

**TRUTH AS CONCEIVED IN YOGĀCĀRA AND  
MĀDHYAMIKA**

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I

Truth is something that concern everyone in one's day-today affairs; yet people are puzzled when asked the question: What is truth? Is it something indefinable? If not, what, then, is truth? Is it an attribute or a substantive or a quality or a property? Several questions are asked about truth. Philosophers, both in the East and West, interpreted truth in various ways. As ordinary men leading mundane life, we are more concerned with everyday truth. It is generally believed that objects, properties and events are neither true nor false. They are mere facts of existence. Only our perceptual judgements about those facts are termed either true or false. In this sense truth or falsity can be attributed only to those judgements about our cognitions or perceptions of objects, properties, and events. Then, in a manner of speaking, we are treating truth or falsity as a property attributed to our judgements. But, what kind of property is it? Is it a natural property? Of course, it is not. Can we call it a property by convention? If it is a property by convention, then it is taken for granted that what is truth or falsity is based on our agreement and disagreement in our opinions. Another important factor to be noticed here is that truth cannot survive without its opposite non-truth (falsity). It is an epistemic precondition that a judgement/proposition is either true or false. Our claims to knowledge of various aspects of reality are true provided our claims are not disputed by subsequent claims. Thus discussions about truth somehow lead us to the discussions about knowledge. In a way, truth and

knowledge are inseparable, for the latter involves the former. Not only that, whenever we speak of knowledge we speak of the various conditions of knowledge such as: the knowing self or mind (the knower), the known, and the source. Against this backdrop, let us make an attempt to examine the theories of truth advocated by two prominent idealist schools of Buddhism, namely, Yogācāra and Mādhyamika.

## II

The profoundness of any theory of truth depends on the way in which it explains the nature of error. Thus the problem of error becomes an important component of the theory of truth. The theory of error advocated by Yogācāra is known as Ātmakhyāti. According to this school, there is no external reality as such. What is ultimately real is consciousness (mind). Ontologically this school "adheres neither to the doctrine that all things exist, nor to the doctrine that nothing exists because it asserts that ideations do exist."<sup>1</sup> Hence, there are no objects independent of the perceiving mind. The so called external objects are unreal as they are our own mental projections. In order to uphold and substantiate the Doctrine of Dependent origination (pratīyasamutpāda), the Yogācāra holds that consciousness is an ever changing stream. Therefore, whatever exists can exist only as an idea in the mind. The independent existence of external objects cannot be established by any logical means. The reason stated is that consciousness and its content (object) are simultaneous, hence identical. In other words, no object can ever be perceived apart from consciousness.

Yogācāra advances many arguments<sup>2</sup> against the view that external objects have independent existence. As a matter of fact, these are the arguments directed against the two major realist schools of Buddhism, namely, Sautrāntika, and Vaibhāṣika. One of the arguments is that for an object to be independent must be either indivisible, partless, and atomic, or divisible and complex. Either way there is a problem. If an object is indivisible, then it is imperceptible since minute atoms cannot be perceived. If the object is complex, then the entire object *cannot* be perceived at a time. Thus, either way the view that

external objects exist independent of consciousness cannot be justified on logical grounds. Dīñāga in his *Ālambana-parikṣā* writes: "It starts with the declaration that it is neither an atom nor an aggregate of atoms, it is nothing but an idea without a corresponding external reality".<sup>8</sup> The logic advanced by Yogācāra is not all that illuminating. It may be admitted that an object being indivisible cannot be perceived. But its imperceptible nature does not bar its existence independent of consciousness. Similarly, a complex object, though it cannot be perceived in its entirety, can exist independent of consciousness. We admit perception as a source of knowledge. But when it fails to reveal the nature of things or objects, it does not in any way mean that their ontological independence is questioned. It only proves the point that perception is not a legitimate source of knowledge.

