

Ontological Minimalism: Dharmakīrti's Buddhist Critique of Relations

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Philosophers have always argued about the question of relations.
-Albert the Great

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In the history of Buddhism, philosophical speculation has seldom been conceived as either an end in itself, or simply an attempt to satisfy intellectual curiosity. Buddhist Philosophy is an instrument to overcome wrong views and to justify the right view. Its persuasive and curative task is, in certain texts and in some historical phases, explicitly polemical, but remains grounded in the soteriological telos of Buddhism. The Buddha, himself, sets the example by refraining from metaphysical speculation; that he declines to answer Malunkyaputta's earnest but speculative questions is a case in point. What we see in the *Culamalunkyasutta* is indicative of a constant theme in Buddhist texts, namely, a pragmatic approach to philosophical activity. It is certainly not the case that Buddhism is committed simply to the assertion of dogma, nor that it does not involve philosophical nuances. The philosophical preoccupations of the Buddhists, however, remain both anchored in their teleological commitment to *nirvāṇa* and directed toward the path to achieving it. Regarding the metaphysical questions that he leaves unanswered, the Buddha says:

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Why have I left that undeclared? Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of spiritual life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to Enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*. That is why I have left it undeclared.¹

The Buddhist ontological and metaphysical commitments, whether to *dharma*s, emptiness or *svalakṣaṇa*s, are motivated by a preoccupation with Nirvana. A particular set of ontological commitments is espoused and defended only because it is understood as the correct interpretation of Buddhist doctrine and thus directly relevant to the liberative program. The Buddhists are in agreement with the other Classical Indian schools that philosophical inquiry into the nature

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of reality is essential to overcoming the conceptual distortions that pervert our grasp of reality and lead to false beliefs which ultimately are at the root of suffering. Philosophical discourse, in the classical Indian *darśanas*, is not incidental to the search for liberation, but is, in fact, integral to it. As the *Nyāya Sūtra* puts it, “It is by understanding the nature of reasoned inquiry, epistemology and debating theory that one attains the highest goal (*niḥśreyasa*).”² The next verse makes the idea more explicit by establishing a causal connection between knowledge (of what there is) and liberation (*apavarga*). “Pain, birth, activity, faults and misapprehension (*mithyājñāna*)—on the successive annihilation of these in the reverse order, there follows release.”³ The removal of *mithyājñāna* through philosophical inquiry is the foundation of the edifice of Nyāya. This removal of “misapprehension” is achieved by clearly delineating the way the world really is.

The debate between the Nyāya realists and the Buddhist anti-realist Dignaga and his followers is of singular importance in the history of Indian philosophy. Although the Dignaga School adopted the dialectical style of Nyāya, its adherents strongly resisted Nyāya realism, in defense of an idealistic doctrine that developed from *Yogācāra*. The Buddhist philosophers rejected the common sense realism espoused by the Naiyayikas, which claimed that experience gave us access to reality, i.e., the world as it is. Reality, according to the Buddhist, is grasped through “pure sensation,” which excludes the conceptual framework that consciousness imposes on the data of pure sensation. The Buddhist logicians are not idealists in the sense that they deny all external reality, that is to say, see it as entirely mind-dependent. Their opposition to realism lies in their contention that most of what naïve realism takes to be external is merely a conceptual construct. The idealism of the Buddhist logicians rejects the folly of desiring a world that is a conceptual construct. Experience, they argue, does not give us access to the world as it is, but merely a world seen through the lens of a consciousness afflicted with craving, and thus suffering, which affords only a distorted view of reality. Where the realist accuses the Buddhist of burying phenomenological “givens” under speculation, the Buddhist argues that his revisionary stance is of singular importance for the sake of showing that what we take to be given is merely constructed or a “conceptual elaboration” (*kalpanāpodha*). The classic example of such a conceptual construct is the self, whose constructed status we have to discern as an integral aspect of the Buddhist soteriological enterprise.

From the realist standpoint, if the cognition of particulars as related is indeed the cognition of an extra-mental reality, then not only are the particulars real and mind-independent but so are the relations that obtain between these particulars. Given the premise that perception gives us access to reality, Nyāya naïve realism cannot consistently deny

the reality of relations. Anti-realisms of various shades, including those espoused by the Buddhists, with their skeptical stance toward the given (specifically, the conceptual baggage foisted upon the data of perception), cannot accept the extra-mental reality of relations.

