

Ramanuja's Theory of Illusion: Critical Exposition

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Abstract: *The above criticisms, nevertheless, provide good materials for thought to all serious thinkers. The doctrine of "trivritkarana" holds that the elements of three types form the stuff of every object. So, when we perceive silver, we actually see the fiery part of the object and not actual silver. If this fiery part is called silver, then there will be different silvers corresponding to the different elements of which the total silver is composed. One type of silver will be composed of the fiery part, one of the earths and a third of water and so on. This is an unhappy position. If we say that the whole alone is called silver, (and not a mere part), then in the conch-shell only the fiery part is present and that also in a small quantity. How can we, then, say that 'silver' is present in the conch-shell? The confusion, here, is perhaps due to the fact that the so-called 'bhutas' (elements) exist in the subtle forms as well as in the forms of the gross objects. Fire is subtle as well as gross: so also, are earth and water. The word 'fire,' therefore, can be used to mean the subtle element called fire as well as the gross object of the same name. We are justified in saying that in 'fire' (in the sense of gross fire), 'earth' is present as the subtle form of the later also bears the same name: but we cannot on that account say that in the conch-shell silver is present, as 'silver' is not the name of the taijasa-element, present in the object.*

Keywords: Illusion Experience Knowledge and Error, Inner explanation, Ramanuja

1. Introductory

We know that there are three stages of mind – Consciousness, where we remember everything done, sub-conscious is that where we partially know something of the past as dreams etc and then there is unconsciousness where we do not remember anything.

Besides this there is one state known as illusion where rope is considered to be a snake. Ramanuja has dealt upon this.

2. Research Methods

A good deal of Research has been undertaken to prove Ramanuja.

3. Illusion of Theory

The subject of illusion¹ as studied in Western Philosophy differs to a considerable extent from that of ancient Indian Philosophy. In the West illusions obtain interpretations which are mostly Psycho- physiological and logical in the ancient Indian Philosophy, however, emphasis is laid on metaphysical consideration and also on epistemological analysis. According to Indian Philosophy, Psychology is an appendage of metaphysics and that man being essentially a spirit, his body and mind are only artificial and invariable additions to his spiritual being due to 'Avidya and Karma'. He will, however, have to remain under the influences of body and mind in the ordinary conditions of worldly existence. The westerners in their study of the subject have tried to find out the nature of knowledge of our waking life and also of the nature of dream-knowledge. The ancient Indian thinkers, however, have gone further to an analysis of dreamless sleep as well where the soul remains entirely free from the influences of the body and the sense-organs. Their main concern was to find out whether in dreamless sleep, they could discover anything that might be regarded as the generator of knowledge. Naturally, therefore, they had recourse to a psychological analysis of illusion only so far as it is helpful to anybody for understanding its ontological status. Physiological explanation of illusion also does not figure

prominently in ancient Indian Philosophy. In Ramanuja's account of illusion, however, we find treatment from the points of view of ontology, logic, psychology and physiology. He has also made an attempt to distinguish between illusion and dream-hallucination in his theory of error.

Nature of Illusion: 2



Birth 25, April, 1017 CE at Sriperumbudur & Death 1137 CE at Srirangam (120 years)

According to Ramanuja, illusion means perceiving one thing as another : for example perceiving a conch-shell as silver. The specialty of his theory, however, consists in the fact that for him, not only the conch-shell but also the silver perceived in it are real. His theory is thus a combination of Satkhyati and anyathakhyati. The object of illusory perception must be held as real, otherwise we shall have to admit that there can be perceptual consciousness of an unreal object which is absurd. The sky-flower, for example, is unreal and it can never become an object even of illusory perception. Perception is illusory not because of the fact that its object is a product of imagination : it is illusory because the object perceived in illusion is a subdued one and is not, therefore, the determinant character of that particular object. Due to this, the object perceived in illusion also fails to satisfy the practical needs

of human beings. When silver is perceived in a conch-shell, the silver perceived does exist in the conch-shell; but as it exists there in a very small quantity, the object is not called silver by anybody. Otherwise “Sarvam Jnatham Satyam Savisesavisayam.”

