated objectively into different logical parts, and would try to replace the structure-based picture of the language-world link by a different one, perhaps by a theory built on speaker conventions.

There is some historical evidence that the standard picture is indeed what Nāgārjuna's opponent presupposes.

Garfield<sup>26</sup> points out that

in the Nyāya-influenced logico-semantic context in which these debates [in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*] originate the dominant view of meaningful assertion (the one that Nāgārjuna calls into question) is one that from our vantagepoint can best be characterized as a version of Fregean realism: meaningful assertions are meaningful because they denote or express independently existent properties. A proposition is the pervasion of an individual entity or groups of entities by a real universal or sequence of universals.<sup>27</sup>

On this understanding of the emptiness of statements we can read the opponent as claiming in verse 1 that because of Nāgārjuna's thesis of universal emptiness the Mādhyamika cannot accept the standard semantical picture for his utterances. For Nāgārjuna questions of both ontology (how the world is sliced up) and semantics (how language and the world are linked) must be settled by appeal to conventions. The opponent, on the other hand, can assume that there is a 'ready-made world', as well as an objective, structural way of linking this to our language.<sup>28</sup> Now the opponent argues that on this picture Nāgārjuna never gets out of his system of conventions to connect



his claims with the things

- and *that* is the reason why his claims are unable to

refute the opponent's claims, which do manage to connect with the

things. Nāgārjuna's arguments can no more refute the opponent than the

rain in a meteorological simulation can moisten real

soil.<sup>29</sup> Nāgārjuna's opponent thus considers the

interesting case of a language where we have two kinds of

statements: some are interpreted according to the standard

semantics (referring via an objective reference relation to

objects which exists independently of us), some are interpreted

according to Nāgārjuna's semantics (which does not make these

assumptions). The opponent argues that statements of the second

kind could not possibly influence the first kind. To see this

consider a similarly structured case. Assume we recognize two

kinds of norms, norms which are real, objective, 'out there' and

norms which are the product of human convention. Moral realists

take certain ethical norms to be of the first kind, traffic rules are generally considered to

be of the second

kind. Now it is clear that although the two kinds of norms could

be in conflict, a norm of the second kind could never override one

of the first kind, since the former are part of the objective

normative framework of the world, while the latter are only a

supplement of human design.

Although he does not explicitly say so, Nāgārjuna's arguments seem to imply that he agrees that this situation would indeed be problematic.

If there are two kinds of statements, the latter would be as impotent compared to the former as a film would be to reality: we could not escape the burning cinema by entering the scene projected onto the wall. Nāgārjuna counters the charge of impotence by denying that there are two kinds of statements, which differ like film and reality. All statements are to be interpreted in the same way, so that their interaction is not ontologically any more problematic than the interaction of different characters in a film.<sup>30</sup>

Interpreting the emptiness of statements as their interpretation according to a non-standard semantics we can also give a more interesting rendering of the argument in verse 4. Remember that there the opponent claims that Nāgārjuna might want to say

“According to this very method, a negation of negation is also impossible; so your negation of the statement negating the intrinsic nature of all things is impossible.”

The opponent has just claimed that because Nāgārjuna's theory entailed a non-standard semantics his assertions did not manage to

connect with the world and were therefore meaningless. But if the opponent then sets out to refute the thesis of universal emptiness, this either means that he takes it to be meaningful after all (and therefore deserving refutation) or that the statement he wants to defend (which is the negation of Nāgārjuna's claim) is meaningless as well, since plugging in the word 'not' will not help to turn nonsense into sense.

The opponent could reply to this charge by pointing out the difference between internal and external negation. While it is plausible to assume that the internal negation of a nonsensical statement is nonsensical too ('the number seven is *not* yellow (but rather some other colour)' is as problematic as 'the number seven is yellow') this is not the case for external negation ('*it is not the case that* the number seven is yellow' is not just meaningful but also generally taken to be necessarily true). Nāgārjuna's opponent could then claim that his negation of the claim of universal emptiness is external only and therefore not affected by the lack of meaning in the claim it negates.<sup>31</sup>

