

The Logical and the Historical Significance of the Jaina Philosophical Tradition

K. K. DIXIT

A PROPER evaluation of the Jaina philosophical tradition necessarily requires a proper evaluation of the Indian philosophical tradition as a whole. For even a reader who has a fairly correct idea of what the Jainas have to say by way of solving the fundamental philosophical problems might underrate or overrate the Jaina performance in case he happens to be ignorant of or misinformed about the background of this performance. We therefore begin our treatment of the Jaina philosophical tradition with a brief preliminary survey of the Indian philosophical scene of the times when this tradition arose and developed.

By philosophy we understand a reasoned and systematic working out of the fundamental nature of what constitutes reality, and as thus understood philosophy is a comparatively late product of India's otherwise hoary history. The material that has come down to us in the form of the Mantra, Brāhmaṇa or even the Aranyaka portion of the Vedas has the remotest affinity with a philosophical enquiry, but the Upaniṣads seem to make a break with the pre-philosophical past. However, even the Upaniṣadic texts are not of the form of systematic treatises on philosophical problems; for what they do is to narrate stories that inevitably culminate in a dialogue where certain characters discuss

—more or less elaborately—some stray problems whose philosophical import is doubtless obvious. The first attempt to systematize the scattered philosophical teachings of the Upaniṣads was made in the Brahmasūtras, but even they do not seem to have influenced in any material fashion the contemporary discussions on philosophy which went on without taking any serious notice of them till at least the time of Śaṅkara, the author of the earliest available commentary on them. In the post-Śaṅkara period there was no doubt a spate of mutually hostile commentaries on the Brahmasūtras, but the scholastic atmosphere that was the hall-mark of these commentaries—Śaṅkara's not excluded—was substantially out of tune with the tradition of free philosophical enquiry that had matured in the country by the time Śaṅkara appeared. It is the rise and development of this tradition that constitutes the real subject-matter of a historian of Indian philosophy; and the pre-Śaṅkara phase of this tradition requires to be specially studied with a view to correctly assessing the influence exerted on it by Śaṅkara and his fellow-commentators (all hostile to him as to each other) of the Brahmasūtras.

The Indian tradition of a systematic treatment of philosophical problems can be broadly subdivided into two groups. One of these repudiates the reality of empirical phenomena and banks on some sort of mystic intuition as the sole means of comprehending that trans-empirical reality which is here declared to be 'real' reality (in contrast to 'illusory' reality that empirical phenomena allegedly are). The other group ascribes sole reality to empirical phenomena and seeks to comprehend their nature through rational means. For the sake of convenience the former group might be designated 'transcendentalist', the latter 'empiricist'. Now the earliest powerful spokesmen of the transcendentalist trend are the authors adhering to the Buddhist schools of Śūnyavāda and Vijñānavāda while the earliest powerful spokesmen of the empiricist trend are those adhering to the Brahmanical schools of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā; (the Brahmanical school of Sāṅkhya, too, was empiricist and had a considerable past, but in the period of systematic treatises—a period which alone matters from the point of view of our present interest—it wielded meagre influence and was extremely vulnerable to criticism).¹ An empiricist trend within the Buddhist camp took some time to crystallize. For it

1 From the point of view of our present interest it is also an immaterial consideration whether the Sāṅkhya as well as the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools had not a 'pre-Brahmanical' past.

is the followers and commentators of Diñnāga and Dharmakīrti in their capacity as Sautrāntika thinkers who constitute the really powerful school of Buddhist empiricism, a school whose pre-history may be traced in the philosophical investigations of the Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika authors of the pre-Diñnāga period. That the followers of Diñnāga and Dharmakīrti—and the Masters themselves—have to be studied sometimes in their capacity as Sautrāntikas and sometimes in their capacity as Vijñānavādins is an anomaly but is the only course open to the student who wishes to appreciate the most valuable of the Buddhist contributions to the empiricist tradition of Indian philosophy.

It was in this background that the Jaina entered the arena of philosophical enquiry. His affiliation to the empiricist tradition was unequivocal but his mode of arguing his case had two conspicuous tendencies. In the first place, he thought fit to cross swords with the transcendentalist whose teaching it was that 'real' reality can in no way be described through words (and that because it can in no way be comprehended through rational means). Secondly, he made it a fashion to demonstrate how a particular philosophical thesis of his was a synthesis of two onesided theses whose respective defects it managed to avoid precisely because it was such a synthesis. The first of these tendencies was responsible for the emergence of the doctrine of 'seven forms of assertion', the second left its indelible imprint on the stand taken by the Jaina on those burning questions which the empiricist philosophers of the time were seeking to answer in their respective manners. We consider these tendencies one by one.

