

## **A Comparative Study on the Way of Knowing between Buddhism and Virtue Reliabilism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Epistemology is the branch of Philosophy which focuses on the study of the nature and scope of knowledge. What we can know or, the real object of knowledge (*prāmā*) and how we know or, the valid means of knowledge (*prāmanā*) are the burning issues for last 1500 years in Indian Epistemology as well as in Western Epistemology. The way of knowing , in Buddhism , has a significant role to achieve the ultimate end and eliminating the ignorance (*avidya*). Buddhism accepts two acts of knowing; namely, Perception (*pratyaksa*) and Inference (*anumanā*). They are reliable in the sense that, they direct the knower to such an object which has a desired efficacy (*arthakriyākāritva*). On this criterion a reliable knowledge is distinguished from an unreliable one. On this account we find a similarity between Buddhist Epistemology and Virtue Epistemology. Virtue epistemology is a contemporary epistemological approach divided into two groups Virtue Reliabilism and Virtue Responsibilism. Virtue Reliabilism says that knowledge is true belief produced by a cognitive ability, this ability enable the knower to reach at the ultimate end or truth and it also cuts down the possibility of errors. The aforesaid two epistemologies may have some differences also. It will also be discussed in my paper. The paper concludes by the discussion of the relationship between the Buddhist Epistemology and Virtue Reliabilism.

**Key Words :** Buddhism, Virtue reliabilism, Epistemology, Knowledge

### **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of our social life is to acquire knowledge for achieving further goals. The ultimate aim of human is to attain liberation from suffering. Knowledge helps man to liberate from all those material sufferings. There is a long debate about the sources or means of knowledge in different philosophical traditions and religions. Epistemology is a field of study which deals with the contents, sources and the means of knowledge. Among different philosophical traditions it can be said that Buddhist epistemology occurs a central place for developing different epistemological perspectives. *Pramāṇas* or the means of knowledge is the only single notion, which Buddhist epistemology centrally focused on. Meaning of the term '*pramāṇa*' is not same in Buddhist tradition as non-Buddhist tradition maintains about it. So the meaning of the term *pramāṇa* and how the term is derived from are most important to understand that Buddhist epistemology differs from any non-Buddhist traditions. To acquire a knowledge or *pramā*, there are three things, which are necessarily important, viz., *pramtr* – the knower, *prameya* – the object of knowledge and *pramāṇa* – the

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means or the instrument of knowledge.

‘ John knows that the table is brown through perception ’

Here, John is the knower or *pramtr*, the table which is brown is the object of knowledge or the *prameya* and perception is the means of knowledge by which the knowledge about table is acquired.

In Indian epistemology, especially in Buddhist epistemology, the central object of investigation is the nature of *pramāṇa*. So, *pramāṇa* being an instrument of knowledge produces an episode of knowledge. It is evident that *pramāṇa* is the instrument of knowledge which has been termed differently in various Indian tradition by their epistemological thoughts.

As well as Indian epistemology, western epistemological concerns are centered on the instrument of knowledge. Virtue epistemology is one of the branches of western epistemology which centrally focused on the intellectual ability of human being by which one can reach at the truth and diminishes of falsity about the object. So, the study of *pramāṇa* or the act of knowing found more or less similar about it in Indian Buddhist epistemology and in Western virtue epistemology, respectively.

### **Epistemological Background :**

#### ***Buddhist Epistemology:***

Dignāga (480 – 540) was the father of Buddhist epistemology. In which sense Dignāga takes the term *pramāṇa*, his followers also hold that sense of *pramāṇa*. Dignāga takes the meaning of the term *pramāṇa* in a different way. According to him, there is no difference between the *pramāṇa* and *pramā*, which is the result of *pramāṇa*. Buddhist epistemology holds the meaning of *pramāṇa* as an episode of knowledge but not a means or instrument of knowledge. In Indian Buddhist tradition, sometimes the term *pramāṇa* refers to a valid cognition and also sometimes refers to an episode of knowledge itself. Other than the Indian Buddhist tradition the *Nyāya* School of philosophy treats *pramāṇa* as a means of knowledge by which knower knows the object. But in Buddhist epistemological tradition rejects the knower – object – instrument or means account of knowledge. Other than the Buddhist tradition, *pramāṇa* or the means of knowledge has been used as instrument for a cognitive agent to acquire knowledge of something. But Buddhist tradition does not consider a cognitive agent as independent of their episode of knowledge. The knower is constituted, according to Buddhist tradition, by their cognitive episode. It can be said that if there is no an independent agent of cognition then the idea of instrument of knowledge does not stand. Dignāga and his followers do not an agent of knowledge and the instrument of knowledge but they accept only the episode of knowledge as *pramāṇa* and the object of knowledge. So, the study of *pramāṇa* is the central topic of Buddhist epistemology and its central task is to investigate the nature of knowledge. According to Dignāga there are two *pramāṇas*; perception and inference in Buddhist epistemological tradition. Although, there is no any agreement about ‘how many *pramāṇas* are there’ in all the systems of Indian philosophy. *Nyāya* school of philosophy accepts four *pramāṇas*; perception, inference, similarities and testimony. But Buddhist epistemology denies the other two *pramāṇas*, similarities and testimony as a separate means of knowledge because they claim that these two *pramāṇas* are included in inference. So, there is no need to accept them as a separate *pramāṇas*.

