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Does Freedom Contradict Causal Exhaustion? – A Critical-Epistemological Resolution (KU-NCCU Graduate Roundtable)

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Does Freedom Contradict Causal Exhaustion?

– A Critical-Epistemological Resolution

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If one wants the empirical reality, one has to (1) admit freedom (viz., self-awareness in Dignāga) and (2) give up the world in itself as ultimate cause (viz., Nāgārjuna). Then, one has to admit (1) epistemology is prior to ontology and (2) practice (freedom) is prior to theory (cognitive reality). Such priority should be on behalf of truth and we the best can only adopt it as an attitude; we should not take it in time (in reality/convention/appearance) or in logic. When one is in a moral situation or in the dying breath, if one could persist and stay also in freedom in stead of only in reality (the object-oriented desire), that must be much nicer, both on behalf of ethics and soteriological concerns, not for the sake of faith or ideal only. Life-and-death, or fear, etc., are resulting cognitions; freedom and each of them, distinct from each other though, do not contradict each other; they do not remove each other. To misidentify resulting cognitions as the cause of human being is the root of all fears and vexations. To put freedom and phenomenal causal exhaustion in the same field of force and make them contradictory is one of the most troublesome, rooted confusions in humanity.

1. Freedom and Causal Exhaustion – West (Kant) and East (Buddhism)

Kant has a very good display of these notions and the problem (in the 3rd antinomy); I just borrow it to show the problem. The Thesis of the antinomy is: beside of the causal law of nature, it is necessary also to admit the causal law of freedom, that there must be a cause without any preceding cause. Argument: if there is no free cause, there is no sufficient determination of the previous causal conditions and then nothing can happen. The Anti-thesis is: there is no freedom; any thing that occurs must have its cause(s) in the previous time stage – (the law in the 2nd analogy). Argument: if there is free cause, the law of natural causality (2nd analogy) loses its universal validity. Kant's position: both the thesis and the anti-thesis are true, and the only resolution to this antinomy is transcendental idealism, i.e.*, if we abandon the pre-critical metaphysical assumptions such as the transcendent reality of the first cause and, instead, accept that the first cause rests in cognition, i.e*, if we stop viewing this issue in the world in itself and begin to view this in the situation of cognition.

The seemingly contradictory point is obvious: we want the absolute cause (uncaused cause) to give a full account for causality and we want to maintain the law of natural causality that everything that is causally effective must have

its cause in the previous time stage. On the one hand, we don't want the infinite regress of causation (if only with the law of 2nd analogy alone, causation is problematic, because the complete determination of the series of previous causal conditions is lack); on the other hand, we want the causal network in the phenomenal world to be comprehensive so that the law of the 2nd analogy has to be exhaustive in all phenomena (let us call it "phenomenal causal exhaustion"). The corer issue is: we want to preserve the law of natural causality (otherwise, we would render up the universality of natural laws for sciences and the applicative legitimacy of logic performances) for the sake of empirical realism, but preserving it seems to contradict itself in both the thesis and the anti-thesis. The only way to clear away the difficulty is to succeed in identifying (a) the orthogonality of the causality in time (nature) and the causality not in time (freedom) and (b) their necessary unity in a person (a cognizer).

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This is also a core issue in Buddhism, especially the Mahāyāna Buddhism. On the one hand, we want it to be true that there is a chance for us to get rid of saṃsāra; on the other hand, we want to maintain a comprehensive causal relativity among all possible "pratītyasamutpānna (緣起法)" (that which arises and ceases). In Nāgārjuna, we can see his rejection to the reality of any "absolute cause" -- atoms and pramāṇa-s being the uncaused objective and subjective cause of all dharmas, so that the comprehensive causal relativity among all dharmas can be preserved (the empirical reality is wanted); nonetheless, he still has to leave a space for a positive account for the ultimacy of a status free from the the causal chains in saṃsāra – nirvana – and for the ultimacy of "pratītyasamutpāda (緣起性)" (the principle that everything must co-arise with multiple conditions, which is equivalent to "śūnyatā 空性"). However, no argument for this is provided except a persuasion that we must have a proper understanding of the two-truth distinction in MMK 24.