The crux of the issue central to the struggle between realism and idealism in the classical Indian context is simply getting things right. Epistemic success in discerning the nature of reality, i.e., knowing what there is necessary for liberation. The interest in such a program of epistemic success is described by Paul Williams in his *Buddhist Thought*. Williams writes: "In the Indian context it would have been axiomatic that liberation comes from discerning how things actually are, the true nature of things."⁴ Thus, the debate between the realist and the idealist is neither merely a speculative exercise, nor an idle curiosity. In the context of relations, the central question is whether we should commit to the existence of relations in any substantive way; in other words, are relations a kind of *res* and do they possess being? On the other hand, is relation-talk that moves in the direction of granting them existence, simply a reification of our conceptual creations?

This paper seeks to examine the Buddhist arguments against the reality of relations. To clarify the context for the Buddhist critique we will first elucidate the importance of relations for the old Nyāya School and the paradigmatic relations they espouse. Secondly, we will discuss the Buddhist stance on relations and then turn to the specifics of Dharmakīrti's arguments against the reality of relations. Although Dharmakīrti is as astute a philosopher as his Nyāya counterparts, his argument against relations is based, we contend, on a fallacious premise. Dharmakīrti presents his case against relations with a peculiar concept of relations in mind, a notion that none of his opponents maintain. In other words, he argues against a straw-man. The apparent success of his argument will have to be reconsidered once this defect is made explicit.

The Problem of Relations

In the idiom of Classical Indian philosophy, the concept of relation (*sambandha*) is quite clearly distinguished from other concepts such as attribute, property and adjective. An attribute (*guṇa*) is characterized as an essential property of a substance, as opposed to a *dharma*, which is a non-essential property. Attributes are more essential to substances than mere properties or *dharma*s. The Nyāya system also speaks of relational properties (*upādhi*) or adventitious complex properties like "potness" (*sakhandopādhi*) and "etherness" (*ākāśatva*), which is called an unanalysable relational property (*akhandopādhi*). Adjectives operate like "red," as in the "rose is red,"

where the word describes the color, whereas the relation “being red” connects the color (i.e., the property) with the rose and should not be confused with the adjective. Where the adjective describes, the relation brings about the predication of “red” to the individual “rose.”

R. K. Tripathi holds that relation is the “central question” in all Indic philosophical systems. On his view, the attitude that each *darśana* adopts towards relations determines their “metaphysical structure.” Tripathi is right in emphasizing that the manner in which Indic philosophical systems are concerned with relations is primarily with the reality, i.e., the ontological status of relations. This concern is motivated and energized by a persistent interest in discerning whether non-dualism or pluralisms of different shades accurately account for reality. Broadly speaking, in the Indian context, non-dualism implies an anti-realism about relations, while pluralism implies a commitment to the reality of relations.

The positions articulated in Indian Philosophy include (1) either the relata are real and the relation is not, (2) both the relata and the relation are real, or, one could argue, (3) the relata and relations are all equally unreal. The Dignaga School would argue that both the relata and relations as experienced are unreal. The position that relations as well as the relata are equally real is the fundamental metaphysical doctrine of all the realist systems, especially the Nyāyikas. The position that “relata are real” is commonsensical, but how does the reality of relations become pivotal to Nyāya naïve realism?

For the Nyāya realist, although relations cannot be known without reference to the relata, their existence is not contingent upon the relata. Relation is not a passive concept, but has a constructive role in the Nyāya system. In fact, the pluralist systems like Nyāya, Mimamsa, and the realist schools of Vedānta like Viśiṣṭadvaita etc. cannot sustain their pluralism without the reality of relations.⁵ Nyāya makes substance, qualities, actions, universals, and other items in its rich and diverse ontology, dependent, as it were, on the inherence relation (*samavāya*). On the Nyāya view, as we shall see in the next section, the world, as experienced, is built on a relational foundation. Given the importance of the inherence relation in the fabric of realism, the anti-realist critics of Nyāya like the Advaitins and the Buddhists have to criticize and reject the concept of relation in order to overcome realism. If the relational foundation is incoherent, then realism becomes untenable.