As, perception and inference are the two *pramāṇas* in Buddhist epistemology, it is also important to consider that the object of knowledge or *prameya*. Because if there is a *pramāṇa* there must be a *prameya* also. According to Dignāga, the father of Buddhist epistemology, there are two objects of knowledge namely; general entities (*sāmānyalakṣaṇas*) and particular entities (*svalakṣaṇas*). Dignāga made differences between the object of knowledge by their *pramāṇa*. The object of

perception is particular entities (*svalakṣaṇas*) and the object of inference is general entities (*sāmānyalakṣaṇas*). This idea of Dignāga, to distinguish object by their *pramāṇa* definitely made Buddhist epistemology unique. Perception captures the *svalakṣana* or the defining characteristics of the object where inference captures the *sāmānyalakṣaṇas* or the *sāmānya* or *jāti* resides in objects. Dignāga's successor Dharmakīrti adds a defining characteristics on perception which is unmistakable – 'a cognition that is unmistakable and free from conception' – means that perception is non-conceptual just as it is unmistakable.

### **Virtue Epistemology:**

Virtue epistemology is a contemporary approach of epistemology which focused on the key notion of intellectual virtue. Ernest Sosa was the introducer of the term 'virtue epistemology' in 1980. On Sosa's thought if virtue epistemology has been taken as an approach to justification of knowledge it will help to solve many epistemological problems such as the debate between internalism and externalism, foundationalism and coherentism, also the problem of skepticism can be sorted out by adopting such an approach. All virtue epistemologists are classified into two groups by their understanding of the notion of intellectual virtue; virtue reliabilists and virtue responsibilists. Some of the virtue epistemologists called virtue reliabilists take the notion of intellectual virtue as 'cognitive abilities or powers', these cognitive abilities are perception, memory, sound reasoning etc. Some other group of epistemologists called virtue responsibilists take that notion of intellectual virtue as character traits and those traits are fair mindedness, intellectual honesty and intellectual courage etc. All epistemology being a normative discipline, its central task is to investigate the normativity for making any epistemic evaluation. Virtue epistemology challenges that by adopting this kind of normativity in epistemic evaluation many progresses can be done and some new lines of investigations made under the epistemic and the moral dimensions of knowledge. Before virtue epistemology there was traditional analytic epistemology which takes beliefs as the primary object of evaluation, so, this is called *belief based epistemology*. On the other hand virtue epistemology takes agents rather than beliefs as the primary object of evaluation. Also, virtue epistemology takes intellectual virtue as the evaluation of agents. On this point virtue epistemology differs from traditional analytic epistemology. As mentioned earlier virtue epistemologists disagreed about the nature of intellectual virtue but all are agreed about the sort of *i.e.* the cognitive excellences. Virtue epistemology gives the definition of knowledge as it is produced by an intellectual virtue.

### **Motivation :**

#### ***Buddhist Epistemological Enquiry :***

A belief is justified by the arguments supplied for the cognitions reliability. It can be said that the belief that 'there is a fire on the hill' will be true, just as that cognition which is produced by a disposition that is reliable and reliably making a causal characteristics of that object. Here the cognition produced by a reliable belief be called an act of knowing but there is some other dispositions that made the belief reliable to acquire knowledge. One of the prime dispositions is 'the desire to know' (*jjhāsa*), without which the cognition is not possible. In order to have cognition about the unseen fire on the hill one must have 'the desire to know'. So, these particular dispositions played a central role to motivate one to have knowledge. According to Buddhist epistemology knowledge is justified true belief and the account will be inadequate if the cognitive dispositions are disregarded in the act of knowing. Buddhist epistemological enquiry asserts that not only reliability of the act of knowing is important but also it must be the motivator for a purposeful action. This motivation is

taken to be a novelty and this is not the only requisition for the purposeful action but it also requires reducing doubt from any act of knowing. Dignâga the father of Buddhist epistemology was not so much concerned about the reducing of doubt from the cognitive act. But Dharmakîrti and his followers was so much concerned about the certainty of knowledge. Also, the notion of motivation can be applied to the ontological issues also, such as the concept of universal. As Buddhist epistemology allows only perception as the motivator of action. So, the possibility of universal should be eliminated. Thus, in Buddhist epistemology the concept of universal is not accepted.