It is also viewed by Yogācāra that the belief in the independent existence of objects or external world can be disproved by making use of the ontology of momentariness. Since objects are not substances, but durationless point-instants, it is difficult to explain how a momentary object can be the cause of consciousness. If it were treated as a cause, then there must be a time gap between the arising of the object and our consciousness of it. But such a time gap appears to be an absurdity for the following reasons. (1) The object as point-instant is durationless, therefore, it cannot be causally efficacious. (2) Both the object and consciousness are experienced by us at a time. Based on these two reasons it can be argued that the external object cannot be the cause of consciousness. In fact, "The object of cognition is the object internally cognized by introspection and appearing to us as though it were external. The ultimate reality is thus the 'idea' of consciousness."<sup>4</sup> This point can be further illustrated with a suitable example. Dharmakīrti argues that we often make a distinction between the awareness of the colour blue and colour blue itself. But this distinction is illogical because the colour blue cannot be perceived except in awareness of something blue. Therefore, the awareness of the colour blue and the colour blue are identical. But this identity does not prevent us from making a distinction between the consciousness and the content of consciousness, though the latter is inseparable from the former. This view is further substantiated by Yogācāra

with an example of dreaming. When we dream we assume that the objects of dream are real and have objective existence outside our dream. It is only when our dream is disturbed we come to realise that they are mere dream objects. Just as our dream objects do not have any independent existence apart from the dream, the objects of our consciousness too do not have any independence existence apart from the consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

The dream analogy stated by Yogācāra does not really substantiate its point that there are no objects outside realm of consciousness. The question of perception of any object arises only when there is an object to be perceived. The awareness of colour blue is different from colour blue. Unless there is colour blue, the question of its awareness does not arise. This is the argument advanced by Moore against idealists in general. Also, the objects experienced by us during the state of dream are the outcome of our normal experience which are buried in subconsciousness. Thus the dream experiences have their base in our day-to-day experiences.

The point that Yogācāra tries to establish is that the ultimate reality is of the nature of consciousness (*vijñāna*). The existence of external reality outside consciousness is a myth. The supposed external objects are nothing but the ideas in the mind. Thus the external reality is both epistemologically and ontologically dependent on consciousness. This position of Yogācāra is often compared with that of Berkeley. As a matter of chronological importance we would say that Berkeley's position is similar to that of Yogācāra. Once it is established that consciousness is the only reality, Yogācāra distinguishes between the various levels of consciousness. However, there is one seed-consciousness (*Ālaya-vijañāna*) which is basic to all other levels of consciousness. This seed-consciousness has an independent existence. All conscious activities arise out of its potentiality. The nature of this seed-consciousness is that it is self-determining and self-revealing. It is this consciousness that is responsible for the existence of any object which is believed to exist independent of consciousness by an ignorant person. This is where the error lies. The nature of this seed consciousness cannot be explained, for it is beyond all differentiations and distinctions. The relation

between this seed-consciousness and ordinary consciousness can only be explained through similies. The following illustration is found in *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*:

Consciousness consisting of the skhandhas (five groups), dhātus (elements of being), and āyatanas (sense fields), which are without a self or anything of the nature of a self, arises from ignorance, karma, and craving, and it functions through being attached to grasping at things by means of the eye and all the organs, and makes the presentations of its store-mind appear as bodies and vessels, which are manifestations of its own mind (the store-consciousness).<sup>6</sup>

Since the ultimate reality is of the nature of consciousness, the question of its being either one or many does not arise. Our experience of many distinctions in our day-to-day life is nothing but the manifestation of seed-consciousness as touch, mental activity, feeling, perception, and choice. It is due to our ignorance we differentiate and accord independent status to the activities proceeding from the seed-consciousness from that consciousness. This makes us believe that there is reality external to the seed-consciousness. According to Vasubandhu: "The various consciousnesses are but transformation. That which discriminates and that which is discriminated are, because of this, both unreal. For this reason, everything is mind only."<sup>7</sup>

Some serious objections can be raised against this position of Yogācāra. First of all, can there be internal objects without external objects? The word "internal" has meaning only in relation to the word "external". They are polar concepts. Each word derives its meaning only from its opposite. Secondly, if the ultimate reality is of the nature of consciousness and external objects are identical with that consciousness, then why is it that we cannot perceive the objects that we want to perceive? Why cannot we the appearance, change, and disappearance of the object of our perception? Well Yogācāra makes an attempt to answer the second question by appealing to the law of Karma. To quote the remarks of Dīñāga in this context : It is not the eyeball that represents the organ, but the respective sensuous faculty. In assuming a subconscious store of consciousness instead of an external world and a

