DIGNĀGA, MEINONG AND RUSSELL ON THE PROBLEM OF EMPTY TERMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Dr. Saikat Bandyapadhyay

Introduction:

The problem of empty terms is one of the most discussed problems in logic and analytic philosophy. Several philosophers from the East and West have tried to solve this problem with their own methodology. In the East, especially the Navya-Nyāya and the Buddhist schools of philosophy have dealt intensively with the problem of empty terms. More recently, Professor Bimal Krishna Matilal also carefully addresses the said problem. On the other hand, in the West, a serious attempt is being made in Aristotelian logic to identify the problem, and many Aristotle scholars believe that empty terms are a real problem in Aristotle's logic. Paolo Crivelli has argued in the *Proceedings of the Boston Area of Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, published by Brill, that Aristotle's logic may indeed contain empty terms. In the 20th century Western philosophy, Russell, Frege, and more recently John Searle and Michel Dummett have addressed the problem of empty terms. In this paper, I do not intend to trace the history of philosophical discussions of empty terms. Rather, the first step will be to present the theory of description Russell used to solve the problem of empty terms. In the next step, the methods of paraphrase and apoha will be highlighted, which are alternative solutions to the problem of empty terms in Dignāga's philosophical system. Then a comparative study will be made between Russell's theory of description and Dignāga's method of paraphrase, and between Dignāga's theory of apoha and Meinong's theory of objects. But before proceeding to the first step, let us briefly look at the notion of empty terms and the philosophical problem associated with it.

Empty concepts and the problem of empty concepts:

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, empty terms are "terms that refer to nothing or describe nothing."[i] *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* also points out that in logic and philosophy of language, a term that has no carrier or refers to nothing in particular, can be called an empty term.[ii] Bimal Krishna Matilal, in his famous work, *Logic, Language: An Introduction to Indian Philosophical Studies*, has defined empty terms as "expressions that are meaningful but do not refer to anything real."[iii] As we have seen, empty terms are meaningful in language, but they do not refer to any particular object in the real world. 'The son of a barren woman, 'round square', 'sky flower',

'green virtue', 'golden mountain', 'the horn of the hare', and 'the winged horse' are some examples of such terms. These terms lack actual reference, and yet they have their own meaning.

An empty term, which has a meaning but lacks the proper referent, poses no philosophical problem at all for philosophers. The problem arises when we use an empty term in a sentence in place of the subject term and assume that the sentence has a meaning even though the subject term lacks a real referent. The sentence 'The golden mountain is beautiful' has a definite meaning, but in reality, there is no golden mountain in the real world. Although we hear this sentence, we understand something, but there is nothing that exists as a golden mountain. The question naturally arises- how can it be justified that such a sentence is considered meaningful, although the subject of the sentence does not denote anything? Here lies the problem of empty terms.

Russell on the problem of the empty terms:

Bertrand Russell, the renowned analytic philosopher of the West, is influenced in his early life by the realist view of the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong. Following Meinong, Russell, in his earlier days, believes that the objects that are the subject of our thoughts have a kind of ontological status. We can talk about the 'golden mountain', 'the round square', or 'the present king of France' (lately France no longer has a monarchy). So, they have a kind of being, a logical reality. Otherwise, a sentence which contains empty terms like 'golden mountain' or 'round square' as the subject term must necessarily be meaningless.

At a later stage, however, Russell refuted Meinong's theory of empty terms. If Meinong's observation were true, then the world of things would be full of imaginary, absurd, and peculiar entities. Russell believes that we should adhere to a clear rationalist view in logic. For this reason, Russell has adopted the law of parsimony or Occam's razor to leave aside all insignificant entities. In this context, Russell introduced the theory of description, whose main goal is to show that propositions such as 'the golden mountain does not exist', 'the present king of France is bald', 'a round square is round', etc. are meaningful, yet we need not accept that empty terms like 'the golden mountain', 'the present king of France', 'round square' etc. are denoting some peculiar real objects. Actually, they are not at all referring expressions.

