

# **IDEALISM AND REALISM IN WESTERN AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES**

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Over the centuries the philosophical attitude in the west has never been constant but undulated between Idealism and Realism. The difference between these two appears to be irreconcilable, being more or less bound up with the innate difference of predispositions and tendencies varying from person to person. The result is an uncompromising antagonism. The western scholars, who were brought up in the tradition of Kant and Hegel, and who studied Indian philosophies, were more sympathetic towards the Idealistic systems of India. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a predominant wave of monism and scholars like Max Muller were naturally attracted towards the metaphysical views of Sankara etc. and the uncompromising Monism of Vedanta was much admired as the cream of the oriental wisdom.

There have been different Idealistic views in Western and Indian philosophies as follows :

## **Western Idealism**

### **(i) Platonic Idealism**

The Idealism of Plato is objective in the sense that the ideas enjoy an existence in a real world independent of any mind. Mind is not antecedent for the existence of ideas. The ideas are there whether a mind reveals them or not. The determination of the phenomenal world depends on them. They somehow determine the empirical existence of the world. Hence, Plato's conception of reality is nothing but a system of eternal, immutable and immaterial ideas.

### **(ii) Idealism of Berkeley**

Berkeley may be said to be the founder of Idealism in the modern period, although his arrow could not touch the point of destination. The

existence of things must be determined by perception of idea : *Esse est percipi*. This type of Idealism may be regarded as subjective Idealism. According to Berkeley, it is the individual mind that determines the existence of external objects. For the emergence of perception the existence of external objects independent of mind is necessary. Without an external and independent object no perception is possible. To overcome this difficulty Berkeley established a new doctrine in his later u-works, which is known as "*esse est concipi*". In this new doctrine he placed the word 'conception' meaning thereby "to exist is to be conceived".

### **(iii) Idealism of Kant**

The Idealism of Kant, consists in that the world of our knowledge is an ideal construction out of sense manifold to which alone the forms and categories of understanding are confined and, therefore, is known as objective Idealism. It is subjective in the sense that knowledge does not reach out to the world of things-in-themselves. He argues that reality cannot be grasped by our knowledge because our judgement is conditional, relative and partial. We cannot know a thing as it is but we know it as our experience reveals. His view of the Transcendental Unity of Appreciation is more important as regards the unity of knowledge. All knowledge presupposes the synthetic unity of pure appreciation, because unless there is synthetic unity, no knowledge is possible. This idea of synthetic unity of pure Appreciation leads Kant quite near the conception of soul which is not accepted by him outwardly.

### **(iv) Idealism of Bosanquet**

While explaining the nature and functions of thought, Bosanquet says : "The essence of thought is not in a mental faculty, but in the objective order of things. We bring the two sides together if we say, it is the control exercised by reality over mental process.<sup>1</sup> He puts in his own words : Implicit in all the modes of experience which attracted us throughout, it is now considered in its own typical manifestations, in which the idea of system, the spirit of the concrete universal, in other words, of individuality,

is the central essence.<sup>2</sup> On this very fundamental basis he defines error as simply an inadequate determination without a system, which leaves alternative possibilities open, i.e. dependent on unknown conditions.<sup>3</sup> The Idealism of Bosanquet, establishes the monism of the spirit which is at once the unity of experience and the unity of values. The ultimate spirit is the “Real Thing”. This spirit is nothing but the totality of existence and the unity of values. Thus, the external world is nothing more than the spirit as a unity of experience and unity of values. The Spiritual Idealism propounded by Bosanquet is monistic in character.

#### **(v) Idealism of Hegel**

The fundamental question before Hegel was : What must be the nature and characteristic of ultimate principle of the universe in order to explain by it the origin, growth and development of mind and nature, their mutual relations, as well as the question of science, philosophy, ethics, art and religion. The world consists of both mind and nature, subject and object, self and not-self. Hegel seems to reserve for his Absolute an immutable and inexhaustible being which always transcends its heterisation or the world of becoming.<sup>4</sup> It shows that the Absolute Idealism of Hegel is monistic spiritualism i.e. in the shape of one spiritual reality as the source and foundation of all external objects as well as individual thoughts. In other words the absolute Idealism of Hegel may be called objective Idealism.