I think it is less controversial to maintain the phenomenal causal exhaustion; even the non-Buddhist should be very happy about it (that's why Buddhist epistemology is said to admit a common ground with the realists). It excludes the non-Buddhists and Hīnayāna Buddhists in the Indian context when we further specify that the idea of the absolute reality of any absolute cause (atoms as the ultimate real and pramāṇa-s as the ultimate real) cannot go along with the idea of the phenomenal causal exhaustion (Nāgārjuna's contribution). It then becomes controversial when we come to consider to include the thesis of freedom. Perhaps it is okay for most of us to say that Nāgārjuna must leave the space for the two ultimate claims: nirvana and pratītyasamutpāda. It may be okay for us to say pratītyasamutpāda as a true claim can be regarded as an idea or concept without any ultimate ontic (transcendent) reality, but it would upset many people to say that nirvana is the same case, for some ethical and soteriological concerns. Yogacarins (e.g., Vasubandhu & Dignāga) may be said to have greater interest in arguing for the thesis of freedom and go into the study of epistemology. Some Mādhyamikas (e.g., Candrakīrti) disagree with this approach because of the overwhelming worry in the anti-thesis in Nāgārjuna's works. Some Mādhyamikas (Bhaviveka) may not want to skip this question of freedom and bring back the treatment into the context of epistemology in Nāgārjuna's original concern of the middle way (Kātyāyana passage in Saṃyuktāgama cited in MMK 15.7) and move closer to the Yogācāra approach. Some Yogācārins (Dhamarkīrti), however, identify themselves so much with their opponent (Candrakīrti) in the importance of the phenomenal causal exhaustion that they just dilute the weight of the thesis of freedom in their introducing too much ontic value understanding Buddhist epistemology. No matter how history goes, the problem of the third antinomy remains, even in this Buddhist context; Kant does not hold the patent of the problem. Because of this and in this philosophical context, the Mādhyamaka effort in appreciating epistemology should be appreciated.

2. Defending Kant's Transcendental Idealism on the Thesis

Schopenhaur, Kemp Smith (1962), Strawson (1966) questioned, in the reconstruction of Allison (1983/2004):

Thesis of the Third Antinomy: With the second analogy, there must always be a previous cause, and then there cannot be any complete determination of the series of the previous (causal) conditions; then, nothing can happen; hence, the absolute first cause is needed.
The Thesis not only demands (a) second analogy, but also (b) the complete implication of that analogy, namely, the complete determination of the series of all previous causes.
Schopenhaur, Kemp Smith, Strawson: the implication (b) from (a) is problematic and unexplained. Without (b),

Thesis would fail, and the Anti-thesis, namely, with the second analogy alone, can suffice. Then, we can give up Thesis and preserve only Anti-thesis. (This move is to remove transcendental idealism from Kant's critical philosophy, which is a very welcome attitude in German idealism and the Kant scholarship in North America.)
Allison: the requirement of (b) is reasonable even to the naturalists (the empirical realists). One still has to answer the question where's the first (absolute) cause? If it's not true that there's an absolute first cause, then the causal series is actually not true (determined). Such a determination needs an explanation. Allison's suggestion: (b) is not a demand for reality (ontological understanding of the determination); it's a formal demand (epistemological determination). Both Thesis and Anti-thesis are demands from “reason”, not demands of the world.

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Gustav's Supporting Allison's Defense:

(a) is only effective in resulting cognition (empirical ontology), and (b) is not a reasonable demand in the scope of resulting cognition ((b) is demanding for the cause, which should not be looked for in the results); without (b), resulting cognition in which (a) is necessarily expressed and found, cannot be possible at all, because (b) is part of the transcendental condition of cognition (formal condition, not empirical condition) and need not reasonably and logically follow natural causal laws (which are only necessary in resulting cognition). Besides, (a) should also be included in the transcendental condition of cognition as well, but (a) can be verified in particular experience while (b) cannot, because (a) is giving the condition (natural causality) to every possible cognition while (b) only regards the condition itself. Because (b) only demands for the condition, not for the results, so the demand of complete determination of the previous causal series is complete already in the condition insofar as the resulting cognition is realized (the resulting cognition immediately implies the satisfaction of the condition of cognition); its implication to the sum total of previous resulting cognition, with their empirical reality, is not necessary.
The demand for the second analogy is a rule/concept (the category of causation) of understanding; the demand for the complete determination in the condition is an idea of reason. When the resulting cognition is realized, both demands are, and must be, satisfied at once, because they are required conditions of cognition.

3. The Mādhyamaka-Yogācāra Conflict

One patent disagreement in the Mādhyamaka-Yogācāra conflict is: while Mādhyamaka rejects every ontological assertion about the ultimate reality, many Yogācārins are understood to expound their tenets as supporting that there must be something ultimately real/true – mind, consciousness or means of cognition (pramāṇa量) – that makes every phenomenon (resulting cognition) possible. Mādhyamikas must reject this ontological assertion in order to maintain that the principle of dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), viz., the principle of causality, must exhaust all those which arise (originate) in phenomena – any realized phenomenon must be determined through comprehensive and complicated causal network rather than any determined particular cause(s), so that all possible phenomena are thus altogether be placed in the scope of the conventional. The positive ontological assertion of the ultimate reality obviously jeopardizes the phenomenal exhaustion of causality and invites contradictions to the explanation, because the ultimate reality, which must be an absolute cause (because no other determined cause can precede it), itself would be free from the mutual dependence of originations. On the contrary, its negative ontological assertion invites annihilation (uccheda, 斷滅). Yet, the suspension of assertion makes the school unable to sufficiently account for either the apodixis of its thesis-assumption, viz., the necessary exhaustion of the principle of pratītyasamutpāda itself in all pratītyasamutpanna-s (all those which arise conditionally) which accounts for their complete relativity at the theoretical level, or the necessity and purposiveness of cultivation in Buddhism in general at the practical level. To further account for the phenomenal exhaustion of causality and the purposiveness of Buddhist practice, as well as to defend the school of existence (有宗), Yogācārins subscribe to and further refine epistemology within Buddhism. Naturally, to defend their own school, later Mādhyamikas criticize this attempt in return.

