

The Comparative Study on the Theories of Perception between Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika

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Abstract: The Sarvāstivāda assumed that perception (**buddhi*) is a direct process, while the Sautrāntika believed that the object is perceived indirectly. The Sarvāstivāda recognized “tri-temporal existence”, while the Sautrāntika insisted that the past and the future do not actually exist. The Sarvāstivāda assumed that the physical assemblage (**saṃcaya*) of atoms (*paramāṇu*) can be directly perceived, and refined the theory of presentational perception. The Sautrāntika, on the other hand, based on the “pursuant element” (*anudhātu*), proposed the theory of “consciousness having representational form (*ākāra*)”. Therefore, the cognition of the external object is indirect, and the direct object of cognition is the unified complex (**sārnagrī*) of atoms, by which the Sautrāntika refined its theory of representational perception.

Keywords: Perception, **Samcaya*, *Sahabhū-hetu*, *Pratyakṣa*, *Anudhātu*, *Ākāra*, **Sārnagrī*

1. Introduction

Because of “tri-temporal existence”, the Sarvāstivāda believed that the external object can be directly perceived. The simultaneous presence of faculty, object, and consciousness makes it necessary to establish “simultaneous causality” (*sahabhū-hetu*). Since the Sarvāstivāda did not recognize the self-cognition (*sva-saṃvedana*) of consciousness, three kinds of “direct perception” (*pratyakṣa*) must be established to complete its system of cognition. The Sautrāntika acknowledged the nonexistence of the past and the future, prompting the necessity of establishing the theory of “consciousness having representational form (*ākāra*)” based on the “pursuant element” (*anudhātu*). In this way, the Sautrāntika can also justify the process of cognition on the premise of self-cognition of consciousness.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) How did the Sarvāstivāda’s theory that the consciousness must have an object and the Sautrāntika’s theory that the consciousness arises without a perceptual object evolve?
- (2) The external object is composed of atoms, and according to the Sarvāstivāda on existence, the external object should be nominal existence, so why does the external object have the actual effect of generating consciousness?
- (3) The Sautrāntika believed that when consciousness arises, the object has already been extinguished into the past, so how does present consciousness cognize the object in the past?

2. The Mind and the Perceptual Object

2.1 Sarvāstivāda theory of Consciousness Having an Object

The “tri-temporal existence” is the foundational topic of the Sarvāstivāda. The Vaibhāṣika argued that all *viśaya-s* are actual existences. The Ny stated, “whatever that does not fall outside the object-domain of [sensory] consciousness, visual, etc. exists truly.”^[1] “Whatever that is conceptually real (*prajñaptito’sti*) can only be the perceptual object (*ālambana*) of mental consciousness.”^[2] From epistemology, one of the seven fundamental treatises of the Sarvāstivāda, VKŚ states, “In line with the Buddha’s teachings, consciousness must have an object. The fact that we can cognize the past and the future is the proof that the past and the future exist.”^[3]

The AKB summarizes them into four major arguments including two teachings and two principles. One of the teachings is, “The Sutra says that consciousness arises from two conditions. What are the two? It refers to the visual faculty (*cakṣur-indriya*) and visual object (*rūpa-viśaya*), and it’s explained

in detail up to the mind (*manas*) and mental dharma (*dharma-dhātu*).^[4] One of the principles is, “When consciousness arises, there must be an object. It is said that there must be an object for consciousness to arise, and if there is none, it does not arise.”^[5] Both of them identify the same issue that the consciousness must have a perceptual object. Since it is possible to cognize the events of the past and the future, therefore, the past and the future actually exist.

2.2 Controversies

Contrary to the Sarvāstivāda position, the Vibhajyāvādins denied that the past and the future exist, and decided that only the present actually exists. Moggaliputta Tissa, a proponent of the Vibhajyāvādins said, “The mind without a perceptual object (*asad-ālambanaṃ cittaṃ*) is definitely existent. What is it? It’s the mind cognizing the past or the future.”^[6] Like the Vibhajyāvādins saying that there is the mind without a perceptual object, the early Dārṣṭāntika ^[7] (Metaphorist) from Sarvāstivāda accepted the existence of the mind without a perceptual object. They questioned the theory that all cognitions have perceptual objects by giving examples such as “mirror image” ^[8], “sound of the valley” ^[9], and “*satkāya-dṛṣṭi*”^[10]. For these questions, Vaibhāṣika replied, “they actually exist, for they are what the sensory consciousness cognizes, and what the field (*āyatana*) includes.

For the question of “*satkāya-dṛṣṭi*”, the Vaibhāṣika replied, “*satkāya-dṛṣṭi* cognizes the five aggregates of grasping and images ‘self and what belongs to self’. It is like that the rope and stump that are cognized are said to be snake and human being. This is a mistaken perception of the form (*ākāra*) ^[11] in regard to objects, rather than that it’s not without a perceptual object, for the five aggregates of grasping actually exist.”^[12] It can be seen that the Sarvāstivāda’s refutation of the mind without a perceptual object is still based on the fact that “there exists perception”.

