

CĀRVĀKA HEDONISM: SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

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I

We know that Indian Philosophy, in general, prescribes for four *puruṣārthas*, viz., *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. But the Cārvāka School accepts only two *puruṣārthas*, viz., *artha* and *kāma*, and rejects *dharma* and *mokṣa* altogether. Between the two *puruṣārthas*, *kāma*, the Cārvāka School says, is the supreme end and *artha* is the means to fulfil this end.

Let us explain the Cārvāka ethics in brief. The ethical theory of the Cārvāka School is known as hedonism. Here the question comes: What do we mean by hedonism? The word ‘hedonism’ literally means a doctrine of pleasure. This ethical theory holds that pleasure is the ultimate or supreme goal of human life. Hedonism is based upon two assumptions – one is metaphysical and another is psychological. The former holds that we are basically sensuous in nature. We have reason no doubt, but our reason is not the master, rather, it is the slave in the hands of our passion. According to the psychological assumption man naturally seeks pleasure and avoids pain. This hedonism is of two types viz. Psychological hedonism and ethical hedonism. ‘Psychological hedonism holds that pleasure is the natural and normal object of desire, that we always seek pleasure and avoid pain. Ethical hedonism holds that pleasure is the proper object of desire; that we do not always seek pleasure but ought to seek pleasure’.¹ According to the Cārvāka School, the satisfaction of sensual pleasure and biological need is the supreme goal of human life. Thus, it is seen that the Cārvāka ethics is nothing but hedonism. Ethical hedonism again is subdivided into two kinds- (a) egoistic hedonism and (b) altruistic or universalistic hedonism. ‘Egoistic hedonism regards the individual’s own pleasure to be the moral end, whereas universalistic hedonism considers the pleasure or happiness of all to be the ideal.’² The Cārvāka ethics can be described as egoistic hedonism since it suggests the individual’s own pleasure to be the moral end. The ideal of the Cārvāka ethics is beautifully expressed in the oft-quoted verse which goes as:

*“Yāvatjīvetasukhamjīvetarṇamkṛtvāghṛtampiveta.
Bhasmibhūtasadehasyapunarāgamanamkutaḥ”.*

¹ Sinha, Jadunath. *A Manual of Ethics*, p. 66.

² Sharma. I.C. *Ethical Philosophies of India*, p. 110.

i.e., ‘while life remains let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee even though he runs in debt; when once the body becomes ashes how can it ever return again?’³ The Cārvākas advise people to live happily even at the risk of incurring debt because they are of the opinion that this life is the only life, after death, there is no chance of coming back to the world again. According to them, there is no soul over and above the body. The soul is the conscious-living body. Our consciousness is nothing but the by-product of the combination of the four material elements mentioned above in a particular proportion. So, after death when our body is turned into ashes then how can our consciousness come back again? Saṅkarācārya, in this regard, says: ‘The soul is but the body characterized by the attributes signified in the expression, “I am stout,” “I am youthful,” “I am grown up,” “I am old,” etc... The consciousness found in the modifications of non-intelligent elements is produced in the manner of the red colour out of the combination of the betel areca nut and lime.’⁴

As the existence of the soul as different from the body is denied the mokṣa, the transmigration of the soul along with the existence of God are rejected altogether by the Cārvākas. This view has been expressed by Mādhavācārya in the following way: ‘Hence it follows that there is no other hell than mundane pain produced by purely mundane causes such as thorns, etc.; the only supreme being is the earthly monarch, whose existence is proved by all the world’s eyesight; and the only liberation is the dissolution of the body.’⁵ God is generally admitted as the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. The Cārvākas maintain *svabhābavāda* and therefore deny the necessity of God. They hold that the creation, preservation and destruction of the world is an automatic process. In this regard, Mādhavācārya says: ‘The fire is hot, the water is cold, refreshing cool the breeze of morn. From their own nature was it born?’⁶

Conforming to the norm of the discussion of Indian philosophy the Cārvākas first refute the views of the other schools, that liberation is the summum-bonum of human life. By liberation, we mean a state of total and permanent destruction of

³ Mādhavācārya. *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*

⁴ Saṅkarācārya, *Sarvasiddhāntasamgraha*, p.7.

⁵ *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*, p. 4.

⁶ *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*, p. 10.

suffering. This liberation or *mukti* is of two types: (a) *Jīvanmukti* and (b) *videhamukti*. The former holds that liberation can be attained only after death when the soul is completely detached from the body. The latter, on the other hand, maintains that liberation can be attained even in this life when our soul continues to be united with the body. But the Cārvākas criticize both of the views and ultimately reject them. They argue that *Videhamukti* cannot be accepted for the simple reason that this *mukti* consists in the freedom of the soul from its bondage to physical existence, but there is no point in maintaining the existence of the soul apart from the body, since the conscious-living-body itself stands for the soul.

