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A Buddhist Critique of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Conception of God: A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract

In this paper, the Buddhist criticism of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conception of the world's permanent, omniscient and efficient cause, Īśvara, will be discussed. In the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition, it is accepted that Īśvara is an intelligent cause which arranges the eternal atoms and other causal conditions in an orderly universe. The Buddhist philosophers, especially Dharmakīrti, contest this view by discussing the logical connection between permanence, omniscience, causation and the production of intermittent effects. The main Buddhist teaching is that a fixed and unchanging creator is not sufficient to account for the effects which appear and disappear in different times. If the creator has an unchangeable causal power, then the effects should be continuous; otherwise, if the causal power is variable depending on the circumstance, then the creator can no longer be considered absolutely permanent. The Buddhist critique also calls into doubt the epistemological validity of a permanently omniscient being, and denies the Genuine Establishment of an additional causal principle of the nature of the Īśvara. The paper brings these arguments together, demonstrating that the Buddhist criticism is not only anti-theistic, but a thorough investigation of the coherence of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika causal theory. The philosophical implications of the debate for the understanding of permanence and change, causality, omniscience, and intelligent agency and the production of the world are also discussed.

Keywords: Buddhism, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Īśvara, Dharmakīrti, Buddhist critique of theism, causality, Momentariness, Dependent origination, Omniscience, Karma.

It is important to grasp the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika notion of God in the context of its broader theory of causation. Eventually, the school will accept the concept of Īśvara as an eternal, omniscient and intelligent entity, who is the efficient cause of the universe. Earth, water, fire and air are not created by God but rather are eternal, material parts. God is, on the contrary, known as the intelligent principle which orders, directs and combines these pre-existent constituents according to the karmic situation of living beings. According to this doctrine, God does not create new things out of nothing, but acts in an intelligent manner by arranging and organizing preexisting things.

The Nyāya argument is closely related to the argument from the effect to an intelligent maker. Determinate arrangements of human artefacts (e.g., pots, houses, tools) are found in the artefacts themselves and have determinate purposes; thus, Nyāya argues that there must be a conscious maker to account for them. The world, too, is filled with ordered bodies, organs, structures and objects that have determinate functions. If the world is dependent on an intelligent cause, for an effect that usually requires one, the universe, an effect, requires an intelligent cause. This is one of the main ways in which Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tries to prove the existence of Īśvara by inference. Thus, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika view of Īśvara can be best understood as the intelligent and efficient organizer of the universe, rather than the material cause of the universe. This is particularly clear in the following reference to “God as the world’s shaper and arranger”¹ and it is to this reference that we now turn our attention. The Buddhist opposition thus does not only reject the religious concept of God, but the logical connection between a permanent intelligent agent and changing effects.

The Nyāya position, therefore, depends on three interdependent assertions: (a) There must be a cause for every effect; (b) Some effects must have an intelligent or conscious cause; and (c) The universe is an effect that requires an intelligent or conscious cause. All three steps are attacked by the Buddhist response, but the second and third steps are particularly addressed. As the Buddhists say, causal explanation need not assume any one stable consciousness as the cause of each process. What is needed is an appropriate set of conditions that would explain the emergence of the effect. When the idea of causal plurality and momentariness is taken seriously, the need for Īśvara is questionable.

Buddhist philosophy tries to solve the problem of the origin of phenomena by ascribing it to dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). A phenomenon occurs under particular circumstances and does not exist when those circumstances do not exist. This principle does not mandate anything as specific as an “outside” producer to begin the causal chain. Instead, it describes phenomena in terms of the relations of dependence between events that are conditioned. In this model, the universe is not the result of a single act of God’s will but it is always produced in the process of conditioned arising.

The doctrine has certain metaphysical implications. That which is conditioned is impermanent; that which is impermanent has arisen and passed away. Thus, Buddhist thinkers object to the explanation of impermanent effects in terms of a cause which is absolutely permanent and unchanging. If one has a new causal role, he or she must be changed in some way, but a permanent entity cannot be changed into a new role. However, if it is altered, it is not that permanent either. Without change it is hard to see how it can have an effect at one time and not at another.

