

A Brief Survey of Post Śāntarakṣita's Apoha Theory

The preceding two chapters dealt with how Śāntarakṣita's defense and modification of *apoha* theory gave altogether a new orientation to it. Now, in the present chapter, I will look into how this position was again criticized by the great Naiyāyika, Vācaspati Mīśra and how the Buddhist philosopher, Ratnakīrti squarely defended the Buddhists position by refuting the objections raised by this scholar. However, it is out of the purview of my work to go into the detail of their arguments. So, we shall have to confine ourselves to take up, very selectively some of the objections to the theory of *apoha* and the rejoinders from the Buddhist scholars. For this my procedure would be the following: Firstly, I will quote, Vācaspati's criticism directed against two main contentions/theories of the Buddhist: (i) The theory of negative similarity (*sādrśya*), and (ii) the theory of non-apprehension of difference (*bhedāgraha*). Secondly, I will endeavor to trace, how Ratankīrti's reformulation of the theory refuted the objections advanced by Vācaspati Mīśra and veered round to the old position of their masters.

Vācaspati Mīśra's criticism of *Apohavāda* (Text: *Nyāyavārttikatātparyaṅkā*)

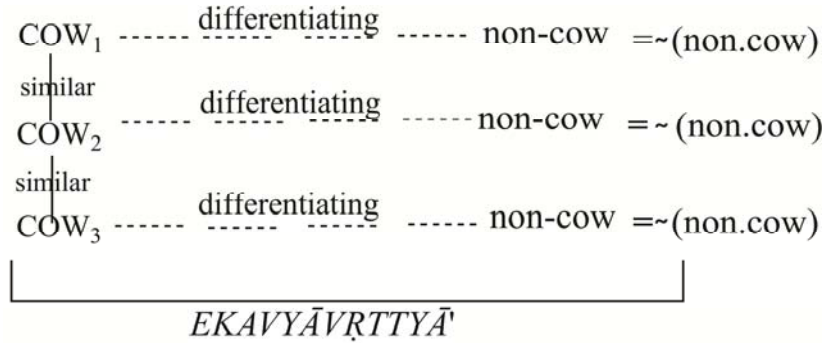
Vācaspati Mīśra gives a convincing refutation of the Śāntarakṣita's *apoha* theory. He does not consider the explanation and clarification given by Śāntarakṣita satisfactorily, so he regards the whole nominalistic stand as

contrary to reason and experience. The main argument from his long discourse, marked with great subtlety, may be summed up thus: 'particular, with universals subsisting in them, are the objects of words (class-names) as well as of thought-images. These particular objects are by virtue of their participation in a universal different from other particulars and, therefore, one person asked to confine a cow does not confine a horse.'¹ Vācaspati Miśra then makes a subtle examination of the Buddhist position and directed his criticism against two main contentions of the Buddhist, namely: (i) That the negative similarity (*sādrśya*) between the concept (the universal) and the particular thing consisting in the common negation of the contrary is the basis of co-ordination between the two; and (ii) That the illusion of objectivity with regard to a subjective construction arises due to the non-apprehension of difference (*bhedāgraha*) between the conceptual and the real. We will discuss the above mentioned Vācaspati's criticism one by one in detail in the following manner:

1. *Vācaspati's criticism of Buddhist conception of similarity (sādrśya)*

Now, before mentioning this criticism, we have to first of all understand the concept of 'similarity' (*sādrśya*) according to the Buddhist view as well as according to the Vācaspati's view, with the help of the following diagram:

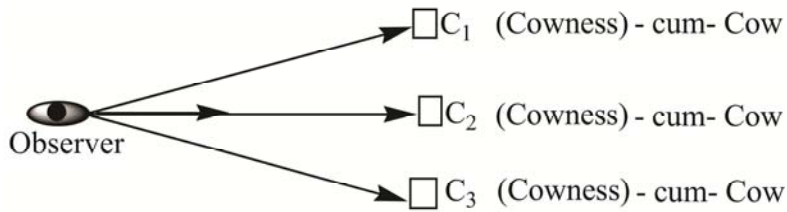
Buddhist view of Similarity



I.E., C1 = C2 = C3 = Functional Similarity

Similarity (*sādrśya*) is due to performing the same function i.e., negation of the contrary (not non-cow). Therefore, it is a negative similarity as both are negations of the same contrary.² Moreover, the apprehension of identity (similarity) between the two (real cow and conceptual cow) is due to ‘*bhedāgraha*’ i.e., non-apprehension of difference.