It is possible that the opponent had argued like this, as a distinction between the different scopes of negation, as well as the accompanying presuppositional and non-presuppositional

readings, was made in the philosophical literature of the time.<sup>32</sup> It has to be noted, however, that the passage in question fails to make any direct reference to different kinds of negation being involved.<sup>33</sup>

A more abstract way of employing the distinction between the two kinds of negation in the opponent's reply consists in rejecting Nāgārjuna's peculiar semantics. Here the opponent points out that he does not have to accept Nāgārjuna's semantics as it is a particular characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*) of Nāgārjuna's system, but nothing the opponent would be forced to take on board.<sup>34</sup> The opponent does not just negate Nāgārjuna's claim of universal emptiness, but the entire non-standard semantics which comes with it. If *prasajya*-negation is seen as a presupposition-cancelling negation which negates not just a proposition but also that proposition's presuppositions,<sup>35</sup> and if the semantics according to which a speaker wants the set of his utterances interpreted is included amongst these presuppositions, denying a claim together with the semantics it comes with can be regarded as an example of *prasajya*-negation.

## 4. The specific rôle of verse 29

It is interesting to note that verse 29, which is meant to be a reply to the opponent's argument given in verse 4 does not attempt a comeback in trying to argue that the opponent's negation of Nāgārjuna's claim of universal emptiness is somehow impossible after all. Instead Nāgārjuna addresses a difficulty (*doṣa*) arising from the 'specific character' of his system which the opponent raises at the end of verse 4.

If we consider mKhas grub rje's *sThong thun chen mo*, an influential dGe lug work which deals with the interpretation of this passage,<sup>36</sup> we realize that this difficulty is taken to be inconsistency. If Nāgārjuna assumed that his thesis of universal emptiness was non-empty itself (*rang bzhin gyis yod pa*) and, on our interpretation, would therefore have to be supplied with a semantics according to the standard picture, his position would be inconsistent (at least until he proposed a special reason why this statement should be excepted, which Nāgārjuna does not do). But, mKhas grub argues, since

none of Nāgārjuna's claims of universal emptiness are taken to be non-empty, the difficulty of inconsistency does not arise.<sup>37</sup>

What is unsatisfactory about this interpretation is that Nāgārjuna has already made the point ascribed to him here in verse 22. There he states that his claim of universal emptiness is also empty, and gives reasons why he thinks it can still have argumentative force, thus avoiding the charge of impotence. Unless we assume Nāgārjuna to be unnecessarily repetitive it is not clear why we should assume that he makes the very same point once again a couple of verses later, and also formulates it in a much more obscure manner than the first time.

It is important to note that verses 21-28, which deal with the objections raised in the first three verses of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* are primarily concerned with solving the dilemma of inconsistency and impotence which is faced by Nāgārjuna's claim of universal emptiness. Verse 29, however, (*pace* mKhas grub and Tsong kha pa) is not again concerned with the thesis of universal emptiness. Nāgārjuna realizes that the twin problem of inconsistency and impotence is not just a problem for his thesis of universal emptiness, but for *any other claim* he holds as well. Any other claim will

either face the problem of being a counterexample to Nāgārjuna's assertion that all claims should be given a non-standard semantics, or it will fail to connect up with the world in the way sentences with the standard semantics do, and will therefore be meaningless. I want to argue that this is the difficulty arising from the 'specific character' of Nāgārjuna's system the opponent refers to in verse 4 and which Nāgārjuna takes up again at the beginning of verse 29. He is not interested in defending the claim (attributed to him by the opponent in verse 4) that his thesis of universal emptiness could not possibly be negated. Instead he takes up the opponent's more important point that apart from defending his claim of universal emptiness from the twin problems of inconsistency and impotence, he had better say something about the status of his *other* assertions as well. This is why he says in verse 29 that none of his other assertions should be regarded as propositions with standard semantics (*pratijñā*) either.<sup>38</sup>

The plausibility of this interpretation rests on there being two meanings of 'thesis' (*pratijñā*) in play here, one referring to theses with standard semantics (which Nāgārjuna rejects) and one which refers to theses with non-standard semantics (which Nāgārjuna

does not reject). In fact there appears to be good textual evidence that the notion of 'thesis' is indeed used in two different ways in Mādhyamika literature.

