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Cārvāka and Hume's Perception: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

Cārvāka and David Hume are the philosophers of two different poles. Cārvāka adopted only one source of knowledge and that is perception. He is materialist in the history of Indian metaphysics, and they are pure empiricist in Indian epistemology, since, according to them we have no any other ways of valid cognition apart from perception. On the other hand, we have two main theories regarding the sources of knowledge in the western philosophy- Rationalism and Empiricism. These two theories were reflected on the pre-Kantian Epistemology. At first, David Hume consolidated the shape of the empiricism in the western Epistemology. After refuting the traditional concept of John Locke and Barkeley regarding substance, David Hume had tried to explain the concept of substance in the light of pure-empirical point of view. He had applied the observational method in the realm of empiricism properly and denied all whatever is not under our observational experiences. The theories of Cārvāka and Hume regarding perception are different but they have some similarities in some respects. The following paper is an attempt to show the similarities and dissimilarities regarding their views on the perception.

Key Words: Perception, Impression, Idea, Empiricism, Consciousness.

Introduction: In Indian Epistemology, Cārvāka holds perception as the only source of valid knowledge. Similarly, David Hume consolidated the shape of the empiricism in the western Epistemology. After refuting the traditional concept of substance, David Hume had tried to explain it in the light of pure-empirical point of view. He had applied the observational method in the realm of empiricism properly and denied the all whatever is not under our observational experiences. He admitted the sense impression as the only primary element of our knowledge. The aim of both Cārvāka and David Hume regarding the perception is almost same. Although, their mode of presentations of their 'ism' are different to each other but they have some similarities in some ways. The objective of this paper is to show the similarities and dissimilarities regarding their views on the perception.

Cārvāka's position: The Cārvāka holds that perception is the only dependable source of knowledge and criticizes the possibility of other sources like Inference etc. They criticize mainly the Inference, since, almost all the schools of philosophy admitted it as the reliable source of knowledge.

According to *Cārvāka*, perception is held to be of two kinds, (i) External perception and (ii) Internal perception. It means to say that perception is produced by external sense organ or by the inner sense organ, i.e. mind. The external perception means the contact between sense organs and the objects.

The *Cārvāka* don't admit the inference as a means of valid knowledge. They argue that if Inference is to be regarded as a *pramā* or means of valid knowledge, it must produce knowledge about which we can have no doubt and which must be true to reality. But Inference cannot fulfill these conditions, because when we infer, for example, the existence of fire on a mountain from the perception of smoke, we take a leap in the dark, from the perceived to un-perceived object. A logician perhaps will point out that such a leap is justified by our previous knowledge of the invariable relation between smoke and fire, and that the inference stated more clearly would be: 'all cases of smoke are cases of fire', but the *Cārvāka* refused it and argue that this contention would be acceptable only if the major premise stating the invariable relation between the middle term "smoke" and the major terms "fire" is beyond doubt. But this invariable relation can be established only if we have knowledge of all cases of smoke in the presence of fire. However this is not possible because we cannot perceive even all the cases of smoke and fire existing in different places all over the world now, to say nothing of those which existed in the past or will exist in the future. So no invariable universal relation can be established by inference. Neither can it be based on another inference, because it will involve a fallacy, since in the case of this inference to establish it, and so on, and hence would arise the fallacy of an adindefinitum. So, being the ground of the Inference is weak, Inference is not regarded as a dependable source of knowledge. Similarly, they refuted Comparison and Testimony as the valid sources of knowledge.

David Hume's position: In the words of Prof. A.J. Ayer "David Hume, to my mind the greatest of all British philosophers..." Hume discussed about the source of knowledge in the first chapter of his first book of 'A Treatise of Human Nature', it was this book that awakened Kant from his 'dogmatic slumbers', and in the second chapter of his 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding'. Likewise, Locke and Berkeley, Hume also regarded perception as the only dependable source of our knowledge. Following the way of Berkeley, Hume concluded about empiricism more destructively. Whatever is beyond our sense experience has no existence. Soul, substance are not regarded as existent matter as they are beyond sense experience. Even the existence of God cannot be proved logically. Thus, Hume's philosophy falls under the skepticism.

Hume divided all of our perception into two kinds-(I) impressions and (II) ideas. All of our ideas are produced only from impressions. Ideas are only the 'faint copies' of impression. Therefore, according to Hume without the base of impression no ideas can be produced. There is no invariable and static world which is beyond of our impression. Even, he denied the existence of invariable and static mind as the substratum of our ideas, as it cannot be perceived through our sense perception. There is no such type of eternal

substance. It is possible in our mere imagination. By the 'reflection' we get some changeable, separated ideas and feelings of our mental activities only but we don't feel about any type of existent, invariable and eternal substance. In the Hume's words "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure". There is no logical argument for accepting the existence of the soul as the substratum of the invariable mental activities. All of our thoughts or ideas, which are unconnected and loose, assemble and relate with each other in accordance with the laws of thoughts. Frank Thilly has stated about the laws of association in his book 'A History of Philosophy' as follows:

¹ "Our thoughts or ideas, however; are not entirely loose and unconnected or joined by chance, they introduce one another with a certain degree of method and regularity; there is a kind of union between them, one calls up another. A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original (resemblance), the mention of one room in an apartment suggests and adjoining one (contiguity), the thought of a wound calls up the idea of pain (cause and effect). This is the phenomenon called 'association of ideas'".

