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Aśvaghōṣa and Vaiśeṣika

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Aśvaghōṣa, being one of the earliest classical Sanskrit poets whose work has survived at least in part, is an extremely important source of information for Brahmanical thought. Though himself a Buddhist, Aśvaghōṣa was very well acquainted with Brahmanical culture, as has been documented by E. H. Johnston in the introduction to his English translation of the *Buddhacarita*. Johnston enumerates the different departments of Brahmanical learning known to Aśvaghōṣa, which are numerous, but which do not include the Vaiśeṣika system of philosophy. Johnston claims that this system was “entirely unknown to Aśvaghōṣa”, and observes that this is remarkable in view of the fact that the outstanding position of this system is freely recognised in later Buddhist literature. He continues: “The argument *ex silentio* for once has cogent force, because in later Buddhist lists corresponding to [Saundarananda], xvi. 17 (e.g. *Laṅkāvatāra* and *Visuddhimagga*), reference to the Vaiśeṣikas is included by the addition of the word *aṇu*.”

Johnston's conclusions are important, because they are based on a thorough acquaintance with the texts. And yet there is at least one passage in the *Buddhacarita* which makes most sense if read in the light of Vaiśeṣika thought.¹ The passage occurs in the twelfth chapter (*sarga*) of this work, in the discussion between the Bodhisattva and his teacher Arāḍa Kālāma. What Arāḍa teaches him is in many respects close to Sāṃkhya, and Arāḍa's teachings as reported by Aśvaghōṣa are indeed an important source for the early history of that school of thought. However, not all Arāḍa teaches is Sāṃkhya; the path of meditation which he recommends to the Bodhisattva is in fact thoroughly Buddhist in nature, in which however some Sāṃkhya notions survive, prominent among them the idea of a *kṣetrajña* “knower of the field”. The Bodhisattva rejects Arāḍa's path, concentrating in particular on this specific notion. He maintains that no liberation is possible as long as the notion of a self is not abandoned. In this context he presents some arguments which are difficult to understand against a Sāṃkhya background.

Consider first *Buddhacarita* 12.77, which reads:

¹ This passage has also been studied by Murakami, 1978: 772 ff.

*saṃkhyādibhir amuktaś ca nirguṇo na bhavaty ayam/
tasmād asati nairguṇye nāsyā mokṣo 'bhidhīyate//*

Johnston translates:

And as the soul is not released from the activity of reason and the like (*saṃkhyādi*), it is not devoid of attribute (*guṇa*); therefore, as it is not devoid of attribute, it is not admitted to be liberated.

Johnston is not however very sure of this translation. In a note he makes a number of observations, among them the following: “The exact meaning of *saṃkhyā* here is uncertain; if it could be solved, we should perhaps know how the name Sāṃkhya arose. ... What attributes are indicated by *ādi* also escapes me. It would be wrong to understand a secondary sense in the second line with reference to the *guṇas* of classical Sāṃkhya, for the word *guṇa* in Aśvaghoṣa's day was ordinarily used in Sāṃkhya discussions of anything rather than the three factors of *prakṛti*, and in the Sāṃkhya known to the poet salvation was attained by the destruction of *rajas* and *tamas* only, *sattva* remaining alone in an enhanced state.”

The difficulties surrounding the correct interpretation of *saṃkhyā* vanish when we consider the possibility that a Vaiśeṣika-like position is criticised here. The word *saṃkhyā* in classical Vaiśeṣika means number, and numbers are conceived of in this system as qualities (*guṇa*). Even a liberated soul will, from the Vaiśeṣika perspective, possess the quality ‘number’ by virtue of the fact that it has a number: each liberated soul by itself is one in number. Nor is number the only quality which even a liberated soul will possess. Praśasta's Padārthadharmasaṅgraha alias Praśastapādabhāṣya explicitly enumerates the following qualities (*guṇa*) that can reside in the soul (WI § 80, p. 16): *buddhi*, *sukha*, *duḥkha*, *icchā*, *dveṣa*, *prayatna*, *dharma*, *adharmā*, *saṃskāra*, *saṃkhyā*, *parimāṇa*, *prthaktva*, *saṃyoga*, and *vibhāga*. The first nine of these do not remain in a liberated soul; some of the remaining ones will.

It follows, then, that the above stanza allows of the following translation, which makes complete sense against the background of Vaiśeṣika thought:

And as the [soul] is not released from number etc., it is not devoid of qualities; therefore, as it is not devoid of qualities, it is not admitted to be liberated.

