

SANTARAKSITA AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

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The philosopher Santaraksita was born in Bengal, the son of the king, in the same family as Atisa.. Renouncing worldly honors, he became a monk. Eagerly pursuing knowledge, he became one of the greatest Buddhist philosopher of all time. Professor of philosophy and abbot at the famous university-monastery of Nalanda in north India, he analyzed and refuted many tenets of Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools.

Summary:

Santaraksita asserted nothing to be true on the absolute level. But on the relative level he claimed that all of reality was nothing other than mind. He arrived at his philosophical position in the following way. There are two possible candidates for the nature of reality, -material and mental. If reality is material, it must be made of parts. The smallest of these are said to be atoms. But if they are the smallest, they must be indivisible. However, if they are indivisible, they can have no extension. (For the only number which is indivisible is zero.) Nor can they have sides to attach to one another, for if they had sides, they would be divisible into those sides. So they cannot combine to make up larger objects.

So it would seem that the only alternative is that reality is mental. It is, after all, impossible to deny awareness without utilizing awareness. But there are problems with the concept of mind and its relation to an object. Mind is either one or many, a unity or a plurality, one with its object or different. If mind is one with its object, that is, the same as its object, there is no way one mind could become aware of a changing world. If it is distinct from its object, the following problems arise: 1) If it is one and unified, how could a single mental state perceive an entire flowered cup while catching the diversity of its differently colored flowers.? 2) But if mind is compounded, other problems arise. How could a diversified mind perceive diversity in a single instant and recognize the different aspects of the cup to be the same? 3) And if the perceptions occur sequentially and very rapidly, as with a torch whirled around forming a circle of light, then one perceives what is not really there. Further, if mind is claimed to be real, we must ask how we know it. To know one's mind, we would need a mind to know it, and a mind to know that mind, etc. generating an infinite regress.

In spite of this, Santaraksita was not a nihilist. He believed that through non-conceptual meditation, one could have direct awareness of reality. This experience resulted in great spiritual bliss. It was enlightenment itself.

Santaraksita was also a great tantric master. He believed that certain practices on the relative level, with wisdom, compassion and mantra could lead to enlightenment. He is revered by Tibetan Buddhists as an emanation of Buddha Varjrapani

Santaraksita is famed for having held the reins of the two chariots of the Madhyamaka philosophy mainly associated with Nagarjuna, and the Chittamatra (Yogachara) school often associated with Asanga. The Madhyamaka school held that everything is emptiness. The Chittamatra school had many divisions, but all maintained the ontological primacy of the mental.

My goal in this paper is twofold, first to show how Santaraksita anticipated many of the ideas in Western philosophy from Descartes onward, and to show how modern philosophy can elucidate important points in his philosophy which were ahead of his time and perhaps were not fully understood by his contemporaries.

Like Descartes, Santaraksita makes self-awareness² central to knowledge. He differs from Descartes, in that he will not consider the self to be a thinking thing. Self-awareness is not an instance of xRy, that is as a relation between a subject and an object. Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*², quotes Lichtenstein approvingly as saying that Descartes only had the right to conclude from his 'cogito' argument, that there are thoughts, not that there is a thinker. Santaraksita would agree.

Santaraksita was under attack from those philosophers who feared that in accepting self-awareness, he would commit himself to the existence of a separate self." In defence, Santaraksita makes a move that could be associated with Wittgenstein, who said that a picture could have us in its thrall.³ The picture here is of a subject looking at an object which happens to be itself, like a person looking in a mirror. The same insight was at work in Gilbert Ryle's critique of Cartesian dualism as captivated by the picture of a ghost in the machine.⁴

Santaraksita claims that the standard picture or model of knowledge, the knower (subject), the known (object), and knowing (activity) fails to apply in the case of self awareness.⁵ The Wittgensteinian philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe makes a similar point. 'I' is not a word that refers. Is Santaraksita saying the same? I'm not sure, but certainly he wants to break the hold of the standard model of subject, object and activity, when we consider self-awareness.

