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LANGUAGE AND BUDDHIST THEORY OF ORIGINATION
("Abhidhmarkośabhāṣya", III, 28)

Abstract

The passage that will be discussed in this article ("Abhidharmakośabhāṣya", III, 28) is a polemic dialogue between Vasubandhu and so-called grammarians. The whole disputation starts with the etymological analysis of the Buddhist theory of origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), but it becomes soon evident that the main subject of disagreement between Vasubandhu and the grammarians is a rather different understanding of the nature of the language than the proper usage of certain grammatical forms in the term *"pratītyasamutpāda"*. To some degree, all philosophical schools in Vedic tradition share the opinion that the language (Sanskrit) can reflect reality exactly as it is. For philosophical schools like Mimaṃsa and Nyāya, the notion that Sanskrit can reflect the true nature of reality is important as it establishes the ultimate authority of Vedic literature and Vedic word. Buddhism, on the contrary, treats language as a limited tool, which sometimes, e.g., by means of conventional meaning (*vyavahāra*), is only able to point at a certain process or entity but is unable to express the essence of those phenomena. Vasubandhu skillfully argues that grammatically correct forms, here "[it] arises" (*utpadyate*), are rendered absurd when the grammatical structure is thought to reflect the real state of things.

Thus, the passage discussed in this article sheds some light not only on the Buddhist view of the nature of language but also on some important aspects of the Buddhist theory of origination and the difficulties regarding the definition of the agent (*ātman*) in Buddhist philosophy.

Keywords: *Pratītyasamutpāda*, Vasubandhu, language, origination, agent.

Vasubandhu is one of the most praised and often studied Buddhist scholars of the Sarvāstivāda school. The importance of his fundamental work "Abhidharmakośabhāṣya"[1] cannot be overestimated. Willemen calls Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma "the basic "Theology" of China and Japan, and of *Mahayana* in general" (Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998, XI.). "Kośa" is also valuable to scholars due to its polemic style. It contains different opinions of other Buddhist or non-Buddhist schools regarding particular issues. The passage that will be analyzed in this article ("Kośa", III, 28) is also written in that polemic style. Vasubandhu's opponents in this short passage are so-called grammarians with whom the author discusses some aspects of the Buddhist theory of origination.

Buddhist theory of origination is known as *Pratītyasamutpāda* and usually is discussed in two different contexts: (1) As twelvefold formula it is used to explain the origination of a sentient being (*sattva*). In this context, twelve members of the formula are usually arranged according to three times (past, present, and future) in order to show the basic causal links between the past and present and present and future lives of a being. Twelvefold *Pratītyasamutpāda* is addressed as a special theory of origination[2]. (2) General theory of origination is expressed by two formulae, two sentences ("when this exists, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises") that describe the general rule of origination, which explains the origination of all phenomena, all animated and unanimated things[3].

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[1] Henceforth "Kośa".

[2] On special and general theories of origination see Sopa 1986 and Sopa 1984.

[3] There are many opinions about what *pratītyasamutpāda* actually means, e.g., E. Shulman suggests that originally *pratītyasamutpāda* was expressed with the intention to show the "mental conditioning" and not the real nature of all that exists (Shulman 2008). In this paper, only Vasubandhu's view will be discussed as presented in his "Kośa".

Neither Vasubandhu nor his commentator Yaśomittrā identifies the grammarians and their arguments with any particular school, but it is possible that the grammarians here express the views of one of *astika*[4] schools since grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) and etymology (*nurukta*) are among the traditional "limbs" of Vedas (*vedāṅgas*), i.e., supplementary sciences of Vedic knowledge and literature, which explain and analyze the meaning of Vedic word. Language, in general has, very a special place in Vedic tradition, e.g., the categories of Nyāya school are called *padārthas*: here *pada* means "word" and *artha* is its meaning, real phenomenon expressed by the word. The word and the phenomenon expressed by it are treated as one whole, and thus, it is believed that all words (in Sanskrit) have their real analog in the world. There is another opinion that in this passage, Vasubandhu represents views of two Buddhist schools, Satvāstivāda or Sautrāntika (La Vallée Poussin 2012, 1173). But as the purpose of the article is to show Vasubandhu's view of the language, I will proceed without identifying the grammarians.

The importance of this passage has been acknowledged by scholars far better than me. Goran Kardaś in his paper (Kardaś 2015) compares nearly similar formulations made by Vasubandhu and Cadrakīrti that lead to a different understanding of the term *Pratītyasamutpāda* and concludes that the meaning of words depends on the speaker's intention and is, therefore, "private" and "mental" (Kardaś 2015). Though I do not argue with this conclusion, I'd like to draw attention to the fact that whether the same expression could be understood in different ways, it is obvious that both parties involved in this discussion (Vasubandhu and the grammarians) attempt to prove their ontological views by means (no surprise there) of language and the main question is, I think, whether the language, in general, is able to express certain kind of reality. The dispute between Vasubandhu and the grammarians shows that grammatical construct does not allow some kind of reality to be expressed; the simple sentence "it arose" makes no sense if arising is understood as the first appearance of the thing.

