



THE YOGACARA'S REFUTATION OF BUDDHIST REALISM

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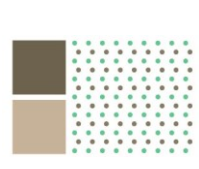
Abstract

From the time immemorial, there has been a clash between two schools viz., Idealism and Realism in philosophy both East and the West. We have witnessed different offshoots of these two schools which are antagonistic to each other. The problem is whether the external world can be existent independent of the knowing mind or not. The first systematic attempt to answer this question in Indian philosophy was made only in the later Buddhist school viz., Vijnanavada or Yogacara. The central concept of this school is the external world is nothing but the idea in the mind. The purpose of this paper is to expound the ontological and epistemological standpoint of Yogacara School of idealism in comparison with the Buddhist School of Realism. It also aims to analyze the logical implication of the views. The paper is based on the information culled out from the relevant works of Buddhism which are cited in the footnote as well as in the bibliography. Mainly three methods are employed in preparing this paper viz., analytic method, comparative and critical. The method is analytical in that an attempt to analyze the basic concept of Yogacara idealism is made in the paper and these concepts are presented in a systematic manner. The method is also critical in that the paper tries to show the merit and demerits of the Yogacara idealism. Thirdly in doing this, the paper attempts to make a study of the school in comparison with realism.

Keywords: Yogacara, Buddhist Idealism, Buddhist Realism, subjective idealism

Introduction

Gautama Siddhartha was born in 564 BC in a Royal family in Kapilavastu, in a hilly town at the foot of the Himalayas in the northern part of India. Siddhartha renounced the world at the early stage of his life. The sights of illness, old age and the death impressed him with the idea that the world is full of suffering. He wandered around in order to search for the light from many teachers and the religious scholars of those days and practiced great austerities, but nothing satisfied him. Siddhartha had enlightened and became the Buddha while he meditated under the Simsupa tree in Bodhgaya. The enlightenment he got is the Four Noble Truths which is the instrument to conquer the suffering in this world. The message of his enlightenment laid down the foundation of both Buddhist philosophy and religion which spread widely to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia region and in the Northern Asia region as Tibet, China Japan and Korea. The Buddha had never produced any of his teaching in the written format. He taught through the conversation like all the other great teachers in the ancient



time. His teachings were handed down for a long time through instruction and were collected into a written format by the successive generation.

The Buddha was primarily an ethical teacher and reformer, not a metaphysician. His urgent task was to show man the way to be out of the suffering and therefore his teachings laid great emphasis on the practical matter of discipline and conduct leading to liberation through non-attachment and freedom from any passion.

According to the Buddha, ignorance is the root cause of suffering and it is by only removing the ignorance that suffering can be removed. Ignorance is false knowledge of the impermanent as permanent. It is delusion that one is permanent; which is the root of the cycle of birth and death. In order to eliminate the suffering caused by the ignorance, according to the Buddha, practical matter of morality and conduct are needed, not the philosophical inquiries. In view of this attitude toward the problem of metaphysics, the Buddha is sometime described as an anti-metaphysical pragmatist.

However if we examine The Buddha's teachings closely, we will see that he begins his spiritual career with wooing metaphysics. His cardinal doctrine of suffering appears to be rooted in a metaphysical view of existence. But when he sees metaphysics draws to near or when it comes to committing himself to specific metaphysical propositions, the Buddha is found to jilt metaphysics without remorse. To use a mundane simile, he flirts with metaphysics without reverse, but when metaphysics proposes to him, he shies away.

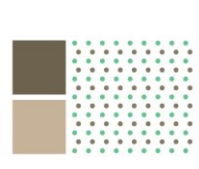
The Buddhist Realism

Despite the Buddha's disclaimer of commitment to ultimate question of metaphysics, he does indeed have metaphysics to his credit. If we analyze his statement carefully, we shall discover the realism dominant thrusts therein.

The Buddha begins as a realist par excellence. He analyzes existence into "dharma", meaning element or sense-data, which is usually presented as objective phenomena. He grants full reality of non-material alongside with the material. Out of the five aggregates (khandhas)¹ all but form (rupa) and out of the six elements (dhatus)² consciousness (vinjnana) are clearly non-material. Both the orders of reality are irreducible ones, whereby the Buddha deserves to be called as a dualist. On the question of the relation between the two orders of reality, they are said to be somehow interdependent, in the sense that the one constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition for emergence of the other and vice versa, and life goes on (Harsh Narain, 1997).

¹ In Buddhist phenomenology, the khandhas are the five functions that constitute human being which are form (rūpa), sensation (vedann), perception (sanjna), mental formation (Sankhara) and consciousness (vinjnana).

² The dhatus are the six organs which are function through the aggregates viz., eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and consciousness.