The Nyāya Background

The Buddhist critique of relations is directed against the Nyāya realism about relations. Unlike the table of categories of Aristotle and Kant that include relation, *sambandha* is not a category in Nyāya; inherence (*samavāya*), a particular kind of relation, is a category

(*padārtha*).⁶ On the other hand, contact (*samyoga*), another kind of relation, is classified as a quality (*guṇa*). Contact, inherence and the self-linking (*svarūpa*) relation are paradigmatic relations in Nyāya. Contact is a non-eternal relation, because it is a contingent conjunction of two (separable) things having an independent existence. The things in contact are said to exist independently by virtue of the fact that each one has different constituents from the other. Contact can be understood as a quality that inheres in two substances simultaneously and like other qualities is perceptible. Consider, for example, a person bearing a staff: the perception of the staff, the person, and the contact between them gives rise to the perceptual awareness “staff-bearer.” In this case, the person is the qualificandum, the staff is the qualifier, and contact is the relation between them.⁷ This *samyoga* relation brings two or more substances together in a manner that makes them contiguous in such a way that there seems to be no intervening space between them. Besides this proximity, however, it does not create any real difference in the substances thus connected. To prove the objectivity or reality of contact, the Naiyayikas point out that although “the farm, water, seed etc” are already existent, they do not produce a sprout because a relation is lacking. As soon as this relation appears, however, a sprout is produced from the seed and this relation is *samyoga*.⁸ Furthermore, the Nyāya position is that contact itself resides in or relates to a substance by means of the relation of inherence. This makes the acceptance of contact as relation and its explanatory value with regard to perceived phenomena contingent upon the acceptance of inherence. D. N. Shastri has cited this relationship of quality contact to category inherence as an instance of Nyāya “realism with a vengeance which stands in radical conflict with the idealism of the Buddhist.”⁹

Inherence is a pre-occupation for the Vaiśeṣika thinkers as well. For them, the world is composed of entities that arise from the combinations of the three primary entities: substrata (*dharmin*), properties (*dharma*), and relations (*sambandha*). Kanāda, the founder of the Vaiśeṣika system, includes the relation of inherence as a category (*padārtha*). Inherence is further explained as generating the cognition that something is “here,” i.e., in this particular locus. As Prasastapāda develops the Vaiśeṣika view, inherence is understood as the relation “between two inseparable (*ayutasiddha*) things” and as the relation between locus and what is located on it.¹⁰ There seems to be a problem in admitting that two things are inseparable, while admitting a relation between them. If they are indeed inseparable, why do they need to be connected by a relation? In addition to this apparently paradoxical relation of inseparables, the concept of inherence raises some other logical difficulties. In order to be related, things have to exist separately, but in the case of inseparables that seem to be numerically

one, the relata cannot be specified. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers, as we will see, develop a response to this criticism.

In his discussion of inherence, Prasastapāda also sidesteps the regress problem that dogs relation-talk. In order to avoid being overwhelmed by the question of how inherence is related to that which it connects, he adumbrates the view that the relation of identity (*tādātmya*) connects inherence to the relata. Inherence neither can be related by contact, as only substances can be in contact, nor can inhere in the relata by a further inherence since, like Being (*sattva*), there is only one inherence. Prasastapāda, in order to strengthen this doctrine of identity by means of which he is able to avoid the regress, further argues that inherence is “self-occurent” (*svatamāvriddhi*) and is not caused by something else. This makes inherence an “absolute relation” in the sense that it does not require a further relation to connect it to its relata.¹¹

According to T. K. Bhattacharya, Prasastapāda’s definition consists of three commitments: (1) Inherence obtains between inseparables, (2) Inherence obtains between a substratum and that which is supported by it, and (3) Inherence is the cause of the cognition “It is here.”¹² The concept of *ayutasiddha* or “inseparability” becomes vital to the Nyāya theory of inherence (*samavāya*). The explanation of this concept is somewhat circular in the Nyāya texts, where the relata are never separated¹³ or are said to not exist as unrelated.¹⁴ The examples given for inherence include the inherence of the color in a cloth, inherence of threads in cloth, the inherence of a universal in a particular, and the inherence of motion in a ball. *Samavāya* involves a relation between a substratum and what is supported by it; as in the last example, the ball is the substratum of the motion that is inherent in it.

Inherence is eternal, one, perceivable, and capable of linking other real objects without requiring another relation.¹⁵ This metaphysical structure of inherence needs to be maintained to ensure that this category does not collapse. If inherence were non-eternal, it would be an effect of something else and we would have to give a causal account of inherence. This causal story would, to say the least, be difficult to reconstruct because this is a concept that plays a leading role in most other causal stories. From the Nyāya standpoint, all causal accounts presuppose inherence, with the exception of those that pertain to efficient (*nimitta*) causation. For example, the production of a piece of cloth requires inherence since the cloth is said to inhere in the threads, which are its material cause. The inherence relation is at work in the instantiation of universals, the presence of qualities in substances, and in the connection of wholes to their parts. The status granted to inherence implies that a relation can exist even when there is no relatum, which is precisely what Nyāya realism claims.