Biotic Force (Karma) instead of the physical sense-organs, we will be able to account for the process of cognition. There will be no contradiction." The consciousness, according to Diññaga, is a stream of ideas and states that contain *kārmic* impressions within themselves. These *kārmic* impressions are the result of our past experience. They are latent in the stream of consciousness. They rise to the surface only under appropriate circumstances. Just as our memory is made up of countless number of things which we recall and remember at certain times and places, there are myriads of impressions that lie deep in our consciousness. Only some rise to the surface under certain circumstances and appear as internal and external objects. It is in this sense the consciousness is referred to as seed-consciousness (*Ālaya-vijñāna*). However, the question that arises is : What is the source of these impressions? Well, consciousness is the only repository of the impressions, but not the source. Not only that, in the absence of a continuous self the series (*vijñānas*) cannot be witnessed. This position of *Yogācāra* ends up in solipsism, for there is nothing external to perceiving mind or consciousness. *Yogācāra*'s comparison of the object of normal experience with those of dream to show that the former are as unreal as the latter abolishes the distinction between truth and illusion. This argument of *Yogācāra* is not all that convincing, because it is not the case with the objects of normal experience. Above all, we infer the falsity of dreams by comparing them with our waking experience. If there is no distinction between dream experience and the waking state, then by what other criterion can we ever distinguish one from the other.<sup>9</sup>

### III

Unlike *Yogācāra*, *Mādhyamika* avoids all kinds of extremes. The theory of error advocated by this school is known as *asat-khyāti*. The followers of *Mādhyamika* believe that both external reality and consciousness are only relatively real, for there is no ultimate reality in the conceptual realm. The *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* of Nāgārjuna, who is regarded as the chief architect of *Mādhyamika* philosophy, brings out the central doctrines of *Mādhyamika*. Nāgārjuna asks the questions, what is knowledge? and how is it produced? The ingenuity of Nāgārjuna is revealed in his answers to these questions.

Knowledge, if at all it is expressible, is propositional, and propositions are made up of concepts and percepts. In other words, concepts and percepts are nothing but names and forms.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the reality that philosophers talk about in their discussions on knowledge is only the reality of names and forms, but not reality *per se*. In their quest for knowledge of reality philosophers often mistake the reality that they construct out of names and forms for the reality as such. This is where the error lies. They fail to see the distinction between illusion and reality. The reality constructed out of the knowledge of names and forms is only illusory. If one tries to capture the reality through names and forms, then he is making a vain attempt. *Mādhyamika* tries to illustrate this point with its own arguments.

In fact, the polar concept argument advanced by the modern western philosophers to disprove scepticism is introduced by *Mādhyamika* school long ago to analyse the nature of thought and knowledge. According to *Mādhyamika*, the polar nature of our concepts gives rise to thought process. Every concept acquires its meaning only from its opposite. The dependence of one concept on the other makes our thought, language, and knowledge possible. Now the question arises: Whether there is a unique way in which concepts can be put together in order to produce knowledge? *Mādhyamika*'s answer to this question is negative. The knowledge generated out of certain concepts by bringing them together is dependent upon many factors. The chief among them is the presupposition of a given thinker. Any attempt to demonstrate the presuppositions of any given system of knowledge is bound to be circular, for any demonstration has to employ the same concepts and categories determined by the presuppositions themselves. Thus, it involves the fallacy of begging the question. Therefore, there is no view of reality that is absolutely true. All the views about the reality are relative to each other. The so called perspectivism adocated by the modern western thinkers like Quine is anticipated much earlier by *Nāgārjuna*. Views, being conceptual constructions of names and forms, cannot point to the reality. Every view is a mere opinion. A dialectic of views can only provide an insight into the nature of reality. The error occurs when one mistakes a view of reality for the reality itself.<sup>11</sup> The true philosophy, for *Mādhyamika*, is the dialectical consciousness

of the limitations of our constructions of reality out of name and form.

