

METAPHYSICAL REALISM IN CLASSICAL INDIAN BUDDHISM AND MODERN ANGLO-EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

C.A.L. Barborich¹

Correspondence: adambarborich@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In modern Anglo-European philosophy there is a distinct progression from the metaphysical realism of ancient and classical philosophy towards a type of scepticism that eventually leads towards nihilism. Interestingly this progression also appears in the doctrines of the Classical schools of Indian Buddhism that pre-date modern European philosophy by six centuries. This progression stems from the application of the same types of logical and philosophical reasoning to the problems of metaphysics. The movement from metaphysical realism to representationalism to idealism and finally towards nihilism, which is seen within both the classical Indian Buddhist tradition and Modern Anglo-European philosophy are products of a coherent and wholly logical progression from the acceptance of certain metaphysical principles. The fact that these same movements occur in two philosophical traditions that are separated by vast chasms in space, time and culture seems to point to an underlying commonality underlying human philosophical enquiry, whether this is a result of a common intelligible reality, an essential and universal human nature or both is a philosophical question we must continue to pursue.

Keywords: Buddhism, skepticism, metaphysical realism, idealism

In studying modern Anglo-European philosophy, one cannot help but notice the progression from the metaphysical realism in ancient and classical philosophy towards a type of scepticism that eventually ends in nihilism. This progression also appears in the doctrines of the Classical schools of Indian Buddhism that pre-date modern European philosophy by six centuries. This progression stems from the application of the same types of logical and philosophical reasoning to the problems of metaphysics and this is indicative of a common pattern in human reasoning that transcends cultures and religions.

The most interesting problem of metaphysics arose among the ancient Greeks in the respective visions of Parmenides and Heraclitus. The works of Heraclitus exemplify the empirical world of sensation and change while the thought of Parmenides exemplifies the abstract and intelligible world of continuous theoretical unity. Heraclitus postulates a world of perpetual flux in which men are capable of directly perceiving things as they are in reality, although they generally fail to attain this perception (Kirk, 1954 pp. 55-56, 376). In contrast, Parmenides postulates a world of universal stasis in which all changes are merely illusory, while the true and absolute reality is unitary,

¹ Postgraduate Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

indivisible, timeless and unchangeable and can only be known through the intellect (Coxon, 2009 p. 64). The illusory nature of change is also at the root of the paradoxes of Zeno, who was himself a student of Parmenides (Coxon, 2009 pp. 389-399). If it can be said that the European philosophical tradition “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (Whitehead, 1978 p.39), it can be further stated that much of the work from Plato onward, especially the work of Plato's pupil Aristotle in *Physics* (Sachs, 1995 pp. 34-35, 41, 43) was essentially an attempt to answer Heraclitus and Parmenides.

The same problem emerges in early Indian philosophy with the interaction between the predecessors of the orthodox *Āstika* schools of Hinduism and the heterodox *Nāstika* traditions of the *śramaṇa* schools. The texts of the Buddhists and the Jains attest to the interactions between their followers and those of other *śramaṇa* traditions, as personified by the six heretics in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (D.i.47) of the Buddhist Pāli Canon. This interaction between schools in India is best exemplified by examining the differences between orthodox Brahmanism (the predecessors of contemporary Hinduism) and heterodox Buddhism. One can clearly see that this interaction parallels that of Parmenides and Heraclitus in a philosophical sense, as orthodox Brahmanism was heavily influenced by the Upaniṣadic account of the one eternal and immutable cosmic principle and ground of being, *Brahman*; while the followers of the Buddha denied the existence of *Brahman* or any other permanent, immutable and substantial entity.

The main driver of philosophical speculation between the ancient Greeks and the ancient philosophers of India was to explain the unified theoretical intelligibility of things with the empirical fact of unceasing change. For the monists of both traditions, all was ultimately an immutable one, while the pluralists offered an account of universal flux. However, what was undisputed by any party in the earliest philosophical speculation was the reality of the world. It is often said that nobody doubted the existence of the external world until Descartes proved it existed in the sixth meditation. We will see that this is not really the case, but there is more to the statement than a witty observation. Although both Brahmanism and Buddhism believed that one's knowledge, experience and perception of the absolute (as *Brahman* or *nibbāna*) was hindered by the effects of delusion and illusion, neither denied the reality of the external world in their first formulations. In fact, both schools, as well as the majority

of the ancient Greeks shared a belief in an eternally existing, uncreated and very real universe.

In the European tradition, the father of classical metaphysics, Aristotle, used a theory of metaphysical substance to solve the metaphysical problems of unity and plurality, being and becoming. His insight lasted for a considerable length of time, being further developed throughout the Middle Ages and serving as a foundation for metaphysical thought in the Anglo-European tradition up to the present day. This metaphysical framework unified the empirical experience of plurality in the functioning of one infinite intellect that acts as the first cause, the unmoved mover and ultimate ground of being. This solution was so fundamentally brilliant that the essentials of Aristotle's metaphysical framework were not seriously challenged until the modern era.