So far as the concept of the *jīvanmukti* is concerned the Cārvākas hold that if liberation means the attainment of a state in this very life which is absolutely free from all types of pain, then again it is also equally an impossible ideal. This worldly life is the essential mixture of pleasure and pain. So, the absolute cessation of pain in this life is quite impossible. In this situation, we can only try to minimize pain and enjoy as maximum pleasure as possible. Liberation in the sense of complete cessation of pain and suffering can only mean death.⁷ The Cārvākas state that those who try to attain a state completely free from sufferings and pain through rigorous suppression of their natural appetites are nothing but fools. In this context they argue that no wise man would ‘reject the kernel because of its husk,’ nor ‘give up eating fish because there are bones,’ nor ‘cease to grow crops because there are animals to destroy them,’ nor ‘stop cooking his food because beggars might ask for a share.’ The Cārvākas opine that as we know that our existence is confined to the existence of the body and this life only, so the wise decision is to enjoy this life as much as possible. They further maintain that no wise person should through away the opportunities of enjoying this present life, in the uncertain hope of enjoyment hereafter. In this context, they say, ‘Rather a pigeon today than a peacock tomorrow,’ ‘A sure shell is better than a doubtful golden coin,’ ‘who is that fool who would entrust the money in hand to the custody of others?’⁸ Keeping all these in mind the Cārvākas hold that the supreme goal of a human being is to enjoy this present life by attaining pleasure as

⁷ *Maranaṁ eva apavargaha, Bṛhaspati-sūtra.*

⁸ *Kāma-sūtra*, Chapter. 2.

maximum as possible and avoiding the pain. A good life is a life of enjoyment. A good action is an action that makes a balance of pleasure.

II

Cārvāka ethics is nothing but the corollary of the Cārvāka metaphysics, and the Cārvāka metaphysics, in turn, is the necessary consequence of the Cārvāka epistemology. So, we can say that the Cārvāka ethics is nothing but the essential corollary of the Cārvāka epistemology. If so then the refutation of the Cārvāka epistemology implies the refutation of the Cārvāka ethics. I think Cārvāka epistemology can be refuted by a number of cumulative arguments and thereby the Cārvāka ethics also can be refuted. According to the Cārvāka epistemology, perception is the only source of valid cognition. Cārvāka School categorically denies the other sources of knowledge like inference, testimony, comparison and so on. Some arguments have been produced by the Cārvāka School in order to refute the other means of cognition. Among them, one of the important arguments is that the other means of cognition like inference, testimony, etc., sometimes give us false knowledge. But then owing to the same argument the perception also cannot be regarded as a means of valid cognition, since sometimes perception also gives us false knowledge. Who can deny the fact that sometimes we perceive a rope as a snake, a shell as silver, and Ram as Shyam? These types of erroneous knowledge are not universal in the sense that these types of errors are not committed by all persons at the same time. When one perceives a rope as a snake others may perceive that rope as a rope but not as a snake. But sometimes we come across some of the universal types of perceptual erroneous knowledge. We know that the sun is more than thirteen million times bigger than the earth. But we all without exception perceive the sun millions of times smaller than the earth. We all universally perceive that the sun moves around the earth but the fact is otherwise. Besides this, our perception cannot give us the true picture of anything. For example, when we perceive a tree, we perceive only one aspect of the tree; the other aspects of the tree remain unseen and thereby unknown to us. Now keeping all these things in view if perception is considered as a *pramāṇa* then why the other means of cognition cannot be regarded as *pramāṇa*?

The Cārvāka School denies inference as a *pramāṇa*. We all know that another name of inference is argument. So, to deny inference amounts to deny argument. But if the validity of argument is refuted by the Cārvākas, then how can they establish their own views? We come across different arguments given by the Cārvākas to substantiate their own views and they obviously consider these arguments as valid, and thus indirectly they recognize the validity of inference. Besides this, if the validity of inference is denied then our practical life will be paralyzed.

The Cārvāka School does not recognize the validity of inference because it does not recognize the relation called *vyāpti* underlying the *hetu* and the *sādhyā* which is considered as the nerve-centre for the possibility of inference. But if the relation of *vyāpti* along with the inference is denied then how can our day to day-transection be explained. If we are in the need of fire then we seek smoke. The moment we perceive smoke coming from a particular place we go there without hesitation for receiving fire. Likewise, when we are thirsty, we drink water immediately in order to allay our thirst, and most importantly in no case we are disappointed. The validity of all these days to day-transection clearly implies the validity of the relation called *vyāpti*. Now let us go to another important *pramāṇa* called verbal testimony. The Cārvāka School also denies verbal testimony as a *pramāṇa*. But if the Cārvākas does not recognize the validity of the verbal testimony then why the other persons will believe in the views of the Cārvāka school itself? What is the logical ground of their appeal to others to believe in their views? I think in this way a long-listed arguments can be produced against the Cārvāka view of epistemology and thereby deny the same. We have already pointed out that the Cārvāka metaphysics is the corollary of the Cārvāka epistemology. So, to deny the Cārvāka epistemology is to deny the Cārvāka metaphysics. The Cārvākas are of the opinion that as perception is the only valid source of cognition it implies that whatever is perceived can only be recognized, and we cannot recognize anything which is beyond perception. The four material elements called earth, water, fire and air along with the objects produced out of the combination of them can only be perceived and therefore they can only be recognized. But the ether, soul, heaven, hell, God, etc., cannot be perceived and therefore their existence cannot be recognized. But as long as our discussion is concerned, we have seen that the perception is not the