According to Hume, impressions and ideas are the only elements of our knowledge. Hume said in his 'Treatise' under the heading of 'Of the Origin of Our Ideas' as follows:

² 'all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call Impressions and Ideas. The difference between these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul.'

On the other hand, Hume said about ideas that 'By ideas I mean the faint image of these in thinking and reasoning.' In other words, when a knower perceives an object, after having sense-object contact he gets some sensation. These sensations are called impressions. After sometime, in the absence of that object when he thinks about that object he gets some copies of which he saw in the past by his memories or imaginations. Thus we can say that, ideas are produced by the memories or imaginations. Hume stated this fact as follows:

³ 'By the term 'impression' then I mean all our more lively perceptions when we hear or see or feel or love or hate or desire or will. These are to be distinguished from ideas, which are the fainter perceptions of which we are conscious when we reflect on our impressions.'

Therefore, we can get our impressions by the direct contact between the object and our senses but for the ideas the sense-object contact is not necessary. We can get impressions only when the object is in front of our senses. When the object is beyond our senses and we

¹ Thilly, Frank. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York : Henry Holt & Comp., 1914. p-370

² Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. ed. By L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1978. p-7

³ Hume, David. *An inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. By Antony Flue. New York : Collier Books, 1962. p-8

think or imagine about those impressions then we get ideas. So, Ideas are the copies of impressions.

Similarities:

(I) First and foremost similarity of *Cārvāka* and David Hume is that they are both empiricist philosopher in epistemological point of view. Because they admit that sense perception is the only means to our knowledge.

(II) According to Hume impression is the primary element of the knowledge. Without impression of object we cannot get any knowledge of something. He regarded perception as the only way of valid cognition. *Cārvāka* also divided perception into (I) External Perception (which we get through our external sense organs) and (II) Mental Perception (which we get through our internal organ, mind). Though, they did not admit the mind as an independent sense organ. They hold mind as a sub-sense organ which is created by the assembling of the five external sense organs. *Cārvāka* admitted mind as conscious.

⁴“consciousness is an epiphenomenon or by-product of matter; there is no evidence of its existence independent of the body”. That is why, mental perception always depends on the external perception. Without external perception of object we cannot get any mental perception. In this context, there is a similarity between Hume's impression and ideas and *Cārvāka*'s external and mental perception.

Therefore, both *Cārvāka* and Hume adopted the first stage of our perception as the external perception and impression respectively. They termed the next stage of perception as mental perception and ideas respectively. The source of *Cārvāka*'s external perception and Hume's impression is the same; similarly, the source of *Cārvāka*'s mental perception and Hume's ideas is the same. *Cārvāka*'s mental perception depends on external perception and posterior to the external perception. Similarly, Hume's ideas also depend on impressions and posterior to the impressions.

(III) *Cārvāka* has restricted our scope of imagination by saying that the mental perception is dependent upon the external perception. Similarly, Hume also determined our limitation of our thinking by saying that there are no ideas without impressions.

(IV) *Cārvākas* and David Hume denied the possibility of universal knowledge. According to them, no one can reach upto the universal knowledge through the sense perception.

(V) In Indian philosophy, perception is of two types, namely, *nirvikalpaka* or the indeterminate and *savikalpaka* or the determinate. *Nirvikalpaka* perception is the primary cognition of an object and it cannot be expressed in words; but *savikalpaka* perception is the cognition of an object's nature and it can be expressed in words. *Cārvāka* admitted that type of perception through which we can get a complete knowledge of an object. So, *Cārvākas* has admitted *savikalpaka* perception only, since, perception can be expressed by the proposition. Similarly, David Hume had adopted determinate perception, because, all of our ideas are related and connected through the laws of association.

⁴ Chatterjee, Satischandra and Datta Dhirendramohon. An Introduction to Indian Philosophy. New Delhi: Rupa Publication, 2011. p-60
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Dissimilarities:

(I) *Cārvākas* is of before the 7th century B.C. and it was in the primitive stage of the development of Indian philosophy. So, there was no possibility to get an influence by any theories of philosophy, prior to the *Cārvākas*. Rather, *Cārvākas* had collected data from the daily life of the ordinary people. The epistemology, the ethics and the metaphysics of the *Cārvākas* were free from the provocations of any other philosophies.

