

Chapter 4

Universal and Meaning

The problem of universals in Indian Philosophy is intimately connected with the problem of the Import of words. Just as the controversy over universals arises from the attempt to explain the generality of our cognitions, so does a similar controversy arise from the attempt to explain the generality of words and their meanings. Realist holds words to be an adequate expression of reality and as words relate to universals in the first instance these universals should be looked upon as stern realities existing in their own right. That is, knowledge and language deal directly with reality (R=K=L)¹, while Buddhist maintains that words are the expression of illusory construction of thought, that is, words have no reference to reality in any sense because words are the expression of illusory construction of thought, that is, words are the result of mental conceptualization and therefore they refer to mental images and cannot be directly associated with external realities. Moreover, in Buddhist system language is a part of logic in so far as it is a means of communicating

inferential knowledge. Language is not a separate source of knowledge nor does it describe reality (R/K=L). Therefore, reality or real things are neither the objects directly signified by language nor are they the objects that we directly conceive. Thus, according to Buddhist, words do not name anything, but deals only with concepts and these concepts are subjective construction.

But, now the question is - *What does a word signify or refer to?* i.e. *What is the meaning of a word ?* In this regard there are four distinct kinds of theories advocated by the realists. But, before examining these theories, we have to understand *what does the term 'meaning' (artha) conveys?*

The term '*artha*' conveys three things, namely: (1) purpose, (2) cause and (3) objects of senses.² The realists seem to take the term in its third sense, while the nominalists prefer the other two meanings because, if words mean the objects of the senses, our experience of language would be the same as those of the sense-object-contact in perception. Then, the mere pronouncement of words, for instance, honey and fire would produce efficient effects of sweet taste and burning sensation.³

Four Theories of Import of Word

I. *Individualist theory (vyāktivāda)* - According to this theory, the individual is the import of words. This theory was accepted by Sāṃkhya.

Objection

- (a) If a word 'gau' merely denotes an individual, say cow we cannot employ it to convey another cow.
- (b) In many instances, words refer to universal and not to individual alone for example, law provides that man is not to be killed if the word 'man' here means a particular man and not a man in general, a person may kill all men he comes across except any one particular man. Therefore, this theory is unsatisfactory
- II. *Configuration theory (ākṛtivāda)* - This theory holds that it is the configuration (*ākṛti*) which is denoted by a word, because the determination of the exact nature of a thing is dependent on it.⁴ This theory was accepted by Jainas.

Objection

- (a) The image of an object varies from individual to individual.
- (b) The image of an object is not a relation to an action such as sending.
- (c) If somebody is told to bring a cow, he does not bring the picture or the earthen model of a cow.
- (d) Configuration is never common, but always particular.

(e) If a word 'cow' denotes the configuration of a cow then we cannot use such expression as 'the cow is white', because it is absurd to call a shape as having a colour. Hence, this is also unsatisfactory.

III. *Universalists theory (jātivāda)* - This theory holds universal to be the meaning of words. The main arguments advanced in favour of this theory are: (1) The universal is apprehended before the individual in verbal cognition (2) That a word is not found to give rise to a mixed conception, but to a single uniform conception. (3) That when the order for example, 'bring a cow' is given, the person receiving the order brings any cow he chooses. This theory was accepted by Mīmāṃsā.

Objections

(a) According to Buddhist, if the universal is distinct from the individual they must appear to be so, if they are regarded identical then, what is good of accepting over and above vyākṛti.⁵

(b) Patanjali states that a universal cannot have any gender or number thus it cannot be regarded as the referent of a word. Moreover, if universal is one it cannot be present in different individuals and different places at the same time. And, finally, if this theory is accepted the destruction of one individual would lead to the destruction of all. Thus, this also is unsatisfactory.

IV. *Theory of Composite Denotation (vyākṛtyākṛtijātivāda)* - The Nyāya maintains that the import of words cannot exclusively be confined either to the individual or to the configuration or to universal, but all three are included in the meaning of a word. It is not individual alone when we refer to but it is also a reality that an individual always participate in a universal, since a cow is a cow on account of the fact that it has something, which makes it known as a cow i.e. universal 'cowness'. Moreover, it necessarily presents the image of the concerned object. There is no hard and fast rule concerning the predominance and subordinating of these elements of meaning.

So, the Nyāya view seems to be most plausible i.e. 'The referent of the word 'cow' is the image of the creature which is a particular participating in the Universal Cow hood'.