The basis for this theory is the doctrine of Trivrit Karana as a result of which all elements get mixed up in different proportions in different objects. It, therefore, follows that since all elements in different proportions are present in all objects, the diverse objects of the world are not rigidly distinct and different from one another. On the contrary, each object in some respect or other, resembles every other object of the Universe. The elements present in a piece of rope are the same as those present in a snake. Only, quantity is different in these two cases. Therefore, when a man perceives a snake in a piece of rope, he is actually perceiving the snake portions of the rope which are small in quantity. The rope-portions which are greater in quantity and more prominent in the object are not revealed to him due to some unavoidable causes. When those causes are removed, the rope-portion becomes more prominent and we say that the man is perceiving the object correctly. The ‘snake’ which is the object of illusory perception is not, therefore, imaginary. It is real, it is in the object, though in a subdued condition.

This illusory experience may also be described as ‘anyathakhyati’, since in this case, everyone has got to admit that one thing is always experienced as another.

The supporters ‘of atmakhyati’ say that all objects are the products of buddhi and that they are really the ideas of our minds. From the minds they are projected into the external world and viewed as external objects. Their externality is purely imaginary. So, all our phenomenal experiences are ultimately illusory. To say that the internal ideal is appearing as the external object, is equivalent to holding the theory of “anyathakhyati”. Even Anirvacaniyakhyati is nothing but a form of ‘anyathakhyati’, as here also ‘anirvacaniya’ silver is mistaken for a real silver.

If this be the position, then in the opinion of Ramanuja, it is wise and economical to recognize only ‘anyathakhyati’ as it includes within its fold all other theories of error and illusion. Here of course, we must remember that in illusion the object perceived is as real as the thing which is the substrate of illusion.

Logical Consideration of Illusion: 3

According to Ramanuja, there seems to be no difference between true knowledge and error, when considered logically. Truth means agreement of our thoughts with facts accompanied by a belief in their agreement. In Ramanuja’s theory of illusion, the object of illusory thinking is in agreement with fact and the subject in illusion also believes that there is an agreement between his idea and the actual fact. Differences arise only when one proceeds to apply pragmatic test. Pragmatically, the object of true knowledge is serviceable but the object of false knowledge fails to be of any service to human beings.

Psychological Consideration of Illusion: 4

When considered psychologically, illusory experience is for Ramanuja as factual as the so-called true experience. Both the forms of experience are directly received from the real stimuli in the same process, only with this difference that while the content of one is practically useful, the content of the other is not. In illusory experience, the subject does not introduce anything from his imagination which is objectively false. The thing perceived by him is there. The external stimulus, operative in illusion, is not falsely understood. The object is in the external world in the same form in which is perceived. The silver-portion which is the object of the illusory experience is in the object and is stimulating the sense-organs of the ‘subject’. The result is that the subject is perceiving ‘silver’ on the occasion and not the ‘conch-shell’. The question, therefore, arises: is illusion psychologically on a par with the so-called true experience?

The very fact that in illusion the mind of the perceiver fails to select the dominant and determinant character of the object and selects only a subdued one, proves that psychologically, there is some difference between illusion and true experience. The cause for the inability of the perceiver to perceive the prominent character of the object lies in the psychological make-up of the perceiver only and not in the percept itself. It is due to the presence of a particular type of vasana in the mind of the perceiver that he perceives a character which is only a subdued one in the object. A person, who is greedy for silver will have such a bent of mind that as soon as he will come across any object, in which though silver is not the major element, yet in relation to other existing elements is more prominent, his eyes will immediately catch the silver portion, and he will perceive it as silver. Falsity here is due to his inability to receive the impression of ‘conch-shell’, and this inability is due to adrista or vasana or the mental inclinations he has developed due to his past impressions. So, although illusion is factual, yet there is difference between illusion and true experience, so far as selection of parts of the real object is concerned. While in true experience, the selection has universal approval, it is not so in illusion.

