

Idealism and Realism in Indian Philosophy: A Critical Review

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Abstract: The debate between idealism and realism has been a longstanding and central concern in Indian philosophy. From the ancient Upanisads to the modern era, Indian philosophers have grappled with fundamental questions about the nature of reality, knowledge, and existence. Idealism, which posits that reality is fundamentally mental or spiritual has been championed by schools such as Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta. In contrast, realism which asserts that reality exists independently of our perceptions has been advocated by schools such as Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Mīmāṃsā. This review aims to explore the complex and nuanced debate between idealism and realism in Indian philosophy, examining the key concepts, arguments, and implications of these philosophical perspectives.

Keywords: Indian philosophy, idealism, realism, Buddhism, Advaita Vedānta, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya-Yoga, Mīmāṃsā.

In Indian philosophy idealism and realism are two prominent metaphysical positions that have been debated and explored in various traditions. Idealism in Indian philosophy posits that consciousness or mind is the fundamental reality and the external world is either an illusion or a manifestation of this consciousness. There are several types of idealism in Indian philosophy, including subjective idealism is held by the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, posits that the individual self (jīva) is the only reality. On the other hand, objective idealism is held by the Advaita Vedānta school of Hindu philosophy, posits that there is a universal consciousness or ultimate reality that underlies all existence. Another, the concept of realism in Indian philosophy posits that the external world exists independently of our perceptions or thoughts. There are several types of realism in Indian philosophy, including direct realism is held by the Nyāya

school of Hindu philosophy, posits that we can directly perceive the external world through our senses. On the other hand, indirect realism is held by the Vaiśṣika school of Hindu philosophy, posits that we can infer the existence of the external world through reasoning and inference.

Discussions about the relation of knowledge to its subject can be seen in philosophy since ancient times. While discussing the relationship between knowledge and its subjects, many philosophers have tried to prove that subjects do not have unknowable entities. According to them, knowledge of matter is its essence. The current name of this view is ideology. And there is a group of philosophers, who think that the thing we know must have their own unknowable existence. This view is called realism or materialism. The last word of idealism is the denial of the real existence of the subject of knowledge, and the key word of realism or materialism is the cognition of the independent existence of objects. Realism is quite dominant in Indian philosophy, likely Nyāya, Vaiśṣika, Sāṃkhya Yoga, Mīmāṃsā etc. philosophies have much acceptance of pragmatism. Only in Buddhist philosophy and Vedānta philosophy is there a slight bias to words idealism.

Buddhism is known as scientism. Buddhist called the thinking of the mind as science. The great proponents of this view are the famous Buddhist philosopher Asaṃga and his younger brother Vasubandhu disciples Dignāg (425 AD) and Dharmakṛiti (600 AD) explained this science in details. These scientists say, without knowledge we cannot find the existence of matter. For example, without the knowledge of blue our identification with the blue being is impossible. Buddhist philosophers called this relation of subject to knowledge of idealism. From this co-experience it can be concluded that there is no existence beyond the knowledge of matter. In the language of Buddhist philosophy, the existence of matter is therefore accomplished in science. According to Buddhist Vijñānavādī, our instinctive belief in an external entity of the subject of knowledge is a delusion we think that when we know the happening, the knowledge of the happening is in the external world. But Vijñānavādī say “when we can never touch the event without its knowledge, then the event is nothing but the knowledge of the event”. Here the question may be that if chance is nothing but our knowledge, then where is chance when we do not know it? And if chance exists only when we know it, and does not exist when we do not know, then it must be chance, we create chance. If we accept it like this it means that when we know the numerous things in the world, we create them suddenly, and when we do not know

them they are destroyed instantly. To imagine the relation of matter with knowledge in this way is nothing but nonsense.

Vijñānavādī Buddhist must have been aware of this objection, so they did not turn knowledge into nonsense. They were aware of this inconsistency even if they did not accept the unknowable nature of the matter, so they tried to find an answer to it. Instead of the vast cosmos beyond the mind, Buddhist philosophers envisioned a vast knowledge ocean being. They think that from that sea of knowledge, all the small knowledge such as trees, stones, animals, beasts, houses appears in our mind. So when we do not know the chance, the knowledge of the chance is mixed in the sea of knowledge, and when we know the chance, the knowledge of chance hits the door of our mind like a small wave of the great ocean. Vijñānavādī Buddhist named this vast knowledge ocean 'ālaya vijñāna' and our smaller knowledge arising from it 'instinctive vijñāna'.

