On the Problem of Negative Existential Propositions: 
Dignāga, Uddyotakara, and Dharmakīrti

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0. Introduction

Proofs which contain negative existential propositions such as “X does not exist” are problematic because they negate something that is nonexistent. If an object is nonexistent, can the act of negating such an object be established? Indian Buddhists who need to prove the nonexistence of things, such as primordial matter (pradhāna) and self (ātman), etc., advocated by their adversaries, struggled with this problem. In his Nyāyamukha Dignāga (ca. 480–540) tries to offer a solution. The Naiyāyika Uddyotakara (6c), defending the existence of a self, criticizes Dignāga’s idea. On the other hand, Dharmakīrti (550?–650?) reinforces Dignāga’s theory and brings forth a counterargument against Uddyotakara.

The aim of this paper is to examine the views of Dignāga, Uddyotakara, and Dharmakīrti about the problem of negative existential propositions and to show its historical development in Indian philosophy.

1. Dignāga

Dignāga refers to the following proof in his NMu when he explains the general rule of an inference that one property of the subject (i.e., sādhya-dharma / a property to be proved) is known through another property of the same subject (i.e., sādhana-dharma / a proving property):

<Proof 1> [Primordial matter] does not exist because it is not perceived. ¹)

He explains this <Proof 1> as follows:

When the nonexistence [of primordial matter] is proved [on account of its not being perceived],
"nonperception" is a property of a conceptually constructed object (kalpita). According to this explanation, the subject of the negative existential proposition, though it is not accepted by Buddhists as a real entity, can be regarded as a conceptual construction, i.e., as a kind of existence. Therefore, if this theory is adopted, any pseudo-entity, such as primordial matter, is accepted as a substratum of the logical reason, and the fallacy of āśrayāśiddha can thereby be avoided. And this theory enables Dignāga to deal with the negative reasoning as a proper proof (sādhana). This strategy, following Prof. Tillemans, is called the "principle of conceptual subjects." 3)

In the third chapter of Pramanāsamuccaya, however, Dignāga employs another method for avoiding the fallacy of āśrayāśiddha. There, he says that when the negative existential proposition is put forth just for the purpose of refuting the opponent's position, its logical reason does not have to fulfill the first characteristic of the proper logical reason, i.e., pakṣadharmatva. 4) As seen below, the subject of Uddyotakara's criticism is the "principle of conceptual subjects," but not the theory propounded by Dignāga in the PS.

2. Uddyotakara's Critique

In his Nyāyavārttika on Nyāyasūtra 3.1.1, Uddyotakara deals with the proofs for nonexistence of ātman probably put forth by Buddhists. There, he criticizes the following three proofs:

(A) A self does not exist because it is not produced, like a rabbit's horn. (NV 319,15–323,11)
(B) A self does not exist because it is not perceived, [like a rabbit's horn]. (NV 323,12–325,16)
(C) A living body does not possess a self because it is existent. (NV 325,17–326,6)

Of these, as Prof. Steinkellner has pointed out, proof (B) is intended to refer to <Proof 1> of the NMu. 9) Here Uddyotakara applies Dignāga's "principle of conceptual subjects," which is originally presented with regard to the negative proof of primordial matter, to the negative proof of a self.

Discussing the logical reason of proof (B), Uddyotakara mentions the "principle of conceptual subjects" and criticizes it.

[Objection (Dignāga):] "Nonperception" (anupalabdhi) is a property of [a self] which is conceptually constructed. [Answer:] It is to be explained in what way [you can say] "of that
which is conceptually constructed,” whether [the self is conceptually constructed] as a [real]
existence or as a nonexistence? If [the self is conceptually constructed] as a [real] existence,
then it does not possess nonperception as its property. For, once a post is conceptually
constructed as a man, properties of the post do not appear [at the post anymore]. Or if
nonperception is a property of [the self which is] conceptually constructed as a nonexistence,
then the nonperception is established as a property [of the self]. [In this case], however, it is
useless to conceptually construct it. Why? Because conceptual construction (kalpanā) means
being in a different way (atathābhāva). To be more precise, conceptual construction means
indeed being in a different way, and the self is conceptually constructed as a nonexistence,
hence the self [should] not be a nonexistence. If [the self] is not a nonexistence, then it is
useless to conceptually construct it.  