Santaraksita has often been compared to Kant because his distinction between the absolute level of reality and the relative level looks very much like Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena. Gudnursen's fine book on Wittgenstein and Buddhism rightly warns the reader not to identify these two distinctions because the absolute level, namely emptiness, unlike Kant's noumenon, is not to be understood as an entity, but only as a negation of the relative level⁶. But Gudnursen is not entirely fair to Kant who at times insists that we must interpret noumena in a rather negative way. Nevertheless Kant does not always heed his own warnings. For example he claims there are three such noumena, God, the cosmos and the self.

Like the early empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, Santaraksita tends to reduce all objects to combinations of sensory data. And like Hume, he denies that causality is a necessary connection between events. In fact following Nagarjuna he goes further and denies the possibility of a causal relation altogether, considering it as only a useful illusion.

Santaraksita's philosophical position is often characterized as idealist on the relative level and Madhyamaka on the absolute level. But his 'holding the reins of the two chariots' seems to me to be more complex than just joining two views. Santaraksita does use Vasubandhu's⁷ arguments against materialism, but he then uses Sautrantika arguments against the Cittamatras.^{xx} Although I am really going out on a limb here, it seems to me that rather than accepting a straightforward idealist position on the relative level, Santaraksita is defending self-awareness, but understands cognitive processes neither as mental nor physical. Rather he claims that cognitive processes cannot arise from physical processes. In other words, he is against reducing them to physical processes. But does he reduce the physical with the mental? His critique of the various theories of perception of his contemporaries would indicate that he does not. He seems to find "mental" as problematic as "material". I find him to be rather a conceptual dualist. Both physical and mental predicates are constructed by the mind. But this does not make them the same.

On the relative level, real entities can be said to be composed of atoms, but only in the sense that the mind is able to divide things into smaller and smaller parts. The smallest, which is not divisible, is the atom. This atom is not the same as the empirically understood atom of modern physics, which is divisible. It is an *a priori* notion. And upon analysis, one discovers its paradoxical nature. If it is really indivisible, it must have an extension of zero, because zero is the only number that cannot be divided. And since zero plus zero is zero, atoms could not combine to add up to anything. Also they could not combine, because they could have no sides. If they contacted another atom, therefore, they would take up the same space. (This is Vasubandhu's argument.) Neither Santaraksita nor Vasubandhu puts the argument in terms of the number zero, but I suppose that is what they had in mind, for Indian mathematicians had invented the zero.)

One might argue that modern theories of the smallest particle are just as much a matter of logic as those of Santaraksita. The latest theory, that of vibrating strings existing in eleven dimensions, can only be understood in mathematical terms. And mathematical entities, many people believe, are conceptual constructs..

Santaraksita also argues that the atom cannot be either one or many. If it is a single indivisible particle, the above problems arise. If it is compound, it is not really an atom. I was surprised to learn that this dichotomy is an issue for modern physics. In Scientific American January 96,⁸ one prominent scientist was reported as saying that it may not be possible any longer to identify fundamental particles as single or compound. (Perhaps these notions have to be understood contextually or relatively).

The compatibility of Santaraksita's view with recent philosophical interpretations of quantum mechanics has been argued in a letter to me, by Michel Bitbol. the French philosopher of science:

... The major argument of Santaraksita is that whereas atoms are supposed, by their very definition, to be partless, their being embedded within a spatial continuum is enough to define parts. In the text, the parts are (so to speak) "facets": fractions facing different directions, and different atoms in the same directions. If the conclusion that atoms have parts is to be avoided, then the only option is to accept that they are one and the same, since this would entail there is nothing external the unique atom can be related to. Some similar problems of compatibility between the spatial status and the definition of atoms arose in classical western atomism. ... In all these examples, one sees the intermingling of metaphysical and geometrical arguments. The geometrical properties of atoms are often seen to be hardly consistent with their ascribed metaphysical properties. I think Sankaraksita's argument is of this type.

2) *How are these problems overcome in modern atomism? Few people usually raise this question. But I think interesting answers are available. The answers are quite simple to state:*

(a) The "properties" of elementary particles, including their spatial properties such as position or size, are not intrinsic but contextual (or relational);

(b) The very "existence" of these elementary particles is not intrinsic but contextual (or relational).

