

The Charvaka Philosophy - Materialism

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Abstract: *Materialism is the name given to the metaphysical doctrine which holds that matter is the only reality. The doctrine tries to explain mind and consciousness as the products of matter. In general outlook materialism represents the tendency that seeks to reduce the higher to the lower or explain the higher phenomena in the light of the lower ones. In this respect it is opposed to spiritual interpretations of the universe. Though materialism in some form or the other has always been present in India, and occasional references are found in the Vedas, the Buddhistic literature, the Epics as well as in the later philosophical works, we do not find any systematic work on materialism, nor any organised school of followers as other philosophical schools possess. But almost every work of other school's state for refutation, the materialistic views. Our knowledge of Indian materialism is chiefly based on these. Charvaka was even originally a common description name given to a materialist either because he preaches the doctrine of eat, drink and be merry. Some writers again regard Brhaspati as the founder of materialism.*

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1. Observation

A materialist is called Charvaka or Lokatika

We confined during our observation that Charvakas is the final say. Perception is the only valid source of knowledge. But whoever be the founder of India materialism, Charvaka has become synonymous with materialist. The word used for materialism is also lokaya mata i. e. the view of common people. A materialist is originally called also lokayaitika.

The Charvaka Epistemology

The entire philosophy of the Charvaka may be said to depend logically on their epistemology or the theory of knowledge. The main problems of epistemology are: How far can we know reality? How does knowledge originate and develop? This last question involves the problem: What are the different sources of knowledge. This problem forms one of the chief topics of Indian epistemology. Knowledge of reality or valid cognition is called prama and the source of such knowledge is called pramana. The Charvaka holds that perception is the only pramana or dependable source of knowledge. For establishing this position he criticizes the possibility of other sources of knowledge like inference and testimony which are regarded as valid pramanas by many philosophers.

Charvaka has denied everything except sense perception Inference is not certain

If inference is to be regarded as pramana, it must yield knowledge about which we can have no doubt and which must be true to reality. But inference cannot fulfill these conditions, because when we infer, for example, the existence of fire in a mountain from the perception of smoke in it, we take a leap in the dark, from the perceived smoke to the unperceived fire. A logician like the Naiyayika will perhaps point out that such a leap is justified by the previous knowledge of the invariable competence between smoke and fire and the inference stated more fully would be: All cases of smoke are causes of fire, this (mountain) is a case of smoke, therefore this is a cause of fire.

To characterize the philosophical materialism of the sutras period it is important to single out the following general features.

- recognition of the fact that the external world, of which

man is a part, exists objectively and is therefore not a product of his brain but exists independently of any consciousness.

- recognition of the fact that the external world manifests itself in a law governed fashion, the laws being capable of change only through physical action rather than through ideas, magic, or prayer.
- negation of the existence of supernatural forces, that the view of the world develops spontaneously, without outside interference.
- recognition of man's perceptions of the objects or phenomena of the outside world (sense experiences) as the only source of knowledge.
- recognition of the fact that the nature of man's life and activity is determined by the conditions of his life and not by a deity.
- Some of these features are inherent, in some form to a certain extent, in many systems of Indian philosophy of the medieval period and even in the modern times.

The idea of existence of God

Charvaka rejected the idea of the existence of God, recognizing four material elements as the substance, earth, water, fire, and air. Combination of these elements produce all objects of phenomena of nature, both material and spiritual. The soul is a body endowed with consciousness, emerges from unconscious elements as their temporary in a specific form under definite conditions. In substantiating this proposition Bhisan said that a man could not get drunk by eating some rice and a kind of molasses made of beetroot. A mixture of rice and molasses, however, is used to prepare wine man can drunk, consciousness is nothing but the result of a certain process of combining material elements. A man's death signifies simultaneous destruction of both consciousness and soul. A Charvaka named Ajita Kesakambalin (6th Century BC) said that both a wise man and a fool die along with the body, both are dead and have no existence after death.