For Uddyotakara, only two ways of being conceptually constructed are acceptable, i.e.,
either as a real existence or as a nonexistence. In the former case, when the subject
“self” is conceptually constructed as a real existence, it should be perceived. And
hence, the logical reason “nonperception” cannot be a property of the subject and fails
to be a proper reason. In the latter case, on the other hand, the logical reason can be a
property of the subject because the self is conceptually constructed as a nonexistence.
However, due to the definition of the conceptual construction, i.e., being in a different
way, it would follow that the subject “self” must originally be a real existence.

Next, Uddyotakara points out that the proposition “a self does not exist,” which is
shared by both proof (A) and (B), also contains a fault. His criticism runs as follows:

First, in the [proposition “a self does not exist”], two terms, i.e., “self” and “does not exist,”
contradict each other. The term “self” which is coreferential with the term “does not exist”
does not convey the nonexistence of a self. Why? [Because the term] “self” expresses an entity.
[The term] “does not exist” is its denial.  

For Uddyotakara every word/term must have its meaning.  If the object of the word
“self” does not exist in reality, the word would be meaningless. Then, what is the
meaning of the term “does not exist?” A negative existential proposition such as “X
does not exist” cannot convey the nonexistence of the subject X in general but it just
expresses the nonexistence of X in a particular time or place. For example, when the
sentence “pots do not exist” is uttered, it means that a pot does not exist in the kitchen,
etc., but does not mean there are no pots at all. With regard to a self, however, even
such a particular denial cannot be applicable because it is omnipresent and eternal.
Therefore, the proposition “a self does not exist” cannot be established.  

In this way, Uddyotakara criticizes Dignāga’s “principle of conceptual subjects” by pointing out (1) the problem of paksadharmatva of the logical reason and (2) the problem of the proposition itself in <Proof 1>.  

3. Dharmakīrti’s Defence  

Dharmakīrti adopts the “principle of conceptual subjects” and, for providing counterarguments against Uddyotakara, he develops Dignāga’s theory from the point of view of vijñānavāda.

In his PV 1.205–206 (= PVin 3.53–54), explaining Dignāga’s <Proof 1>, Dharmakīrti says as follows:

The object of words, which is completely derived from conceptual cognition produced by the beginningless latent tendency, is a dharma of three kinds: based on something existent, something nonexistent or both. When the [object of words such as “primordial matter,” etc.], which is not based on existence, is [the subject] to be proven, then the nonperception of this (i.e., the object of the word “primordial matter”) as being in such a way [i.e., as existing externally] is the logical reason. The nonexistence of the [object] itself is not [that which is to be proved], for the words [like “primordial matter,” etc.] are used.

Commenting on this, he says:

The object of these words is not [external] particulars (svaṅkaśaṇa). [The words] have an entity (artha) which appears in the conceptual cognition produced by the beginningless latent tendency as their object. And both speaker and listener share such a conceptual cognition because [the former] uses [words] according to the intention to convey a thing as it appears [to his conceptual cognition] and because [the latter, by hearing the speaker’s words,] brings about the conceptual cognition which has the same representation (ākāra) [as that of the speaker].

Just like Uddyotakara, Dharmakīrti also accepts the idea that every word, even such as “primordial matter,” etc., has a real entity as its object. But unlike Uddyotakara, he asserts that the object of words is not an external entity but a representation, i.e., an internal entity, appearing to the conceptual cognition. In this way, Dharmakīrti interprets Dignāga’s “principle of conceptual subjects” and thereby he can solve the two problems of Dignāga’s theory pointed out by Uddyotakara. First, since the object of the word “self” is a representation appearing in the speaker’s or listener’s mind, it is
not perceived as an external entity. Therefore, the logical reason "nonperception" in
<Proof 1> can be a property of the subject of the thesis (pakṣadharmā). Second, while the
object of the word "self" exists internally, it "does not exist" externally. Therefore, no
contradiction would occur in the proposition of <Proof 1> any longer.