Point (a) was soon made clear by Bohr and Heisenberg. Heisenberg thus said that in modern physics a Lockean distinction between non-spatial "secondary" qualities and spatial "primary" qualities had become pointless. In fact, all the "qualities" of microphysics are "secondary", where secondary means relational.

*Point (b) arises from a straightforward reflection about Quantum Field Theory (see P. Teller, *An interpretive introduction to Quantum Field Theory*). Indeed, in QFT, the number of particles is an "observable", namely a value which arises with probability P when an interactive relation between the environment and an apparatus occurs. The number of particles is thus not inherently defined. P. Teller says that this means particles are not the sort of things that either exist or do not exist in the absolute.*

It is then very clear that the modern answer to the conundrums of classical atomism is exactly what Santaraksita had in mind in slokas 14 and 15: partless atoms are ascribed no intrinsic nature, no intrinsic existence. They are only correlates of a certain activity of investigations, whose byproduct is ordered by quantum theories. No intrinsic partlessness but rather partlessness relative to a certain range of method of partitioning; no intrinsic directions, or geometrical properties, but rather spatial properties relative to certain modes of geometrical measurements; no intrinsic existence but rather existence relative to one another and to certain methods of detection. The difference between the two cases is that Santaraksita formulated this idea as part of the Madhyamaka systematic deconstruction of any "essence", or assertion of inherent being, showing that it provided a rational dissolution to the problem of classical Indian atomism. Whereas modern physics was so to speak forced to this solution by the very limits of operativity of the old schemes of classical physics in the microscopic domain. But there is still reluctance against this solution nowadays: many physicists think this is a renunciation of the ideal of their science, and desperately look for "realist" interpretations of quantum theories (where they mean interpretation that ascribes inherent properties and inherent existence to their entities).

Because of these problems with the notion of the atom, Santaraksita rejects materialism, even on the relative level, except for practical purposes (e.g. how much lumber do we need to build our house?) He does not, however, reject awareness.

But if he is an idealist, how are we to make sense of sloka 16 in the *Madhyamakalankara* where he argues that the mental can only come from the mental. It cannot come from what is not mental. But what is this non-mental set of things from which things cannot come?

This problem can only be resolved, I believe, by appealing to what many philosophers assert, namely that mental properties are not reducible to physical properties. Therefore we must understand the mental/physical dichotomy in terms of types of concepts. This does not entail substance dualism. In other words, the issue is not as Descartes thought, that there are two substances interacting, a mental substance and a physical one, but rather, whatever reality is, mental activities such as thoughts are not the same as physical processes, such as breathing. And just as there is a problem today in physics of making sense of fundamental particles, there is a similar problem in making sense of mind. Because when Santaraksita turns to both the Sautrantika and Cittamatra views on how the mind perceives, he finds none of them to be coherent.

In addition to his critique of causality, a further proof that the relative level is not the ultimate level is provided by his critique of perception. It was generally assumed that the object of perception must be present since the past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist. But the object of perception cannot be present because the present is instantaneous and the object of perception endures

over time. Sautrantikas and Cittamatrins alike see the mind as an entity that can be thought of as one or many, and the perceptual object as one or many, and the inability to match up the mind with its object in an instantaneous present. For it is a given in all these systems that perception is only of what is in the present.

Through these considerations, Santaraksita is led to the conclusion that the mind cannot contact reality through perception. But if perceptions are not the cause of knowledge, what is? The mind cannot produce all its objects out of whole cloth. What is making us know successively, and not all at once? Santaraksita answers that the mind is not its own master, It is dependent on causes other than itself. In modern terms, it is in a matrix, and we are clueless about the causes that govern mind.

Santaraksita's final step, is to appeal to Nagarjuna's critique of causality. If mind is dependent on cause and effect, and we cannot make sense of cause and effect, then the final word is emptiness. Reality is, on the absolute level, beyond conception.

So what we have now is what has often been pointed out, a parallel between Santaraksita and Kant. Kant's noumenon, which is beyond conception, resembles Santaraksita's absolute level. His phenomena resemble Santaraksita's relative level.¹⁰ I'm not sure how far I can push this similarity. For Kant, phenomena are objectively real, -objects of scientific knowledge. Yet we know them through categories, and in terms of transcendental modes of apperception of space and time, which are mental. Ultimately their reality is noumenal, that is, the way in which the cosmos manifests itself to consciousness. Also Kant believes in relative permanence through space and time, a view which I doubt Santaraksita would accept even on the relative level.