#### **(vi) Idealism of Bradley**

Bradley finds that the external relations are meaningless to the conception of the unity of reality and the internal relations. Bradley thinks that the proper organ for grasping the absolute Reality is not intellect but the whole of mental life which is constituted by intellect, feeling and will. He, therefore, describes his Absolute as identified with experience. Human experience is a piece of transcendental experience and can approximate it when it has learnt to transcend the limitations of intellect. The Absolute of Bradley therefore, is to be felt, experienced or realized and not to be known by our simple intellect.

## **Indian Idealism**

After giving an introductory account of Western Idealism, now come to the Idealistic schools of India. Buddhism and Vedanta are the most important schools of Indian Idealism.

### **(i) Yogacara school of Buddhism**

According to it, as is generally believed, only momentary ideas are real. The reality which is grasped by the four categories of thought is only Phenomenal.<sup>5</sup> The highest reality is unchanging, calm and permanent. It is beyond the four categories of thought.<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the duality of subject and object.<sup>7</sup> By mere analysis we cannot grasp reality. Thus, it is indescribable and devoid of any explanation.<sup>8</sup>

The external world is the creation, not of the individual consciousness, but of the absolute consciousness.<sup>9</sup> All except consciousness, is unreal. Consciousness alone is the established truth preached by the Buddha. All the three worlds are the result of discrimination or thought-relations. No external object exists in reality. All that is, is consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

### **(ii) Idealism of Sankara**

In the philosophy of Sankara the ultimate reality is Brahman or self. He maintains that the transcendental grounds of experience is self. The self is not momentary but permanent, not changing but changless, not finite but infinite, not limited and conditional but unlimited and unconditional. The existence of self is self proved (svayam siddha) and cannot be denied. It is always conscious. Sankara recognizes three grades of reality.<sup>11</sup> The external object of our ordinary experience have only a Vyavaharika Satta (empirical reality), the objects appearing in dreams and illusions enjoy only a Pratibhasika Satta (illusory appearance) and Brahman, i.e., the Absolute has the Parmarthika Satta (ultimate reality). The Vyavaharika and Pratibhasika existences are real from a lower stand-point. The ultimate reality is the highest reality which is devoid of all differences and

contradictions. We cannot know Brahman but we can become Brahman. “He who knows Brahman, becomes Brahman.”<sup>12</sup>

### **(iii) Madhyamika School of Buddhism**

According to this school, reality is beyond the four categories of thought.<sup>13</sup> Human intellect cannot grasp reality. What we grasp is the Prapanca, and not the Paramartha. If we put this idea in technical language of Buddhism, we can say that the human knowledge is confined to the Samvarti-Satya, i.e., to the phenomenal reality. It is unable to grasp the Paramartha-Satya i.e. the noumenal reality. The Buddhism preaches reality (dharma) considering two types of truth. The first type is the Phenomenal Truth and the second one is the Noumenal Truth.<sup>14</sup> The empirical world is the phenomenal reality, while the ultimate truth is the noumenal reality. “The ultimate truth is intuitional, peaceful, devoid of plurality and one. This is the nature of reality.”<sup>15</sup>

## **Western Realism**

The Realism, which believes in one material reality, is called monistic Realism. If it takes the existent to be two, it would fall in the category of Dualistic Realism. If it admits reality to be more than two, it would be called Pluralistic Realism. Similarly, some other types of Realism would be dealt with according to their specific characteristics.

### **(a) Monistic Realism**

The primitive Greek philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Heraclitus, in so far as they each thought one or other of water, air or fire to be the one indivisible stuff of reality, were Monistic Realists. To them all things as the physical objects, the mind, the life and the rest were the products of any one of these stuffs. Thus, consciousness was considered to be merely a product of matter.