Decried Religious Superstition

The Charvakas decried religious superstition which kept the people ignorant and oppressed, and opposed their view of cognition as the result of sense perception to religious vision. The Charvaka materialism is characterized by direct orientation against idealist and religious doctrines, the desire to prove the untenability of idealism and to denain the falsity

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and deception of religion and its preachers. Thus, the charvakas main purpose was denouncing Brahmanist ideology rather than creating a consistent philosophical system.

The doctrine charvakas Lokayatiks can be reduced to the following propositions.

- 1) Four material element (mahabhuta) are the basis of all that is: fire, earth, water & air.

These elements are spontaneously active with a force of their own (svabhava) inherent in them.

- 2) Only “this world” loka exists; there is not hereafter or life after death.³ that is, after man’s death, the life is neither continued “there” (that is in the Brahman - Atman world) nor revived “here” (on this earth). The Charvakas said:

While life is yours, live joyously: None can escape
Death’s searching eye; When once this frame of ours
they burn
How shall it ever again return ?⁴

- 3) There are no supernatural (divine) forces. God is an invention of the rich to dupe the poor. Charvakas taught that the religion of Brahmanism, just as any other religion, was untenable and harmful for it distracted the attention and strength of the poor towards imaginary gods, offering sacrifices to unknown forces, listening to obstruct preaching. Religious writing was based on the fantasies of a certain group of persons materially interested in all this.
- 4) There is no soul – in the sense in which the ministers of religious cults and in agreement with the latter, the philosophers used the term. It is matter that thinks, rather than the soul which is alleged to exist independently of matter.
- 5) The law of karma (requital for both good and bad deeds) is an invention of the adherents of religion employed also by idealistic philosophers. The source of evil on this earth should be booked for in the cruelty and injustice existing in society rather than in the properties of human nature and inevitable sufferings said to be predetermined from on high.
- 6) The only source of knowledge of nature is sense perception. Only direct perception (through the five senses) gives man genuine knowledge (pratyaksa). Only that exists which can be directly perceived. That which cannot be perceived does not exist such as God, Soul, and heavenly kingdom etc.

According to the Charvakas, “God whose existence cannot be perceived fores no better than the soul. The material elements produce the world, and the supposition of a creator is unnecessary. The objection may be raised. Can the material elements by themselves give rise to this wonderful world? We find that even the production of an object like an earthen jar requires, in addition to clay which is its material cause, a potter who is the efficient cause that shapes the material into the desired form. The four elements supply only the material cause of the world. Do we not require an efficient cause, like God as the shaper and designer who

turns the material elements into this material world? In reply charvakas states that the material elements themselves have God earth its fixed nature (svabhava). It is by the nature and laws inherent in them that they combine together to form the world. There is no necessity for God. There is not proof that the objects of the world are products of any design. They can be explained more reasonably as the fortuitous products of the elements, the Charvakas, therefore prefer atheism.

2. Ethics

Ethics is the science of morality. It discusses problem like. What is the highest goal or summumbonism man can achieve? What should be the end of human conduct? What is the standard of moral judgement? The Charvakas discuss these ethical problems in conformity with their metaphysical theories.

Some Indian philosophers like the Mimanasakas believe that the highest goal of human like is heaven (sevarga) which is a state of unalloyed bliss that can be attained hereafter by performing here the Vedic rites. The Charvaka rejects this view because it is based on the unproved existence of life after death! Heaven and hell are the inventions of the priests whose professional interest lies in coaxing, threatening and making people perform the rituals. Enlightened men will refuse to be duped by them.

