
Ontology and Self-Certainty in the *Prasannapadā*

*Bibhuti S. Yadav**

1

We begin with a couple of pedagogical qualifications. We believe that in some cases, definition should yield to description: rather than defining terms at the outset. It is prudent to let the terms disclose their sense through the discourse. 'Ontology' is one such term. A discourse must be thematically definite, however: it should state, albeit descriptively, the sense of the term signifying the theme. We use 'Ontology' in the sense of *prameyāśāstra*, a discipline which is concerned with a categorical description of entities that constitute the world. It also is a method of establishing the existence of the entities, including a theory of language through which demonstratively true claims can be made about these very entities. We use 'ontology' to signify a methodology of establishing what exists and what does not, and of demonstrating that certain propositions are true, or false, about what exists and what does not.

2

Whether logic should be ontologically committed is not our concern here. We note that ontology in Indian thought has been essentially associated with epistemology and logic, the latter two being more or less inseparable. The issues of ontology are not purely logical or propositional. However, a form of being, or non-being, is invariant with a form of thinking, the two then serve as ground for a healthy form of life. Mental health, according to Nyaya and Buddhist logicians, is comprised of propositions embodying truth claims. Such claims, in turn, are constituted by definite, indubitable and non-contradictory cognitions of what is the case and how, and what is not the case and how not. An ontological stance leads to successful actions, not disappointments; to a form of life based on truth, not

* Former Professor, Indian Buddhism / Temple University, Dept. of Religion.

deceptions; to the rules of a collective form of moral life rooted in rational decisions, not instincts or whims. (Vdayana, 1919: 276) Ontology is a liberating celebration (Dhamattara, 1972: 3) of the virtues of self-criticism, detachedness and objectivity. It redeems mankind from compulsive anxiety of self-certainty, a tool by which to overcome the possessive ego that is condemned, in vain, to self-predicative recurrence through rebirth and redeath. (Udayana, 1978: 11) Ontology is meta-medicine (*mahāusādhih*).

3

We argue in the following pages that ontology does not do what it pretends to do. We take a *Mādhyamika* stance, one that was taken by Chandrakīrti in his *Prasannapadā*. The pretension that is ontology is neither simple nor innocent. Like anything else in the life of the mind, it does not just happen to be the case; there are causes and conditions given which it comes to be the case (*pratītya samutpada*). As a constitutive element of existence an ontological pretension also becomes a justificatory reason for perpetuating the causes that bring it to being in the first place. Presenting Chandrakīrti's point of view, we argue that ontology is an expression of man's anxiety with his identity, that man projects being and non-being in his own image (*ātmiyakara*); that he does so for reasons of self-certainty and self-love. (Chandrakīrti, 1960: 198) The anxiety of self-certainty has a structure ; it involves participation in, as well as distanciation from, the entities so projected (*vastu ālambana*). We further argue that such an anxiety is existentially *apriori* (*ānadi*); rather than derived from experience, it necessarily demands a world and world of discourse, including ontological discourse. The structure as well as limit of being and non-being is constituted by the self-predicating ego; philosophers construct logic and prepositional language to cover up the anxiety of self-certainty. (*Ibid.*, 119) (*Ibid.*, 131) We conclude by showing that ontology is a kind of resistance principle, an abstract defense mechanism and a metapsychological *maladie* (*vyādhi*).

4

To be true to Chandrakīrti, we wish to situate the issues in their contexts, both conceptual and textual. This we do for two reasons: to stay in methodological affinity with Chandrakīrti, and to indicate that the issues at hand constitute the very heart of Buddhism proposed in *Prasannapadā*. Interested in showing that language of ontology embodies deep disquietudes of the mind, Chandrakīrti makes a series of clearing assertions