Early Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, was explicitly non-substantial from the earliest teachings of the Buddha who made it clear that concepts can mistakenly be endowed with a substantial identity by assigning them an intrinsic and independent existence in the linguistic processes (Inada, 1988 p. 262) of categorising and naming. Buddhism also depended on a very different view of causality than that of Aristotle. The Buddhist principle of causality is known as dependent origination (*paṭīccasamuppāda*) and it is a doctrine of interdependent and pluralist causality that is abstractly formulated in the discourses by way of the formula “This arising, that arises; this ceasing, that ceases” (A.v.185; M.i.263-263; M.ii.32; M.iii.63; Sii.28; S.ii.65; S.ii.70). This abstract formulation of dependent origination as a general causal principle means that all phenomena in all possible realms, mental and physical, arise and cease in relation to other phenomena and in dependence upon their conditions.

The Buddha illustrates this dependence with the example of two bundles of reeds stood up and leaning against each other so that each supports the other. One cannot say that either bundle caused the other bundle or the aggregation of the two standing bundles to exist. However, the aggregation of the two bundles only continues to stand so long as the bundles of reeds are dependent upon and supporting each other. If one bundle is taken away, the other falls as well. In the same way, aggregates of the human personality such as consciousness and the other immaterial aggregates (*nāma*) are dependent upon and conditioned by the aggregate of materiality (*rūpa*) and the

presence of the entire psychophysical entity (*nāmarūpa*) involves the arising of mind and materiality together in absolute dependence upon each other (S.ii.114). All of the factors in a causal chain mutually condition each other and provide the support necessary for each factor to arise in succession.

In spite of the fact that early Buddhist metaphysics differs substantially from that of Aristotle and his successors, the early Buddhists also accepted the reality of the world as a given. While it is true that Buddhist philosophy puts great emphasis on one's subjective experience of the phenomenal world, this should not be taken to imply that there is no real world to be experienced. This is especially true given the differences between how an unenlightened being and an enlightened being experience the same world and the fact that the early Buddhist texts have nothing explicit to say about putting forth any type of systematic ontology. What is found in the early texts seems to indicate that the dominant ontological perspective of early Buddhism was a type of realism in regard to things / events as existing independently of the mind. For example, the conditioning of contact (*phassa*) via the sense faculties involves contact with something that is externally existent. According to the doctrine of dependent origination, the existent cannot have independent existence and therefore it cannot be known intrinsically by way of any essence or substance. However, this does not entail that a dependently originated existent or event is somehow unreal or that their reality is dependent on being subjectively perceived. Indeed, the very idea of attaining salvation in Buddhism by "seeing things as they are" (*yathābhūtam*) means that by removing one's subjective ignorance it is possible for one to perceive the existents as they are in reality. The Buddha also says that truth is one, implying that the liberating truth of the Buddhist teaching and cosmic order (*dhamma*) is singular, objective and real (Sn. 888). Lastly, even if all that is conditioned is impermanent, changeable and somehow unreal; the liberated state (*nibbāna*) as taught by the Buddha is unconditioned, immutable and imperishable and therefore must be real in some very important sense. The Buddha also teaches that he does not dispute with the world about what exists and what does not exist. Instead, he agrees with the wise about the existence of impermanent, suffering and ever-changing aggregates and he also agrees with the wise about the non-existence of permanent, eternal and unchanging aggregates (S.iii.138-139).

Early Buddhist realism was exemplified by the Sarvāstivādins and persisted in Indian Buddhism for centuries. However, it was strongly challenged during the period of the *Abhidhamma* and Buddhist Scholasticism. The *Abhidhamma*, a systematisation of Buddhist philosophy that emerged a few centuries after the passing of the Buddha, tended to use a methodical form of logical reductionism in which phenomena were reduced to *dhammas*, conceived of as the smallest perceptual building blocks of experience, and there was a tendency to reconstruct them as discrete and atomistic ultimate entities (*paramattha-dhamma*). The same logical reductionism applied to phenomena was also applied to time and temporality and this gave rise to a theory of momentariness in which time consists of atomistic and discrete moments in succession. The atomistic momentariness of time was ultimately coupled with the conception of *dhammas* to form discrete time-moments, or point-instants. This conception of time created logical problems with the concept of direct perception of the external world and with the concept of causality as the momentary *dhamma* as a point-instant could not be said to endure over time to condition the successive *dhammas* that arise following each *dhamma*'s cessation without granting *dhammas* some form of substantiality or essence.