Candrakīrti's commentary on Nāgārjuna uses one sense of thesis (*pratijñā*) to refer to statements with a clearly unproblematic status; indeed some utterances by Nāgārjuna himself are regarded as theses in this way<sup>39</sup> while theses in another sense are firmly rejected. We might want to refer to the first kind of theses as *propositions*, and to the second as *views*. How are we to understand the distinction between them? It has been claimed that views are theses with philosophical or metaphysical commitments<sup>40</sup> and, more specifically, that they postulate an independently existing entity (*bhāva*).<sup>41</sup> Propositions, on the other hand, do not make such commitments and are therefore philosophically unproblematic. It is important to note at this point, however, that what distinguishes a view from a proposition is not just that the former asserts the existence of objects existing from their own side while the latter does not. On this understanding the statement 'Object *x* does not depend in any way on any other object' would be a view concerning *x*, while 'Object *x* stands in a variety of dependence relations with other



objects and does not exist from its own side' would not be. Ontological commitment only comes into play

at the level of semantics. Whether someone asserting that the average man has 2.4 children is committed to an object which acts as the reference of the expression 'the average man' depends on the semantics given. If we interpret the statement in the way statements like 'Paul has two children' are usually interpreted, such commitment to a strange man with partial children ensues; if, on the other hand we read it (more plausibly) as a statement about ratios between the number of men and children in a certain set there is no such commitment.

It therefore seems to be plausible to take the distinction between views and propositions and between theses with standard and non-standard semantics as coinciding. The views the Mādhyamika rejects are theses which are interpreted as referring to a ready-made world and a structural link between this world and our language. The propositions he takes to be unproblematic, and some of which he holds himself, are theses which are given a semantics which makes neither of these two assumptions.

Some support for this semantic interpretation of the difference

between the two senses of 'thesis' can be gained from a verse from Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakārikā (13:8):

“The Victorious Ones have announced that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. Those who in turn hold emptiness as a view are said to be incurable.”<sup>42</sup>

Although Nāgārjuna does not use the word *pratijñā* for 'view' but rather talks of *drṣṭi*, it seems to be sensible to treat the two terms as synonymous in this context.<sup>43</sup> If the difference between propositions and views just depended on what the statement asserted, statements asserting the emptiness of some phenomenon (such as 'each spatio-temporal object depends causally on some other object') *ex hypothesi* could not be views, contrary to what Nāgārjuna says in the verse just cited. If, however, we treat 'view' as denoting a statement together with the standard semantics, this is indeed possible. For if we read 'each spatio-temporal object depends causally on some other object' as asserting the existence of various objectively existing individuals in the world, linked by a relation of causation, about which we speak by exploiting an objectively obtaining structural similarity between language and the world, it would indeed be turned into a view.

That the point at issue here is a specific (and, as Nāgārjuna sees it, inappropriate) conception of semantics is supported by Candrakīrti commentary on this verse. Candrakīrti argues that one taking emptiness to be a view is like one who, when being told by a shopkeeper that he has nothing to sell, asks the shopkeeper to sell him that nothing. The customer (like the White King in *Alice through the looking-glass*) treats 'nothing' like a proper name and therefore expects it to denote a particular object, as proper names do. But though justified by the surface grammar of the sentence concerned, this does not lead to an understanding of what the merchant wants to say. Similarly, giving a standard semantical interpretation of statements asserting emptiness does not lead to an understanding of what Nāgārjuna wants to say.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

I hope to have convinced the reader that the semantic interpretation outlined above provides a good way of making sense of verse 29 within the argumentative structure of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. What Nāgārjuna means when he says that he 'has no thesis' is that none of

his theoretical statements (including the claim of universal emptiness) are to be interpreted according to a semantics based on the standard picture. For the Mādhyamika no assertion is to be taken to refer to a ready-made world of mind-independent objects, nor can he assume that there is a structural similarity linking word and world which is independent of human conceptual imputation.

<sup>1</sup> Both the Sanskrit text and an English translation can be found in Johnston et al (1978).

<sup>2</sup> *yadi kācana pratijñā syānme tata eṣa bhaved doṣaḥ / nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ* (Johnston et al 1978: 61).