the context of which we wish to state before we proceed further. Chandrakīrti is aware that philosophers make a logical defence of the language of ontology which, in turn, necessitates a response in kind. For such a response, Chandrakīrti refers his critics to *Vigrahavyāyartīnī* and *Vaidalvasūtram* of Nāgārjuna, his master. At least four centuries separate Nāgārjuna and Chandrakīrti, the latter coming of age in an era when some of the greatest works on epistemology and logic had already appeared. It was time to do something else, to introduce a methodological reversal. This is not to suggest that Chandrakīrti himself does not do formal reasoning. Indeed he does; he even insists that he can. (*Ibid.*, 8) But he does so on his way to establishing how the logical is a mask for the psychological. With this in mind, he insists he has no desire to play the language game which philosophers play (*vācanam krīḍartham*); that he has no ontological thesis and no methodology of arriving at universally true propositions (*prayoga vākya*). (*Ibid.*, 6-7) However, he insists that words are not policemen; (*Ibid.*, 7) that he can think through a thesis without being committed to its truth claim; that he can play the language game without believing in the validity of the rules of the game. (*Ibid.*, 11) For instance, he can successfully show that a given conclusion is inconsistent with its premise; that attempts to turn apparently reasonable assumption into truth claim are futile: that such attempts invariably involve either self-contradictions or a vicious circle, or both. (*Ibid.*,19)

5

Chandrakīrti is aware that the establishment philosophers accuse him of the following. Responsible thinking involves an ontological claim, including a methodology through which to demonstrate the truth of the claim. Since he does not claim to propose either, Chandrakīrti is professionally irresponsible. Not having an ontological thesis is not innocent. It reflects lack of commitment to objective criteria of truth, something that implies a refusal to play the game of life according to the rules. Secondly, Chandrakīrti is practicing psychologism. Not to have an epistemological thesis, the method of acquiring and determining valid knowledge, would reduce cognitions to fantasies, truth claims to uncritical assertions. The logic of objective truth claims is something like this: "X is Y" is true because, and only because, of Z, where the universal and unconditional concomitance between Y and Z is established empirically, and where X is the locus in which such concomitance occurs. It is reasonable to say "There is fire on the hill" is true, because "Wherever there is smoke, there

is fire" is true, and because "there is smoke on the hill" is true. Such is the logic of law and order in life. If Chandrakīrti's claim were taken seriously, a person can say "X is Y" is true without any regard to Z. Another person, with equal impenitence, can say "X is B" is true, even though both of them are talking about the same X at the same time, and even though Y and B may signify mutually contradictory state of affairs. It is not for nothing, insists the establishment philosopher, that words are policemen; there is a form of life to enforce the rules of which policemen carry staff. "Life in the universe of discourse is no different." There are agreed upon rules, grammatical and logical, in terms of which philosophers use language to make claims and counter-claims. Last, but not least, Chandrakīrti is out to deny the truth of all propositions. As a Buddhist, Chandrakīrti should know that there are rules of assertion and denial; that a negative claim is still a claim; that it too must fulfill the requirements of a significant claim. (*Ibid.*, 19) For instance, "the rabbit's horn is not sharp" is not a significant assertion because, and only because, "the rabbit's horn is sharp" is not. That which cannot be significantly affirmed can't be significantly denied. Since Chandrakīrti does not subscribe to the rules of making significant claims, nothing fruitful would be accomplished in dignifying his *Prasannapadā* by subjecting it to the standards of critical discussions.

6

Such is the standard rebuff by the establishment. One either believes in the rules of the game, or one does not play at all. Chandrakīrti is amused with such a vision of critical thinking, of dogmatically accepting methodological presuppositions as valid in order to arrive at a conclusion which could then be called critical. One would like to believe that critical thinking consists of consistent demonstration, in seeing whether a conclusion follows from a given premise. Since Chandrakīrti has something else at hand, he once again refers his critics to Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, the text to which he refers his project in *Prasannapadā* be taken as a sequel. "If", says Nāgārjuna, "there were a thesis advanced by me, that in itself would be a flaw. I have no thesis, and therefore no flaw. If through the means of valid knowledge I were to cognize an object, I would affirm or deny the existence of that object. I do not do so, and therefore should not be accused on that count. (*Ibid.*, 6). Like Nāgārjuna, Chandrakīrti does not affirm or deny an object, he is not interested in being and non-being, and thus has no ontological thesis. He does not do so by