According to Matilal, by “eternal” the Nyāya philosophers mean simply that the inference between a cloth and its threads is such that the relata do not exist independently.¹⁶ Consequently, after the destruction of the relata, the inference is also apparently destroyed. Even in the case in which a piece of cloth is torn in such a way that only one relatum, i.e., individual threads remain, the inference seems to have been destroyed. Notice that, for the Naiyayikas, each occurrence of inference is not an instance of a universal. The unique metaphysical status of inference as one needs to be maintained because an admission of a universal of inference would require a further relation to explain the process of instantiation of this universal; this would lead to a regress. Moreover, inference cannot be produced, i.e., an effect, since admitting that it can be produced would contradict the tenet that it is numerically one. If inferences could be produced, then they clearly would be more than one. Since inference is thus a “non-effect,” the Nyāya philosophers conclude that it is *nitya* (literally “eternal” or “endless”).

Nyāya and the Buddhist Response

The Buddhist position on relations, Stcherbatsky argues, has to reflect the core doctrine that reality is ultimately “non-relative, it is the Absolute.”¹⁷ The Buddhist’s reason for denying the reality of relations is a view of ultimate reality that is decidedly anti-pluralist. The anti-pluralism of the Buddhist consists not in denying that there is more than one real, but in reducing reality to a single kind. The Buddhist denies that relations have anything more than a transactional and conceptual reality and seeks to scold the realists for their hypostatizing tendencies. The rejection of relations as anything other conceptual constructs has this consequence, which, as Stcherbatsky puts it, is that “if all relations are cancelled, the Unrelated alone emerges as the ultimate reality.”¹⁸

This stands in stark contrast to the radical realism of the Nyāya philosophy, which is clearly expressed by Uddyotkara, who writes, “The perception of the connection of an object with its mark is the first act of sense-perception from which inference proceeds.”¹⁹ Thus, Nyāya contends that in addition to objects, i.e., relata, the relations between said objects are perceived. For example, the cognition “The boy with the dog” is composed of the qualifier, the boy, the qualificand, the dog and the preposition “with,” which is the relation that connects “the boy” and “the dog.” Besides “the boy” and “the dog,” the Naiyayikas claim that even the relation “being with” is perceptible. The Nyāya school’s epistemology has a ground floor assumption that if we have knowledge of an object, that object has the ontological density of an existent entity. In other words, there cannot be an object such that it is the object of a true cognition and is non-existent. As V. N. Jha states, “The object of

true knowledge must be an ontological fact or reality.”²⁰ It is the real entity which, under the right circumstances, causes its own cognition, as does the relation “being with” in our example. On the Nyāya view, relations are neither fictional nor conceptual entities like a hare’s horn or a flower that blooms in the sky. Fictional entities cannot cause their cognitions and thus cannot be objects of true knowledge; hence, Nyāya scrupulously distinguishes relations from that class of entities.

The cognition of a relation between a boy and a dog, a father and son, or the color “red” and the cloth in which it inheres is given through perception. The Naiyayikas take this cognition as evidence for the ontological reality of relations. Unlike the idealist Advaitin, they affirm the ontological status of relations. Basing their conclusion on the role played by relations in the generation of cognition, the Nyāya philosophers argue that relation is the third element present in any cognition that involves a qualifier-qualificand structure. On the Nyāya view, fidelity to this phenomenological given implies realism about relations.

The Buddhist response to this position compares relations when considered as “objective realities” to “unfair dealers” who purchase goods without paying for them—the relations masquerade as perceptible, while they, in fact, lack any specific form “which they could deliver to consciousness as a price” for the “acquisition” of perceivability.²¹ If relations were perceptible as separate entities, they would have to possess a form that is represented in consciousness. A relation, however, lacks a form that can be represented in consciousness and, consequently, cannot be objectively real. If it were a separate entity, such a form should be available to consciousness. The Buddhist is making the case that unlike stones, chairs, or pens, which have definite forms that are represented in consciousness, relations seem to have no forms and hence cannot be separate entities. Relations as *tertium quid* are not given in perception, although we do experience particulars as related.