This objection is quite well formulated in the epistemological and causal analysis of Dharmakīrti. The first target is the idea of an authoritative consciousness that is permanent. The knowing relation cannot be interpreted as a pure static relation if an authority is aware of objects that are changing. If an authority is aware of objects that change, then the knowing relation cannot be interpreted as a pure static relation. The Buddhist argument is therefore not simply theological, but rather it is based on a theory of cognition, and causal efficacy.

When the Nyāya theory of the permanent nature of omniscientness in the case of Īśvara is considered in conjunction with the Buddhist theory of cognition, then Dharmakīrti’s

criticism acquires an added edge. His claim that “There is no permanent authoritative (being)”² refutes the idea that there can be always ‘an unchanging subject’ that might always be considered the permanent foundation of valid knowledge. As cognition is related to change of objects and change of causal conditions, the Buddhist asserts that permanent omniscience cannot just be said to be the property of an unchanging knower, without bringing about a contradiction. Hence, the Nyāya theory of Īśvara as an eternal omniscience and its authority is shaken both epistemologically as well as metaphysically.

The central Buddhist objection can be put in the form of a dilemma: If Īśvara is immutable then he cannot take any form. However, there seems to be an act of causation which involves a difference between an operative and a non-operative state of a cause. The difference would be between his causal and non-causal states if he would create the world at one time and not at another. This difference in some way must have been brought about by some change. But a change in the nature of the Divine is not compatible with the permanent. But, if Īśvara is always active in the causal world, then the effects, which are dependent upon him, should always happen and not stop. However, in the world, something only comes into existence under certain circumstances, there are no universal conditions for it to come into existence. Temporal sequence, differentiation and cessation are found in the universe. If it has a permanent cause and it is always in effect, it seems it cannot explain the intermittent nature of the effects that it is supposed to have.

This is a dilemma that is particularly harmful as Nyāya would like to ensure the permanence of God and the efficacy of His causation. The Buddhist point is that these two predicates are not easily reconcilable given the conception of causation that is based on the notion of change. The difficulty is not that a permanent thing can never be in any relation whatsoever; it is that something of such nature as is stated to be incapable of change, can produce new effects in the production of which the difficulty lies.

The difficulty the central Buddhist have with the concept of Īśvara is the incompleteness of the created and the permanency of the Īśvara. So Dharmakīrti concludes that an intermittent entity, “Īśvara cannot be a creator of such entities”.³ However, a creator that does not exist in a particular time, cannot be changed in such a way that it would account for the production of an effect at one time, but not at another. If the causal capacity is permanently present (always there) with him, then the effects should be produced in a permanent way also, otherwise the permanence of his is challenged. This being the case, the Buddhist argument strikes at the rationality of the permanent creation hypothesis in itself.

A second big Buddhist complaint is that there is an assumption that order or design is indicative of a conscious creator. Determinate arrangement implies an intelligent maker, for pots, houses and other artefacts have determinate arrangements that were made by a conscious activity. Dharmakīrti argues against the validity of this inference on the grounds that it does not hold universally. Conscious agents have to produce some arrangements, this is not enough. The Buddhist asks herself/himself if all the arrangements that are relevant to him or her are always associated with one conscious designer. This is a question about the concomitance which is always present and which is necessary for inference, vyāpti. The meaning of the word inheres or "belongs" will be of no avail unless the reason is always related to the probandum. Shape, if it sometimes occurs in the work of conscious agents, and sometimes occurs by natural causal processes, can't establish a

universal link to a conscious designer. That's not enough of an analogy between a pot and the universe, though.