Vācaspati’s view of Similarity



C₁, C₂, C₃ = One class, because they Possess Cowness

Similarity (*sādrśya*) is due to universal (cowness) in each individual cow and therefore, it is positive similarity. And, moreover, it is due to *ābhedāgraha* (apprehension of non-difference) due to the presence of universal that the illusion of identity arises between the two. Vācaspati

therefore, concludes that our concepts and words must be regarded as referring to particulars qualified by universals. These positive objects of cognition are later on distinguished from others, which are dissimilar to them. All determinate activity follows upon the cognition of positive objects and not of the negation of the contrary alone.³

Furthermore, the substance of Vācaspati's criticism is that all similarity being positive, there can be no similarity between the illusory and the real; hence there can be no coordination between the two as asserted by the Buddhist. Now, in order to understand the above contention of Vācaspati Mīśra, we have to first of all examine the objections quoted by him against Buddhist theory of similarity as presented by Dravid (1972) in the following manner:

- i. Vācaspati objects that negation of others cannot be the nature of a unique particular because it is contrary to its affirmative nature.⁴ The unique particular can not be both affirmative and negative at the same time.

The Buddhist meets this objection by asserting that, the unique particular, as grasped by determinate perception, is not the real external particular, but merely imaginary. Therefore its nature both as affirmative and as negative is not contradictory.⁵

- ii. Again, against above Buddhist reply, Vācaspati asks: 'What is sought to be established by the similarity of the unreal unique particular with the unreal thought-image? There can be no pragmatic activity directed towards such a particular. The goal of our purposive activity is always the real thing, but that being absolutely,

dissimilar to the imagined universal: there can be no motivation towards it either.⁶

The Buddhist replies that he does not say that the unreal object of determinate perception is a real unique particular, but only holds that the power of burning and cooking which belongs to the real unique particular, 'fire' is attributed to the unreal thought-image of fire.⁷ That is, the causal efficiency of the real thing is wrongly associated with the constructed image of it in our mind and thus the latter succeeds in inspiring purposive activity.

- iii. Further, Vācaspati asks – what is the cause of the imputation/imposition of causal efficiency to a thought construction? Is it due to former experience or due to our beginningless impressions (*anādivāsanā*)? The former alternative would not be acceptable to the Buddhist, for conceptual activity, according to him, has no direct foundation in the experience of things. And if the latter, then a man who sees fire for the first time in his life should apriori be cognizant of its power of burning and cooking.⁸
- iv. The real issue, according to Vācaspati is whether the real thing is the object of conceptual cognition or not? In the Buddhist doctrine, the real and the conceptual fall as under. Sensation is confined to the bare thing; it does not introduce its object into our conceptual thinking. The two are complete strangers to each other.⁹ Moreover, in support of the above argument the Buddhist says that the first moment in the cognition of an external object is pure sensation. The conceptual image follows immediately in its track. The particular momentary thing is not adequate to the image, but it appears as

though it were its object, because the image is indirectly produced from it. Vācaspati maintains that this explanation would hold well only on the reality hypothesis¹⁰ and not on the idealistic hypothesis. Returning back to the criticism of Vācaspati regarding the cause of coordination between real and unreal, if the Buddhist further maintains that it is due to the non-aprehension of difference between the two, then according to the Vācaspati, it is nothing but an empty talk.¹¹ Thus in this way, having criticized the Buddhist theory of 'similarity, Vācaspati passes on to the criticism of the Buddhist theory of *bhedāgraha*.

2. *Vācaspati's criticism of the Buddhist theory of Bhedāgraha*

- i. Vācaspati says, in the example of 'fire' which possesses the power of burning and cooking etc, if imposition is due to *bhedāgraha* then whether that imposition occurs when the unique particular of fire is being grasped or when it is not being grasped? It is not possible at the time of being grasped, because as already stated, the real cannot be the object of determinate perception. And if the latter, then there should be imposition of the nature of all the objects of the whole universe, with the non-sensory entities like, God, Master, etc. because there is nothing to prevent it.¹²
- ii. The Buddhist propounds the theory of objectified conceptual image in order to explain conceptual knowledge. Vācaspati holds even this fails. It is also a momentary event like the idea and thing, therefore, can not be thought of or named. It depends, indeed on the act of our productive imagination. It arises and vanishes with the momentary act of our mind and changes with every change in the activity of our

discursive thought. Hence, it can never be regarded as a unity having relative stability.

In defense of above argument, Buddhist argues that the unity of momentary conceptual images is imagined due to the *bhedāgraha*.