But, Buddhist denies this theory, and substitute for universal, his double negation theory - '*Apohavāda*'

Buddhist Theory of '*Apoha*'

The theory of '*Apoha*' is designed by Buddhist philosopher to solve the problem of universal, the particular error (*bhedāgraha*), and the word and its meaning. That is, it is created to answer to the question - *How general terms can be meaningful, in a world of individuals?* They do not accept the reality of universal, because, according to them, only sensation of eventual entity (*svalakṣaṇa*) is real, whereas universal which is a derived notion from the empirical realities

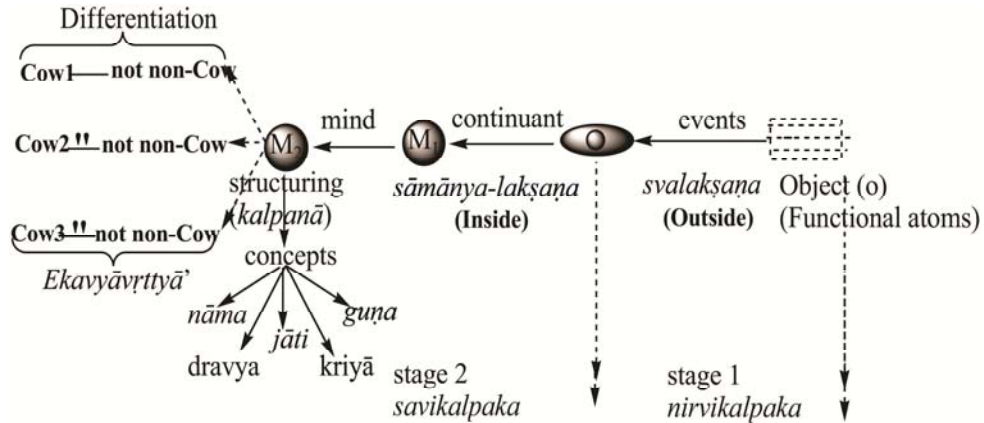
(*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*) and thus unreal, have no objective reality. Therefore, they developed a unique account, according to which, word has no direct reference to any real entity whether specific or universal. Now the question, is, *if words do not signify any real object, then what is its signification?* According to Buddhist, what is signified by a word is neither a subjective idea nor an objective reality, but something fictitious and unreal, which is neither here nor there. The fact of the matter is that both the speaker and the hearer apprehend in fact and reality a mental image, a subjective content and not any objective fact, but the speaker thinks that he presents an objective fact to the hearer and the hearer too is deluded into thinking that the presented meaning is not a mental image, but an objective verity. The speaker and the hearer are both labouring under a common delusion like two ophthalmic patients who see two moons and communicate their experience to each other. So the connotation of words is but a subjective idea, a mental image, which however, is hypostatized as an objective reality existing in its own right independently of the thinking mind.⁶ And as this mental image is found to have a distinctive character of its own which marks it out from other such mental representations and thus to contain a negative implication, we characterize it by a negative expression, i.e., negation of another (*anāyopoha*). Thus the function of a word is to exclude that to which the word does not apply. In other words, 'cow' means 'exclusion of non-cow' (= *anyavyāvṛtti*) or cows = not non-cow.

This view is known as '*Apohavāda*'⁷ (which denies any correspondence relation between language and ultimate reality or universal as a reality and language).

Three Views or Stages of Development regarding the Theory of "Apoha"

I. *Negativism*

The first exposition of *apoha* occurs in Dignāga's '*Pramāṇasamuccaya*'. He holds *apoha* as "total negation of all others (*anyāpoha*) and accepts the existence of something positive only by implication."⁸ Moreover, his views can be explained through a diagram:



According to Dignāga, reality is eventual but in the perceptual process of the subject, the flow of the eventual reality is taken as a spatio-temporal continuant, so this flow is constructed as a continuant in the subject-mind. And they are further associated with conventional concept and language like "*nāmajātyadiyojanā*".

Moreover, the common notion of cow is established in different cows due to performing similar function⁹ of differentiating cow from non-cow and not because of a universal 'cowness' as realist believes.

Consequences of this Theory

- (1) There cannot be any proper name in true sense of the term, where the meaning and reference completely coincide.
- (2) The ultimate reality cannot be directly spoken about but only indirectly indicated through negation.

Advantages of this Theory

- (1) The intimacy of language and thought is brought to the fact like two sides of the same coin.
- (2) The appeal to essences or ingrained properties is obviously avoided and hence the spirit of empiricism is upheld.
- (3) The significant part of theory is that grouping is allowed on the basis of exclusion and negation.

Kumarila's Objection against Dignāga's 'Apoha' theory in his *Śloka-varttika*

- (1) Kumārila argues that the import of positive words is never felt as negative; it is always felt as positive.
- (2) Moreover, if there is no actual universal and words means the negation of opposite, then the word cow and white cow will

become synonymous, since both of them mean the negation of non-cow. Therefore, '*apoha*' is nothing but another name for universal.