By thus rejecting relations, the Buddhist logicians save their view of reality as composed of unrelated point-particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*), but the Buddhist logicians still have to account for inference and inferential knowledge, which is unmistakably based on relations. Like the Naiyayikas, the Buddhist accepts inference (*anumāna*) as a valid source of cognitions. These relations, in order to generate valid inferential knowledge, have to reflect reality and the connections that pervade it. Inference proceeds from the inferential mark, which discloses a relation on which the inference is built. According to the *Vaiṣeṣika Sūtra*, the inferential mark indicates the presence of relations like “effect of,” “cause of,” “conjoined with,” “opposed to,” and “inhering in.”²² Even the Mimamsa philosophers like Sabara consider

inference to be of two kinds: “that in which the relation is experienced (*pratyaksato-drstāsambandha*) and that in which it is experienced from likeness (*sāmanyato-drstāsambandha*).²³ Relation is the hinge that holds the inferential process together, as inference cannot proceed without the perception of relations. Perceiving that there is smoke can lead to the inference that there is fire only if there is some relation between smoke and fire. Furthermore, the structure of reality does not disclose relations as fortuitous co-occurrences, but as necessary components of what there is. A necessary relation is evident between the premises of an inference and the conclusion that follows from it. When we see smoke in the distance, we infer that there is a fire. This inference as to the presence of the fire is based on a certain causal relation between smoke and fire. The guiding assumption for inferences is that relations are not added to phenomena by the mind, but phenomena are perceived as related. So, can we argue that accepting inference as a valid means of true cognition requires the Buddhist to accept relations?

According to Stcherbatsky's interpretation of the Buddhist logicians, they can be committed to a similar claim without conceding the reality of relations, because the entire relational matrix in which reality unfolds becomes, for them, a conceptual construct. Although relations lack being, they still perform the function of connecting things and make possible rational discourse about this subjectively constructed world of interrelated particulars. Buddhist nominalism also explains why we may (mistakenly) take relations to be real. According to the Buddhists, relations are nothing but conceptual constructs resulting from imprints (*vasanā*), and it is the nature of conceptual constructs to seem as though they possess objectivity. As John Dunne explains, “the nature of conceptual cognition is to imagine that its object has the nature of being an extra mental thing.”²⁴

For the Buddhist, the task lies in identifying the conditions that make possible what they consider the reification of relations. Relations only seem to possess being, but are, in fact, merely conceptual constructs that serve as guides to particulars. Accepting relations as real is akin to a conceptual illusion. Dharmakīrti explains in the *Pramāṇa-Vārtika* that perceptual experience, which grasps the nature of particulars, leaves a mental imprint. This “mental imprint” (*vasanā*) leads to an affirmation of an entity as extra-mental and possessing causal efficacy (*arthakriyākāritva*). In the course of practical action (*vyavhāra*), we “imagine” that conceptual constructs have externality or causal efficacy.²⁵ The projection of relations on reality is a mere conceptual construct (*kalpanā*). In fact, it is this conceptual construction that “mixes i.e. connects” essentially unrelated particulars.²⁶ Following the logic of such conceptual constructions, we

use relational phrases or causal ascriptions in language. It is only imagination that establishes a relation between an action and the agent, since on the Buddhist view; there is no enduring agent to relate (enduringly) with the action.²⁷ For the Buddhist logician, inferential cognition is not the means of access to ontological primitives, which, in fact, are given only in perception. Conceptual operations, which are pervasive in experience, impede our access to the unrelated unique particulars accessible to perception. As Dan Arnold puts it, the Buddhist “recurrently emphasizes that the distinguishing of separate qualifier and qualificand is a constitutively conceptual operation—in which case, perception can never itself register such a distinction.” He goes on to add that here “we have the claim that perception yields altogether uninterpreted data—unique particulars under no description.”²⁸ All description of course entails relation-talk and hence realism about relations necessarily has to be eschewed by the Buddhists.

Dharmakīrti's method

Dharmakīrti, in keeping with Buddhist ontological minimalism, rejects the reality of relations. His short work *Sambandhaparīkṣa* and Prabhacandra's commentary on it provide us the best insight into Buddhist arguments against relations. Dharmakīrti's project is dialectical, offering a Buddhist response to Nyāya realism and its commitment to a variety of specific relations that connect the constituents of the world. Dharmakīrti aims to refute “relation in general” with the consequence that all specific kinds of relation are then preemptively dismissed. The Buddhist minimalist “revisionary” metaphysics, in this instance as well as many others, have positions that are diametrically opposed to those of their rivals, the “descriptive” metaphysics supporting the naïve realism of Nyāya. The thesis of the *Sambandhaparīkṣa* is repeated as a refrain through the text “*Sambandho nāsti tattvataḥ*” (There are no relations, in reality).