### **(b) Dualistic Realism**

Plato and Aristotle may be said to have indulged in Dualism in spite of their insistence on the reality of the world of Ideas or Forms. Aristotle

was, perhaps, more pronounced in his Dualism than Plato. In modern philosophy, it was Descartes who gave a distinct turn to Realism. To him matter and mind are independent existences each having a characteristic diametrically opposed to the characteristic of the other. Although Kant was an Idealist in his noumenal outlook, still he became guilty of a Double Dualism-Epistemological Dualism between sense and understanding and ontological Dualism between mind and noumenal world of things-in-themselves.<sup>16</sup>

### **(c) Pluralistic Realism**

Greek thinkers thought that the visible objects of the universe are many and independent of one another, and each such object can be divided further and further till we come to a point beyond which our division cannot go. Such units of material objects, which they call “atoms” must be the ultimate physical principles of the universe. From these “atoms” all else (including minds) have been derived. They are the only reals, self sufficient, self existent and indivisible, and independent of the minds which originate from them. This type of Realism can be called Pluralistic Material Realism or “Atomic Realism”.

### **(d) Pragmatic view of Realism**

Pragmatism means, in the broadest sense, the acceptance of the categories of life as fundamental. The pragmatic means by life, not the imaginary or ideal life of any hypothetical being, not the eternal life or the absolute life but the temporal, operative life of animals and men, the life of instinct and desire, of adaptation and environment, of civilization and progress. The whole “experimentalist” tendency in English, Science and Philosophy may be said to have anticipated the pragmatic theory that truth is achieved by the trying of hypotheses. The tendency of pragmatic Realism is mainly directed against Absolutism.

### **(e) Theory of Immanence**

The neo-Realist suggests by his theory of Immanence that things and minds are not to be regarded as two independent realities but rather as

“relations” into which knowledge as a fact must necessarily enter. As has been observed by Perry : “Instead of conceiving of Reality as divided absolutely between two impenetrable spheres, we may conceive it as a field of interpenetrating relationships.”<sup>17</sup>

#### **(f) Theory of Independence**

According to the Theory of Independence, things being independent of one another, the relations which exist among things are also external and real, and not subjective and internal. Just as things are outside of mind, so is the relation. This view is quite similar to the Nyaya-Vaisesika conception of the external existence of relations.

#### **(g) Theory of Critical Realism**

According to Theory of Critical Realism the things have their independent existence and are not known in their entirety but only in their partial character. Our knowledge of things is determined by our interest which selects certain qualities of things in preference to the rest. Things are not entirely unaffected by our experience, as the Neo Realists hold.

#### **(h) Selective and Generative Realism**

The Generative hypothesis holds that the existence of data is physiologically conditioned. The sense-datum is the effect of two joint causes viz., the physical object and the sense-organ. Thus a color is actually produced by the interaction of the physical object and the organ of sight. If this hypothesis is taken to be true, there will exist no color when there is no eye. Similar conclusions follow as regards the data of the other senses. Hence, according to this theory, sense data exist only when they are being perceived.

### **Indian Realism**

Indian Realism can be classified into two broad divisions : Orthodox Realism and Heterodox Realism. That school which believes in the Vedic

Testimony is called Orthodox and that which does not regard the Vedic Authority as valid is called Heterodox.

### **(i) Sankhya School of Realism**

This school falls in the category of Realism. It points out that there are two ultimate entities viz., Purusa and Prakrti both of which are eternal and different from each other. Purusa is nothing but consciousness (cit) while Prakrti is unconscious (jada).<sup>18</sup> Purusa is spectator (drastrsaksin) and enjoyer (bhokta), while Prakrti is what is seen and enjoyed (drsya and bhogya). From this account it is evident that Purusa is consciousness or spirit, whereas Prakrti is physical existence. Prakrti is further manifested into different forms.<sup>19</sup> The Sankhya system believes in two realities which are independent of and different from each other.