virtue of not having, or not being interested in having, the requisite methodology of doing so, namely epistemology and logic. (*Ibid.*, 7) Chandrakīrti insists that a *Madhyamika*, indeed a Buddhist, must not construct a logic in order to demonstrate that the truth of a proposition is consistent with, or not contrary to that of the premise. (*Ibid.*,6). Given his project in *Prasannapadā*, Chandrakīrti would have counseled against one more thing, something modern scholars attribute to him and Nāgārjuna. It is that a *Madhyamika* does metalogic and metalanguage in order to make formal claims about material language, the language of ontology. Such a stance, we submit, is untextual and unhistorical. "One", said Nāgārjuna, "who is ridden with the hubris of logic and epistemology, and who is desirous to debate in order to defend a position, I compose *Vaidalyasūtram* to deconstruct his ego." (17) Nāgārjuna did what he promised to do; he deconstructed the language of logic and ontology, including inferential justification of the relation between words and objects.

7

But there is another dimension in Nāgārjuna's thought which he indicated but did not cultivate systematically. It is the connection between hubris and the logic of truth claims, between desire and truth claims, between defense of a claim and refutation of a counter claim, between ontology and the ego. Chandrakīrti proposed to take over where Nāgārjuna left off, and he promises to do so as a good Buddhist, particularly as a faithful student of Nāgārjuna. He will talk the language of dependent origination, showing that logic and ontology happen in the history of the mind, that such a happening is not a matter of logical necessity, certainly not formal necessity. (*Prasannapadā*, 21) Chandrakīrti is not interested in turning material ontology into a formal ontology, ordinary logic into a metalogic. He is interested in psycholinguistic analysis of ontology itself, showing why intelligent people do ontology, and how mental cramps get formalized in the language that philosophers speak. With this in mind, he swears in the name of the Buddha that he has none other than ordinary language at his disposal, and that he will not subject ordinary language to an extraordinary use. (*Ibid.*, 25) His project is to bring the extraordinary back to the ordinary, the *coqito* to the insecurities of the ego, the ontology of being and non-being to the anxiety of living and fear of dying.

Chandrakīrti does psychohistory of ontology by situating himself in the history of (Indian) philosophy itself. Engaged in hermeneutical thinking (*bhāṣya*), he invokes historical memory. He remembers the Buddha who vowed to speak ordinary language; who demonstrated how the ego is obsessed with being and anxiety of its non-being; how the fearful ego becomes an ontologist and imagines a linguistic space in order to sublimate its everyday discomfort; how philosophers, like fish, are subject to nervous commotion in a churning ocean as it were; and how he practiced psycholinguistic analysis by catching them as a skilled fisherman (Brahmajāla Sutta). Chandrakīrti notes with dismay that Buddhists forgot the analytic vocation inaugurated by the Buddha, speaking instead the non-Buddhist language constituted by agent-act grammar and subject-predicate logic. (Prasannapadā, 23), (*Ibid.*, 92) Committed to ontology of momentariness by refuting that of substance, they even instituted *vā dauidhi*, the methodology of establishing the truth of their claim by showing the contrary claims as false. The Buddhist made ontological commitment to protect their collective ego, thus subjecting themselves to defense mechanism even though they rejected the existence of the self as disguised ego. Committed to making indubitable truth claims in order to establish the certainty of their existence as Buddhists, they necessarily needed an other, a competing truth claim (*pūrvapakṣa*) from which they could then contrast themselves by showing it to be erroneous, dubitable, and therefore a logical malady in history. The non-Buddhist returned the favor. Hence the comparative structure of Indian philosophy, a conceptual circle set in motion by conflicting claims and counter claims, a rolling conference in which each claims encounters all others, and all of them requiring all for reasons of self-certainty. History of Indian philosophy is history of group-hink tanks (*siddhānta*), each group necessitating the others for the certainty of its identity, and each refuting the validity of the other at the same time. History of (Indian) philosophy is a density of competing egologies, a dialogical continuity of neurosis of identities, group identities (*pakṣapūrvapakṣa*). It is a world of traditions as well. Group neuroses subject to the dialectic of rebirth and redeath, have been frozen into the ontic forms of 'is' and 'is-not', truth and falsity, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. (*Ibid.*, 118) It is a world sedimented with self-love, a thick forest of banana trees into whose trunks libidinal self-certainty and anticipatory fear of losing identity have found home, and at whose stem is *sanskāra*, the subconscious in the

underground which incarnates itself in words like "being" and "non-being" ,
" *gautama*" and "*tathāgata*" (*Ibid.*, 41) (*Ibid.*, 13) (*Ibid.*, 15;104)