Santaraksita is again, more consistent than Kant, because Kant thinks of the noumenal as including self, world and God. But since number is on the phenomenal level, how can Kant maintain that the noumenal is three? In fact, there is one place in the Critique where Kant says that all three forms of the noumenal are really God.¹¹ This obviously creates problems in trying to identify God with that which is beyond categories. Santaraksita, wisely, is silent on the nature of emptiness.

Finally, there is another resemblance to be drawn, that is between Santaraksita's understanding of mental and physical concepts, and Wittgenstein's understanding of the meaning of words in terms of tools in a tool chest, i. e. their use. For Wittgenstein, some words, such as tree, generally get their meaning from the manner in which we perceive objects. Others, such as beauty, do not, and have to be understood in terms of another perspective, the aesthetic rather than the physical. For Santaraksita too, concepts of physical objects and processes have their uses, but are not appropriately applied to concepts like thought and awareness. This provides a clue as to what Santaraksita is doing when he speaks of the usefulness of the physical level, or the mental level, or the absolute level.

But if emptiness is ultimate reality, Santaraksita is faced with the problem of how it can be of religious concern. If all is emptiness, so what? Why pay homage or endeavour to experience it as wisdom, compassion and bliss? What saves the Buddhist from pure scepticism or nihilism?

The answer to these questions is to be found in the *Tattvasiddhi*. Here Santaraksita argues that the way to reality (*tattva*, or suchness), involves a perspectival shift. Santaraksita argues that there is a hierarchy of perspectives that one can take, beginning with the commonsense view of reality in terms of physical objects.

The next step in the hierarchy is yogic perception. This results from familiarization with non-conceptual meditation which is non-dualistic, i.e. devoid of subject and object. The result of yogic practice, which is not of the ascetic sort, but relies on bliss, mental and sensory, is to produce in the meditator a non-dualistic state of happiness. All of experience is colored by this special form of bliss, which cannot be understood exactly in terms of ordinary bliss, but bears some similarity to it.

How are we as modern philosophers to understand this? Virgil Aldrich in his insightful *Philosophy of Art*¹² has given us a clue. Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, placed great weight on the duck–rabbit figure, a figure which could be viewed either as a duck or a rabbit. Aldrich applies this perspectival notion to works of art, (with the qualification that, while it is unimportant if one sees the duck-rabbit figure as either a duck or a rabbit, someone who is incapable of taking the aesthetic perspective is aspect blind.) There is the material thing, which can be viewed as either a physical object or an aesthetic object. A Jackson Pollack drip painting may be viewed by someone incapable of appreciating modern art as just oil pain dripping on canvas, i.e. as a physical object. The lover of modern art will see it as brilliant, intriguing, vibrating with color etc., i.e. as aesthetic object. How could one prove to the one who saw it only as a physical object that there was more to be seen? Perhaps going to art school might bring about a change. But how would one put this perspectival shift into words? Perhaps one could not. Similarly, Wittgenstein says in his *Notes on Religion*, that if one were to ask someone who had become religious, what had changed, the person may be unable to say.

In *Tattvasiddhi*, Santaraksita admits that there is no proof that the yogic perspective can be had. But he does say that given a special set of causal conditions or circumstances, it is not illogical to admit the possibility of this special result. And this is true not only of the meditation on bliss. In an extraordinary passage, Santaraksita links logical analysis with yogic perception, as a cause of a perspectival shift:

Tattvasiddhi Folio 74

One explains everything through realization of the particularity of the cause and the particularity of the effect. Nevertheless, after examining names and categories, grasping and excluding [inference], there may be complete agreement or clarity [about concepts such as the nature of the compounded [impermanence], nevertheless the appearance of subject and object are not clear and manifest. Renowned Acarya Dharmakrti also taught that in samsara, whatever knowledge which arises appearing clearly, following from the careful distinctions of subject and object is due to logical analysis. Therefore names and categories are distinguished and are clearly apparent. Different from worldly knowledge, the direct perception of enlightened beings is nondualistic and does not rely on conventional characteristics, etc. Acarya Dharmakrti taught that one must thoroughly analyze subject and object, through analyzing names and categories, relying on the perfect knowledge of subject and object, which arises from experience of objects. Then if one confirms this with categories of establishing and reversing, becoming accustomed to this type of experience, [through meditation], then one must agree this will not block clear perception of reality.