3. Sarvāstivāda Definition of Existence

Acting on the contention of serving as an object that can produce perception (*buddhi*), Saṃghabhadra defined existence (*asti*) in Ny.

“Why the characteristic of existence is only present (*pratyutpanna*) and not other than that? Therefore, what they’re arguing is not really a characteristic of existence. Here, I’ve made this statement that the characteristic of existence is what serves as an object that is capable of producing perception. This [existence] is divisible into two: what exists actually, and what exists nominally, the two being designated on the basis of ultimate truth and conventional truth [respectively]. If relying on nothing, a thing can produce perception, this thing exists actually, e.g. *rūpa*, *vedanā*, etc. If it produces a perception relying on something, then it exists nominally, e.g., a vase, an army, etc.”^[13]

The so-called “existence” is something that can give rise to perception. The existent dharma, such as five aggregates that give rise to perception without depending on anything else is actual existence. On the other hand, those things that produce perception depending on anything else, such as bottles and clothes, are only nominal existence. Both the actual and nominal existences, though different in nature, can be regarded as objects cognized by the mind.

4. Sarvāstivāda Theory of Assemblage of Atoms

As mentioned above, if the perception of a thing in itself is not lost by forceful decomposition or wisdom analysis, it means that there is an identity, the intrinsic nature of the thing and its components. It can be seen that the intrinsic nature of the Sarvāstivāda can be understood as the singleness or indivisibility of the constituent elements of a thing, while the so-called conventional existence refers to the fact that a thing is made up of many elements of different natures. Therefore, according to the Sarvāstivāda’s view on “the nominal and the actual existence”, the atom that cannot be further decomposed is actual existence. However, the external objects made up of atoms can be decomposed, so they should not be actual existence. But if the external object is nominal existent, then it is like the conception of self (**sattvātman*) composed of the five *skandhas*, and it does not produce any real effect. Then how does the theory that all cognitions have perceptual objects hold up?

The Sarvāstivāda believed that the atom is actually existent, but when it exists alone, it is not perceived.^[14] Saṃghabhadra suggested that a sensory consciousness must take a physical assemblage or agglomeration of atoms (**saṃcaya*)^[15] as its object, saying, “The atoms are assembled and arranged. They’re always the conditions for the arising of the sensory consciousness. There is no atom that does

not take a physical assemblage.”^[16]

From the quotation, it can be deduced that Saṃghabhadra emphasized that the five faculties and five objects refer to each of the atoms making up them. The union of the five faculties and five objects leads to the sensory consciousnesses.^[17] Each atom cannot exist alone but is always in the state of agglomeration, that is, many atoms have been arranged and combined in a certain way. Each of the atoms in this state is actually existent, and therefore can become the faculties and the subjects from which the sensory consciousnesses arise. In this sense, both the faculties and the subjects are actual existence.

Since the external actual existence is each of the atoms in the state of agglomeration from which the consciousness arises, it is these atoms that directly enter the cognitive range. For example, when one recognizes a piece of embroidery, the external actual existences are the atoms of the embroidery, which are arranged in a certain way and are in the state of agglomeration, and under the effect of the vision, the atoms enter the cognitive range. The visual faculty can only cognize the external object generally and the eye consciousness does not have the power of discrimination, so the atoms cannot be distinguished one by one.

Therefore, the presence of an external object is the condition for the validity of cognition, and this condition can be satisfied only if the faculty and the object give rise to consciousness as a process of “simultaneous causality” (*sahabhū-hetu*) under the premise of momentary arising and ceasing (*kṣaṇotpanna-bhaṅga*). This is the main reason why the Sarvāstivāda proposed the theory of “simultaneous causality”^[18].

However, the Sautrāntika clearly opposed the simultaneous causality theory of the Sarvāstivāda^[19]. The Sautrāntika proposed “heterochronous causality”, which holds that the cause comes before the effect. In this case, the Sautrāntika has to answer two questions.

(1) Where do the objects experienced by the mental consciousness come from?

(2) What is the theoretical basis for the cognitive object serving as the auxiliary cause and the past consciousness serving as the direct cause of mental consciousness?

This involves the Sautrāntika’s theory of “resemblance or representational form” and “*anudhātu*”.

5. Sautrāntika Theory of Resemblance or Representational Form

The first question can be answered by the Sautrāntika with the theory of “resemblance or representational form (*ākāra*)”. Because the Sautrāntika believed that the external object that gave rise to the sensory consciousness is absent at the instant of the arising of the sensory consciousness, it is impossible for the external object to directly stimulate the arising of the visual consciousness. According to the Sautrāntika, the visual consciousness can actively unite with the external atoms in the previous instant and produce a corresponding form (*ākāra*) on this visual consciousness, and the generation of this image means indirect (*apratyakṣa*) cognition of the external object, which is known as “carrying resemblance or representational form”. As it is said in AKB, “although this consciousness cognizes object accomplishing no action, it is said to know the object, for it carried the resemblance form.”^[20] To “carry” means that one’s cognitive and sensory apparatus conveys to conscious an impression that is qualitatively similar to the object in its mode of activity.