The possibility that stanza 12.77 does not deal with, and therefore does not criticise Sāṃkhya ideas is strengthened by the immediately following stanza. Buddhacarita 12.78 reads:

*guṇino hi guṇānām ca vyatireko na vidyate/
rūpoṣṇābhyām virahito na hy agnir upalabhyate//*

Johnston's translation, in which I have substituted 'qualities' for 'attributes', reads:

For no distinction exists between the qualities and the possessor of the qualities; for instance, fire is not perceived, when devoid of outward appearance (*rūpa*) and heat (*uṣṇa*).

Outward appearance (*rūpa*) and touch (*sparsā*), of which hot touch is but a variety, are qualities of fire both in Sāṃkhya² and in Vaiśeṣika³. The mention of these two does not therefore allow us to determine what position is criticised here. However, the denial of a distinction between qualities and the possessor of qualities makes no sense if Sāṃkhya is criticised. The Sāṃkhya of the Śaṣṭitantra — as testified by various early authors, among them Bhartṛhari, Mallavādin, and Dharmapāla (Bronkhorst, 1994) — maintained that objects are nothing but collections of qualities. Aśvaghōṣa's own description of Sāṃkhya (Buddhacarita 12. 18 f.) includes the qualities as final evolutes among its fundamental *tattvas*, which seems to indicate that this form of Sāṃkhya, too, saw material objects as collections of qualities. Vaiśeṣika, on the other hand, has always distinguished between the two.

The assumption that the opinion here criticised by Aśvaghōṣa shares some essential features with early Vaiśeṣika finds confirmation in a curious line of argument which the Bodhisattva presents in stanzas 12.80-81. The soul is here still called *kṣetrajña*, a term common in Sāṃkhya and unknown in classical Vaiśeṣika, but this choice of terminology should not lead us astray. Nor should we be confused by the first half of the argumentation, which raises problems of its own. Its second half is such that a link with Vaiśeṣika ideas inevitably comes to mind. These stanzas read:

kṣetrajño viśarīraś ca jño vā syād ajña eva vā/

² E.g. YD p. 225 l. 17: *śabdasparsāguṇāt sparsātanmātrāt triguṇam tejah.*

³ Cp. VS(C) 2.1.3: *tejo rūpasparśavat*; 2.2.4: *tejasya uṣṇatā.*

*yadi jñō jñeyam asyāsti jñeye sati na mucyate//
athājñā iti siddho vaḥ kalpitena kim ātmanā/
vināpi hy ātmanājñānaṃ prasiddhaṃ kāṣṭhakudṛyavat//*

Johnston's translation, slightly modified, has:

And the knower of the field, when without a body, must be either knowing or unknowing. If it is knowing, there is something for it to know, and if there is something for it to know, it is not liberated.

Or if your teaching is that it is unknowing, what then is the use of inventing the existence of a soul? For even without a soul the feature of not-knowing is well established as in the case of a log or a wall.

Once again, this criticism has not much force if directed against something like classical Sāṃkhya, which conceives of the consciousness of the soul as being essentially without object. Vaiśeṣika, on the other hand, thinks of consciousness as essentially object-oriented. What is more, consciousness or knowledge (*buddhī*) is, in Vaiśeṣika, a quality (*guṇa*) of the soul which does not remain in the state of liberation. The liberated soul, and consequently the soul in and by itself, is unconscious, and therefore like a log or like a wall. This view of liberation has been ridiculed by others,⁴ but appears to be inseparable from Vaiśeṣika. The fact that we find it here in the Buddhacarita can be taken as an indication that Aśvaghōṣa was familiar with this notion, and therefore possibly acquainted with Vaiśeṣika.

At this point we have to turn to Eli Franco's recent article about “the earliest extant Vaiśeṣika theory of *guṇas*” (2000). Franco presents here some fragments from the Spitzer manuscript, which presumably dates from the 3rd century C.E. at the latest.⁵ These fragments seem to criticise a Vaiśeṣika position which does not in all respects tally with the Vaiśeṣika of the Padārthadharmaśāstra and other later works. These fragments appear to refer to an omnipresent (*sarvagata*) soul,⁶ and speak about qualities that inhere in the soul

⁴ See e.g. Ny p. 636 l. 12-13: *atha matam: acetanasyātmano muktasyāpi pāśānād aviśeṣaḥ, so 'pi hi na sukhāyate na ca duḥkhāyate, mukto 'pi yadi tathāiva, ko 'nayo viśeṣaḥ?*; Bhāskara on Brahmasūtra 2.2.37: *pāśupatavaiśeṣikanaiyāyikakāpālikānām aviśiṣṭāḥ muktyavasthāyām pāśānakalpā ātmāno bhavant[i]*; id on 1.1.19: *anyathā sukharahitaṃ brahma vaiśeṣikādimatavat prāpnoti*; further Maṇḍanamiśra's Brahmasiddhi (ed. Madras 1937) p. 16 l. 14-16.