<sup>3</sup> Verse 50. *che ba'i bdag nyid can de dag / rnam la phyogs med rtsod pa med / gang rnam la ni phyogs med pa / de la gzhan phyogs ga la yod//* (Lindtner 1982: 114).

<sup>4</sup> 6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually realizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) [...]

7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

<sup>5</sup> The traditional ascription of the

Vigrahavyāvartanī to Nāgārjuna has been questioned in (Tola and Dragonetti 1998) by arguments of varying strength. See also (Ruegg 2000: 115, note 10).

<sup>6</sup> (Mabbett 1996: 306-307), (Bhattacharya 1999: 124).

<sup>7</sup> As Nāgārjuna points out in Mūlamadhyamakārikā 1:10 this is in fact a necessary condition for its being able to perform its function: only a cinematic key could open a cinematic door, a real key could not. See also the commentary on this verse in (Garfield 1995: 119).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed we might think that the

argumentative context makes it most likely that the opponent misunderstands 'empty' as 'non-existent'. In this case the problem that non-existent statements cannot really refute anything seems to be most pressing. But in the case of the other two alternatives other problems become more serious. If Nāgārjuna meant 'meaningless' when he said 'empty' his claim that everything is empty would obviously just be false, given that we perfectly well understand the claim he makes (in the same way as somebody saying 'all statements, including this one, are not grammatically well-formed' would utter a falsehood). If, however, 'empty' meant 'false' Nāgārjuna's thesis of universal emptiness would reduce to the liar paradox and there is no good textual evidence that *this* is the problem the opponent had in mind. On this last point compare also the discussion in (Mabbett 1996) and (Sagal 1992).

<sup>9</sup>(Mabbett 1996: 307).

<sup>10</sup> (Tsongkhapa 2000-2004: III: 230; 236-249).

<sup>11</sup> (Ruegg 2000: 173-187).

<sup>12</sup> (Ruegg 2000: 32-33, note 59).

<sup>13</sup> (Ruegg 2000: 194-195, note 135).

<sup>14</sup> (Lopez 1994). A translation of dGe 'dun chos 'phel's kLu grub dgongs rgyan can be found in (Lopez 2005).

<sup>15</sup> See also (Cabezón 1997).

<sup>16</sup> In his mKhas pa nams 'jug pa'i sgo, III: 37-39. See (Jackson 1987:1:271) for the Tibetan text, volume 2, 341-342 for an English translation. A summary with comments is in (Ruegg 2000: 169-171).

<sup>17</sup> "It is not being said that the Mādhyamika

has no theses; he merely has no theses that inherently exist.” (Hopkins 1983: 471). The same point is made in mKhas grub rje's commentary on this passage; see (Ruegg 2000: 179).

<sup>18</sup> (Gyatso 2005:66-69).

<sup>19</sup> The basic text of

this school is Jaimini's Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtra. For the Mīmāṃsā theory of language see especially the first *adhyaya*, first *pada* of this text (Jaimini 1916:1-22). See also (D'Sa 1980: 113-140).

<sup>20</sup> (Sharma 1960: 220-222).

<sup>21</sup> (Dreyfus 1997: 213-215).

<sup>22</sup> That Nāgārjuna's opponent was a Naiyāyika is claimed in (Bhattacharya 1977: 265) and (Johnston et al 1978: 1). See (Bhattacharya 1999: 124) for further references.

<sup>23</sup> (Ames 1995: 309). The form “*gacchate*” is not found in the editions by prepared by Poussin (1903-1913: 97 line 14) and De Jong (1978). However, recent palaeographical research strongly suggests that “*gacchate*” is indeed the correct reading (MacDonald 2007: 32-33).

<sup>24</sup> (Ames 1995: 342, note 65). Notes 64-70

provide very useful information for identifying some of the authors Bhāviveka quotes.

<sup>25</sup> (Ames 1995: 310).

<sup>26</sup> (Garfield 1996: 12).

<sup>27</sup> For discussion of the relation between the Vīgrahavyāvartanī and the Nyāya school see (Meuthrath 1999), (Bhattacharya 1977), and (Oberhammer 1963). For some remarks on the realist background of the Navya-Nyāya see (Ingalls 1951: 1, 33-35).