- iii. Further, Vācaspati points out that there is equal possibility of unity, which is their essential character, being not apprehended and difference being imagined, since non-apprehension exists in the case of both unity and difference.¹³ Moreover, even if the discontinuity of the conceptual images is held to be ultimately unreal, the Buddhist must admit that the conceptual image depends upon an act of imagination.
- iv. The real issue is, can the conceptual image which depends upon the changing act of imagination, appear as a unity? Vācaspati denies it, he maintains that such an image must appear as being discontinuous as split into discrete moments. Hence, the conceptual image can not be the object of determinate cognition, because being as momentary as fleeting pleasures or pains, it is indeterminate.¹⁴

Concluding the discourse, Vācaspati Mīśra repeats the argument of Kumārila of the fallacy of mutual dependence (arguing in a circle). In this way, both the theories of the Buddhist, *sādrśya* and *bhedāgraha* has been demolished by Vācaspati. Therefore, the Buddhist nominalism required a reformulation. This task was performed by Ratnakīrti, who do not adopt these two theories of their predecessor and even discard the theory of successive cognition of positive and negative meaning propounded by Śāntarakṣita. Thus, in this way we have reached to our second part of our chapter i.e., Ratnakīrti's reformulation of the theory of *apoha*.

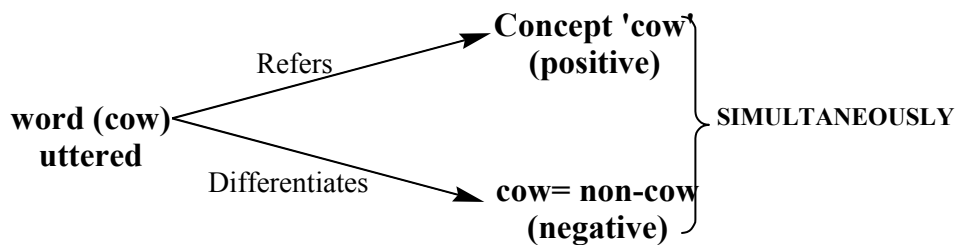
In the third place, we find Ratnakīrti entering the arena with his subtle dialectic and forceful diction. He successfully meets the criticism of *apoha* theory put forth by the opponents in his *magnum opus* 'Apohasiddhi'. Moreover, Ratnakīrti's own modification of the theory (*viśiṣṭāpohavāda*) does not advance against any basic principle of the Buddhist system of thought. His exposition of *apoha* theory is elaborate, critical and lucid. Before mentioning his theory, it is imperative to quote his defense of Vācaspati's criticism.

Defence of Vācaspati's criticisms

Regarding the Vācaspati contention, that 'words mean objects that participate in the universal. These particular objects are by virtue of their participation in a universal different from other particular and therefore, one person asked to confine a cow does not confine a horse as mentioned above'. Ratnakīrti asserted that this explanation is not logical. The universal is taken as a particular universal and not universal in general. Cowness resides in cows and not the universal. But the knowledge of cowness rightly depends upon the knowledge of particular cows depends in turn upon the knowledge of cowness. Particulars and universals are interdependent. There is no way out of this circularity except admitting that this cowness is a construction of the mind which, when a particular object is seen, is projected upon it.¹⁵ Further, regarding their criticism against the two theories of Buddhist (*sādrśya* and *bhedāgraha*), Ratnakīrti do not adopt these two theories and even reject the successive stages of positive and negative meanings propounded by Śāntarakṣita.

Ratnakīrti's *Apoha* theory

A slightly different interpretation of the *apoha* theory is found in the '*Apohasiddhi*' of Ratnakīrti. He says that a word has both a positive and negative signification.¹⁶ He rejects Śāntarakṣita's view that a word conveys a positive meaning first and a negative meaning later by logical implication.¹⁷ He asserts that there is no successive stage in the verbal comprehension, so it is baseless to argue. He also rejects the view that negation is the direct meaning and that the positive notion comes latter.¹⁸ According to his view, *apoha* is neither merely positive nor merely negative. It is a positive thing qualified by 'the negations of others'.¹⁹ Both positive and negative mutually qualify each other. Logically both positive and negative meanings are relative terms. When we say something about the former the latter is implied automatically. So there is no point in postulating a successive stage in verbal comprehension. Both of these meanings are mutually qualifying (exclusive) and exist in the same substratum simultaneously. Just as in the term *indīvara* (blue lotus) the element of 'blue' and the element of 'lotus' are cognized simultaneously, so also in every word the two elements of the meaning are grasped simultaneously.²⁰ Furthermore, we can explain the Ratnakīrti's *apoha* theory with the help of the following diagram:



That is, when we utter a word 'cow', it refers to the concept 'cow' and at the same time differentiates cow from non-cow.