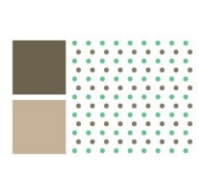


In the history of Buddhism, the concept of realism was clearly demonstrated in the teachings of the Sarvastivada School of Buddhism which later sprang out to the Vaibhasika and the Sautrantika. The Sarvastivadins hold that everything exists. The elements, mental and physical are real. However there are some slightly differences between the teaching of the Vaibhasika and Sautrantika regarding to the reality.

The Vaibhasikas hold that the external objects are real and perceptible. They recognize the reality of mind and matter. Mind is composed of elements. Matter is composed of elements. There is no permanent soul. Existence is either transient or eternal. Space and Nirvana are eternal as well (Ramakrishna Puligandla: 2008). The elements of matter, mind and forces are momentary and phenomenal. The elements of phenomenal are past, present and future. The past and the future elements are as real as the present ones. There are only four elements viz., earth, water, air and fire. Earth is hard; water is cool; fire is warm and air is mobile. External objects are the aggregates of atoms; an atom is invisible, inaudible, intangible, ageusic and indivisible.

The Sautrantikas are called as the representationists, they advocate indirect realism. They recognize the reality of the external objects, but they regard them as the objects of inference. They reason that external objects produce their cognitions and imprint their forms on mind. The forms of cognitions are similar to those of external objects. When cognitions come into being, their objects have ceased to be. Present cognitions cannot perceive past objects, therefore external objects are inferred from their cognition as well as the forms of objects. Jadunath Sinha (1938) mentioned that according to the Sautrantikas, cognitions are copies or representations of their objects, which are their archetypes. Furthermore, they also hold that cognitions are formless and homogeneous; they are diversified by their objects. Different external objects produce different cognitions and impress their forms on them, which are perceived. The internal forms of cognitions are representations of the external forms of objects; we infer external objects from their cognitions. If there were no objects, there would be no cognitions. External objects exist and produce perceptions of colors, sounds, tastes, odors, temperatures, pressures, pleasure and pain. Perceptions are produced by external objects which are their basic condition.

Ramakrishna Puligandla (2008) stated that the Vaibhasikas criticize the Sautrantika's doctrine of inferability of external objects from their cognitions as contradictory language. If all external objects are inferred from their cognitions, then there are no objects of perception. There is therefore no observation of invariable concomitance of the middle term with the major term, which is the ground of inference. Hence mere inference without perception is not possible since it contradicts all actual experience. Thus Sautrantika position is not tenable. There are two kinds of objects viz., the objects that are apprehended by indeterminate perception, and other are apprehended by determinate perception. Indeterminate perception is free from conceptual construction. Determinate perception is perception wrought up by the conceptual construction, which is therefore invalid. The validity of inference can be tested by its fruitful action.



From the analysis mentioned above, we can conclude that the Vaibhasikas recognize the reality of external objects and regard them as the objects of perception. They advocate the direct realism. While the Sautrantikas advocate indirect realism. They recognize the reality of the external objects, but they regard them as the objects of inference. Thus they are called as the representationists.

The Buddhist Idealism

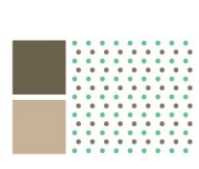
On the other hand, there are many scholars urge that subjectivity is the main feature of Buddhism, from the very outset Buddhism had been subjective and critical. A skeptical attitude was always maintained regarding the reality of the whole experience. Thus the initial postulation in Buddhism is the distinction between what obtains in reality and what appears empirically. M. Hiriyanna (1993) observed that the discovery of the subjective nature of certain aspects of experience was the great achievement which revolutionized not only the subsequent development of Buddhism, but the entire Indian philosophy.

A content is said to be subjective when it exist only in thought, and has no grounding in external reality. In the basic concept of Buddhism, subjectivity entails a constructive mechanism of thought which obviously distinguishes it from the realistic theory of knowledge. The concept of subjectivity is found in the Yogacara school of Buddhism.

The distinguishing doctrine of the Yogacara is that the consciousness alone is ultimately real; consequently, the external objects are regarded by the Yogacara as unreal. According to the Yogacara, all internal and external objects are the ideas of mind. It is impossible to demonstrate the independent existence of external objects. The main argument of this view is that since consciousness and its objects are simultaneous, they are identical. To put it differently, no object can ever be experienced apart from consciousness. Therefore, consciousness and object are one and the same.

According to the view mentioned above, we can assume that the Yogacara is the subjective idealist. They do not accept the existence of the external objects, but a series of momentary cognition apprehending themselves. Dharmakirti, one of the Yogacara leaders said that one who cannot perceive cognitions, cannot perceive their objects. There are two logical implications which we can assume from Dharmakirti's view. First, we cannot have a perception without cognition. Perception of an object without the cognition is impossible. Therefore perception and cognition are identical. Second, there cannot be any objects outside the cognition. Object and cognition are one and the same.