### **(ii) Ramanuja's Realism**

According to Ramanuja, the conscious substance (citattiva) is knower and is the substratum of knowledge (jnana). Both are eternal and inseparably connected together.<sup>20</sup> Knowledge is all pervading. It is immaterial (ajada) and of self-revealing nature. It is capable of contraction and expansion (sankoca and Vikosa). It illumines things as well as itself.<sup>21</sup> But it cannot know itself. The physical substance is divided into three kinds : (i) that which possesses immutable existence (sattva) only, (ii) that which has all the three qualities (gunas) and (iii) that which does not possess any one of the three qualities (gunas). It is eternal.<sup>22</sup> It is distinct from knowledge and is free from consciousness.<sup>23</sup> It is subject to change.<sup>24</sup>

### **(iii) Purva-Mimamsa schools of Realism**

Both the scholars viz., Bhatta and Prabhakara, believe in two independent realities. But a close study of the Mimamsa-Sutra in which it is indicated that knowledge is produced when the sense-organ comes in contact with the object, shows quite clearly that the writer believes in the separate and independent existence of knowledge from objects. It is right to say that both the schools of Purva-Mimamsa are of realistic nature.



#### **(iv) Nyaya-Vaisesika school of Realism**

It holds that spirit and matter are two independent substances. It believes in seven categories of reality. Matter which is an important factor in the concept of Realism has been shown as eternal, non-momentary and cognizable through one or more means of valid cognition.

#### **(v) Jain Theory of Realism**

All the philosophical problems are based upon the conception of universe. No school of thought denies the existence of universe but tries to prove it by its own point of view. In the Bagavati-Sutra a question is asked by Gautama in connection with the conception of universe. Lord Mahavira replied in a direct manner. The conversation is as follows :

Gautama : “O Lord! What is universe?”

Mahavira : O Gautama! This universe is composed of five extensive substances. They are the medium of motion, the medium of rest, space, soul and matter.<sup>25</sup>

In some chapters of the Bhagavati-Sutra, Time is mentioned as a separate entity.<sup>26</sup> This two-fold classification shows that there are two schools of thought in Jainism. One believed in the existence of five extensive substances and the other conceived the universe as composed of six substances.

#### **(v) Vaibhasika and Sautratika schools of Realism**

According to Vaibhasikas, knowledge, consciousness or intellect is formless, while it has forms according to Sautrantikas. The former believes in the direct perceptibility of the outside world, while the latter holds it to be entirely inferential. The Vaibhasika system may be called “Direct Momentary Realism”. The Sautrantika school may be named “Indirect Momentary Realism”.

#### **(viii) Carvaka School of Realism**

According to the Carvak, consciousness is not a separate reality. He holds that reality consists of the objective world only which is constituted by

the four Mahabhutas (Primary Elements), viz., earth, water, fire and air. Consciousness is merely a by product of a peculiar amalgamation of the above mentioned Mahabhutas.<sup>27</sup> Although none of them possesses it separately. This school does not believe in anything which is neither a bhuta nor bhautika (product of bhutas). This system of Realism is purely materialistic.

This is all about Western and Indian Idealism and Realism.

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**References :**

- <sup>1</sup> Life and Philosophy in contemporary British Philosophy, p. 61.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 63.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 67.
- <sup>4</sup> Principle of Philosophy, p. 107.
- <sup>5</sup> Lankavatara-Sutra, p. 188.
- <sup>6</sup> Catuskotivinirmukta.
- <sup>7</sup> Grahya grohakavinirmukta.
- <sup>8</sup> Lankavatara Sutra, p. 116.
- <sup>9</sup> Indian Philosophy—C.D. Sharma, p. 145.
- <sup>10</sup> Lankavatara Sutra, p. 186.
- <sup>11</sup> Vedanta-Siddhanta-Muktavali, p. 25.
- <sup>12</sup> Brahmaid brahma eva bhavati.
- <sup>13</sup> Catuskotivinir muktam tattvam madhyamika uiduh.
- <sup>14</sup> Madhyamika-Karika, XXIV.8.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, XVIII.9.
- <sup>16</sup> Principles of Philosophy, p. 91.
- <sup>17</sup> Present Philosophical Tendencies, p. 311.
- <sup>18</sup> Sankhya-karika, 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Sankhya Karika, 21.
- <sup>20</sup> Tattva-traya, p. 17.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 35.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp. 41, 46.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 41.
- <sup>24</sup> Vikaraspadam.
- <sup>25</sup> Bhagavati-Sutra, XIII.4.481.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, XXV, 2.4
- <sup>27</sup> Saddarsana-Samuccaya, p. 306.