Moreover, *apoha* theory can be presented on the structure of syllogistic reasoning:²¹

Major Premise: Whatever is a denotative term implies the cognition of the mere positive thing X, differentiated from non-X.

Example: 'There is water in this well'. That distinctly expresses the well and thus differentiates it from old and dried wells and also from the waters in non-wells.

Reason: The reason is identified, word and the referred object (as cow=cow animal in reality).

Conclusion: Thus it is established that every denoted term denotes the positive thing qualified by the discrimination of others in the judgmental conclusion.

Concluding Remarks

With this interpretation Ratnakīrti provides a cognitive base to the theory of *apoha* and makes two important points against the realist theory: (i) That the meaning of words though empirically positive and external to mind necessarily contains within it the negative element of difference from others. (ii) That the object of conceptual cognition is not ultimately real like that of perception. Their whole argument rests on the distinction of two 'truths' which is the necessary consequence of the Buddhist belief in the ultimate indeterminacy of the real. Thus in this way, through his reinterpreted theory of *apoha*, Ratnakīrti established the master's original ideas as sound and valid. Moreover, then comes another Naiyāyika Udayanā who again criticized the Ratnakīrti's *apoha* theory in his text '*Attmattvaviveka*'. But, from the Buddhist's side we do not find much interest in his criticism. There criticism is not even much substantial for our present work because these scholars do not come out of their own theoretical web to initiate a debate of universal nature.

Notes and References

1. *NVT*, p. 488, ‘*tasmāj jātimatyō vyaktayo vikalpānaṃ śabdānāṃ ca gocaraḥ/ tāsāṃ tadvṛttinaṃ rūpam ataj-jātīya-vyāvṛttamity arthaḥ/ atas tad avargater nag āṃ badhāneti codito ’ svādīn badhanāti*’
2. According to the Buddhist, similarity (*sādṛśya*) between the external unique particular and the thought-image on account of both is performing a common function of negating others. The Buddhist holds that not only the concept ‘cow’ excludes all non-cows by its very nature, but the real cow also negates all things other than itself in as much as it is distinguished from everything else in the world (*trailokyavilakṣaṇa*).
3. *NVT*, p. 487.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 488, ‘*na tat-svabhāvo vidhi-rūpeṇa virodhāt*’.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 488, ‘*adhyavasīyamānam api sva-lakṣaṇam na paramārtha-sad, apitu tad api kalpitam/tasmāt tasya vidhi-niṣedha-rūpatā na virudhyata*’.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 489.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 488, ‘*kiṅtu atīkasyava dāha-pākādika-sāmarthyarūpam*’.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 489.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 489.
10. That is, if it is admitted that images arise from traces left in our consciousness by former experience (*anubhavavāsanabhaveṣu*).
11. *NVT*, p.490, ‘*tasmādatīkasya bāhyatvam vikalpago cara iti riktam vacaḥ*’. Udayanā also holds that there can be no illusion of identity due to the *bhedāgraha*. Because, he holds that the non-apprehension of difference between the constructed concept and the real thing would be possible if the former were apprehended devoid of its negativity and the

- latter devoid of its positivity. But this is impossible, because both the concept and the real thing in the Buddhist view, being partless (the former being a non-entity and the latter being a point-instant), there can be no partial apprehension of them. *ATV*, p.121.
12. *NVT*, p. 489, 'agrhyamāṇa tu vahni-svalakṣaṇa tatu bhedāgrahaṇa tadrūparope trailokyarūparopa-prasaṅgo niyama-hetorabhāvāt'.
 13. For detail, see Dravid (1972), pp. 299-306.
 14. *NVT*, p. 490.
 15. *AP*, P.5.
 16. For a detailed exposition of Ratnakīrti's views on *apoha*, see Satkari Mookerjee, *BPUF* (1975), pp. 130-139.
 17. *AP*, p. 3, *na hi vidhiṃ pratipadya kaścīd arthāpattitaḥ paścād apohaṃ avagaclhati'*.
 18. *Ibid.*, 'apohaṃ vā pratipadyānyāpoḍham'.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 3, 'nāsāmbhir apoha śabdena vidhireva kevatobhipretaḥ nāpyanyavyāvrttimātram, kiṃtu anyāpohaviśiṣṭo vidhiḥ śabdānām artaḥ'.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 3, 'yathā nilopala niveśitād indīvaraśabdān nīlotpalapratitau tatkāla eva nīlimasphuraṇam anivāryam, tathā gośabdād api'.
 21. This syllogistic structure was originally presented by Rajneesh Kumar Mishra in his '*Buddhist theory of Meaning and Literary Analysis*', (1965). I am only quoting him.