Many other philosophers regard liberation as the highest goal of human life. Liberation again, is conceived as the total destruction of all sufferings. Some think it can be attained only after death, when the soul is free from the body, and others believe it can be attained in this life. But the Charvaka holds that none of these views stands to reason. If liberation is free som from its bondage, freedom from soul from the bondage to physical existence, it is abused because there is no soul. “But if liberation means the attainment of a state free from all pain, this very life, it is also an impossible ideal. Existence in the body is bound up with pleasure as well as pain. We can only try to minimize pain and enjoy pleasure as much as we can. Liberation in the sense of complete cessation of sufferings can only means death.⁵ Those who try to attain in life a state free from pleasures and pains by rigorously suppressing the natural appetites, thinking that all pleasures arising out of their gratification are mixed with pain, act like fools. For no wise man would reject the Kernel because of the husk’ nor ‘give eating fish because there are bones’ nor ‘cease to grow crops because there are animals to destroy them, ‘nor stop cooking his food because beggars might ask for a share’. If we remember that out existence is confined to the existence of the body and to this life, we must regard the pleasures arising in the body as the only good things we can obtain. We should not throw away the opportunities of enjoying this life, in the future hope of enjoyment here after. ‘Rather a pigeon today than a peacock tomorrow. ‘A sure shell (course) is better than a doubtful golden coin’. Who is that fool who would entrust the money in hand to the custody of others’? ⁶

The goal of a human life, is therefore to attain the maximum amount of pleasure, in this life, avoiding pain as far as possible. A good life is a life of maximum enjoyment. A

good action is one which leads to a balance of pleasure and a bad action is one which brings about more pain and pleasure. Thus Charvaka ethics may be called, therefore, hedonism or the theory that pleasure is the highest goal.

Liberation in the sense of destruction of all sufferings can be obtained only by death and no wise man would willingly work for that end. Wealth and enjoyment are the only rational ends that a wise man can to achieve. But enjoyment is the ultimate end, wealth is not an end in itself, it is good only as means to enjoyment.

The Charvakas are against the performance of religious ceremonies with the object of either attaining heaven or avoiding hell or propitiating departed souls. They raise cheap laughter at the customary rites. If the good offered during funeral ceremony (sraddha) for the departed soul can appease hunger, what is the use of traveler's taking food with them? Why should not his people make some offerings in the name at home to satisfy his hunger? Similarly, food offered on the ground floor should satisfy a person living upstairs? If the priests really believe, as they say, that animals killed at a sacrifices (yajna) are sure to reach heaven, why do they not rather sacrifice their old parents instead of animals and make heaven sure for them. Why do they not sacrifice their own child with the hope of going to heaven religion is thus reduced to morality and morality to the search of pleasure. The ethics of Charvaka is only the logical outcome of the materialistic metaphysics.

The materialism of Samkhya Philosophy

The founder of Samkhya philosophical system and the author of Kama Sutra Kapil (6th to 5th C) primarily principle is that the world is material. Matter (prakriti) is the basis of everything that is, it is the basis of everything, that is, it is omnipresent, eternal and one. The motion of prakriti is just as eternal as prakriti itself. Primordially, prakriti has neither beginning nor end. Kapil wrote that the world was not created, and therefore there was no creator, the world itself was the cause of the world, the world developed gradually. Kapil used this material doctrine of the cause-and-effect links to substantiate his atheism and to criticize the religion of Brahmanism. He wrote that if the first cause is God (Brahma) as the world is the effect, there is a discrepancy between cause and effect. There can, however be no discrepancy between cause and effect. The cause of this world is matter (prakriti). The universe is the result of modifications of matter. In criticizing Machism, Lenin pointed out "The question of causality is particularly important in determining the philosophical important in determining the philosophical issue of any of the recent "isms" 7.

According to Samkhya Doctrine, prakriti consists of three forces or gunas sattva, rajas, and tomas. Sattva is regarded as something light and illuminating, rojas, motivating and movable tonas, heavy and restraining. Analysis of the Samkhya Karika shows that in effect sattva is potential consciousness, rojas, the source of motion action, and development, tomas is that which restrains action and slows down development. The gunas are a kind of primary principles mass (tamas), energy (rojas), and the conscious principle (attva) 8 Everything in nature is charged, as, if

were with these three principles.