A favourite—and basic—argument of the transcendentalist was that each and every empirical phenomenon is illusory because it is in the very nature of things impossible to describe it either as existent or as non-existent or as both existent and non-existent or as neither existent nor non-existent. In essence the argument was that an empirical phenomenon is indescribable (and hence illusory) because there is no knowing what this phenomenon is or what it is not. And a simple answer to this argument would have been that an empirical phenomenon is describable because we can know both what this phenomenon is and what it is not. But as a matter of historical fact the argument in question was considered by the general run of Indian empiricists to be too fantastic to merit an answer. To the Jaina this attitude of his empiricist colleagues seemed to betray complacency and he on his part came out with an elaborate rejoinder against the

transcendentalist. Thus he maintained that an empirical phenomenon is describable in as many as seven ways, viz.

- (i) by pointing out what this phenomenon is,
- (ii) by pointing out what this phenomenon is not,
- (iii) by first pointing out what this phenomenon is and then what it is not,
- (iv) by confessing that it is impossible to simultaneously point out what this phenomenon is and what it is not,
- (v) by combining the attitudes (i) and (iv),
- (vi) by combining the attitudes (ii) and (iv),
- (vii) by combining the attitudes (iii) and (iv).

In this rejoinder of the Jaina against the transcendentalist three points are noteworthy.

(1) The Jaina suggests that to point out what an empirical phenomenon is is to describe it as existent while to point out what it is not is to describe it as non-existent. Thus the transcendentalist who asserts that an empirical phenomenon is describable neither as existent nor as non-existent is sought to be silenced by the Jaina by his counter-assertion that it is describable both as existent and as non-existent. An impartial reader should nevertheless take note of the rather technical character of the Jaina's description of an empirical phenomenon as non-existent (i.e. of his description of it not as something utterly non-existent but as something different from the phenomena that are other than itself).

(2) The Jaina suggests that to confess that it is impossible to simultaneously point out both what an empirical phenomenon is and what it is not is to confess that this phenomenon is indescribable. This might seem to be a concession in favour of the transcendentalist who is of the view that an empirical phenomenon is utterly indescribable. As a matter of fact, the Jaina simply demonstrates to the transcendentalist the only possible sense in which (according to the Jaina) an empirical phenomenon can be said to be indescribable; he is thus forestalling the latter's extravagant claims in this connection. In any case, an impartial reader should take due note of the rather technical character of the Jaina's admission that an empirical phenomenon is also somehow indescribable.²

² There is also another sense—not intended in present context—in which the Jaina admits an empirical phenomenon to be indescrib-

(3) The crux of the Jaina's position lies in asserting that an empirical phenomenon is describable both as what it is and as what it is not, an assertion which was fully endorsed by the entire camp of empiricists who stood opposed to the transcendentalist's rank nihilism and obscurantism.

The Jaina's intervention in the inner-family discussions of the Indian empiricists had its own peculiar features. These empiricists were one in maintaining that the empirical world of physical and psychological phenomena is a veritable reality and is guided in its operations by the law of causal determination; but the different schools offered different accounts of the physical and psychological phenomena and of the functioning of the law of causation. The most acute—and the most fruitful—controversies were those in which the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika authors on the one hand and their Buddhist counterparts on the other were parties; (however, certain typical Sāṅkhya and Mīmāṃsā positions, too, made for a better clinching of the philosophical issues). The most important questions that gave rise to controversy were the following :

- (i) What is permanent and what is transient in the world of empirical phenomena ?
- (ii) What relation holds between a composite body and its component parts ?
- (iii) What is the nature of the substance-attribute relationship ?
- (iv) What is the nature of the universal—as contrasted to the particular—features exhibited by empirical phenomena ?

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika authors were chiefly concerned with the last three questions, the Buddhist authors with the first; but as the controversy developed the two schools defined their respective positions on each of the four questions as follows :

(i) On the question of permanence and transience the Buddhists maintained that the entire world of empirical phenomena is ever-changing, so that nothing lasts for more than one moment. As against this, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas maintained that certain phenomena are no doubt momentary but that certain others last for a limited period of time while still others last for ever.

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able. That sense is conveyed when it is argued that an empirical phenomenon is indescribable because it is possessed of an infinite number of attributes which it is impossible to describe in their entirety.

(ii) On the question of the relation between a composite body and its component parts the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas maintained that a composite body is an independent entity over and above its component parts (the former residing in the latter by the relation technically called Samavāya). As against this, the Buddhists maintained that it is merely conventional to say that there exists a composite body over and above its component parts.

(iii) On the question of the substance-attribute relationship the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas maintained that substances constitute one group of real entities while their attributes (further subdivided into qualities and actions and residing in substances by Samavāya relation) constitute another such group. As against this, the Buddhists maintained that it is merely conventional to say that the empirical world consists of substances on the one hand and their attributes on the other.