<sup>28</sup> In fact the opponent's

conception of a harmonious word-world link goes so far as to deny the existence of empty names; thus arguing from the existence of a term like *svabhāva* to the existence of the referent (Vīgrahavyāvartanī 9, Nāgārjuna replies in verse 57).

<sup>29</sup> In Vīgrahavyāvartanī 1 the opponent claims that ‘a fire that does not exist cannot burn, a weapon that does not exist cannot cut, water that does not exist cannot moisten; similarly a statement that does not exist cannot deny the intrinsic nature of all things.’ (*na hy asatāgninā śakyam dagdhum / na hy asatā śastreṇa śakyam chettum / na hy asatībhiradbhiḥ śakyam kledayitum / evam asatā vacanena na śakyah sarvabhāvasvabhāvapratīṣedhaḥ kartum*) (Johnston et al 1978: 43).

<sup>30</sup> See particularly verses 23 and 27 of the Vīgrahavyāvartanī, as well as verses 17:31-33 of the Mūlamadhyamakārikā.

<sup>31</sup> (Garfield 1996: 12) reads the argument in

this way and argues that the opponent just wants to negate Nāgārjuna's position, without asserting the contrary.

<sup>32</sup> For present purposes we can assume a (simplifying) identification of *paryudāsapratīṣedha* with internal negation and of *prasajyapratīṣedha* with external negation. For further differentiation see (Ruegg 2002: 19-24, note 6).

<sup>33</sup> Compare also the discussion in (Ruegg 2000: 117).

<sup>34</sup> ‘The objection applies only to the specific

character of your proposition, not to that of mine. It is you who say all things are void, not I. The initial thesis is not mine.’

(*tava hi pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptam na mama / bhavān bravīti śūnyāḥ sarvabhāvā iti nāham / pūrvakaḥ pakṣo na mama*) (Johnston et al 1978: 45-46).

<sup>35</sup> As e.g. in (Shaw 1978: 63-64).

<sup>36</sup> See (Ruegg 2000: 173-187) for a summary and analysis of the relevant part of the commentary.

<sup>37</sup> 150a1-3, (Ruegg 2000: 179). The same point is made by Tsong kha pa (2000-2004: III: 241): “Therefore, the issue as to having or not having theses is not an argument about whether Nāgārjuna has them *in general*. It is instead an argument as to whether the words of the thesis ‘all things lack intrinsic nature’ have intrinsic nature. Hence the meaning of the lines from the Vīgrahavyāvartanī is this: If I accepted that the words of such a thesis had an intrinsic nature, then I could be faulted for contradicting the thesis that all things lack intrinsic nature, but because I do not accept that I cannot be faulted.”

<sup>38</sup> (Oetke 2003: 468-471) reconstructs Nāgārjuna's argument differently and suggests an alternative reading of verse 29; he argues that here Nāgārjuna claims that for the Mādhyamika there is no thesis to be made at the absolute level (*paramārtha*) - a reading entirely consistent with Nāgārjuna's other statements (e.g. Mūlamadhyamakārikā 18:9).

<sup>39</sup> For example Mūlamadhyamakārikā 1:1 in the Prasannapadā (Poussin 1903-1913: 13, line 3). See (Ruegg 1983: 213-214) for further examples. (Oetke 2003: 458-459), however, argues that the distinction

between two senses of *pratijñā* only arises in the later Prāsaṅgika literature and should not be read back into Nāgārjuna's works.

<sup>40</sup> (Sagal 1992: 83).

<sup>41</sup> (Ruegg 1983: 213).

<sup>42</sup> *śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnāṃ proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ / yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatādrṣṭis tān asādhyān babhāṣire* (Poussin 1903-1913: 247, lines 1-2.)

<sup>43</sup> As done in (Ruegg 1986: 232-233) and (Mabbett 1996: 301). For more details on the relation between the two terms word *pratijñā* and *dṛṣṭi* see (Ruegg 2000: 129-136).

<sup>44</sup> This interpretation does of course not imply that one could hold ‘any position at all’ as long as one gives it the required non-standard semantics, as (Galloway 1989: 27, note 5) asserts. A statement like ‘things arise from what is other than themselves’ will be regarded as false by Nāgārjuna, independent of whether it is interpreted according to the standard or the non-standard semantics.