Russell thinks that there is indeed a difference between name and description, which his predecessors like Meinong did not understand. A name is a complete symbol that has a reference and is apparently a referring expression. A description, on the other hand, is an incomplete symbol. It has no reference to the real world, but can still be used in a meaningful sentence. For Russell, 'the golden

mountain', 'the present king of France', and 'a round square' can be categorized as non-referential expressions under 'description'. Take, for example, the sentence used by Russell himself, 'The present king of France is bald'. Russell has shown that this sentence is meaningful, but that the description it contains has no real reference. Russell points out that from the point of view of grammar this sentence has the form of a subject predicate, but from the point of view of logic it has a different form. When we analyse the sentence, we get the exact form, that is, the logical form. We would see that 'the present king of France' is not the logical subject of the sentence, but that the sentence is not an utterance about the present king of France at all. Following Russell, we can now analyze said sentence as follows:

  The present king of France is bald (S1)

(a) There is at least one person who is the present king of France, and

(b) There is at most one person who is the present king of France, and

(c) The person who is the current king of France is bald.

Following the symbolic scripts, this sentence can be expressed like this:

($\exists$x) [Fx . (y) (Fy $\supset$ y = x) . Bx] (S2) { Here Fx: x is the king of France, Bx: x is bald}

In this analysis, we obtain a conjunctive sentence whose first conjunction is false, because there is no one in the world to whom 'the present king of France' refers. Therefore, the entire conjunctive sentence is necessarily false. Since S2 is logically equivalent to S1, i.e., the main clause, must also be false, and its falsity necessarily implies its meaningfulness. Another important fact is that in the above analysis, the term 'the present king of France' does not occur. For this reason, in order to explain the meaning of the sentence, one must not admit the meaning of the term. This is also true for all other empty terms. From the point of view of grammarians, empty terms belonging to sentences are of the subject-predicate structure, which leads to the problem of empty terms. However, if one follows Russell's logical analysis, the sentences with empty terms are not of the subject-predicate structure, so the problem of empty terms is guaranteed to be solved. Using this descriptive theory, one can easily show that the negative existential sentences with empty terms are also meaningful. For example, the sentence 'The present king of France does not exist' can be analyzed in this way:

  The present king of France (S3)

(a) There is at least one the present king of France

(b) There is at most one present king of France

In symbolic scripts with quantifier and predicate, we can symbolize the sentence as follows: ~ (∃x) [Fx . (y) (Fy ⊃ y = x)] (S4)

In this case, according to Russell, the negative existential sentence containing an empty term is still meaningful if we analyze the sentence in this way. The same method could be applied to other negative existential sentences with empty terms.

Dignāga on the problem of the empty term:

Dignāga, who is called Pyogs-glan in Tibetan, is the father of mediaeval logic. Dignāga as a philosopher in the system of the Buddhist school, is fully aware of the fact that Buddhist philosophy, since its primitive times, admits some basic existential sentences in which the inclusion of the empty term is frequent. The Buddhist accepts the existential sentences such as 'the self does not exist' (anatman), 'eternal entities do not exist' (anitya), 'intrinsic nature does not exist' (sunyata) and so on. Zhihua Yao says in his scholarly article, "the subjects of these propositions (sentences) are all considered empty terms because, as stated in the propositions themselves, they do not really exist. Therefore, the Buddhist tradition has had to face the problem of empty subject terms from its very inception."[iv]

Dignāga, as a Buddhist philosopher, deals with the problem of the empty terms during his philosophical journey. In *Nyāyamukha*, Dignāga has tried to identify the said problem in a dialectical way. He first states the opponent's thesis concerning the empty terms. Then he mentions the differing thesis put forward by the Buddhists.

According to Dignāga, Samkhyas can argue:

Primordial matter exists. (Thesis)

Because one can see that the various individuals hold a general or similar feature. (Reason)

On this issue, according to Dignāga, the Buddhist can argue:

Primordial matter does not exist. (Thesis)

Because there is non-apprehension of primordial matter. (Reason)

At this point it should be noted that for the Samkhyas 'the primordial matter' is not an empty term. Because in their metaphysical system, they accepted prakṛti as the first cause or primordial matter. But the Buddhists, unlike the Samkhyas, do not admit a first cause because there is no

supporting *pramāṇa* for the acceptance of the first cause. Consequently, the Buddhists accept 'the primordial matter' as an empty term.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the Dignāga converges with both positive and negative existential propositions that contain empty concepts. We see that Dignāga not only identifies the problem of empty terms in his philosophy, but also gives a possible solution to the problem. We have already mentioned that according to Buddhist philosophers, sentences such as 'primordial matter exists' contain empty terms. Dignāga, a rigorous Buddhist philosopher, holds the same line of thought. For him, the meaningfulness of the two sentences 'primal matter exists' and 'primal matter does not exist' is necessary to establish the Buddhist ethos. If a sentence like 'primal matter exists' is meaningless, then all the Buddhist's talk or counter-arguments are hollow. If, again, a proposition like 'primal matter does not exist' is meaningless, then the Buddhist viewpoint would be unsupported. For then their own theory would be called into question. Dignāga, the most eminent logician of Buddhist thought, is fully aware of these implications regarding sentences with empty terms. To limit these unwarranted implications, Dignāga employs the method of the para-phrase in his later work, *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. In this classic text, Dignāga offers both dialectical and para-phrase methods to solve the problem of empty terms.