The Yogacara also offers other arguments against the belief in the independent existence of the external objects. These arguments can be counted as the Yogacara's critique of the Vaibhasika and Sautrantika School. Assuming that there exists an external object, this object might be either indivisible, part-less, atomic, or divisible and composite. If it is the former, it cannot be perceived since atoms are too minute to be perceived. On the other hand, if it is composite, we cannot either perceive all the parts and the side of the object simultaneously. Thus in either case, the assumption of the existence of the external object is fraught with insurmountable difficulties. The Yogacara points out that his own thesis of the identity of



consciousness and its object is not open to the above objection and difficulties, for one cannot sensibly ask whether consciousness is atomic or composite.

The Refutation of Realism.

As we discussed previously, the Yogacara holds that the consciousness is the sole reality. The empirical world reduces itself to ideas which are in so many vibrations of consciousness. Ashok Kumar Chatterjee (1975) pointed out that the independence of the external object confronting consciousness is only appearance. The distinction naively made between the perception and its content is illusory. The blue and the consciousness of blue are identical (Sahopalambhaniyama).³

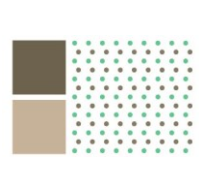
Since the external object is invariably perceived along with the consciousness of it, its independence is not tenable. To establish the difference between two things, it is necessary to perceive them apart. If two things are invariably found in conjunction, they cannot be counted as two. This principle is applied by the Yogacara to prove the unsoundness of the realistic hypothesis.

Realist holds that the content perceived is independent of the act of perception. Perception does not alter, in anyway, the content perceived. It remains identical and emerges unaffected out of the process of perception. Perception can be compared to light; it does not make or unmake the things upon which it shines, but merely reviews or discovers what was before hidden in the darkness. The change that occurs in the content is only in this very respect. The change pertains to our knowledge of object and does not, in anyway, touch the object themselves. Jadunath Sinha (1938) asserted that perception is ontological neutral, it reveals things as they are and does not construct it either wholly or in part. If perception in anyway made the things perceived differently from what they were before, it shows that two acts of perceptions being different. Then they would create different manner of perception. If perception does not wholly create its content but only modifies it in part, then they would remain an unmodifiable core which is absolutely indifferent to its being perceived.

George Cronk (2000) urged that the realist content is only accidentally the object of perception. Perception reveals the object, but the object needs not to be revealed. There is nothing in its nature which forces it into the keen of perception. A content is a content in its own right except this face of being perceived. The object which was previously unperceived enters into the knowledge situation retaining its absolute identity and without undergoing any other change than that of being perceived.

But the Yogacara disputes that to trace this identity we must know the object in both circumstances before being perceived and during the perception. We are thus leading into a curious position. To assert that the object owes nothing to the fact of its being perceived, we must know what the object was before it was being perceived; that is to say, we must know without knowing. We can call a thing identical only when we find it in two or more set of

³ The Sahopalambhaniyama is a rule of co-apprehension that proves the identity of objects with cognition from their invariably simultaneous perception. It is comparable to *ess est percipi* of George Berkeley.



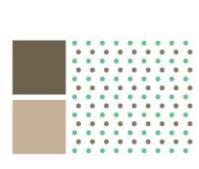
circumstances and recognize it as being the same. However, from the very nature of the case, such recognition cannot be had. All identity is relational absolute identity. If there is such a thing at all, being necessarily non-conceptual, But in the case of perception, one end of the relation is invariably missing. We know the thing and its content only as it is perceived and cannot compare it with its unperceived state. Ashok Kumar Chatterjee (1975) further mentioned that to maintain the continued independence of the content the realist must set an impossible task before himself, he must know the object when the ex-hypothesis is not known.

The Yogacara concludes that as the assertion that knowing makes no different to what is known involves what is defined as the unknown then the contention that the object is present in both circumstances identically must be discarded. We can never transcend knowledge. To say that perception only reveals object's existence implies this transcendence. The object has no separate existence if its own. Since it cannot be known apart from the consciousness of it, the two are not different at all. The blue is abstraction; what exists is only the consciousness of blue. It cannot be said that in that case we shall not be justified in speaking of the consciousness of blue, but should speak only of the "blue consciousness", as though the consciousness itself was colored. There is no blue, but the consciousness of blue. Surendranath Dasgupta (1969) suggested that we should deny from speaking "This is blue" and start speaking "I am blue" instead. Just as the blue has no independence of its own, so that "I" also has no separate existence apart from the discrete consciousness of "I", hence "This is blue" is not less justified than "I am blue".