Ontological Consideration of Illusion: 5

Ramanuja believes in the ontological existence of the object of illusion. Illusions, for him, are primarily on the same level as other physical appearances which are considered as true. The silver we see in a conch-shell, is as much non-mental and objective as the conch-shell. Illusion consists simply in the selection of the silver-portion of the conch-shell which is very small in quantity and is not, therefore, of any practical use. Ramanuja, being a staunch believer in the reality of both cit and acit, was eager to prove that whatever object the individual soul contemplates, exists independently of it. Even an object of illusion does not depend for its being on the mind of the subject. The illusory character is as much a part of the stimulus as the true one; and only experience shows that the former is not practically useful and has not obtained the necessary approval of every body’s experience. Since all objects are composed of the same elements, everything possesses the character of every other thing; the perceiver only selects one or the other under a particular set of

conditions. An illusion is as much a part of the world as a real fact. Ontological status of the two (as facts of the world) is not, therefore, different. What we perceive in true experience is not more real than what we perceive in illusion. Ramanuja has not recognized any difference in the degrees of reality belonging to the objects of true and false knowledge.

Physiological Consideration of Illusion: 6

Ramanuja has also mentioned some forms of illusions with physiological origin. When a white 'conch-shell' is perceived as yellow by a person suffering from jaundice, the illusion is purely physiological. In the case of the perception of double moon, the cause is however psycho-physiological. The perceiver desires to see two moons instead of one and accordingly he presses the retina of the one eye a little downward with his finger and it does not therefore correspond to the retina of the other eye. As visual light in such a case comes out of the two eyes in two parts, two moons are perceived. The physiological change here is produced by the desire of the agent.

Dream-hallucinations: 7

Ramanuja has given a queer explanation about hallucinatory experiences of our dream-life. Objects seen in a dream are as independent of the perceiver's mind as the objects of our waking experience. They are also real, although they have no existence outside of the dream-world. These objects are, however, created by God at the time of dream, in accordance with the accumulated merits and demerits of the dreamer. During waking-hours, the jivatman enjoys the so-called external objects which are also ultimately rooted in God, and in the dream-state, a new world and new objects are created by God and these objects can be enjoyed by the dreamer alone. The difference between the two worlds lies only in this, that the longevity of the dream-world is very short as compared with the relatively permanent character of the world of our waking life. While illusions are facts of the external world of our waking life, dream-hallucinations are facts of the dream-world only.

4. Summary and Conclusion Consideration of some important objections raised against Ramanuja's theory of illusion:

Shankara Caitanyabharati, who represents the advaita-position of Samkaracharya, has pointed out some defects inherent in Ramanuja's theory of error in his book called 'khyativada.' Although he believes in the doctrine of 'trivritkarana', yet he is unwilling to accept the interpretation of 'trivritkarana', given by Ramanuja in his theory of error. If we say that milk contains wine due to 'trivrit-karana' then a man should be supposed to acquire demerit by drinking milk which is Suratmaka. A Ramanujist may, however, answer that in milk 'wine' exists in a very small quantity and therefore by drinking milk, one will not commit any sin. This also cannot be accepted as it has not been stated in the 'Sruti' that a man will commit sin only if he drinks wine in a large quantity³. If therefore we accept Ramanuja's interpretation, we shall have to give up completely all our drinking and eating. Such a state of affairs cannot even be conceived.

Again, in the 'sreebhasya', it has been stated that the 'Sruti' has prescribed the use of 'putika' in the absence of 'soma-creeper,' simply because the parts of a 'soma-creeper' are present in the 'putika'. The fact that resemblances are often found between two objects, proves that the constituent elements of the "Khyativada", therefore, raises the question : can 'putika' and soma give us the same amount of merit and demerit or the amount differs in the two cases ? As they are not identical, he continues, the quantity of merit and demerit in two cases cannot be exactly the same.

Now, if a Ramanujist says that they can give us the same quantity of merit and demerit on the strength of 'Codana', then 'adrista' will result from the 'Codana-Vakya' and not from the facts that the constituent parts of 'soma' are present in the 'putika'. Further if 'Codana-Vakya' is competent enough to generate potency in a thing for creating 'adrista' then anything can be a substitute for the 'soma- creeper'. Why then 'putika' alone has been mentioned as the substitute and not anything else ? If it is argued that 'putika' has been prescribed specially as it contains 'some parts' in the largest quantity and is therefore very efficacious for producing maximum merit, then also the difficulty cannot be totally eliminated. According to Samkara Caitanyabharati, a question will again be raised : if this be so, then a man, who is by nature eager to get maximum merit, will normally and naturally seek that substitute in which parts of 'soma' exist in the largest quantity. Why should then be any mention of the 'putika' in the Sruti as the only substitute for the 'soma-creeper' ? So the author of the 'Kyyativada' is not ready to accept the example of 'putika' in a manner in which Ramanuja has used it to justify his interpretation of the doctrine of trivritkarana.