- (3) Further, he argues that the negation cannot be negated because the word like being and non-being would become meaningless. So, *apoha* theory is not applicable to the words like 'knowable', 'nameable' and even 'all'.
- (4) According to Kumāriḷa, Dignāga's *apoha* theory is useless, since, according to his own theory, the meaning of a sentence is the intuitional ideas (*pratibhā*), why bother with *apoha* at all? i.e. Why do you talk about elimination of others (distinguished from non-x) when you can talk about ideational meaning.

Due to these objections against *apoha* theory, Śāntarakṣita modified the *apoha* theory and answered the objections raised by Kumāriḷa.

II. Positivism

The second *apoha* theory propounded by Śāntarakṣita advocates that words means something positive and negation of the other is rendered by implication i.e. *apoha* theory corresponds to conceptual negation "*buddhyātmaka*" and not to simple (total negation) or ontological negation.¹⁰

Thus, the principle meaning of a word is the conceptual image or thought image felt as positive (positive not in the sense of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika but the positivity attributed to the meanings of words are only illusory due to innate constructive tendency of the human intellect) and secondary meaning exclusion of the contrary meaning.

Therefore, according to Śāntarakṣita *apoha* is neither positive nor negative, neither diverse nor same. It is neither subsistent nor non- subsistent neither one nor many. In reality, it does not exist in the form in which it is cognised, hence it is not positive. Nor is it negative since, it is cognised as positive.¹¹

Since *apoha* being an apriori concept - a mental construction it cannot be said to have any character in the real sense of the term.

Objections of Kumarila, answered by Śāntarakṣita

- (1) Kumarila's objection regarding the synonymy of all words (cow and white cow) would be valid only if their meanings were identical, but cow means not non-cow, whereas white cow means not non- white cow.
- (2) Regarding Kumarila's contention that 'negation cannot be negated', Śāntarakṣita says, that only negative character of negation cannot be negated as it is a self-contradictory, but one can legitimately assert that a positive entity is not negative. In this sense negation may very well be negated i.e. being can be said to be the negation of non-being, because it is not denying the

negative character of non-being, which is the negation of being, it only denying that 'being' is non-being or negative and this denial does not make the negation of 'non-being' positive.

- (3) Regarding Kumāriila's objection that Dignāga's theory is useless i.e. why do you talk about elimination of others (distinguished from non-x) when you can talk about ideational meaning? Śāntarakṣita answer, because thought involves all three types of elimination. Since neither the purely negative element nor ideational meaning by itself can provide a complete explanation of conceptuality, all three types of eliminations must be considered.

Vācaspati's Criticism

Vācaspati Miśra does not consider the explanation and clarification given by Śāntarakṣita satisfactory. Therefore, he directed criticisms against two main contentions of the Buddhist:

- (1) 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.

But, according to Vācaspati similarity (*sādrśya*) is due to universal in each individual thing, therefore it is positive and all similarity being positive, there can be no similarity between the

illusory and the real, hence there can be no coordination between the two.

(2) 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.

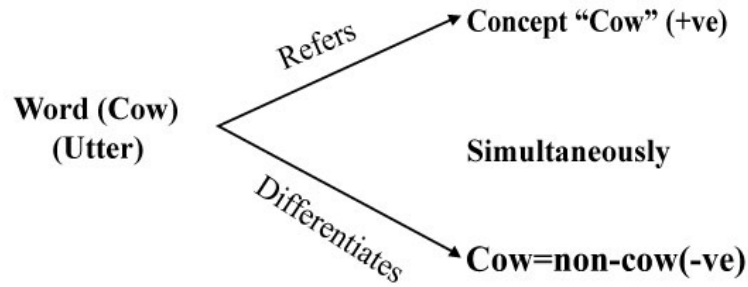
But, according to *vācaspati*, it is "*abhedāgraha*" i.e. apprehension of non-difference among species due to the presence of universal. Our concepts referred to particular qualified by universal. These positive objects of cognition are latter distinguished from others, which are dissimilar to them. Therefore, according to them, the process is opposite.

Now, due to this demolition of Śāntarakṣita's *apoha* theory by *Vācaspati*, the Buddhist nominalism required a reformulation and this task was performed by Ratnakīrti.

III. *Dialectism*

The third *apoha* theory propounded by Ratnakīrti advocates that the import of word (*apoha*) is neither merely positive nor merely negative. "*It is a positive thing qualified by the negation of others i.e. affirmation and negation are simultaneous.*"¹³

Ratnakīrti View



When we utter a word 'cow', it refers to the concept 'cow' and at the same time differentiate cow from non-cow.

But, Udayana has criticised Ratnakīrti's view in his *Ātmatattoaviveka*. His main objection is that: "The object of conceptual cognition is not unreal."