9

Chandrakīrti has no desire to grow another banana tree. He has had enough of the forest, this libidinal babbling of children as adults, as detached philosophers. (*Ibid.*, 13) Chandrakīrti would rather dig into the underground, the stem of the tree itself. It is here that he introduces his methodology, citing Nāgārjuna and the *Prajñāpāramitā* to justify his stance. His intent in so doing is two-fold. First, to request that Buddhists suspend ontological commitments, (Madhyanak Sastram, 15.7) (Prasannapadā, 118) that defense and refutation of truth-claims is contrary to the *Buddha's* way. (Samadhiraja Sutra quoted by Chandrakirti) Secondly, to examine the mental cramps given to which philosophers are committed to truth claims. It is not for nothing Nāgārjuna, as the legend has it, brought the *Prajñāpāramitā* from the bottom of the ocean, symbol of the unconscious in Indian myths.

10

There are two strands in Chandrakīrti's methodology, both concerning the concept of space. First, the Buddhists need not torment themselves with claims in a competing conceptual space, claims that are made by non-Buddhists over there and should therefore be proved as false. That would constitute bad faith, a self-deceptive diversion, the belief that the hell, or heaven, is the other out there. It is not for nothing that the *Buddha* forbade the language of proof and disproof. (*Ibid.*, 15) Chandrakīrti reinstates the stance of the *Buddha*. He does so by showing that space cannot be conceived apart from movement in space, and vice versa; that the concept of movement is logically silly because the relation between the points of departure and arrival involves contradictions. This he does on his way to showing why philosophers turn the psychological into the ontological, how a collective claim is threatened by a counter claim by virtue of both being localised in space, and why Buddhists think about the problematics of life in terms of the place the Buddha makes an exit from (*nīlsaraṇa*) and the path through which the Buddha arrives at the place he does (*thatāgata*). It is a matter of territory and turf. Movement, observes Chandrakīrti, is a purposive act; it incarnates the intentions of the agent. Space, since it is conceived in light of movement, is not a thing-in-itself (*svabhāva*). Space is a purposive horizon, an experienced expansion constituted by the intentional gaze of the agent; it is a lived distance conditioned by the

reciprocity of the points of departure and arrival. (Madhyamaka Sastram, 2.2; 33) (Prasannapadā, 34) Space is an aesthetic panorama, through the contours of which the ego has posited its immortality wish and metaphysics of eternal entities, the ontology of *sva-lakṣaṇa* and the logic of *anumāna*, the beginning of the world and cosmic eschaton (*laya*), agony of death and mythology of heaven or hell, the Buddha and God. (Prasannapadā, 17) (*Ibid.*, 17) Chandrakīrti cites the *Āryapariṣecchāsūtra* in order to liken the Prasannapadāspace with a spaceship. It is a ship imagineered out of gold by agents who suffer from perpetual childhood, who are fearful of being in the world by virtue of having to die in it, and who deny to themselves such fear in themselves by cheerfully exteriorizing their existence into the celestial, the transcendent. Decorated with automatic *bliks* and truth claims, the ship, space itself, is stuck with circular motion unto the heavens, the mirage of the promised land called nirvana. (Prasannapadā, 80)