### **Virtue Epistemological Enquiry :**

From virtue reliabilists point of view, knowledge requires intellectually virtuous motivation to be justified. So, intellectual virtue, the key concept of virtue epistemology plays a central role to motivate someone to believe something he desires. 'The desire to know' or 'the love for knowledge' is taken to be the fundamental motive in this approach. On Greco's view, "one is subjectively justified in believing a given proposition just in case this belief is produced by dispositions that one manifests when one is motivated to believe what it is true. Greco stipulates that an exercise of intellectual virtue entails the manifestation of such dispositions."<sup>1</sup> Generally one crucial objection raised against the virtue reliabilists account of knowledge that the intellectually virtuous motivation can limited the class of knower; just as children cannot acquire knowledge because they do not have any motivation to believe something, though they have the virtues to acquire the truth. Virtue reliabilism asserts that intellectual virtue can be both acquired and natural. So, it can be said that children have the intellectual virtue as a natural disposition to acquired knowledge. Thus it is essential to believe anything which is the manifestation of intellectually virtuous motivation, this virtuous motivation generates attention that results the awareness, which is required for a belief or knowledge to be acquired. So, the motivation is very much essential to direct one to be attentive. This motivation in virtue reliabilism must be the intellectual virtue.

### **Epistemic Reliability :**

#### ***Buddhist Perspectives :***

According to Buddhist epistemology the concept of (*arthakriyā*) is reliable process by which one may able to have a cognition by the act of knowing- perception or inference. This special feature distinguishes reliable cognition from any other unreliable cognition as it will either enable one to a particular goal or it presents as a means of fulfilling the goal itself. "Suppose, for example, that one is cold, and that one seeks to warm one's hand at a fire. Because the hearth contains a fire that is capable of fulfilling one's goal, the perception of a fire in the hearth is deemed reliable. When one reaches the hearth, the sensation of heat on one's hands is itself the fulfillment of one's goal. Thus cognition of heat is also reliable".<sup>2</sup>

So, Buddhist justification of belief or knowledge based on the reliability presents in the telic efficacy (*arthakriyā*). The cognitions reliability will be settled by the way it presents the object and its causal characteristics. The cognition will be reliable if the presented causal characteristics function in an expected manner. If not, then it is not a reliable cognition. Cognitions are two types; intrinsically reliable (*svataḥ*) and extrinsically reliable (*parataḥ*). Cognitions will be intrinsically reliable if the cognition itself presents the dispositions for desired result. But extrinsically reliable cognitions require to be verified or confirmed by another cognition.

***Virtue Epistemological perspectives :***

One of the branches of virtue epistemology is virtue reliabilism. Some leading virtue reliabilists are John Greco and Ernest Sosa. Only Greco's and Sosa's account will be noticed here. Virtue reliabilism came up to answer or to defend process reliabilism on its different problems like generality problem etc. There are some common features these two reliabilism share together, one of them is epistemic competence of Sosa's account, that is similar to process reliabilists account of reliable belief forming process. Sosa, in his recent works has used the terms 'virtue', 'skill', 'competence' synonymously, also Greco used the term 'ability' synonymously. On Sosa's account the intellectual virtue has been used as similar as acquired skill. It is also to be noted here that, according to Sosa, the term 'virtue', 'competence' can also be applied to the acquired skills intellectually or otherwise. Sosa's definition of competence; "...a disposition .... With a basis resident in the competent agent....that would in appropriately normal conditions ensure (or make highly likely) the sources of any relevant performance issued by it"<sup>3</sup>. Sosa's account is that intellectual virtues are reliable faculties or dispositions which can produce more true belief than a false one. "Sosa points out that the reliability of a cognitive disposition does not require that it attains truth in highly unusual condition just as the reliability of one's car does not require that it starts when submerged underwater"<sup>4</sup>. On Sosa's point of view, intellectual virtue can be acquired by need not to be acquired. The virtues of vision, memory etc. will produce true belief without doing any intellectual act. Just as Sosa, John Greco also accepts intellectual virtues as stable reliable faculties which can be both acquired and natural. But Greco treats differently the analysis of internal justification from Sosa. On Greco's view 'a belief is justified from the subjects own point of view'. Sosa treats intellectual virtues which produces a lower – level belief that a subject must requires. This requirement has been considered as a strong requirement after Greco. According to his account of virtue, intellectual virtue is a 'well motivated stable reliable faculty'. Belief produced by a disposition manifested by the subject when one is motivated to belief something is true, is the motivation which can attain truth and avoid falsehoods. But this motivation is not taken to be an acquired one but a natural one, according to Greco. So, the epistemic reliability comes up by the above mentioned reliable process or reliable belief forming process of virtue reliabilism.