The method of dialectic employed by Mādhyamika aims at showing the self-contradictory nature of consciousness. However, Mādhyamika does not employ its own standpoint to show the contradictory nature of the concepts used by the other systems, for it does not have a standpoint of its own. According to Nāgārjuna, adhering to a particular view of reality is the cause of conflict and suffering. Even relativity is not regarded as truth. As he puts it: "but if people begin to cling to this very concept of 'relativity', they must be called irreclaimable."<sup>12</sup> Chandrakīrti, who wrote a commentary of Nāgārjuna's aphorisms, holds that one who believes that relativity as itself absolute is in a way clinging to non-clinging. To quote his words in this context : It is as if somebody said, I have nothing to sell you, and would receive the answer, all right, just sell me this - your absence of goods for sale."<sup>13</sup> The truth of the reality is that it is Sunya. In other words, the reality is void and empty in the sense that it cannot be brought under any conceptual framework. It is absurd to talk about the reality as true or false. It is simply *is*. Nagarjuna simply refers to the reality as Emptiness. This does not mean that reality is non-existent or illusory. Nāgārjuna says: The teachings of Buddha are based on two truths, the mundane and ultimate. those who do not know the distinction between these two truths do not understand the profound teachings of the Buddha.<sup>14</sup> The phenomenal or mundane truths are grasped through names and forms, but ultimate truth can only be realised. The world of names and forms is governed by the doctrine of dependent origination. Therefore, every truth generated by any conceptual system is only relative, and dependent on other truths and systems. Thus, from the phenomenal point of view reality is only relative an relativity is only real. The Phenomenal truths are only conventional. They are lower truths (*samvṛtti-satya*). the absolute truth is supra-mundane, unconditional. It is beyond percepts and concepts, therefore, ineffable. It is the higher truth (*pāramārthika-satya*). the absolute truth is grasped in prajñā, the direct intuitive insight. It is not instinct, and cannot be identified with any biotic force. It is supra-rational.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Śūnya of Mādhyamika is beyond the four categories of intellect (*catuḥskotī-vinirmukha*). In other words, the reality transcends existence, non-existence, both and neither.

## IV

To conclude : Both Yogācāra and Mādhyamika refute the realist position on truth. The former claims that reality is of the nature of consciousness (mind) and the latter views reality as Śūnya. The position of Yogācāra is untenable for the following reasons. First of all, consciousness is always directed towards something or the other. If there are no objects external to it, then it is not directed towards anything. It is something unusual and uncommon to say that consciousness is directed towards itself. In that case, the same consciousness has to split into both subject and object. Not only that, the content of consciousness is consciousness only. Secondly, how can there be consciousness without a knowing subject that supports the relative nature of the phenomenal world. However, this relative conception of reality? In the absence of a continuous self, the activities of consciousness as a continuous stream are not witnessed by anyone. Thus, the crude subjectivism of Yogācāra is an absurdity. Its position ultimately boils down to solipsism which defies any meaningful discussion on anything. Although the position taken by Mādhyamika is more logical than that of Yogācāra, yet it is not free from certain contradictions. In the case of Mādhyamika, it recognised the relative nature of the phenomenal world. However this relative conception of the world is possible only when there is a reality which is absolute in itself. If Śūnya is regarded as void and devoid of everything, then the question arises: Is it devoid of existence (*sat*) too? If it were the case, then there is no reality to be termed as absolute. In the absence of any absolute reality, the question of relative reality does not arise. If the reality is positive (*bhāva*), then it is not Śūnya. There is another problem. If the world of events is only relative, then there cannot be any criterion of truth at all. This assumption is based on the dilemma that either all knowledge is treated as false or all knowledge is treated as true. Of course, the Mādhyamika recognises epistemology as a study of knowledge, but it does not entertain metaphysics of any sort as there is nothing to discuss about the ultimate reality. What is obvious in the analysis of the above mentioned theories of truth is that truth is somehow identified with the reality of some sort. According to Yogācāra, consciousness is the only reality. Therefore, it alone can be treated as true. For Mādhyamika, Śūnya, being the ultimate reality, is the truth. But if it is asked whether truth

represents anything, the answer is it represents Śūnya (Emptiness). In other words, truth represents nothingness in Mādhyamika.

### NOTES

1. Junjiro Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy*, (ed), Wing-tsit Chan and Charles A. Moore, Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 1947),p.80
2. For more details see, Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Buddhist Logic*, Vol.I, (New York : Dover Publications, 1963), pp 513-29.
3. *Ibid*,p.518
4. *Ibid*.pp.519-20.
5. John M. Koller, *Oriental Philosophies*, (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970),p.162
6. E.J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, (London : RKP, 1933),2nd Edn.p.234.
7. S.Radhakrishnan & Charles A. Moore (ed), *Source Book of Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press,1957),p.336.
8. Cited in Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Buddhist Logic*, Vol.I.pp.520-21.
9. M.Hiriyanna, *Indian Conception of Values*, (Mysore, Kavyalaya Publishers, 1975),pp.89-90.
10. K.Venkataramana, *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy: As Presented in the Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, (Banares: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1971),P.238.
11. R. Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy*. New Delhi : D.K.Print World (P) Ltd, 1996),p.86
12. T. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāna*, (The Hague : Mouton & Co., 1965), p.49.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, (tr.)Kenneth K. Inada,XXIV,8,9
15. T.R.V.Murthy, *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, (London : George Allen & Unwin, 1955),p.219.