Buddhist Vijñānavādī has quite a bit in common with the early eighteenth century interpretation of philosophy in modern west philosophy by Bishop Berkeley. At the root of Buddhist Vijñānavādī was a great influence of their temporarism. As I said earlier being, everything that exists is temporary. So, the moment the matter originates that is the moment it perishes. This view of Buddhists is quite inconsistent with the materiality of the outer world. Object in the external world tables, chairs, trees, rocks, houses are all changeable but have a fairly fixed existence. The state of our psyche is just the opposite. The thought stream of the mind is very transient, there is no such thing as its fixed being. Therefore, the essence of thought flow is more compatible with Buddhist ephemerality. This is why the individuality of matter seems to be neglected in Buddhist Vijñānavādī.

Both Buddhist ephemerism and scientism have their origin in the life philosophy preached by the Buddha. The motto of that philosophy of life Nirvāṇa or absolute peace in the cessation of desire, Renunciation of attachment to objects is essential for this cessation of desire. So in Buddhist philosophy, the ephemerality of things is a valid indication of relinquishing attachment to them. When there is no fixed substance in the world, when wife, son, family, wealth are all transitory, attachment to them is nothing but foolishness. Thus inspired the Buddha followers later transformed the impermanence of Buddha preached samsārā into its transitory existence. And from this dispassionate mentality, they transformed ephemerality one step further into Vijñānavādī. Mīmāṃsā Acharjya Kumārila Bhatta rightly says in his critique of scientism

“Buddhist Vijñānavādīs deny the existence of external objects for the practice of dispassion. If there is no external object, there is no question of attachment or attraction it”.

Advaita Vedānta, a school of Hindu philosophy, presents a unique and influential form of idealism. Here’s an overview of Advaita Vedānta’s idea of idealism. Advaita Vedānta posits that the ultimate reality, Brahma, is a unified, all-encompassing consciousness that transcends all distinctions, including the distinction between subject and object. The world we experience is considered an illusion (Māyā) created by ignorance (Avidyā) of the true nature of reality. This school emphasizes that consciousness is the fundamental reality and the world is a manifestation of this consciousness.

Advaita Vedānta can be seen as a form of subjective idealism, as it posits that the individual self (jīva) is a manifestation of the ultimate reality of Brahma. However, there also has element of objective idealism, as it posits that the ultimate reality is Brahma, is an objective reality that exists independently of individual perceptions. This school can be seen also as a form of transcendental idealism, as it posits that the ultimate reality is Brahma, transcends the limits of human knowledge and experience.

Advaita Vedānta idealism has a significant influence on Indian philosophy shaping the development of various schools of thought, including Yoga and Tantra. This schools idealism has implications for epistemology, as it challenges the notion of an objective external world and emphasizes the role of consciousness in shaping our understanding of reality. Idealism has implications of spirituality, as it emphasizes the attainment of liberation (moksa) through the realization of the true nature of reality.

Among the Buddhist philosophers who are realists must admit the transitory nature of external objects. Vijñānavādī have tried to show that matter cannot be known if it is transient. The object is destroyed at the moment of its origin then how can it be known? To know an object at least its momentary state is required. So when the existence of external objects cannot be accepted. This is how Buddhist realism culminated in scientism. It has been severely criticized from the perspective of realists. Sankara, while criticizing Buddhist scientism, says from the point of view of simple realism. We directly perceive the existence of pillars, pots, etc. so their external existence cannot be denied. He also said mysteriously, if we do not accept the existence of

external things, then we can say that we have not eaten even after eating, and we can say that we have eaten without eating. Such criticism of Sankara is reminiscent of the mockery that critics have hurled at Berkely.

In Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika philosophy, realism is a fundamental concept that views the world as an objective reality, independent of our perceptions or thoughts. Here's an overview of the concept of realism in Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika philosophy. Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika philosophy posits that the world exists independently of our perceptions or thoughts. The world is an objective reality that can be known through sense perception and reasoning. Nyāya – Vaiśeṣika philosophers believe in the importance of direct perception in knowing the world. Our senses provide us with direct access to the external world. This philosophy also emphasizes the role of inference and reasoning in understanding the world. We can infer the existence of objects and their properties through reasoning and observation of this school committed to pluralism, recognizing the existence of multiple objects, properties, and relations in the world.

Nyāya – Vaiśeṣika philosophy recognizes six categories of existences (padārtha): substance (dravya), quality (guṇa), action (karma), genus (sāmānya), individuality (viśeṣa), and inherence (samavāya). Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika philosophers believe in the existence of substances (dravya), such as earth, water, fire, and air, which are the fundamental building blocks of the world. This school recognizes the existence of universals (sāmānya) and particulars (viśeṣa). Universals are common properties shared by multiple objects, while particulars are individual objects that instantiate these universals.

Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika's realism has implications for epistemology, as it emphasizes the importance of direct perception and inference in knowing the world. This school realism has implications for metaphysics, as it recognizes the existence of multiple objects, properties, and relations in the world. Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika's realism has practical implications for ethics and morality, as it emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as it is, rather than as we might wish it to be.