By the creativity of consciousness should not be understood the illusory notion that consciousness creates real physical object. Its creativity consists in being diversified into so many modes which, through having an apparent externality, are really but mode of consciousness. One idea generates another idea and not an external object. The idea itself masquerades as an external object.

Realists hold that consciousness is different from the object perceived. The two have attributes contradictory to each other. The objects are characterized by its own physical quality such as soft or hard, small or large, etc. The Yogacara argues that it is absurd to call consciousness as soft or hard. The Yogacara does not say that an idea itself has spatial attributes but it has a form that manifests those attributes. The attribute have no independent physical existence apart from their appearance before consciousness.

Yogacara also tries to classify the consciousness from the memory. There are many questions related to the concept of memory from the view of consciousness of the Yogacara. What is the essence of memory? Or what is the nature or characteristics of the memory? The realistic theory holds that the essence or the content of the memory should be as external and independent as the content of perception. The object remembered should enjoy the same status as the object perceived. If consciousness was nothing but pure transparence, what would happen if one is said to recognize a thing, with the added consciousness of having cognized it before? However, the Yogacara holds the view that the memory is also subjective. In memory, the Yogacara said, the actual presence of the object is not required to be cognized



and hence the difficulty of the realists does not arise; but it does arise in a slightly different form. Being transparent or entirely formless, consciousness can have no memory. It can reveal the object only as it actually manifested before; it has no past or future.

There is also a conflict between the Yogacara and the Realist in the view of illusion. Illusion is the mire which all forms of realism flounder. Realism which holds that consciousness reveals object literally as it is, it cannot distort or falsify the object but only discover. It is like light which cannot add or take anything away from the object it illumines. So long as the course of knowledge flows on smoothly without any hitch that means the naive theory works out well. The immediate perceptibility of the content receives a rude shock when we consider that difference of perspective makes a consideration in the content perceived differently. The same object, when near, appears big, but with the further distance, it appears smaller. What is the real size of that particular object?

With the concept of the oneness of the object precludes the hypothesis of its being merely a collocation of different sizes. However, no two percipients perceive any object in an identical manner. Again, raising another question related to the illusion such as “How can the object be identical when its revelations are conflicted?” the realists might reply that though the perceptions are varying, the object remains identical because there is a common meaning and identical reference in these perceptions. But this identical reference itself is never perceived; and hence the alleged identity remains always problematic.

Conclusion

It is clear that by consciousness Realists and Yogacara understand two different things. Consciousness for one is a diaphanous entity through whose transparence objects pass in and out without suffering the less modification. In itself consciousness is entirely formless and neutral. The forms we perceive are those of the objects, directly and immediately revealed by consciousness. Since the Yogacara has no other reality but consciousness, the forms perceived must pertain to consciousness alone, there being no external object. Consciousness creates its own form. The content of consciousness is not imported from outside, but is inherent in the states of consciousness themselves.

An easy way out of this problem is to reject the transparency of consciousness and to hold that consciousness does not directly reveal the object, but it can perceive only its own ideas. Objects are not immediately presented to the consciousness, but are represented indirectly through ideas which are but sign of their presence and character. The representative theory of perception was put forward to explain cases of illusion where the theory of direct perception failed. When the image is referred to its correct original we have a case of veridical perception; but when it is supposed to refer to an object which is not its original, we have a case of mistaken perception or illusion.

Apparently an illusion consists in perceiving a thing where it is not as taken a rope which is mistaken as a snake. The realist holds that the snake consciousness is not a unitary consciousness at all. According to his analysis, the consciousness of “this is a snake” the “this” is perceived as actually a real object. The “snake” is not a percept at all. It is a memory

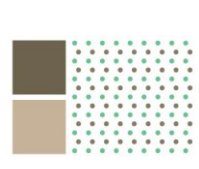


image and its objective counterpart that is perfectly real. “Perception is in principle veridical”, mentioned by the realists what happens in the perception of rope-snake is that the rope is imperfectly apprehended and its similarity with the snake evokes the memory of the latter which is a perfectly real consciousness. These are two states of consciousness having two distinct and real objective counterparts. But this distinction is not apprehended and consequently perceived two independent consciousness which having nothing to do with each other as a unitary consciousness.

Consciousness cannot perceive what is not given; it cannot import foreign matter to the given data, it cannot distort but it can select. It is never be the case that what appears in consciousness is not found in the objective. Confusion is not a distortion, but solely non-apprehension of the distinction. The analysis of the nature of illusion points to the conclusion that the creativity of the consciousness must be accepted in one form or the other. Granting that the snake is a subjective creation, it does not in any way tamper with the objectivity of the rope, reality of which in fact made it possible for the snake to appear. Hence the Yogacara takes the case of illusion as the norm where the object is nothing. The case of dream can be suited this concept.

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