Dharmakīrti's strategy is to systematically reject the Nyāya position on relations in order to establish his own position that can be considered as a species of conceptualist nominalism. The *Sambandhaparīkṣa* does not merely bear the burden of offering a critique of realism about relations, but also has the onus of reconciling Dharmakīrti's nominalism with other features of his ontology.²⁹

Dharmakīrti's critique of Nyāya relation-talk addresses the general assumptions about relation as such implicit in Nyāya as well as the philosophical difficulties which arise as a result of accepting particular kinds of relations, such as contact (*samyoga*), inherence (*samvāya*), nondifference (*tādātmya*), the causal relation, and the self-linking (*svārūpa*) relation, all of which are paradigmatic relations in Nyāya. In the Buddhist system, the constituents of reality are not the

kind of enduring entities that can enter into enduring, static relations. If reality is composed of momentary “flashes of energy,” then the only acceptable relation will be a form of causality which links one such flash with another. The core Buddhist concept of dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is an attempt to explain globally pervasive causal links and yet Dharmakīrti's critique of relations is largely a critique of the causal relation. We then have to ask what specific model of the causal relation is Dharmakīrti addressing in his critique of relations. Firstly, what did Dharmakīrti understand by the concept of relation?

Dharmakīrti understands relation as used in the philosophical idiom of his *purva-pakṣa*, to be either a type of dependence or an “amalgamation of forms” (*rupaṣleṣa*). To reject relation as an “amalgamation of forms,” Dharmakīrti introduces his definition of relation, according to which a relation always holds between at least two distinct things. If there is an instance of the amalgamation of forms, then we have only one object and there can be no relation, since by definition it can hold only between two distinct relata. Dharmakīrti's point seems to be that if we have a genuine instance of the merging of forms, then what we are left with is one identity, which, following Dharmakīrti's definition, cannot be a relation. In an instance of inherence of a color in a cloth, neither the cloth nor the color is available separately. The *rupa* of each of the relata is separately unavailable; hence, Dharmakīrti thinks that inherence describes an amalgamation (or “commingling” as Dunne translates it),³⁰ which then cannot qualify as a relation. In the case of a given inherence, Dharmakīrti argues that only one entity is given, thereby rendering incoherent any talk of relation. If we want to avoid Dharmakīrti's argument, we could try to redefine *rupaṣleṣa* simply as “absence of distance” (*nairāntarya*), which is consistent with the Nyāya definition of inherence. Here, we have once again lost sight of an essential characteristic of relation as defined by Dharmakīrti—that it has to connect two discrete entities. Proximity, to the point where all distance vanishes once again, on Dharmakīrti's definition, disallows relation.

Similarly, the “dependence” model of relations also fails. Dharmakīrti argues that two relata that are produced independent of one another cannot be said to exhibit dependence. Their separate production indicates that there is no dependency between them. On the other hand, it would be absurd to say that dependence holds between phenomena when they are not yet produced, as we would then have established a relation in the absence of the relata.³¹ Moreover, a non-existent entity cannot bear properties like *apekṣādharmā* (property of expecting or requiring something). Dependence, as Dharmakīrti understands it, requires this property in either one or both relata (in the

case of a mutual dependence). If an established entity (*sat-padārtha*) is to be a truly existent discrete entity, it cannot be dependent on something else. In the Buddhist view, having this expectancy means enduring beyond a “moment” and this cannot be accepted by the momentarist Dharmakīrti.³² The critiques of both the dependence and amalgamation models for relation take aim at inherence, the pivotal relation in the Nyāya system.

Dharmakīrti assumes that relations have to be “in” two distinct things and denies that relation can be defined in any other way. By thus locating the relation “in” two discrete particulars, Dharmakīrti radically circumscribes the concept of relation. Requiring two discrete particulars, this locative definition of relation is what allows Dharmakīrti to challenge the fulcrum of Nyāya realism, i.e., inherence. A discussion of relations would be incomplete without reference to the argument that has bedeviled all realists about relations, viz. the regress problem. Dharmakīrti too invokes it, although he does not make it the centerpiece of his refutation of relations.