At the beginning of the argumentation regarding empty terms Dignāga mentions opponents' argument. He says,

Opponents like Samkhays may argue:

Primordial matter exists. (Thesis)

Because one can see that the various individuals possess a general characteristic (Reason)

Just like the fragments of an objects possess one and the same cause. (Example)

Here 'primordial matter exists' may be para-phrased as 'the various individuals certainly possess one and the same cause'. Then logical subject of the thesis would be 'the various individuals' instead of 'primordial matter.' Bearing the method of para-phrase, following Dignāga, we can re-construct the argument as follows:

The various individuals certainly possess one and the same cause (Thesis)

Because one can see that the various individuals possess a similar and general characteristic. (Reason)

Just like the fragments of an objects possess one and the same cause. (Example)

Here we see that in the first sentence of the argument 'the primordial matter exists' has been paraphrased as 'the different individuals certainly possess one and the same cause', which leads to the fact that no empty terms are uttered. Thus, by paraphrasing, the empty term can be avoided and the sentence can be shown to make sense. Consequently, the problem of empty terms can be completely bypassed.

It is important to note that Dignāga, in his writings, does not use the method of para-phrase in regard to negative existential sentences with empty terms. But we find that Shentai , one of the famous commentators of Dignāga's work, has firmly believed that Dignāga used this method of paraphrasing to solve both positive existential and negative existential sentences with empty terms. According to Shentai, the term 'the various individuals' actually denotes twenty-three entities assumed by Samkhayas, and in this system, these twenty-three entities have a similar and general cause, which is none other than the original cause or pradhāna. Shentai takes 'the twenty-three entities or individuals' as the logical subject and applies the method of the para-phrase in the negative existential sentence in this way:

The twenty-three individuals do not possess primordial matter as their cause. (Thesis)

Because primordial matter cannot be apprehended. (Reason)

Example: Just like the son of a barren woman. (Example)[v]

Here 'primordial matter does not exist', the negative existential sentence has been paraphrased in empty terms as 'The twenty-three individuals do not possess primordial matter as a cause'. In this case, the problem of empty terms does not arise. This is because a concept like primordial matter is not the logical subject of the proposition.

We have already seen both Russell's theory of description and Dignāga's theory of the para-phrase. We have found a clear similarity in both theories, although these theories were written almost fifteen centuries apart. Dignāga, long before Russell, used the method of the para-phrase to describe sentences containing empty terms as meaningful. But Dignāga himself is very concerned to illustrate the positive existential sentences, but he does not attach much importance to negative existential sentences. His commentator Shentai has taken great effort to note that Dignāga is also very concerned about negative existential sentence. But we find that in *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, Dignāga carefully avoids the issue of negative existential propositions in relation to empty terms. This is because in the case of negative existential propositions, error may be obvious. If we look back to the example of Shentai

about 'the twenty-three individuals', an unjustified problem may arise. We can mention the argument again here:

The twenty-three individuals do not possess primordial matter as their cause. (Thesis)

Because primordial matter cannot be apprehended. (Reason)

Just like the son of a barren woman. (Example)

If we look closely at the argument, we will see that although the empty concept of primordial matter has been replaced by the phrase 'the twenty-three individuals', there is still an empty term in this argument. In the minor premise, 'primal matter' still remains. But this empty term cannot be replaced by 'the twenty-three individuals' because the method of paraphrase is applicable only to a single sentence, not to the whole conclusion.[vi] Thus, the problem of empty terms remains. For this reason, Dignāga and his followers fail to show that negative existential sentences with empty terms have a meaningful appearance by the method of paraphrase. However, in the case of a positive existential proposition containing empty terms in its part, it can be easily and infallibly proved to be meaningful by the method of the para-phrase.