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If one analyzes phenomena carefully, discovering them to be insubstantial and empty, then meditates on the emptiness one has discovered, then familiarity with this meditation will lead to yogic perception.

But if yogic perception is so different from ordinary perception, how is it possible to speak of it as a mode of perception? Santaraksita says it is possible because yogic perception has some similarity to our ordinary mode of perception. What can he mean by that? Let us return again to the analogy with art. A painting by Magritte may be said to have a quality of lightness. Objects may float in space. If someone inured to aesthetic qualities were to seize a Magritte painting, and throw it into a pond where it sinks, and deny this floaty quality, we might say that such a person had missed the point. The words light, or float have an aesthetic meaning here, not a physical meaning. Yet the aesthetic meaning of the words bears some resemblance to the physical meaning, just as balance in a work of art bears some resemblance to physical balance but is not identical with it. Similarly, words such as bliss from the yogi's or yogini's perspective have quite a different meaning from ordinary bliss, but bear some similarity to it.

The final step in the hierarchy of awareness is buddhahood, or enlightenment. Not only is awareness non-dual, awareness of subject and object having been transcended, but awareness has 'melted into' reality or suchness.

This suchness is beyond conception. Yet in view of Santatraksita's *dzogchen* associations, noted by George Dreyfus¹³, (and his close association with Guru Padmasambhava, one may speculate that his notion of buddhahood in the Tattvasiddhi, may be the same as that of primordial wisdom ((an important *dzogchen* concept) Although primordial wisdom is beyond conception, it could perhaps be appealed to as that which holds things together, rather than the *alaya*.

That all reality is illusory is only true for Santaraksita in an epistemological sense, not an ontological one. There is a reality, but we cannot put it in words, or know it discursively. Reality is emptiness. We cannot describe it. We can only melt into it through non-conceptual meditation. Then we experience (as a result) wisdom, compassion and bliss.

¹Madhyamakalankara Sloka 16

Consciousness arises

As the opposite of insentient matter.

It's own nature is not material,

But rather self-awareness.

² B Russell *History of Western Philosophy*

³ L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*

⁴ G. Ryle *The Concept of Mind* New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949, p. 15

⁵ *Madhyamakalankara* Sloka 17

Because its nature is single and partless
It is impossible for it to have a three-fold nature.
Therefore self-awareness is neither subject, object nor result.

⁶ Gudmunsen, Chris, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* London: Macmillan, 1977, pp 50-51.

⁷ MA slokas 10-15

⁸ Murkurjee, M. “Explaining Everything” in *Scientific American* January, 1996

¹⁰ M Sloka 78

As for myself, I never disputed
The relative reality of the nature of appearances.
Having established this view of things,
One will not be confused about the relation of premise and conclusion

¹¹ ...if I think of a being as existing which corresponds to a mere idea, and a transcendental one, I ought not to admit the existence of such a being by itself, because no concepts through which I can conceive any object definitely, can reach it, and the conditions of the objective validity of my concepts are excluded by the idea itself. The concepts of reality, of substance, even of causality, and those of necessity in existence, have no meaning that could determine any object, unless they are used to make the empirical knowledge of an object possible. They may be used, therefore, to explain the possibility of things in the world of sense, but not to explain the possibility of a *universe itself*, because such an hypothesis is outside the world and could never be an object of possible experience. I can, however, admit perfectly well such an inconceivable Being, being an object of a mere idea, Relative to the world of sense, though not as existing by itself².

¹² Aldrich, V., *Philosophy of Art* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall 1963

¹³ G. Dreyfus “Would the True Prasangika Please Stand?The Case and View of ‘Ju Mi pham’ in the *Svatantrika-Prasangika Distinction* ed. By G.Dreyfus, and S. McClintock, Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2003, pp,330,333,339