(iv) On the question of the universal features exhibited by empirical phenomena the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas maintained that a universal feature is an independent (and external) entity that resides (by Samavāya relation) in the substances, qualities or actions of which it is the universal feature. As against this, the Buddhists maintained that it is merely conventional to say that certain empirical phenomena share a universal feature in common.

Now the Jaina found something unsatisfactory—and also something satisfactory—about both the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Buddhist positions on the four questions here posed. Hence in each case he sought to offer a new position which was in his eyes free from the defects vitiating the two rival positions that had held the field. The following is how he proceeded :

(i) On the question of permanence and transience he maintained that each and every empirical phenomenon is permanent so far as its substance-aspect is concerned while it is momentary so far as its mode-aspect is concerned.

(ii) On the question of the relation between a composite body and its component parts he maintained that to assume the form of a composite body is nothing but the assuming of a particular mode by the concerned component parts in their capacity as substances.

(iii) On the question of the substance-attribute relationship he maintained that a substance represents the substance-aspect of an

empirical phenomenon while its attributes represent the quality-aspect or the mode-aspect of the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

(iv) On the question of the universal features exhibited by the empirical phenomena he maintained that a universal feature exhibited by certain particular phenomena is but the mode called 'similarity in relation to the rest' which each of these phenomena comes to assume.

On closer perusal it turns out that differences among the Indian empiricists on the question of permanence and transience were more vital than those of the remaining three questions.

As a matter of fact; we can even say that on these last three questions the positions adopted by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the Buddhist and the Jaina schools were vitally the same and can easily be translated from one into another.

The reason for it is that all these three schools seek to explain away—as was done by their transcendentalist rivals—the phenomenon of the composition of a body out of certain component parts, the phenomenon of a particular feature belonging to a particular entity, and the phenomenon of a universal feature belonging to a group of entities; in each of these cases the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika offered his explanation by speaking of these or those independent entities (of the form of substance, qualities, actions, universals) entering into the relationship technically called Samavāya, the Buddhist by speaking of these or those conventional usages being adopted, and the Jaina by speaking of these or those substances assuming different modes. There is no denying that each of these modes of speech has its own advantages and disadvantages, but to think—as will be done by the partisans of the three schools in question—that the idea sought to be conveyed by these different modes of speech is not the same seems fraught with confusion.

Then we come to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the Buddhist and the Jaina treatments of the question of permanence and transience. On

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3 Certain Jaina scholars make no distinction between quality-aspect and mode-aspect; on their view it can be said that the attributes of a substance represent the mode-aspect of an empirical phenomenon. On the other hand, those Jaina scholars who distinguish between quality-aspect and mode-aspect tend to identify quality-aspect with substance-aspect, but since an express distinction between substance-aspect and quality-aspect is necessary to their position the above formulation may be taken to represent this very position.

this question the difference between the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Buddhist stands was considerable, that between the Buddhist and the Jaina stands virtually non-existent. The following considerations should elucidate the point.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika ever remained unconvinced of the correctness of the thesis that it is impossible for an entity while occupying a particular place and time to exhibit precisely the same totality of features as it does while occupying another place and time. But it was this very thesis that the Jaina endorsed when he maintained that two empirical phenomena must differ in respect of their mode-aspect even if they happen to be identical in respect of their substance-aspect. The Buddhist virtually agreed with the Jaina criticism of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika stand, but since he made no distinction between the substance-aspect and the mode-aspect of an empirical phenomenon he expressed this agreement of his by simply maintaining that any two empirical phenomena must differ from each other. Thus the Jaina agrees with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika insofar as both find it possible to somehow distinguish between an entity and its features, while he agrees with the Buddhist insofar as both hold that the totality of features exhibited at one place and time can never be precisely the same as that exhibited at another. Deeper probe, however, reveals that the Jaina's present agreement with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika is well-nigh nominal while his present agreement with the Buddhist is extremely substantial. For to distinguish or not to distinguish between an entity and its features is almost a matter of adopting or not adopting a particular mode of speech; but to hold or not to hold that the totality of features exhibited at one place and time can never be precisely the same as that exhibited at another is a matter of adopting or not adopting a philosophical thesis of great importance. It is therefore a point of material significance that the Buddhist and the Jaina agree in maintaining that the world of empirical phenomena is ever-changing, a thesis in opposition to which the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika maintains that the world of empirical phenomena is not ever-changing but that it just exhibits change here and there, now and then. On the other hand, it is a point of mere formal significance that the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Jaina agree in employing a terminology that distinguishes between an entity and its features, a procedure in opposition to which the Buddhist employs a terminology that does not make this distinction.

In passing, it should also be noted that the Jaina's closer agreement with the Buddhist than with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika on the most



crucial question of permanence and transience leads him to agree more closely with the Buddhist than with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika also on the remaining three central questions of philosophical enquiry. However, as has already been pointed out, on these three questions the difference between the Buddhist and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika is itself rather meagre.