To deny both the absolute objective cause and the absolute subjective cause means to deny any particularly determined causal relation – either (a) the particularly determined causal relation between objects themselves or between the non-phenomenal object and the unconscious production of perception in the perceptual faculty, and (b) the particularly determined causal relation between the cognitive faculty and the resulting cognition in

awareness. The Mādhyamika-Yogācāra conflict is on the latter. Exactly at this point, the resolution of the thesis of freedom and the anti-thesis against freedom matters in Mahāyāna Buddhism. And that's why a critical revisit of Dignāga's epistemology, which can support the orthogonality of the causality in time and the causality in freedom, is demanded.

4. The Epistemic Situation Talks

Once a cognition of any particular object appears, it appears with a determined way of thinking itself with certain (associations of) universals, giving criteria by means of which our empirical (a posteriori) inferences about the particular object could be either true, not true or irrelevant. When a particular thing of color appears, it appears together with all its possibilities to be thought, including, e.g., being non-eternal, so that the universal, non-eternity, could be applied to the appearance of this particular thing of color. Because the appearance of the particular object can be thought as “the thing of color” and, under the same circumstance, viz., upon being given the same appearance of the particular, can be thought as “non-eternal,” the expression “this thing of color is noneternal” makes sense and becomes meaningful.

In the same way, the appearance of any particular object can be recognized repeatedly via inferential marks. For instance, when one perceives smoke (the mark of fire), one has the re-cognition (pratyabhijñāna) of “the same fire” (Hattori 1968:81). This is because the smoke perceived is contained in the manifoldness of the appearance of the same fire cognized before, at the specific time and space. Even when one pays no attention to the smoke in his or her first-glance cognition of the particular fire, once the particular fire appears, it appears with the possibility to be thought as being associated with this smoke, so that under the same circumstance, viz., upon being given the same appearance of the particular fire, the possibility is always open for the cognizer to pick up. Upon the same base, the inferential mark, smoke, as produced by particular fire, works to produce recognitions of the same fire, so long as the appearance is consistent regarding the factors of space, time and causality (in a coherent web of experience). Similarly, a case of a kind of object can be recognized because the appearance of the case share similarities in its manifoldness with the other cases.

On the one hand, objects have to appear to our mind in the manifold of the a priori intuition, contained by the way they can only be received, viz., in space and time; on the other hand, our thought has to be based upon the thorough synthesis of the manifold being “gone through, taken up, and combined in a certain way” so that the synthesis of the particular appearance with such manifoldness and the conceptual spontaneity results in a cognition. The receptive manifold in sensibility and the spontaneous unity in understanding must be united a priori, so that the being with intellectual intuition would be omniscient and even omnipotent – as Kant writes “that understanding through whose self-consciousness the manifold of intuition would at the same time be given, an understanding through whose representation of objects of this representation would at the same time exist, would not require a special act of the synthesis of the manifold for the unity of consciousness” (KRV B 139). However, human understanding, which only thinks but does not intuit, “does require (such a special act)” (ibid.). That is, the synthesis of the two unities is a priori, in the sense that so long as any particular appears, it must appear in a certain way that all its possible understandings must be contained. If there were such a being whose understanding is intuitive, it would be the world in itself with self-awareness. However, human understanding is not intuitive. The a priori synthesis of the manifold for the unity of human consciousness must be “the first principle,” so that “human understanding cannot even form for itself the least concept of another possible understanding, either one that would intuit itself or one that, while possessing a sensible intuition, would possess one of a different kind than one grounded in space and time” (ibid.). Thus, any object appears to us must appear in the same space and time and at the same while must appear to only the subject (very similar to Dignāga's two-fold appearance theory in PS(V) 1.11ab). Because of this, the world is known by us in space and time, and we are separated from the world. Nonetheless, the unity of receptive manifold and spontaneous unity works for human beings because the a priori synthesis, which entails the a priori synthesis of “apprehension in intuition,” “reproduction in imagination” and “recognition in the concept,” too, (KRV A 97, 98-110; also reminding us of Dignāga's pramāṇa-prameya-phala-being-not-separate thesis in PS(V) 1.10) is the necessary condition of all possible cognitions. Hence, in the world, we, the cognizers, could explore bit by bit the possible valid knowledge in experience – without needing any a priori ontological basis.

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