This led to the Buddhist realist schools to formulate a theory in which the *dhammas* exist in some way in the past, present and future. However, this was challenged by other schools who saw it, with some justification, as a theory of metaphysical substance that could be said to contradict the Buddhist doctrine of the impermanence of all things (*anicca*). This attempt to avoid essentialism while accepting a theory of time as discrete moments led the Sautrāntika school of Buddhism to commit to a radical form presentism and representationalism. This split between the Buddhist realists of the Sarvāstivādin school and the representationalist Sautrāntika school represents the same type of move away from metaphysical realism that would occur centuries later in the European tradition for similar reasons.

Although Descartes is considered the father of modern philosophy in the European tradition, his theory of substance dualism is unlike anything found in any other type of philosophy known to the author. This is likely due to his emphasis on rationalism and desire for philosophical knowledge that equals the certainty of mathematical knowledge. However, a very similar movement towards representationalism is found

among the British empiricists, likely because Buddhism is also primarily a form of empiricism, and this is evident in the philosophy of John Locke. Like the Buddhists, Locke (1690) sees the danger of reifying concepts in the linguistic process of naming things (p. 380). Locke seems to accept the possibility of metaphysical substance but does not consider it to be intelligible or in conformity with the real experience of indeterminate particulars (p. 404). While particulars seem to have mind-independent existence, one's relationship to these particulars is wholly mind-dependent and representational.

Once this move towards representationalism is embraced, it is logical to move towards a type of idealism. An example of this development occurs in the work of Bishop Berkeley in the Anglo-European tradition and in the development of Yogācāra Buddhism with its emphasis on reality as consisting of mind. In both cases, the experience of things is accepted, but their ultimate existence is said to depend upon being perceived by minds. The reality of the object itself is intertwined with its mental representation. For Berkeley, the existence of God as the omni-present perceiver of all things gives his theory substantial explanatory power and further serves to validate the growing separation of the mental from the physical and the privileging of the former over the latter. In the Buddhist tradition, idealism led to an emphasis on fleeting conscious experiences of perceptions and mental events as constructing the entirety of human existence. The fact that the mind is restless and jumps from thought to thought rapidly also served to reinforce further the atomisation of time brought about by the theory of moments.

The atomisation of time is a major factor in the work of the sceptic David Hume. Like the Buddhists, Hume (1748) sees causality as the key that allows human beings to go beyond the evidence of memory or the senses by way of inference (p. 542). However, Hume argues that causality is an inference ultimately based on no more than one's experience of a constant conjunction between causes and their effects, and contends that one can never actually experience causality itself (p. 544). Given this, he argues that any attempt to argue for the existence of an intelligible causal principle will be circular (p. 545).

Hume is unknowingly following his predecessors in Buddhism by conflating discrete

and momentary mental representations with the ontological reality of things and the empirical experience of time. This causes Hume to encounter the same difficulty in explaining continuity and causality between atomistic point-instants and he responds logically by giving up on the idea of causality itself. The Buddhists were able to save their theory of causality from this effect only because dependent origination is radically different than that put forth in the Aristotelian tradition of the Anglo-Europeans. However, the Buddhist representationalists and idealists end up in agreement with Hume about the non-existence of substance and the absence of a substantial and permanent self.

It is the work of Hume that leads Anglo-European philosophy towards its “Copernican Revolution” in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant (1783) accepts Hume's claim that principles of metaphysical cognition like causality cannot be empirical (p. 665). However, Kant proposes that they must be beyond experience by way of an *a priori* synthetic type of metaphysical cognition, because analytic judgements are *a priori* even when derived empirically due to the fact that they are tautological and can be judged purely on the grounds of contradiction or non-contradiction. Kant then argues that synthetic judgements are always judgements of experience. Given this, Kant says that the essential subject of metaphysics is to determine how synthetic *a priori* cognitions are generated (p. 668). Kant believes that he solves this problem by reversing Hume's argument and making subjective experience dependent upon *a priori* concepts rather than trying to derive these concepts from subjective experience (p. 688).

While these *a priori* concepts are said to be ideal for Kant, his system is not completely idealistic in that he does not deny the ontological reality of outside objects, only our ability to know them through the senses as they are in themselves (p. 677). Instead, what is known perceptually must be subsumed under these *a priori* concepts of the understanding in order to make the judgements of perception into universally valid judgements of experience (p. 682). In this theory, experience consists of cognitions which belong to sensibility, while judgements apply to the faculty of understanding. The senses intuit while understanding thinks by unifying the representations in the consciousness, which is itself a type of judgement. These subjective, individual and possible ways of unifying representations in consciousness and these subjective

judgements function as pure concepts of understanding that are the principles upon which objective judgements are constructed. These principles of possible experience are at the same time universal laws of nature in that they serve as the foundation upon which to build the logical system of natural science (Kant, 1783 p. 684).