Vasubandhu's argument with the grammarians starts with the discussion of the etymological meaning of the term *"pratītyasamutpāda"*[5]. The word *pratītyasamutpāda* has two roots, he says: *i* – "to move", "to go" and *pad* – "to exist"; and two suffixes: *prati* and *sam-ut*. Those suffixes, when added to the roots, change the meaning of the roots as well. Thus *prati* + *i* should be understood as "having acquired", and *sam-ut* + *pad* means "arising". The meaning of the whole word *pratītyasamutpāda*, according to Vasubandhu, is "arising having acquired [conditions]" (*tena pratyataṃ prāpya samudbhavaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ*) ("Kośa", III, 28).

The argument of the opponent contains two points: grammatical (the usage of gerund) and logical ("Besides, there is no action without an agent"). The whole argument goes like that: "When two actions are performed by one agent, the first action is marked by gerund suffix, as in the example – having bathed, he eats. In this case, however, there is no one before arising who first acquires and then arises. Besides, there is no action without an agent" (*ekasya hi kartturdvayoḥ kriyayoḥ pūrvakālāyāṃ kriyāyāṃ ktvāvidhirbhavati*‖ *tadyathā - snātvā bhuṅkta iti* ‖ *na cāsau pūrvamutpādāt kaścidasti, yaḥ pūrvaṃ pratītyottarakālamutpadyate* ‖ *na cāpyakartṛkā'sti kriyeti*) ("Kośa", III, 28). Thus, the argument of the grammarians is that (1) there is no action without an agent, and (2) gerund always indicates an anterior action.

Vasubandhu first summarizes the grammarians' argument: "Are you saying that one acquires [anything] before his arising? That is not possible, because he does not yet exist; and in the case of concomitance gerund is inappropriate as it indicates prior action" (*pratyeti pūrvamutpādād yadyasattvānna yujyate saha cet ktvā na siddho'tra pūrvakālavidhānataḥ* ‖ *iti?*) ("Kośa", III, 28). It seems Vasubandhu just rephrases the grammarians' argument and thus only adds to its credibility. In fact, I think he stresses the main mistake made by the grammarians, which is the belief in the infallibility of grammatical construct: this kind of refutation gives no opportunity to solve the problem as the same contradictions will remain even in case of just one action. Thus, Vasubandhu continues: "Let us ask the grammarians – in what state does element (*dharma*) arise, present or future? What follows? If it arises as present, how can it be without already being arisen. Or if it arises as present being already present, it leads to absurd. [If] it arises as future, how can quality of being an agent be ascribed to one that does not exist or how can there be an action without agent?" (*idaṃ tāvadayaṃ praṣṭavya śābdikaḥ - kimavastho dharmaḥ utpadyate varttamānaḥ, utāho'nāgata iti? kiṃ cātaḥ? Yadi varttamāna utpadyate, kathaṃ varttāmano yadi notpannaḥ utpannasya vā punarutpattāvanavasthāprasaṅgaḥ athānāgata utpadyate,*

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[4] Philosophical schools of Indian philosophy, which accept the authority of Vedic literature.
[5] There are two etymological explanations of *pratītyasamutpāda* in III, 28. Only the first one will be discussed in this paper.

kathamastaḥ kartṛtvaṃ siddhatyakartṛkā vā kriyeti?) ("Kośa", III, 28). Thus, if one accepts the point that there is no action without an agent, the arising of such agent will never be possible: does not matter will it be accepted as already existent or as one that will become existent in the future. In the first case arising is impossible as nothing that already exists can become existent (it already is!) and, in the second case arising is impossible as one that is to perform the action of arising does not yet exist and is not, therefore, able of performing any action.

Vasubandhu's own view is summarized in two sentences: "It arises in the same state in which it acquires [conditions]" (*ato yadavastha utpadyate tadavastha eva pratyeti*) ("Kośa", III, 28). And then: "We, however, do not see the difference between the one who arises and the arising" (*na cātra bhaviturarthāt bhūtimanyāṃ kriyāṃ paśyamāḥ*) ("Kośa", III, 28). For Vasubandhu, the moment of acquiring conditions and the moment of arising are concomitant[6]. An action and an agent should also be understood as a concomitant, and there is no separation of one from another as no agent exists without action (or prior to it), nor does an action without an agent. Those two points of concomitance (of acquiring and arising and an agent and an action), I believe, constitute not only the whole core of Vasubandhu's argument here but also the very heart of *pratītyasamutpāda* theory as Vasubandhu sees it, which is evident as he concludes his argument: "The meaning of words "when this exists, that comes to be, form the arising of this, that arises" is the meaning of *pratītyasamutpāda* (*eṣa tu vākyārtaḥ - "asmin satyasya bhāvaḥ, asyotpādādidamutpadyata iti yo'rthaḥ so'rthaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ" || iti.*) ("Kośa", III, 28). In view of his earlier statement the formula could be rendered as: "when this (conditions) exist, that (*dharma*) comes to be; from the arising of this (agent), that (action) arises". Here both parts of the formula should be understood as concomitant. Vasubandhu once again summarizes his argument: if the agent was already existent before any action (here: the action of arising) ascribed to it, then it cannot arise in a particular moment. And if the agent arises as already existent, it leads to a logical fault: then, it must always endlessly re-arise. In other words, it means that the agent arises together with its action and not a moment before or after. In the sentence "It arose", the distinction of grammatical agent and its action is a logical mistake, which makes the content of the sentence impossible.