In the later part of the PVin 3, Dharmakīrti mentions some objections, one of which
is most probably from Uddyotakara.

For example, another says: [The expression] "a self does not exist" is a fallacy of the proposition
called contradiction of the proposition because when the object (i.e., the self) is negated, it is
not possible to use the word [which expresses the object]. When one employs [the expression],
he postulates the object and, [at the same time,] denies it. Therefore, since there is a
contradiction between two terms of the proposition, it is a fallacy of the proposition.12)

Dharmakīrti’s answer to this is as follows:

Indeed, these [objections] are not included in the false rejoinders (jāti), whose defining
characteristics have been explained [in PVin 3.89ab], and [these are] not refutation either
because [the proposition "a self does not exist"] negates an [external] particular (i.e., a self as a
real entity) without denying the object of the word (i.e., the representation). This has already
been explained.13)

Dharmakīrti sees Uddyotakara’s objection as a completely misguided one and hence it
is not even classified as a false rejoinder. And in the VN, the objection is regarded as a
kind of one of the points of defeat (nigrahasthāna).

[Your objection that] there is a contradiction between two terms of your proposition, i.e., "self"
and "does not exist," is a [fallacious] indication of the fallacy of the proposition.14)

In this way, Dharmakīrti upgrades Dignāga’s “principle of conceptual subjects” by
introducing his theory of language in order to save Dignāga’s theory from
Uddyotakara’s critique.

4. Concluding Remarks

With regard to <Proof 1> and proof (B), which possess a negative existential proposition,
a clear and close relationship is observed among the three philosophers, i.e., Dignāga,
Uddyotakara, and Dharmakīrti. Although Dignāga does not adopt the “principle of
conceptual subjects” as his final position for avoiding the fallacy of āśrayāsiddha,
On the Problem of Negative Existential Propositions (Watanabe)

Uddyotakara wisely finds out its potential for becoming a threat to the proof for the existence of self. Dharmakirti tries to respond to Uddyotakara's critiques by relying on his Buddhist ontological theory. From this it is reconfirmed that Uddyotakara plays a very important role when Dharmakirti, taking Dignāga's theory as a starting point, builds his own system of philosophy.

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Notes

1) NMu (Katsura [1978: 110]) 1c1: 或立為無．不可得故; cf. PVSV 105,15 (= PVin 3 67,4): na santi pradhānādāyayotpatalbdheh.

2) NMu (Katsura [1978: 110]) 1c2–4: 若立為無．亦假安立不可得法。是故亦無有法過; see PVSV 107,9–10 (= PVin 3 70,4): kalpitasyānupalabdhir dharmah.

3) Tillemans [1999: 174].

4) For the details of this argument, see Watanabe [forthcoming].

5) Steinkellner [2013: 287–288, note 605]. Taber [2012: 107–109] suggests the relationship between proof (B) and the argument found in the ninth chapter of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya of Vasubandhu. But it is not acceptable. As for proof (A), Tamaru [1981] reports that a similar argument is found in Bhāviveka’s Prājñāpradīpa. Taber [2012: 100, n. 8; 106, n. 30] notes that Bhāviveka also gives a similar discussion with proof (A) and (C) in his Madhyamakahrdaya. For a detailed summary of these three proofs, see Oetke [1988: 361–379].

6) NV 324,21–325,3.

7) NV 319,15–18.

8) See NV 320,16–17: na hy ekaṁ padaṁ nirarthakam paśyāmah.

9) See NV 320,6–15.

10) Uddyotakara discusses the problem of the example in the proofs (A) and (B), too. As this is beyond the scope of this paper, I will examine it on a different occasion.


12) PVin 3 136,5–8.

13) PVin 3 136,9–11.

14) VN 23,12–14.

Abbreviations


On the Problem of Negative Existential Propositions (WATANABE) (227)

PS Pramāṇasamuccaya of Dignāga. D no. 4204; P no. 5701, P no. 5702.

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