On the other hand, David Hume was the philosopher of 18th century A.D.. Naturally, there was a background to his philosophy. He got influence by the history of philosophy of almost two thousand years. So, Hume's epistemology was influenced by the philosophers, prior to him.

(II) *Cārvākas* epistemology was developed on the ground of his materialism. The background of this was the protestation against the class-exploitation of the society of Vedic-class-inequality. Therefore, this epistemology is more pragmatic or practical than academic.

On the contrary, Hume's epistemology is the product of British empirical epistemology which is influenced by the renaissance. Unlike *Cārvākas*, Hume's context is more academic than pragmatic.

(III) *Cārvākas* did not discuss clearly the distinction between external and mental perception and his explanation is not sufficient in this matter. As a result, there is no clear idea of the method of the production the knowledge.

On the other hand, David Hume clearly distinguished between our impressions and ideas, and said that the distinction is only quantitative but not qualitative. So, we get a clear explanation of the method of the production of knowledge. Hume built a science of the activities of mind which is not appeared in *Cārvāka's* theory. Hume stated further classification in his 'Treatise' as follows:

⁵“There is another division of our perceptions, which it will be convenient to observe, and which extends it both to our impressions and ideas. This division is into Simple and Complex. Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts. Tho' a particular colour, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple, 'tis easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other”.

(IV) *Cārvāka* and Hume had denied the possibility of universal knowledge, since they have adopted perception as the only source of knowledge. But their explanations of the justifications of not accepting the possibility of universal knowledge are different. *Cārvāka* denied the knowledge of past and future by accepting the external perception as the primary source of knowledge. Since, the external perception of the past and future is not possible. They have determined that the cause of the impossibility of the universal knowledge is the limitation of the power of our senses.

⁵ Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. ed. By L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1978. p-8
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On the other hand, the explanation of Hume is different from them. Inductive inference is the basis of universal knowledge and the causality is the basis of inductive inference. Hume raised the question against this causality. According to him, Inductive inference is possible on the basis of the necessary relation between cause and effect. But the idea of the necessity is only mental habit of expectation. He revolts against the popular view of causality. He criticizes the popular connection of cause as 'power or activity'. He says that we have no experience of power in sense perception and cause cannot exert any power to produce the effect. We never observe that the power or force, as an attribute of cause, is producing the effect. We simply perceive a sequence of two events in time and nothing else. Therefore, the explanation of Hume about the possibility of universal knowledge is more analytic, scientific and clear than *Cārvāka*.

(V) *Cārvāka* is materialist. So, his epistemology is in the light of materialistic approach. On the other hand, Hume's discussion was pure epistemological. He did not view about the primitive matter of the world and that's why we cannot say about his philosophy that whether he is materialist or idealist. He did not discuss epistemology in order to accomplish ontological view. He emphasized on the discussion of pure epistemology.

(VI) *Cārvāka*'s explanations about the means of perception or the nature and the number of sense organ are clear and sufficient. He adopted five sense-organs. On the other hand, there is no explanation about the means of perception or the nature and the number of sense organ. Hume started his discussion with the explanation of impression and did not explore about the number and nature of the sense-organs. Perhaps, he agreed with the traditional view of psychology about the nature and number of the senses.

(VII) *Cārvāka* had limited the boundary of our imagination by saying that mental perceptions are dependent upon external perception but its explanation had not been given clearly. Contrarily, David Hume said that 'no ideas are possible without impressions' and this principle clearly declares the limitation of our imagination.

(VIII) There is no discussion about the innate ideas in *Cārvāka*'s theory of perception. Perhaps, he did not feel the requirement to explore this, since, at that time there was no concept of the innate ideas. On the other hand, David Hume discussed it. He criticized the Cartesian concept of innate ideas and said that being elementariness the impressions can be regarded as the innate ideas. To accomplish his theory, David Hume had criticized Cartesian innate ideas and felt to explore about this matter.

Conclusion: There are some similarities and some important dis-similarities between *cārvāka* and Hume's epistemological views regarding the explanations of the concept of perception. It indicates that, *cārvāka* has propounded such a concept of the epistemology before the seventh century B.C. which has been explored properly by David Hume. Their unlikeness is due to the difference of the space, time and the socio-economic situation. It proves that, there is a history of succession of the discussion of the philosophical problem. Contemporary space and time, socio-economic background, science and development of industry take an important role to determinate the motion of the history of philosophy. The epistemological view of *cārvāka* on perception transcended the temporal, spatial and aesthetical boundary and reached on Hume's philosophy by historical succession.

Moreover, this is not its end because there is a clear impact of the view on post- Humean philosophical theories like utilitarianism, logical positivism, pragmatism, phenomenology and the tradition of analytic philosophy.

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