The Buddhist criticism also poses the question: What evidence has been given for the existence of an intelligent cause and how does this evidence translate into the identification of the cause with Īśvara? If it were assumed that some of the effects do need conscious agents, then it would not be a step further to conclude that the agent has to be one eternal, omniscient and omnipotent God. The inference would have to not only prove the existence of a maker (as it does), but the particular attributes assigned to the maker as Īśvara. So the argument may go too far with its implications as to what the premises actually imply. The diversity of the causal conditions in the empirical world in which these problems occur strengthens the problem. The bodies, environments and experiences emerge from a multitude of factors such as the material conditions, previous actions and specific temporal conditions. The Buddhist therefore would rather have a pluralistic causal explanation than to postulate the existence of one universal designer.

Nyāya can reply that nothing is that the divine activity is not found without the rest of the conditions. The generation of a world takes place according to the karmic histories of beings and other causes can be assumed as conditions. For the Buddhist, however, this is a stroke of genius, since the admission is now used to make the dilemma that much more intense. If auxiliary conditions are absolutely necessary Īśvara is not enough to make the production of the effect. If he's good enough without them in his arsenal, then how they can provide a causal contribution is hard to explain. The problem concerns explanatory economy. In a causal explanation, the conditions that are necessary to make the difference in the occurrence of the effect should be identified. If you have an explanation that fits for an event, then a divine explanation doesn't add anything to the explanation. Adds another entity, but not causally substantiated.

Insofar as it is a criticism of an unseen cause, Dharmakīrti's criticism is epistemological as well as metaphysical. We normally make causal connections by induction based on positive and negative concomitance: When the conditions are present, the effect is present and when the conditions are not present, the effect is not present. An entity that is not visible, always there and cannot be separated by such a procedure is not a particle. As a consequence, the divine cause is either superfluous or indeterminate. The idea of momentariness, or *kṣaṇikatva*, from the Buddhist philosophy, is another basis for the criticism. A thing's causal efficacy is that it has this particular condition at this particular moment. Causal efficacy does not have to do with an unchanging power which resides permanently in an entity. The ability to create an effect is related to the causal configuration under which one can produce the effect. The Buddhist analysis separates out a condition that is functioning as a cause, from a condition that is not functioning as a cause, so that this is the reason. When there is no difference at all in both situations there will be no basis for the occurrence of the effect in one case and its absence in the other. The difference needs to be based on some conditions that are changing or in a new relation.

The Nyāya idea of an eternal god is challenged here, because it is claimed that Īśvara has unlimited causal power all the time, most of which is not simultaneous and not permanent. If the divine power is complete always, why is it that the effects come one after the other? The divine activity then comes into play only at certain times, and the divine activity seems to be contingent. The Buddhist does not find any satisfactory compromise

which allows to keep both the absolute independence of the two and the temporal differentiated causation. In the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the reference to Īśvara is not restricted to cosmology, but also applies to other areas of everyday life. God also has a special role to explain the distribution of pleasure, pain and fruits of action. The world seems to be morally organised: things happen to different kinds of beings and the differences that occur in the world are linked to past actions. From this, Nyāya can conclude that there should be an intelligent divine being to whom karmic deserts should be correlated with their respective results.

The Buddhist answer is that moral continuity can be understood by the law of Karma without the need to have a permanent administrator. The results of karmic action come to us in a causal chain. Action and result do not imply that a divine will has to be behind every action or result. From the Buddhist point of view, therefore, it's a superfluous extra layer of explanation to add Īśvara to karma. This also maintains moral responsibility. When every event is established by God's creator, it is hard to see how we can have karmic responsibility. Because of the Buddhist causal model, actions can have consequences, since they cause future events. The moral order is thus, not imposed from the outside by a supreme legislator but it is immanent in causal continuity. Dependent origination is a philosophical alternative, which is good, to theism. Buddhism does not take God out of the world, but leaves it unexplainable. It takes the place of a search for any one ultimate maker with an evaluation of conditions. Phenomena occur when the conditions are "just right," and disappear when the conditions change. The explanatory structure is thus relational, as opposed to substantialist.