In this point of view, idealist philosophers, such as those in the Advaita Vedānta tradition, critique Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika's realism for its emphasis on the external world and its neglect of the role of consciousness. Skeptical philosophers, such as those in the Mādhyamika tradition,

critique Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika's realism for its assumption that we can know the world with certainty. As such pragmatic philosophers those in the Jainna tradition, critique Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika's realism for its emphasis on abstract categories and its neglect of practical concerns.

Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika's philosophy presents a concept of realism that emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as it is. This philosophy provides a detailed metaphysical framework for understanding the nature of reality and has practical implications for ethics and morality. While Nyāya- Vaiśeṣika's realism has been subject to various critiques and challenges, it remains an important and influential school of thought in Indian philosophy.

Sāṃkhya-Yoga philosophy presents a unique concept of realism that is rooted in its metaphysics and epistemology. This philosophy emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as it is, rather than as we might wish it to be. Sāṃkhya philosophy posits a fundamental distinction between two ultimate realities: purusa and prakṛti. This schools believe that the world exists independently of our perceptions or thoughts. The world is an objective reality that can be known through sense perception and reasoning. Sāṃkhya-yoga philosophy emphasizes the importance of sense perception in understanding the world. This school recognizes the role of reasoning in understanding the world, although Yoga philosophy places greater emphasis on direct experience. This realism provides a detailed metaphysical framework for understanding the nature of reality. This realism has practical implications for ethics and morality, as it emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as it is.

Idealist philosophers, such as those in the Advaita Vedānta tradition, critique sāṃkhya-yoga realism for its emphasis on the external world and its neglect of the role of consciousness. Buddhist philosophers critique sāṃkhya-yoga realism for its emphasis on permanence and independence of entities. Pragmatic philosophers critique sāṃkhya-yoga realism for its emphasis on abstract categories and its neglect of practical concerns.

Mīmāṃsā philosophy, one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, presents a concept of realism that is rooted in its metaphysics and epistemology. This philosophy emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as it is, rather than as we might wish it to be. This philosophy emphasizes the authority of the Vedas, considering them to be the ultimate source of knowledge. Mīmāṃsā philosophers believe that the world exists independently of our

perceptions. The world is an objective reality that can be known through sense perception and reasoning. Mīmāṃsā philosophy emphasizes the importance of rituals (karma) in understanding the world and achieving spiritual growth. This philosophy recognizes the role of tarka in understanding the world, particularly in interpreting the Vedas.

Mīmāṃsā realism emphasizes the importance of sense perception, reasoning, and scriptural authority in understanding the world. This realism provides a detailed metaphysical framework for understanding the nature of reality. Realism has practical implications for ethics and morality, as it emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as it is. Idealistic philosophers, such as those in the Advaita Vedānta tradition, critique Mīmāṃsā realism for its emphasis on the external world and its neglect of the role of consciousness. Buddhist philosophers critique Mīmāṃsā realism for its emphasis on permanence and independence of entities. Pragmatic philosophers critique Mīmāṃsā realism for its emphasis on abstract categories and its neglect of practical concerns.

This philosophy presents a concept of realism that emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as it is. This philosophy provides a detailed metaphysical framework for understanding the nature of reality and has practical implications for ethics and morality. While Mīmāṃsā realism has been subject to various critiques and challenges, it remains an important and influential school of thought in Indian philosophy.

Here's a concluding remarks section for a review of idealism and realism in Indian philosophy. The debate between idealism and realism has been a longstanding and central concern in Indian philosophy. The various schools of thought, including Advaita Vedānta, Yoga, Sāṃkhya, Vaiśeṣika, and Mīmāṃsā has each contributed unique perspectives on the nature of reality. Idealism as represented by Advaita Vedānta emphasizes the role of consciousness in shaping our understanding of reality. Realism, on the other hand, as represented by Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā, emphasizes the objective existence of the world independent of our perception. The review of idealism and realism in Indian philosophy highlights the complexity and richness of Indian thought. While idealism and realism may seem like mutually exclusive positions, they are in fact, interconnected and interdependent. Ultimately, the debate between idealism and realism in Indian philosophy serves as a reminder of the importance of critical inquiry and philosophical reflection. By engaging with these complex and nuanced ideas, we can gain a deeper

understanding of the nature of reality and our place within it. Further research on idealism and realism in Indian philosophy could explore the following areas, a comparative analysis of idealism and realism across different Indian philosophical schools could provide insights into the shared concerns and divergent perspectives. An examination of the relevance of idealism and realism in Indian philosophy to contemporary debates in philosophy, science, and technology could highlight the ongoing significance of these ideas. A comparison of idealism and realism in Indian philosophy with similar debates in Western philosophy could reveal interesting parallels and differences. By pursuing these avenues of research scholars can continue to illuminate the complex and fascinating landscape of Indian philosophical thought.

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