It is important to note that Dignāga is also aware of the problem of empty terms in negative existential propositions. For this reason, we think, he deliberately avoids any discussion of negative existential sentences in *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. In his philosophy, another method is introduced to solve the problem of empty terms, which is none other than the theory of apoha. 'Apoha' literally means 'exclusion' or 'differentiation'. According to this theory, words are the result of mental or conceptualization. As a result, words are associated only with mental images and cannot be directly associated with external objects or denote real objects.[vii] Apoha theory also claims that such mental conceptualization of words is possible through anyapoha, a or the method of excluding others. A concept that has no factual referent is recognized by a process of exclusion from other concepts. For example, the general term 'cow' can be understood by excluding all 'non-cows." Tilleman believes that in Dignāga's philosophy 'the unicorn' has the same ontological status as a 'cow." This is because these two words denote certain conceptual images and have a verbal meaning (Śabdārtha).[viii]

If we accept the apoha theory of Dignāga, then there is a complete elimination of the problem of empty terms. Because this theory accepts the same ontological status of both real and empty terms, mentioning that all these terms are associated with conceptual images.

With the help of apoha's theory, Dignāga believes to have solved the problem of empty terms. If there is no difference between a real term and an empty term, then the question of meaning

does not arise when using empty terms in a sentence. Empty terms, like other real terms, do not refer to external objects but to conceptual images, and therefore have a kind of ontological status. But here we can raise many questions against Dignāga's point. His theory of apoha in the context of empty terms sounds like Meinong's theory of objects. Meinong states that empty objects such as 'the horn of a rabbit' or 'the sky flower' have neither existence (Existenz) nor subsistence (Bestand). But their so-being or 'Sosien' can still be referred to without doubt.[ix] As we have already discussed, if we accept Meinong's theory, we accept unnecessarily multiplied objects in the domain of ontology. A similar result will hold for Dignāga's theory of apoha. By adhering empty terms with mental-conceptual images, Dignāga has committed the same error as Meinong does in his philosophy. Thus, the Russellian objection could also apply to Dignāga's attempt for associating empty terms with mental conceptualization.

Conclusion:

Like other philosophical problems, the problem of empty terms has been persistent in the field of philosophical discourse until recent times. This is simply due to the imperfection of our language and logical system. Russell, recognizing this fact, offered a comprehensive solution to the problem of empty terms, but Russell's theory of description was also criticized by his successors such as P.F. Strawson.

In addition to the attempts in analytic philosophy, we can see that some serious efforts have been made in the Indian philosophical tradition to solve the problem of empty terms. In the Nyava-Nyāya and Buddhist traditions, some unique philosophical methods have been applied in connection with the said problem. Dignāga has applied two types of methods, namely the method of para-phrase and the method of apoha. With the method of para-phrase, Dignāga has solved the puzzle of empty terms used in positive existential sentences and it has an obvious similarity with the Russellian model of the theory of description. But in the context of negative existential propositions, empty terms lead to a clear logical fallacy. For this reason, Dignāga has focused more on the theory of apoha than on the former. But we find that the apoha theory admits a kind of ontological status of empty terms, which leads to an unjustified conclusion, just like Meinong in Western analytic philosophy. Interestingly, however, Dignāga's apoha theory takes a dominant position in late Indian and Tibetan Buddhism and becomes a popular theory among Buddhist philosophers. Since Dignāga's apoha theory, despite its popularity, bears a distinct resemblance to Meinon's theory of objects, Russell's objection to Meinong's theory may be similarly relevant and applicable to Dignāga's said theory.

References and Further Readings:

[i] Blackburn, Simon, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy,* Oxford University Press, London, 2005, p. 91.

[ii] Bunnin, Nicholas, Yu, Jiyuan, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing, USA, 2004, p. 208.

[iii] Matilal, Bimal Krishna, *Logic, Language and Reality: An Introduction to Indian Philosophical Studies*, Matilal Banarasidass, 1st Edition, New Delhi, 1985, p. 78.

[iv] Yau, Zhihua, *Empty Subject Terms in Buddhist Logic, Dignāga and his Chinese Commentators*, Journal Source: Journal of Indian Philosophy , August 2009, Vol. 37, No. 4 (August 2009), pp. 383-398 Published by: Springer Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23497734

[v] Shentai*, Commentary Notes on the Nyayamukha* in T, Vol 44, no. 1839.

[vi] Tillemans, T.J, *Scripture, Logic, Language, Essays on Dharmakriti and His Tibetan Successors*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1999, p. 67

[vii] Sharma, Dhirendra, *Buddhist Theory of Meaning (Apoha) and Negative Statements*, Source: Philosophy of East and West, Jan-Apr, 1968, Vol. 18, No. 1.2, p.3, http://www.jstor.org/stabole/1398032

[viii] Tilemans, T.J., op. cit., p. 174

[ix] Yau, Zhihau, op. cit., p. 388.