In fact, the Sautrāntika’s view is confirmed by Dharmakīrti, who also believed that the external object is cognized by the consciousness that arises. It is explained as follows.

If one asks how one can cognize an object in a different time, we answer that the essence of the perceptual object is nothing but the cause of its distinctive appearance that is capable of transferring its knowledge-form (*jñāna-ākāra*).^[21]

In this way, the external atoms are the cause of cognition, but they are not cognized in themselves; what is known is a unified complex (**sārṇagrī*)^[22] of atoms which is carried by the previous consciousness. The **sārṇagrī* is not composed of atoms. In other words, the cognitive process of the Sautrāntika has been divided into two realms: the external one, which is not cognizable, and the internal one, which is cognizable. The external realm is composed of atoms, and the internal realm is the cognitive domain into which the atoms enter. The form of this unified complex is the counterpart of the external realm and is the cause of consciousness. Therefore, what the Sautrāntika called the external cognitive object is actually the internal realm of cognition.

6. Anudhātu

The second question can be answered by the Sautrāntika with the theory of “*anudhātu*”. In order to complete the process of perception in the Sautrāntika, in addition to the theory of resemblance or representational form, it is necessary to use “pursuant element” (*anudhātu*) as the basis. The term “pursuant element” (*anudhātu*) is derived from *anuśaya*. According to the Sautrāntika, *anuśaya* means affliction (*kleśa*) lying within the mind that does not manifest in the present behavior.^[23] “Element” (*dhātu*) has the meaning of seed,^[24] the root cause of all phenomena, the constituent elements of the universe and human beings, and the essence of nature. According to Śrīlāta, the latent state of afflictions can be maintained for a long time and latent deep enough to constitute an element, so it is called “pursuant element”. As recorded in Ny, the Sautrāntika expanded the scope of *anuśaya*. “Pursuant element” that includes all latent functions comes into being.^[25]

Accordingly, it has been known that **anudhātu* is the causality that is embodied in each moment of the individual’s physical and mental continuity. By the theory of “resemblance or representational form” and “**anudhātu*”, the Sautrāntika refined its process of perception. Consciousness arises, carrying the resemblance form. As mentioned above, the object of cognition serves as an auxiliary cause in the consciousness continuum, and the direct cause of mental consciousness is the previous instant of consciousness.

Combining the theory of “resemblance or representational form” and “*anudhātu*”, we can summarize the cognition process of Sautrāntika as follows. According to the Sautrāntika’s theory of “heterochronous causality”, the mental consciousness caused by the five sensory consciousnesses can only arise after at least the third instant. The faculty is united with the object at the first instant, the five sensory consciousnesses arise from the union of the faculty and object at the second instant, and the mental consciousness arises from the five sensory consciousnesses at the third instant. The mental consciousness takes the cognitive object (*ālambana*) of the five sensory consciousnesses of the second instant as the cognitive object.

At the second instant, the cognitive object of the five consciousnesses is the counterpart of the external object of the first instant which is the unified complex of atoms. The counterpart of the external object is perceived due to the unified complex (**sārnagrī*) of atoms carried by the five sensory consciousnesses at the second instant, while the external object is failed to be cognized directly. As mentioned above, the **sārnagrī* is the resemblance or representational form. Since the consciousness of the third instant is caused directly by the five sensory consciousnesses of the second instant, the characteristics of the five sensory consciousnesses as the direct cause are transmitted as a potential force and manifested in the mental consciousness as the effect in the cause-and-effect continuum of the stream of consciousness. As mentioned above, this transmitted potential force is called “*anudhātu*” by the Sautrāntika. In other words, the mental consciousness of the third instant is able to cognize the counterpart of the external object of the first instant through the intermediary of the five sensory consciousnesses of the second instant.

7. Conclusion

The Sarvāstivāda use perception as a criterion for judging existence. Though the existent external object is composed of atoms, each of its atoms enters the realm of cognition. Therefore, the Sarvāstivāda argued that what is cognized is the physical assemblage of atoms, that is, the external object can be recognized directly and the cognitive object is the perceptual object. The Sautrāntika accepted the existence of cognition without a perceptual object, thus proving that the past and the future do not actually exist. Moreover, the Sarvāstivāda did not recognize simultaneous causality. In this way, the union of the faculty and the object occurs at the first moment, while the arising of consciousness occurs at the second moment. The past object no longer exists, and the arising of consciousness can cognize the object that has been extinguished by carrying a resemblance or representational form. Therefore, what the consciousness cognizes is not the external object, but the unified complex of atoms, i.e., the counterpart of the external object.

8. Abbreviations

- AKB Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam Chinese tr. by Xuan Zang (T no. 1558).
 Avatāra Abhidharmāvatāra Chinese tr. by Xuan Zang (T no. 1554).

- MVŚ Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra T27, No. 1545.
Ny *Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra-śāstra T29, No. 1562.
Viṃśatikā Viṃśatikā-vijñapti-mātratā-siddhi Chinese tr. by Xuan Zang (T no. 1590).
VKŚ Abhidharma-vijñāna-kāya-śāstra (T no. 1539).

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