⁵ Franco, 2000a: 559-558 (= [52]-[53]); 2000b: 87-88.

⁶ Franco (2000: 162) states: “This reference [to an omnipresent soul] is of particular interest because it has been widely assumed that in early Vaiśeṣika the *ātman* was only as large as the body. If this assumption is correct, our text provides the earliest reference to the new *ātman* doctrine of the Vaiśeṣika and confirms that this change in the *ātman* doctrine took place at a rather early age in the history of the Vaiśeṣika, perhaps as

and can become “contracted into a minute state” (*aṅusamavasthāsaṃhṛta*).⁷ In that state they are as if destroyed (*pralayagāḥ khalv api vinaṣṭā iva*; p. 158)⁸ though not really destroyed (*avinaṣṭam api sat aṅusamavasthāsaṃhṛtam api pralīnam ity ucyate*; p. 161), and unperceived (*ātmany eva tu pralīnam nopalabhyate*; p. 161).

These fragments from the Spitzer manuscripts confront us with a number of riddles which it may not be possible to solve in the present state of our knowledge. We can however raise the question whether *all* qualities that inhere in the soul can undergo such a “contraction into a minute state”, including the qualities that are not specific to the soul, such as ‘number’ etc. If so, one could imagine that the Vaiśeṣikas of that time used this as an answer to the objection which we know from the Buddhacarita, viz., that the liberated soul of the Vaiśeṣikas still possesses the qualities ‘number’ etc. The Vaiśeṣikas could not of course deny this — after all, *one* liberated soul remains *one* liberated soul; it does not become numberless by being liberated —, but they might point out that the remaining qualities had become totally harmless, indeed as good as destroyed, by this “contraction into a minute state”.

All this is of course pure speculation and should be taken as such. It may nonetheless be useful to ask the question whether the objection against Vaiśeṣika (if it is one) that we find in the Buddhacarita may also have occupied the minds of others, including the Vaiśeṣikas themselves, and whether the latter felt the need to find an answer to this objection.

early as the 2nd c. A.D.” It is of course more straightforward to look upon this reference as additional evidence that in Vaiśeṣika the *ātman* was conceived of as being omnipresent right from the beginning; see Bronkhorst, 1993: 87 ff.; 1993a: 565 ff.

⁷ This translation is to be preferred to Franco's “[contracted] into the state of an atom” (p. 159, 161). The reason is that in Vaiśeṣika qualities, even though they cannot possess ‘size’ which is another quality (so Franco, 2000: 162), can certainly be confined to a part of their substrates or be coextensive with them (cp. WI § 112-113, p. 20: *saṃyogavibhāgaśabdātmaviśeṣagaṇānām pradeśavṛttitvam, śeṣānām āśrayavyāpītvam*). There is therefore in principle no theoretical objection against them becoming “contracted into a minute state” but, being qualities and not substances, they cannot be contracted into the state of an atom. In another publication Franco (2001: 11) concludes from the use elsewhere in the Spitzer manuscript of the compounds *guṇagūṇa* and *guṇāvayava* “that our text was written before the establishment of the classical Vaiśeṣika doctrine that qualities may not be qualified by further qualities and not have parts”. This conclusion is far from compelling, since these compounds occur in a context that does not deal with Vaiśeṣika but with “a Buddhist pramāṇa-theory”, as Franco himself points out.

⁸ Here and in what follows I present Franco's reconstructions / conjectures.

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Abbreviations:

- Ny Nyāyakandalī [of Śrīdhara], with three subcommentaries, ed. J.S. Jetly and Vasant G. Parikh, Vadodara: Oriental Institute, 1991
- VS(C) Vaiśeṣikasūtra of Kaṇāda, with the Commentary of Candrānanda, critically edited by Muni Śrī Jambuvijayaji, second edition, Baroda: Oriental Research Institute, 1982 (Gaekwad's Oriental Series 136)
- WI Word Index to the Praśastapādabhāṣya: A complete word index to the printed editions of the Praśastapādabhāṣya, by Johannes Bronkhorst & Yves Ramseier, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994
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