This model is really quite a significant methodological advantage. Describes specific events using tangible causal relationships, and not a universal invisible agent. It also is able to handle changes, pluralities and temporal sequence. Conditioned phenomena are subject to change and so are their causal connections subject to dynamic understanding. No need to make the assumption that there is an immutable substance that somehow causes effects that are mutable. Dependent origination must not, however, be understood as a mechanical theory, but in its true sense. In addition to physical events, Buddhist philosophy is interested in the nature of thought, will, suffering and liberation. The causal network spans over psychological and ethical processes. The concept of karma, consciousness and experience is woven into a larger narrative of conditioned life. From this point of view, the rejection of God by the Buddhists is a component of a wider philosophical rejection of the unneeded permanencies.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Buddhist difference lies in the question of "how" one can provide an adequate explanation. Nyāya is looking for a unifying principle, that will explain the order of cosmos, coordinate causation and distribute karmic fruits to the intelligent and all-knowing Īśvara. Buddhism, on the other hand, is looking for an explanation via conditioned plurality, momentariness and demonstrable causal efficacy. The Nyāya position is a clear one to say that it has a philosophical strength; it provides a coherent explanation of order and purposiveness. The similarity of the universe and artefacts is intuitively compelling; the call to intelligence seems to account for the organization of the various components. But the Buddhist answer demonstrates that one cannot get the necessary universal concomitance just by resorting to analogy. Most

important, that analogy does not provide an answer to the question of how an agent, who is or isn't changing, brings about temporally differentiated effects.

The Buddhist stance also has its unique power. It does not multiply entities beyond necessity of a causal explanation, thus maintaining the analysis within a range of conditions that can be explored. Momentariness gives a sense of the rationality of causal change and dependent origination gives a sense of the way things are not all arising at once. The theory of Buddhism therefore eliminates the conflict between the cause and the effects. In a parallel manner, one gets new philosophical questions from the Buddhist perspective on the ultimate status of causal relations and on the beginninglessness of conditioned existence. These are not questions which re-establish the need for God, however. The position of the Buddhist is that a problem which can be explained should be resolved without resorting to the introduction of a permanent creator whose causal status raises new problems.

This is the historic value of the debate, its argumentative nature. The Buddhist thinkers were not just theists who denied the existence of God because of scriptural and sectarian considerations. They came in to that joint field of intellectual inquiry, inference, causation, epistemology and metaphysics. The analysis of Dharmakīrti is of special significance in that it raises the question of what is the logical condition of causality when it is the question of God. These lines of criticism were expanded upon by later Buddhist writers, such as Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, and by the Nyāya writers, such as Udayana, who built up complex counter-arguments. It leads to one of the longest philosophical discussions on theism that has been left in classical Indian thoughts.

The Buddhist objections to this God of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika are basically objections to causal explanation. In Nyāya, Īśvara is considered as the eternal and intelligent efficient cause that creates and manages the world and the consequences of one's actions. Buddhism rejects the picture of dependent origination, momentariness, causal plurality and the need for valid inference. The most pertinent objection has to do with the relation of permanence with causal activity. The nature of Īśvara is unchanging if he is unchangeable in his essence then; but if he different at times the causal conditions must also differ between times. Therefore, when God is working, there shouldn't be any interruption to the effects. In the absence of some auxiliary conditions for divine activity it is no longer completely independent. The Buddhist contends that this is impossible for the Nyāya conception to retain all three characteristics of divine permanence, independence and causal efficacy

The criticism of the inference from design further undermines the argument of the Nyāya. When there is order, this does not automatically prove the existence of an omniscient designer, unless it can be proved that there is a fixed relationship between the statement of the reason and the conclusion. In the Buddhist causal pluralism, phenomena can be explained as being determined by networks of conditions but lacking a universal creator.

Therefore, the negative importance of the Buddhist position is not the only one. It suggests a new paradigm of explanation: one that sees causal efficacy as a quality of conditioned and changing factors, and moral and experiential continuity as a quality of karma and dependent origination. The end of the debate is characterized by two opposing visions: Nyāya's quest for a single intelligent principle that underlies the cosmos and

Buddhism's search for an economy of explanation that is based on conditioned causation. The latter is better from the Buddhist point of view, as it does not make the logically dubious assumption of an eternal creator.

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