Further, Ramanuja has combined his 'satkhyati' with the 'anyathakhyati' of the Nyaya school. In the "Vivarana Prameya Samgraha", the theory of 'anyathakhyati'⁸ has been refuted by Vidyaranaya Muni. In his opinion, 'anyathatva' cannot belong to knowledge. If it is in knowledge, then we shall have to admit that knowledge is of the form of silver and that the conch-shell is only its "alombana", either in the sense that it bestows its form on knowledge or in the sense that it becomes the causal basis of our knowledge of silver. Nobody can have knowledge of silver unless his eyes get related to the conch-shell.

Further, it is true that Ramanuja has accepted 'anyathakhyati', but, in his opinion, 'anyathatva' does not belong to knowledge. It belongs to the object and that too, in a very special sense. Indeed in the ordinary sense, knowledge of 'idam rajatam' is as true as the knowledge of 'sandagau' (so far as the object is concerned). The former is false only in the sense that it is not universally recognized as such and that it is not also practically useful. Perception, here, is of the 'yathavasthita' object, but the object is not suitable for use. (Here 'anyathatva' lies in the fact that the silver that is perceived in illusion is different from the customary silver that is an object of every body's experience and use).

Moreover, when the conch-shell⁸ is known as such, we at

once feel that the silver that we perceived a few minutes back was never present in the object: (trikalabadhita) but if one is a follower of satkhyati, then he will have to say that the silver that he had perceived in the conch-shell sometime ago, was not non-existent in the past.

Hence, 'abhava' of 'silver' in three 'kalas' (past, present and future) which is the common belief of the man in the case of illusions cannot be reconciled with the doctrine of satkhyati. The position, therefore, becomes extremely anomalous and miserably inconsistent with the customary beliefs of our ordinary life. Again, all the factors which are generally needed for the production of silver are not in the conch-shell: then how can silver be expected to exist in the conch-shell even for a short while?

Further, it is also very difficult to understand why 'silver' in the conch-shell, which is believed to be real, should fail to render to the perceiver that service which is generally obtained from the silver in the silver-shop? Difference in function results from difference in natures only, and difference in natures cannot here be logically maintained, since both of them are called by the same name and are given the same ontological status. It is no good saying that difference here is only quantitative and not qualitative as quantitative differences always lead to qualitative differences in the objects.

To defend Ramanuja, it can, however, be said that since he has admitted that the world is in no sense dependent on the individual self, he is eager to prove that not a single object of knowledge is a creation of any body's imagination. The world is real, is objective and is rooted only in God. To eliminate subjective element totally from the object of knowledge is a very difficult task, and the defects in Ramanuja's theory of illusion are mainly due to the fact that he is out to prove something that goes against the common beliefs of ordinary human beings. We are persuaded to believe by the evidence of our day to day experience that our perceptions are sometimes indicative of the presence of physical objects and sometimes they are not. So, to assert that illusion is not illusory and that it is as good a fact as a true experience, needs boldness and courage of conviction. Indeed, in ancient Indian

Philosophy it is Ramanuja who alone has given a real place to the illusory objects in the objective world. Even anyathakhyati,⁹ advocated by the realistic Nyasa school, does not recognize the object of illusion as fully factual and objective. According to this theory, when a man perceives silver in a conch-shell, only the common qualities of silver and conch-shell are perceived by him, while the peculiar qualities of the conch-shell remain completely unnoticed.

Language and Style

The language and style is so simple it can be understood by common man.

References

- [1] Subject of Illusion
- [2] Nature of Illusion

- [3] Legal consideration of illusion
- [4] Psychological consideration of illusion
- [5] Ontological consideration of illusion
- [6] Physiological consideration of illusion
- [7] Dream hallucination
- [8] Conch-Shell
- [9] Anyathakhyati
- [10] Ramanuja Theory of error and illusion