



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2019; 5(6): 494-496
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 17-04-2019
Accepted: 26-05-2019

Dr. Anjali Sharma
Department of Philosophy,
Govt. Arts College, Kota,
Rajasthan, India

Realism and idealism: An Indian perspective

Dr. Anjali Sharma

Abstract

The paper aims to elucidate philosophical schools of thought called idealism and realism from the perspective of history of Indian Philosophy. Both idealism and realism, as philosophical terms, deal with the relationship between our minds and the world. Idealism is the view that things exist only as ideas, with no reality as material objects outside the mind. Realism is the view that the objects exist in themselves, independently of our consciousness of them. Therefore, there is a need for proper rationalization and explanation to these philosophical schools of thoughts about their origin, proponent aims and contemporary implications.

Keywords: realism, idealism, eternal transient

Introduction

The philosophical traditions of India have provided profound insights into the realms of realism and idealism, offering unique perspectives that diverge from Western philosophical frameworks. The Indian philosophical systems, such as Vedanta, Samkhya, and Buddhism, present comprehensive views on the nature of reality and the relationship between the material world and consciousness. This article aims to explore the Indian perspective on realism and idealism, highlighting the key philosophical concepts, their interplay, and their implications for understanding the nature of existence. Drawing from the rich philosophical heritage of India, we will delve into the intricacies of these contrasting perspectives while avoiding repetition.

1. Realism in Indian Philosophy

Realism, known as “Pratyaksha Vada” in Indian philosophy, holds that the external world exists objectively and independently of human perception. It posits that our senses provide us with direct knowledge of the external reality. However, Indian realists acknowledged the limitations and subjectivity of human perception. They argued that our senses are fallible and can be influenced by various factors, leading to perceptual errors. Despite these limitations, realism in Indian philosophy asserts that the material world has an ontological existence.

A. Nyaya and Vaisheshika

The Nyaya and Vaisheshika schools of philosophy are prominent proponents of realism in Indian thought. Nyaya philosophers, such as Gautama and Vatsyayana, argued that perception (pratyaksha) is a valid means of knowledge, providing direct access to external objects. Vaisheshika, founded by Kanada, presented a detailed ontology of the material world, positing that reality consists of distinct, atomic entities (paramanus) that combine to form complex objects.

B. Mimamsa

Mimamsa, developed by Jaimini, emphasizes the significance of ritual practices and the Vedic scriptures. While it acknowledges the objective reality of the world, Mimamsa focuses more on the practical aspects of religious and ritualistic observances.

2. Idealism in Indian Philosophy

Idealism, known as “Pramana Vada” in Indian philosophy, posits that reality is ultimately a product of consciousness or mind. It argues that the external world is an illusory projection, and ultimate truth lies in the realm of consciousness.

Correspondence

Dr. Anjali Sharma
Department of Philosophy,
Govt. Arts College, Kota,
Rajasthan, India

According to Indian idealism, the material world is ephemeral and constantly changing, while consciousness is eternal and unchanging.

A. Advaita Vedanta

Advaita Vedanta, founded by Adi Shankara, is one of the most influential idealistic philosophies in India. It propounds the doctrine of non-dualism, asserting that the ultimate reality, called Brahman, is identical with individual consciousness (Atman). According to Advaita Vedanta, the material world, known as Maya, is an illusion that veils the true nature of reality. Liberation (Moksha) is achieved through the realization of this non-dualistic nature of existence.

B. Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhism, particularly the Mahayana tradition, presents a unique form of idealism known as Yogacara or Vijñānavāda. It posits that reality is fundamentally mind-dependent, and the external world is a construct of consciousness. According to Yogacara, all phenomena are manifestations of mind, and liberation is attained through transcending conceptual limitations and recognizing the true nature of mind.

3. Interplay between Realism and Idealism in Indian Thought

Indian philosophy often embraces a holistic approach, acknowledging the interplay between realism and idealism. While some schools lean more towards realism or idealism, others attempt to reconcile the two perspectives.

A. Samkhya Philosophy

Samkhya philosophy, attributed to sage Kapila, presents a dualistic world view that incorporates elements of both realism and idealism. Samkhya posits the existence of two fundamental entities: Purusha (Consciousness) and Prakriti (matter). Purusha represents pure consciousness, while Prakriti is the material realm composed of various elements and energies. Samkhya holds that liberation is attained through the realization of the distinction between Purusha and Prakriti, thereby transcending the identification with the material world and recognizing the primacy of consciousness.

B. Vishishtadvaita Vedanta

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, propagated by Ramanuja, offers a qualified non-dualistic perspective. It recognizes the reality of the external world while emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings with the ultimate reality (Brahman). According to Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, the material world is an expression of the divine and serves as a means for spiritual evolution and realization.

C. Jaina Philosophy

Jaina philosophy, founded by Mahavira, acknowledges the existence of both the material world and consciousness. It posits that reality consists of both dravya (substances) and jiva (souls). Jainism emphasizes the interdependence of the material and spiritual realms and advocates for the purification of consciousness through ethical living and self-discipline.

4. Implications and Relevance of Indian Perspectives

The Indian perspectives on realism and idealism have profound implications for our understanding of existence,

consciousness, and the nature of reality. They challenge the reductionist tendencies of Western philosophies and offer a more holistic and nuanced view of the world.

A. Spiritual Growth and Liberation

The Indian idealistic philosophies, such as Advaita Vedanta and Yogacara Buddhism, emphasize the realization of non-duality and the liberation of consciousness from the illusion of the material world. They provide spiritual paths that prioritize self-realization and the transcendence of egoic identification with the external world.

B. Ethical Living and Social Harmony

Many Indian philosophies, both realist and idealist, emphasize the importance of ethical living and social responsibility. They advocate for compassion, non-violence, and the welfare of all beings as essential components of spiritual growth and societal harmony. These perspectives have practical applications in promoting social justice, environmental sustainability, and the well-being of communities.

C. Integration of Science and Spirituality

The Indian perspectives on realism and idealism offer opportunities for dialogue and integration with scientific inquiries. The deep exploration of consciousness, mind-body connections, and the nature of reality align with current scientific research in fields such as quantum physics and cognitive sciences. Indian philosophies provide frameworks for bridging the gaps between scientific exploration and spiritual understanding.

Conclusion

The Indian philosophical traditions offer diverse and intricate perspectives on realism and idealism. The realistic schools acknowledge the objective existence of the material world while recognizing the limitations of human perception. The idealistic philosophies emphasize the primacy of consciousness and the illusory nature of the material world. Throughout Indian thought, there are examples of reconciling these contrasting perspectives, presenting a holistic worldview that incorporates both realism and idealism.

These Indian perspectives challenge us to question our assumptions about reality, consciousness, and the interplay between the material and spiritual realms. They provide frameworks for spiritual growth, ethical living, and harmonious societal interactions. Moreover, the Indian philosophies offer avenues for dialogue and integration with scientific inquiries, fostering a deeper understanding of the nature of existence.

By exploring the rich heritage of Indian philosophy and engaging with these contrasting perspectives on realism and idealism, we can broaden our understanding of the complexities of human existence and open up new avenues for personal and collective growth.

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