11

There is another strand in Chandrakīrti's methodology, one that pushes the first to more depth. Nirvāṇa would not be different from *saasāra*, if man carried within himself the angst as well as the categories of the space he departed from. Chandrakīrti urges the ship and its makers to pause, to return home to Kapilavastu, the forest of claims and counter claims from which they never made an exit in the first place. (*Ibid.*, 17) Staying there, the Buddhists should reflect on this: Just why do they grow banana trees? The Buddhists should encounter themselves in self-psychanalytic empathy, using their own ontological claim as a mirror as it were: *taklā oātre nirikste*. So doing, he will descend through the *mārga*, the path leading to his own underground, the cave in which the Buddhas are conceived and the seed that shoots through the edges of space. (*Ibid.*, 14) (*Ibid.*, 130) The Buddhist would have lived through the processes of how the libidinal ego incarnates as ontology, the historical Gautama as the *Tathāgata*, the son of man as the body of logos (*dharmakāya*), *saṃsāra* as the bodhitree, and *kapilavastu* as *buddhagayā*, the city of suffering as the city of *nirvāṇa*. That in itself is *Tathātha*, a lived through encounter (*āakatkartavyah*) with how libidinal attachment of the ego with itself becomes stratified into claims, into historical truths or traditions of category formation; and how such claims are formalized as an ontological commitment (*drṣṭinibandhanam*) to which the Buddhist philosophers cling feverishly as if it were a young woman. (*Ibid.*, 131) (*Ibid.*, 17) The Buddhist would have learned one more thing. He

would have discovered that there is no duality, no qualitative gap, between the psychological and ontological; that there is non-duality, a quantitative and qualitative continuity, between being and nothingness, the ego and the ontologist, the *samsāric* and *nirvānic* space. They are all posited by virtue of the ego's obsession with self-certainty. Chandrakīrti's proposal is to deincarnate the ego, and to recognize that the ontologist is not over there, talking about things and in language different from that of man in everydayness. Chandrakīrti demands that ontology be brought to the streets for cross examination, for the witnessing by man of the history of his own mind, and for public confession of his own narcissism. Being and nothingness, God and prophets, the Buddha and Buddhist categories---they are all libidinal symbols turned into ontic entities, in dreams as it were. (*Ibid.*, 236) Chandrakīrti suggests that man recognize the symbols as symbols; that he overcome bad faith by bringing the symbols back to himself, that he envision his symbolic world as a system of functional and therefore conscious illusions, and that he overcome those symbols eventually through a life of self-psychanalytic celebrations (*dhyānasukhavihāra*). After all, how can anything other than man himself be a witness for man? (Dhammapada quoted in Prasannapadā, 151) (*Ibid.*, 115)

12

But the ontologists are used to running away from themselves. They are creatures of categorical habits, and old habits die hard. The ontologists accuse Chandrakīrti of psychologism and nihilism, quickly disposing of him as unworthy of serious criticism: *nadarah kriyate*. Indian philosophers were rigid. They were used to playing the game according to the rules which, in the name of critical thinking, do not allow more than a modification of a claim by a sharper method of demonstrating the truth, or falsity, of the claim. Anything more than that would imperil the identifiability in history of a group form of thinking (*siddhānta*). Chandrakīrti is amused with the confident brevity with which the establishment philosophers ignore his stance, a brevity which in fact contains nervousness of cosmic proportions. He observes that philosophers, when forced to encounter the psychosomatic compulsions for doing ontology, react as nervously as a man who accuses someone of stealing his horse even though he is mounted on that very horse. (*Ibid.*, 219) The irony is as paradoxical as it is existential. The man thinks he has lost the horse by virtue of possessing it; the contingent fact of his having the horse implies the anxiety of not having it, or of his not being there to have it the next day. The anticipatory fear of losing the horse has hardened

into a believed state of affairs (*viparyāsa*), into the claim that his horse, now being stolen, does not exist where it did, and exists over there, in another space or place.

Chandrakīrti uses this metaphor to introduce a paradigm shift, namely, to demonstrate that the words of the Buddha are very deep and are inaccessible to those who are committed to truth claims, primarily because the Buddha was interested in discovering just why philosophers make such claims. (*Samadhiraja sūtra* cited in *Prasannapadā*, 53) Following Chandrakīrti, we now proceed to elucidate the psychopathology of the ontologist, which is the ego, and his ontology which is the horse.

References

- Vdayana *Kiranaṅgali* (Varanasi, Chowkhamba)
1919
- Dhamattara *Nyayablindu Tika* (Mereut, Sahitya Bhandara)
1972
- Udayana *Nyaya Kusumanjalih* (Chowkhamba, Varanasi)
1978
- Chandrakīrti *Prasannapadā* (Darabhanga, Nihila Vidyapeetha)
1960