Materialism in Jainism

The basic premise of Jainism is that the ultimate basic of all that is substance which can be extended and unextended. Extended substance, in its own turn, is divided into living (jiva) and non - living (ajiva). The living substance, or the souls have consciousness, these are the "subjects" in the philosophical sense, so to speak. Non - living substances (ajivas) or objects are matter (pudgala) space, time, time, dharma (the condition of motion) and adharm (the condition of rest. Jainists recognize two kinds of changes (1) loss of old qualities (gunas) and acquisition of new ones (2) change of form. Changes in the world are due to disintegration or merging and combination of atoms.

The Philosophy of Buddhism

Along with Christianity and Islam, Buddhism is know to be one of the three wide spread religions. The adherents of Buddhism have always endeavored to give a profound philosophical substantiation to their teaching. Buddhism, however, is not exceptional in the sense: in India many representatives of the dominant ideology have always believed that philosophy is the theoretical substantiation of religion, while religion is practical philosophy Buddhism rose against the senseless sacrifices and, in the first place, against him to them the sacrifices were offered against the God Brahma, declaring him to be non - existent. The cut of someone who never existed is truly meaningless. The sacred texts of Buddhists were gathered and given final shape some two centuries after Gautam Buddha's death. They were called Tri Pataka (Three Baskets) Buddhism as a system is heterogeneous; there is a great number of schools, Trends and directions in it. However, the way to an understanding of all numerous Buddhistic doctrines lies through comprehending their philosophical bases.

Thus, Buddhism does not recognize qualitative definiteness of objects and phenomena. This qualitative definiteness is infinitesimal (in magnitude and time) states (moments or flares) (carriers) and we therefore cannot speak of any object or phenomena as the subject of existence, that is, we cannot say that they achially exist. Just as a lamp appears a moving object to the observer, whereas in actual fact there is a new flare of light at each given moment, any other material element (e. g. colours, sounds, tastes, scents, and tactile impressions) is nothing but a chain of repeating flares.

The Madhyamika School of Sunyabad (a teaching in the void) adhered to a third view. The founder of the thait School, Nagarjuna (1st to 2nd centuries C. E) believed that the Sarvastevadins and Yogacharas went to extremes and thei approach was one - sided generally speaking, all objects and phenomena of the surrounding world, be asserted, can be approached from four standing points.

- 1) "That" is, for we see it, hear it touch it, or taste it, that is perceived it in one way or another through our sense organs. In short, "that" exists (absolute beings)
- 2) "That" is not (absolute non - beings) for that is ephemeral, transient, dependent on another "that" changes with each passing moment ("flash") passes into another state, becoming some other "that" the latter

becomes a third “that” etc adinfutum (“the external stream or whirlwind”).

- 3) “That simultaneously is and is not, i. e. is both exists and does not exist.
- 4) “That” neither is nor is nor is not i. e. it neither exist nor does not exist.

Declaring all these viewpoints to be one sided and non-genuine. Nagarjuna formulated his own theory in opposition to them, which he termed the theory of dependent origin (pratitya samutpada) According to this theory, only that object truly exists which exists by itself, that is not caused by some outside factor. In replying to his opponents who hold that the world is red, as testified by our everyday experiences and reasoning Nagarjuna says experience and reason do not give us genuine knowledge. The evidence of data of our pramana (the means of proof sensatious, perceptions and syllogisms) is unreliable.

Patanjali was one of the first ancient thinkers to formulate and elaborate on the idea that man is a system (microcosm, or the universe in miniature”) consisting of four basic components – mineral, vegetable, animal and human proper.

Mineral man – At this level, man is regarded as a subsystem consisting entirely of the material of the mineral kingdom. The mineral kingdom is taken to mean here the whole of the inorganic world, the whole of the universe, including the “inanimate bodies” of this planet. The mineral kingdom has always been in motion”.

“All this was indistinguishable, fluid Everything was in motion”.