Kant claims that reason oversteps its bounds when it searches for the noumena beyond experience and produces illusions of transcendent use that are unbound from experience. The ideas of pure reason are completely determined and impel one to look for an ultimate substance that can never be obtained in experience and tends to lead one into the error of reifying phenomena (p. 697). As an example of this, Kant also views the self not as an absolute subject like most people mistakenly believe, but as the fact of bare awareness that cannot in itself be predicated of anything substantial. Instead, the self is only the relation of inner appearances to the phenomenal objects of apperception (p. 698).

As we have seen, this idea that there is no substantial self is also found in Hume and is one of the three conditions of existence for the Buddhist and serves to bolster the strength of our comparison of the divergence from metaphysical realism in classical Indian Buddhism and Modern Anglo-European philosophy. In both cases the movement towards phenomenalism is inevitably preceded by movement towards representationalism on the part of earlier philosophers. From this representationalist stance, idealism enters the discourse and the move towards idealism and emphasis on the role of the mind feeds into a reductionist view of time as made up of discrete atomistic point-instants of inner experience. As soon as time is divided into infinitesimals, or durationless durations, it becomes difficult to account for causal forces acting across contiguous and discrete moments of time.

Unlike the Buddhists (with the exception of the Sarvāstivādins), Kant also took space to be something that could not be experienced. This is because he viewed space as a Newtonian container into which objects were put, leaving space as a negative relation between objects. This means that Kant assigns the the self as subject, causality, space and time to the mental realm of ideas of pure reason rather than regarding them as substantial empirical existents. Since these concepts cannot be experienced and nothing can be shown to exist outside of experience, Kant ultimately finds himself in the same position as the Buddhists who were forced to refer to *dharmas* as the ultimate entities constituting reality while at the same time trying to deny these ultimate entities any type of substantial or mind-independent reality.

Kant made a valiant effort to save philosophy from the threat posed by natural science and mechanistic physics, but in sacrificing metaphysics and drawing a distinction between noumena and phenomena he could not stop the inexorable advance of scepticism towards nihilism that appears to follow from the movement away from metaphysical realism and the resulting ascendancy of the mental over the physical. The culmination of this movement is best exemplified by Nāgārjuna in the Buddhist tradition and Nietzsche in the Anglo-European tradition.

Nietzsche sees the world as being emptied of objective meaning as philosophers come to understand that the world is a continual process of becoming devoid of being. For Nietzsche, the concept of being is a lie that previous philosophers told themselves to avoid facing the aimless, unintelligible and empty process of becoming. Being is merely a mental representation which tries to capture and pervert the process of becoming. In a world of perpetual becoming in which being is a lie, the world is empty of meaning and value and it is left to the individual being to create one's own value in this world. Nietzsche believes that philosophy has served as a way of creating meaning, in much the same way as religion, but ultimately the will to truth in philosophy inevitably undermines itself with its discovery that there is no ultimate truth. For Nietzsche, this dilemma causes one to either retreat into the life-denying asceticism of the will to nothingness or to advance in the life-affirming activity of the will to power. In the Buddhist tradition Nāgārjuna reacted to the scholastic systematising of the *Abhidhamma* by following the logic of non-substantiality to its ultimate conclusion in regard to the *dhammas*. If a *dhamma* was the ultimate entity of experience while itself possessing no intrinsic existence (independent, not dependently originated existence), then the true "essence" of *dhammas* and all of conditioned reality is void or "emptiness" (*suññatā*). In this Nāgārjuna was adopting an explicitly anti-metaphysical stance and he uses dialectic and the tetralemma of Indian logic to negate all dependently originated existence. The impact of this form of metaphysical nihilism is buffered by the presence of Buddhist soteriology as well as the Buddhist teaching of the middle path, by way of which Nāgārjuna's teaching can be seen as denying both existence and non-existence and forging a middle path between extreme views of eternalism and annihilationism. Yet it bears many metaphysical and existential similarities to the philosophy of Nietzsche and his contemporary successors. Furthermore, given the perspective of early Buddhism it is unlikely that Nāgārjuna could have made the logical movement towards emptiness without the prior acceptance of momentariness and

representationalism on the part of his predecessors.

Thus it becomes clear that the movements seen within the classical Indian Buddhist tradition and Modern Anglo-European philosophy are products of a coherent and wholly logical progression from the acceptance of certain metaphysical principles. The fact that these same movements occur in two philosophical traditions that are separated by vast chasms in space, time and culture seems to point to an underlying commonality underlying human philosophical enquiry, whether this is a result of a common intelligible reality, an essential and universal human nature or both is a philosophical question we must continue to pursue.

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