The Regress Argument

Stcherbatsky compares this position to Bradley, for whom the relation regress leads to a rejection of relations. If relations are “facts” which connect other “facts” or, to use Bradley’s phrase “facts which exist between facts,” what connects them to the “facts” or things they seemingly connect?³³ It would be inaccurate to suggest that because they are unable to overcome this difficulty, the Buddhists, like Bradley, reject the reality of relations. As expected, like all anti-realists, Dharmakīrti also deploys the relation regress argument against relations. For Dharmakīrti, the relation regress argument (also known as the “relation paradox” or the “Bradley problem”), although lucid, is not the most important argument advanced to establish the illusoriness of relations. It is stated as follows:

Since of two relata there is a connection through one, this one is a relation—well then if that is proposed, what is the relation of the two, the relation and the relata? There is an infinite regress and therefore the idea of a relation does not hold.³⁴

As Stephen Phillips points out, the regress is based on the treatment of relation as a term³⁵ and admitting a term-like status for relations, leaves us no wriggle room to argue for any exemptions for relations since they are processed and packed as terms. Relations then will be subject to the same consideration as terms in determining whether they require relations to connect them to other entities. The relation (*qua* term) needs

something to connect it to the relata, and that something will need a further tie, and so on *ad infinitum*. There is something counter-intuitive about an infinite relational series (unlike an infinite causal series), which sends up logical red flags.

If the relation is identical with the relata, then Dharmakīrti has made his case for there being no relation in the sense of a distinct entity. If the opponent insists that relation is distinct and different from the relata, however, Dharmakīrti asks how this distinct item is related to the relata. If another relation is required to connect the relation with the relata, we have the beginnings of an infinite regress. The regress argument is also used by Śrīharṣa to reject the reality of relations from an Advaita perspective. Śrīharṣa discusses the regress as an "attribution dilemma."³⁶ If the property red is distinct from a pot, and if the relation of inherence connects it to the pot, then there has to be a relation between this inherence and each of the relata. A realist response to this criticism from the Buddhist and the Advaitin would be the suggestion that relations are not terms at all. Instead, they are, as Phillips puts it, a "different sort of critter."³⁷ Gaṅgeśa and other Navya-Nyāya thinkers rejected the regress critique by arguing that the relation was "self-linking" (*svarūpa*) and does not need something more to connect it to the relata.³⁸ Gaṅgeśa does not defend the self-linking relation as an "independent real." Thus, in the inventory of the world there is no "self-linking" relation. There are only things that are "self-linked."³⁹ From a Buddhist point of view, this would not be a rebuttal, but simply further evidence for the way in which imaginary constructs are foisted on particulars.

Rejecting the Causal Relation

Dharmakīrti's critique of the causal relation rests, once again, on the premise that "a relation is that which exists in two things." The problem with accepting the causal relation is that if a relation, by Dharmakīrti's definition,⁴⁰ needs two existent items "in" which it exists, then we will have to commit to a cause and effect that exist simultaneously. If "the cause and effect do not co-exist,"⁴¹ then a relation between them is not possible. The temporal gap between the cause and the presence of the effect makes any relation between them impossible. Relation, as existing "in" two objects, is dependent on the simultaneous existence of the two objects, i.e., the relata. If one relatum is produced through the action of the other relatum, we do not have simultaneously existing objects and the relation cannot hold. On the other hand, if two objects exist simultaneously, one of them cannot be caused by the other. Thus, for Dharmakīrti, simultaneous existence too does away with the possibility of a causal relation. Insofar as causality is a form of dependence, which, as mentioned earlier, is premised on

apekṣādharmā in one entity, and since that does not obtain in the case of a non-existent entity, causality as a relation does not exist.

Considering a causal relation as a distinct entity is an epistemic error. The causal relation, on the Buddhist view, is no relation, but is simply the fact that in the presence of some *x* (which we can call cause), some *y* (which we can call effect) occurs, and in the absence of this *x*, *y* does not occur.⁴² Dharmakīrti suggests that the reasoning associated with this positive and negative concomitance (*anvayavyatireka*) serve as a minimalist substitute for the ontologically burdensome causal relation. The phenomena of causal links, so vital to the dependent co-origination theory, can be preserved without acquiescing to anything other than a minimalist ontology. The causal relation (*kāryakāraṇata*) as a distinct entity is nothing but a hypostatization, a mental construct (*vikalpa*) that is formed based on this positive and negative reasoning.⁴³ Dharmakīrti uses the by now familiar strategy of arguing that if the cause and effect are truly distinct (*bhinna*) entities, there can be no relation between them. If, on the other hand, they are non-different (*abhinna*), then the question of a relation between them does not arise: “When two things are different, where is the question of any relation between them? If they are not different where is the question of any cause and effect relation also?”⁴⁴ The argument is further clarified by Prabhācandra’s commentary, which consigns the concept of a causal relation to a mere linguistic quirk; since “a single word stands for many different uses,” the term “causal relation” merely points to the fact of positive and negative concomitance and one should not be misled into affirming a separate causal relation.⁴⁵

The argument assumes that if two things are distinct, preserving this distinction implies that they cannot enter into a relation. The term used in Prabhācandra’s *Tika* to indicate this kind of distinctness is *svasvabhāvavyavasthita*⁴⁶ (“established in one’s own-form”). Following the logic of this term, to be a distinct particular is to be established in one’s own-form. The Buddhist argument, besides delineating what a relation has to be, specifies the conditions that will exclude things from being relata. If a particular does not meet the criterion for distinctness, it cannot be a relatum.