- 1) Mineral man is the highest product of the mineral kingdom, a living and active human subsystem subordinated to the laws of life and activity of man, the system (human man).
- 2) Vegetable Man – with the mineral kingdom as the foundation, a higher organization of matter, the vegetable kingdom, emerges. Vegetable life differs essentially from the life of minerals. First, plants are capable of reproducing themselves, bearing fruit and multiplying. Living matter proper is something that is capable of multiplying and producing offspring. Therein animate things differ from inanimate things. A plant is the first form of living matter in the proper sense. Second plants are more “active and enterprising as compared to mineral system. In India, for instance, wild plants can cover and destroy within a short period of time an abandoned house and even a town. Third, the rhythm of the life of life of plants is different. Plants respond in a different way to changes in the seasons and the time of day and night.
- 3) Animal Man – The animal, as a higher organization of matter, compared to the mineral and vegetable systems, could only arise in a highly developed mineral and vegetable kingdom. It imbibes the “refined product” of both. Patanjali stressed that the distinctive feature of the animal as a higher form of the living is its mobility. The ability to move (walk, crawl, run, jump, fly etc) enables the animal to enter upon diverse relationships with the surrounding world.
- 4) Human Man – The highest subsystem is a synthesis and

harmony of mineral man, vegetable man, and animal man. The vital properties of the systems being synthesized (mineral pleasure, “vegetable pushing”, and “animal cunning”) became here. The human man generalizes the life experiences accumulated by generations and assimilator the surrounding world gradually farcing himself from the power of the spontaneous laws of nature. He begins to act on the environment himself, changing it and subordinating it to his interests and needs. He tills the soil, breeds cattle practices various crafts. He can for instance, take wild flowers and cultivate them making them into a charming garden. He studies himself the laws of life, not letting his future to become the product of chance. In general, Patanjali concludes the inevitability disappears, the blind power of necessity cases to rule and the sould shakes off the fetters of prakrati (matter) thus becoming free.

3. Summary and Conclusion

Like the Epicureans Greece, the Charvakas in India have been more hated than understood. ‘Charvaka’ in the mind of people at large is a term of reproach. But it is useful for a student to remember as well that Indian philosophy owes to Charvaka. Skepticism or agnosticism is only the expression of a free mind that refuses to accept traditional wisdom without a through criticism. Kant, one of the greatest philosophers of the west, recognized his debt to septicism when he declared: “The septicism of home roused me from my dogmatic slumber”.

And we may say that Charvaka similarly saved Indian philosophy from dogmatism to a great extent. As noted already, every system of Indian thought tried to meet the charvaka objections and made the Charvaka a tough stone of his theories. The value of Charvaka philosophy, therefore, his directly in supplying fresh philosophical problems and indirectly in compelling other thinkers to give up dogmatism, and become critical and cautious as well as in a statement of views.

The best positive evidence of refined hedonism is found in the ethical philosophy properinded by Vatsayana in the second chapter of Kama - Sutra. It is here that we find a great hedonist himself stating and defending his own views. Though Vatsayana believes in God and in life after death and therefore, is not a materialist in the ordinary sense, yet he may be regarded as one, according to a wider sense of the term, namely one who tries to explain ‘higher phenomena’ by lower ones.⁹

Finally, it may be noted that the contribution of Charvaka epistemology is not in significant. The Criticism of inference put in the mouth of Charvaka by his opponents reminds us of similar criticism made in modern times against the soundness of deductive logic. The Charvaka view that no inference can yield certain knowledge is the view of many contemporary western thinkers like the pragmatist and logical positivist.

References

- [1] Cf Reva, Khada Cavaralocane Sad Darshana
- [2] Hence one of the most famous probable versions of the origin of the name Charvaka “Chatr” four ‘Vak’ word, that is
- [3] Lok means “world” so that the ancient Indian materialists sometimes called Lokayalikias. Etymologically, the world Lok means “that which is wide spread among people that which is secular.
- [4] S. Radhakrishnan Vol I P/281.
- [5] Maranam eva apavargah, Brishspati Sutra.
- [6] Kama Sutra Chap 2
- [7] V. I. Lenin “Materialism and Empiro –Criticism” collected works Vol 14 P/153.
- [8] S. Das Gupta (History of Indian Philosophy Vol I Cambridge 1922 (PP/244 - 245).
- [9] Vide James ‘Pragmatism’ P/93.