Vasubandhu's own opinion on the subject that "there is no difference between the one who arises and arising" (*na cātra bhaviturarthāt bhūtimanyāṃ kriyāṃ paśyamāḥ* – "we don't see the difference between the one who arises and the arising") ("Kośa", III. 28) continues: *"tasmādacchalaṃ vyavahāreṣu"* – "there is nothing wrong with conventional usage [of the expression]", i.e., in conventional meaning there is nothing wrong with the usage of words like *bhavitar* and *bhūti*. That means that Vasubandhu, in general, does not object to the usage of such words as an agent of action, or one who arises, i.e., the conventional meaning (*vyavahāraḥ*) of the word "I" (*ātman*)[7], but he objects its ontological meaning. The structure of the language cannot convey true reality. I'll bring an example: for practical purposes, we have names such as "Nino" and "Merab". The names serve the purpose of pointing at what or who about do we speak, but there is no real entity as "Nino" or "Merab" in the world. Names are empty designations that do not express any real ontological entity. "I" for Vasubandhu is a similarly empty designation, it is used in the language, and it will be pointless to deny its conventional importance in everyday life, but it has no ontological meaning, in the world, there is no entity as "I". That's why when Vasubandhu speaks of origination, he's not having in mind "I", but the origination of the elements of existence, *dharmas*. In his mind, "I" is a name for a certain assembling of the certain *dharmas* in a particular moment in time.

The grammarians' whole argument was based not only on the grammatical view that gerund always indicates the anteriority of action, but more so on the notion that there is an agent, which is anterior to any action ascribed to it. For the grammarians, it seems essential to stand the existence of agent as prior to any action and the question they ask, basically, can be understood as "how can anything arise, if the agent, as the source of any arising, is denied?" Vasubandhu goes radically different path by leading the argumentation to the Buddhist general theory of origination: "when this exists, that comes to be. From the existence of this, that arises" (*asmin satīdaṃ bhavati, asyotpādād idaṃ utpadyate*). By that theory, the Buddhist denies not only the prior existence of the Self but also the idea that there ever was a time when nothing existed at all. In other words, Buddhism denies linear origination that can be expressed

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[6] Later, he brings different examples, where the gerund could indicate concomitant actions: "Having acquired a lamp, darkness has gone" and "Opening his mouth, he sleeps" to substantiate his claim, but it is not my intention to examine the grammatical side of the dispute, I, therefore, omit this point in the main text.

[7] The word itself does not appear in this sentence, but I use it here as a general term for an ultimate agent, which is used with the same meaning by both Buddhists and non-Buddhist schools of Indian philosophy.

by the formula "one + many" as one is never enough; no *dharma* exists without concomitant interdependence to other *dharmas*. Vasubandhu's statement should be understood accordingly: the moment *dharma* acquires [the conditions] and the moment it arises are the same as well as the action of arising and that which arises originate at the same moment. Only when there are the conditions necessary for arising, that, which arises, the act of arising and the cause for arising, it is possible for something to arise. All other attempts to explain origination beyond this point of minimal plurality (of conditions, cause, arising, and arisen) will be logically insufficient.

This short discussion of the limitations of linguistic expression is not enough not only to fully explain the Buddhist view on the topic but also it is not enough to shed light on Vasubandhu's views alone. Along with conventional meaning (*vyavahāraḥ*), of which only one example was discussed here, there are other terms that appear in "Kośa"[8] in nearly similar or with somehow related meanings. Each of those terms deserves separate work far more extensive than was attempted here. My only goal was to show, on the example of one short passage, the limitations of language and the importance of accepting those limitations in Buddhist philosophy, particularly in the context of an agent and the theory of origination.

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[8] Bronkhorst discusses nominal existence or existence by name only (*prajñaptisat*) regarding composite objects, i.e., all-composite objects (in contrast to the *dharmas* that constitute those objects), which is all the things that can be experienced. His works deal with the relationship between language and reality (Bronkhorst 1996) and contain a lot of useful information on the subject. He also deals with linguistic traditions in Indian philosophy, such as etymology, grammar, and phonetics (Bronkhorst 2000). Tzohar examines Vasubandhu's and Sautrāntikā's usage of metaphor (*upacāra*) concludes that it is used "to indicate the outcome of an interdependent causal nexus". Tzohar read Vasubandhu with Sthiramati commentary, and thus he extends his conclusion to the point where the Buddhists assume "the non-existence of objectified phenomena", but he also admits that it is not the case with Vasubandhu, who didn't go so far in his understanding of "figurative usage" of words (Tzohar 2011; Tzohar 2018).