The Straw-Man Exposed

In examining Dharmakīrti’s treatment of relations, it becomes clear that to make the case for a non-dualistic ontology, the Buddhist depends on rejecting relations as real entities. Dharmakīrti’s arguments against relations assume what we have called a locative definition of relation and a strict criterion for what constitutes a distinct particular. Under these assumptions, relations as ontological reals are certainly untenable. Other schools of thought, however, do not share these

assumptions, the Nyāya least of all. One might even argue that Dharmakīrti's assumptions about the nature of relations and particulars are, in principle, unacceptable. At the very least, the concept of relation, as Dharmakīrti envisages it, is not at work in Nyāya, for which the model of relation is inherence as well as contact, the former being more fundamental to the Nyāya system as a whole. As we have seen, inherence does not, and, in fact, cannot proceed with the premise that it relates distinct and discrete particulars. If the Buddhist criterion for understanding a distinct particular is challenged, much of Dharmakīrti's argument is considerably weakened and the strategies used to refute relation in the *Sambandhaparikṣa* have to be abandoned.

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¹ In the Buddha's Words, 230-33.

² *Nyāya Sūtra* 1.1.1.

³ *Nyāya Sūtra* 1.1.2.

⁴ Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, 40.

⁵ The Madhva School is the exception which is pluralistic without accepting any other relations except *bheda* or difference.

⁶ *Tarka-Samgraha* 1.2.

⁷ Phillips, 235.

⁸ DN Shastri, 298.

⁹ D N Shastri, 376.

¹⁰ Potter and Bhattacharya (ed.) 51.

¹¹ The term "absolute relation" is used by D.N. Shastri to describe inherence (Sastri, 376).

¹² *Tushar Kanti Bhattacharya*, 18.

¹³ *Bhattacharya*, 19.

¹⁴ This explanation of the inherence relation as "inseparability" is offered by the later Nyāya commentators.

¹⁵ Although classical Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, for the larger part affirms these structural features of inherence, the Navya Nyāya philosopher Raghunatha considered inherence to be many and non-eternal. Prasatapada considers inherence to be inferred rather than perceived. Samkara Misra points out that the canonical treatment of inherence as one, was replaced by the theory that there were as many inferences as there were instances of inherence (see Potter and Bhattacharya (eds.), 46).

¹⁶ Matilal, 39.

¹⁷ Stecherbatsky, 246.

¹⁸ Stecherbatsky, 247.

¹⁹ Quoted in Stecherbatsky, *ibid.*

²⁰ Jha, xl.

²¹ Stecherbatsky, 247.

²² *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* S IX, ii, 1.

²³ Quoted in Randle, 149.

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- ²⁴ Dunne, 141-142.
- ²⁵ Pramana Vartika quoted in Dunne 140-141.
- ²⁶ Sambandhapariksa, tr. V Jha (henceforth SP) verse 5 pp 12-13.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Arnold, 30-31.
- ²⁹ This discussion, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper.
- ³⁰ See John Dunne's discussion of Sambandhapariksa in Dunne (2004).
- ³¹ Dharmakirti, SP 3.
- ³² Dharmakirti, SP 10.
- ³³ Stcherbatsky, *ibid.*
- ³⁴ Dharmakirti quoted in Phillips, 23.
- ³⁵ Phillips, 23.
- ³⁶ Phillips, 221.
- ³⁷ Phillips, 23.
- ³⁸ Dharmakirti, 11.
- ³⁹ Phillips, 235.
- ⁴⁰ Vide. SP verse 11, p 25
- ⁴¹ Dharmakirti, verse 8, p17
- ⁴² SP, *karika* 11-12
- ⁴³ SP, *karika* 17.
- ⁴⁴ SP, *karika* 18 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁴⁵ Tika on *Karika* 11-12, p 27.
- ⁴⁶ Tika on *karika* 18 in SP, p 39.