**Justification of Knowledge :*****Buddhist Epistemology :***

Dharmakīrti has sorted out the problem of justification left by Dignāga and defined the 'source of knowledge' as reliable cognition in *Prāmaṇavārtika*. According to him reliable cognition means a right cognition which enables one to act. Dharmakīrti claimed 'reliability' as a means which leads one to obtain the object one desires. It can be affirmed that cognition is justified if it is confirmed by a causal efficacy to understand the function of the object and its causal powers as expected. "We can justifiably conclude, for example, that we saw a vase and not some vase like illusion because after the initial perception we then confirmed that what we saw does really hold water, as we expected and wished"<sup>5</sup>. It should be noted here that, if any perceptual knowledge requires any other subsequent perception or inference, it will not be infinite regress at all. Not only perception but inferences also do not need any further confirmation. Because these knowledges are produced by the intrinsic source (*svataḥ prāmāṇya*). This knowledge will preserved its authenticity unless it is rejecting by any cause of error presents in it.

It should also be noted here that any cognition treated as reliable by the route or means by which the cognition came about, not because of that cognition is right and it enables one to reach at

the goals one wishes. “Tibetan scholars will emphasize that to conceptually know P the knower must herself ascertain P with a *prāmāṇa*, and that this ascertainment must itself involve antecedent reliable cognitions in order to be genuine”<sup>6</sup>. For an example, “one ascertains O on the basis of good reasons Q, R, etc., whose characteristics one has ascertained earlier”<sup>7</sup>. Dharmakīrti’s account of knowledge holds that only believing that ‘P’ cannot be considered as *prāmāṇa*. So, by the means of knowledge or *prāmāṇa* can be worked out as one wishes to be, but on the other hand, as they are cognitions they should be produced by a reliable process or route.

### ***Virtue Epistemology :***

Now it should be noted that the virtue reliabilists account of knowledge. In order to give a justification of knowledge in terms of epistemic or intellectual virtue there must be a relation between having a true belief of something and the exercise of intellectual virtue that produced the belief. Sosa’s account of epistemic justification will provide a perfect model for explaining the knowledge situation. In Sosa’s word his model of justification is “stratified”. According to this model primary justification is related to the intellectual virtue and secondary justification is related to the beliefs which are produced by those virtues. On Sosa’s account, a belief is justified if its sources present in the intellectual virtue. So, his view of justification is regarded as externalism. Thus a belief which has its source in intellectual virtue can be justified without being approachable internally to the subject who believes. In this way Sosa’s model of epistemic justification which is grounded on the notion of intellectual virtue has provided a pathway to understand that a belief produced by intellectual virtue is justified.

Greco’s definition of knowledge asserts that one knows something because he believes the truth about the proposition, and that belief comes out of the exercise of an intellectual virtue. Just as Sosa, Greco also gives the central importance to the intellectual virtue for justifying knowledge situation. Greco’s definition of epistemic justification: “A belief B (P) is epistemically justified for a person S *i.e.* justified in the sense required for knowledge if and only if B (P) is produced by one or more intellectual virtues of S”.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion :**

After mentioning all the central points of two different epistemological disciplines; Buddhist epistemology and Virtue epistemology, it can be concluded that Buddhist epistemology makes itself distinctive from any other Indian epistemology by its epistemological point of view *i.e.* this epistemology accepts only two *pramāṇas* ; perception and inference. The central goal of Buddhist epistemology is to attain liberation or enlightenment through right knowledge. Buddhist epistemology is closely related to its concept of enlightenment. Development of one’s mental capacity and reasoning plays a central role to enlighten one. So, it can be said that development of mental capacity or reasoning is the necessary condition for justification of knowledge, because only the right knowledge can help to attain enlightenment. And knowledge can be right or justified by the development of mental capacity, these capacities provide that internal justification of knowledge. To know something the knower must develop the characteristics of the reason and this development is only possible through the reliable procedures. This particular feature of Buddhist epistemology can be related to the western contemporary approach of Virtue epistemology. Virtue reliabilism, one of the group of virtue epistemology, also claims that knowledge will be justified if it is produced by a reliable process. The notion of intellectual virtue, which is the characteristic of the knower provide the internal justification of knowledge just as Buddhist epistemology. Because it produced such beliefs those

can be right knowledge.

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