Reply

The object of conceptual cognition cannot be a real thing, as it is common to both affirmation and negation. For example, in the judgment "*the tree is*" and "*the tree is not*" the object "*tree*" is common to both affirmation and negation. Now, if the tree is real, then affirmation would be useless tautology and negation a contradiction.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that the three forms in which the Buddhist theory of import of words is presented differ only in their emphases concerning the positive and negative significations of words. Essentially all of them maintain that words signify concepts

or thought constructions and not the real entity and that they do so by 'the exclusion of the opposite'. It can be explained through an example. Example - *what do we understand by a word such as "ghaṭa"?* Not an external object, because we never really know external objects, nor the *jāti*, because *jāti* is nothing more than a mere conception formed by our mind and imposed upon what we call external objects. What '*ghaṭa*' than really signifies is that a certain thing possesses some peculiarities which distinguish it from all other things. We never know what *ghaṭa* or *ghaṭatva* is; we only know that it is not, viz. That is not *paṭa* - we have therefore only a negative knowledge of things and consequently the import of words must also be negative. Thus the difference between the orthodox and Buddhistic viewpoints regarding the connotations of words is nothing but a logical outcome of their different views concerning the ontological categories. And the criticism of the orthodox philosophers directed against the concept of *apoha* is an outcome of their muddled thought and want of appreciation of the fundamentals of the Buddhistic hypothesis. Misled as they are themselves they try to mislead others by means of their vitiated ratiinations.¹⁴ In this way, the *apoha* doctrine was indeed a novel way of treating the product of universal in Indian context.

Notes and References

1. Where R = Reality, K = Knowledge and L = Language.
2. See Monier William's *Sanskrit - English Dictionary*, p. 90.
3. See Ap. Sid, p. 9, 12-13.
4. *ākṛtistadapeksatvāt sattvavyavasthānasiddhaḥ* - NS - II, ii, 64.
5. *pr̥thākatte vyakitato jatiḥ* - S.D.-1.1.5.5.
6. *tasmād eśa vikalpaṇiṣayo na jñānakāro nā pi bhaya ity alīka evā "stheyah yathā" ha Dharmottaraḥ / "bbuddhyā kalpikayā" viviktam aparairyad rūpam ullikhyata buddhir nons bahir iti* - NVTT, p. 485.
7. Etymological the word '*apoha*' means - exclusion, separation, and differentiation. It is commonly taken as an abridged form of a compound phrase *anya + apoha* i.e. other plus exclusion.
8. He holds that universal is an explanatory presupposition, an imagination of mind and has no ontological status of being - with - existence. Further words and concepts are intimately related to one another i.e. words are derived from concepts and concepts are derived from words.
vikalpa-yonayah śabdāḥ vikalpah śabda yonayah - NVT, p. 681.
9. *ekārtha - kriyakāritoāt* - NK, p.318, line 5.
10. The main reason why "*buddhyātmaka*" is regarded as "*apoha*" is that every thought-image appears in the form distinct from other thought images. And when a word is spoken, it is thought image of an object - which is directly evoked in our mind through *paryudāsa* (special negation - negation for affirmation) and

therefore that is the principle meaning of a word. Moreover, Śāntarakṣita distinguishes between two kinds of negation, namely: (1) Simple (*niṣedha*) total negation and (2) special (*paryudāsa*) - negation for affirmation. This again is of two types (a) Conceptual (*buddhyātma*) - the negation of the ideal universal or mental image which we have in our perceptual judgment, (b) Ontological (*arthatma*) - the negation of the physical universal, things i.e. it consists in the all-exclusive particularity of the real.

tathā hi dvoividho' pohaḥ paryudāsani śedhataḥ /

dvoividhaḥ paryudāso 'pi buddhyātmārthatma bhe dataḥ // TS, K.1003

11. *"na bhāvo nāpi ca bhāvo pṛthagekatva lakṣaṇa, naśritānāśrito' pohaḥ nai kārṇekaśca vastunaḥ, tathā sau nāsti tattvena yathā sau vyavasāyate, tanna bhāvo na cā bhāvo vastutvenāvasāyataḥ - TS, K. 1188-89.*
12. *nābhāvo' pohaḥ hyave nābhāvo 'bhāva ityayam /
bhāvastu na tadātmeti tasyāraivamapohyatā // TS, K. 1080*
13. *nāsmābhirapoha śabdena vidhireva kevalo' bhipretaḥ
nāpyanyatyāvṛttimātram /
kintu anyāpoha viśiṣṭo vidhaḥ śabdānāmarthaḥ // Ap.Sid., p.3.*
14. *anyāpohāparijñānad edam ete kudrṣṭayaḥ /
svayaṃ tustā durātmāno nāsayantipasān api // TS, K.1003.*