only *pramāṇa*. We have to recognize the other *pramāṇas* like inference, verbal testimony, etc., as well. If so then the existence of non-perceptible things like soul, God, heaven, hell, etc., cannot be denied. The existence of all these things can be established either through inference or through verbal testimony or through both of them. Now if this is the case then the Cārvāka metaphysics called materialism cannot be accepted. The denial of the Cārvāka metaphysics leads to the refutation of the Cārvāka ethics which is considered to be the essential corollary of the Cārvāka metaphysics.

The Cārvākas in order to establish their view that the soul is nothing but one's body itself says that every now and then we pass statements like, 'I am fat,' 'I am tall,' 'I am stout,' and so on. But who does not know that very often we also pass statements like, 'My body is not running well,' 'My body is fit now,' 'My body is tired,' and so on. I think the above views of the Cārvāka School are not acceptable. All of the arguments shown by the Cārvākas can be refuted easily. They maintain that *videhamukti* cannot be accepted because the life after death is not proved by perception, the only *pramāṇa* recognized by them. But we have already seen that perception cannot be the only *pramāṇa*. We cannot but recognize the other major *pramāṇas* like inference, verbal testimony, etc. along with perception. So, the life after death can be established through verbal testimony and inference and thereby the concept of *videhamukti* can be justified. I think the existence of a disembodied soul can be proved by some other arguments.

I think another important objection can be raised against the Cārvāka view of the soul. If the Cārvāka view of the soul is taken for granted then it implies that our body itself is soul. In that case, our sense organs themselves stand for the soul. Not only that our different sense organs stand for different souls which leads to a great problem of integration among different knowledge derived through different sense organs. If there is no soul over and above the body and sense organs then who will integrate the same? Again, if both of the eyes of a person called A are destroyed owing to an accident and if both of the old eyes are replaced by new ones taken from another person called B, then our problems will be multiplied. Here the person with the new pair of eyes would not be in a position to identify his near ones and dear ones. He would not identify even the parents of A, since as per the implication of the

Cārvāka view of the soul the eyes themselves are knower and as they are seeing the parents of A for the first time how can they identify them as his own parents? I think the drama does not end with it. These eyes, on the contrary, know other persons to be his own parents who are the parents of B, from whom the new eyes have been taken. Here problem comes: Whom should be regarded as his own parents and what are the logical grounds behind the answer? Is the person with the new pair of eyes identical with A or with B or with none of them, a new person? Someone may reply that this person with the new pair of eyes is identical to A since the whole body excepting the eyes are the body of A.

Now if the person with the new pair of eyes happens to meet another fatal accident leading to the damage of several organs and subsequently different vital organs like heart, lung, etc. taken from other persons called C, D and so on are replaced and both of his hands and legs are imputed then what will be the status of the identity of that person? Is that person now identical with A or B or C or D or someone else? In this way, we can logically assume that all the different organs of a person may be replaced by different organs, each taken from different persons. In that case what will be the identity of that person? I think no proper answer can be offered from the perspective of the Cārvāka view. But if the concept of soul given by the seven other Indian philosophical Schools (except the view of Buddhism also) that soul is eternal, unchanging and different from the body is taken to be true then all problems mentioned above will be solved in a moment. Besides these, several objections have been raised by the Nyāya School against the Cārvāka and Buddhist view of the soul. But I shall not deal with those arguments because interested readers can go through the Nyāya literature directly and know the same. As long as our discussion goes it is established that there is an eternal and permanent soul apart from our body. The existence of this unchanging and eternal soul logically accounts for the phenomena like memory, recognition and our identity. As this soul is eternal it continues to exist even after the death of our body and thus *videhamukti* is possible. I think *jīvanmukti* is also possible. Apparently, the Cārvāka view seems to be true. If liberation means the attainment of a state which is absolutely devoid of pain and suffering then it appears that the attainment of such a state in this life is not possible, because this life is necessarily mixed with pleasure and pain. But our rigorous logical

analysis shows that attainment of such a state in this very life is possible. In fact, suffering and pain belong to our mental world. It is our mind which suffers or enjoys. There is neither suffering nor enjoyment independent of our minds. But our minds can be made suffering proof, like the bulletproof jacket. Our face is the mirror of our minds. We know that Socrates used to put on the same clothes in summer as well as in winter with a smiling face. In our day-to-day experience, we come across some of the richest persons who are most unhappy in their lives without any proper reason. On the contrary, we see that a sanyasi who lives on begging is one of the happiest persons in the world. Swami Vivekananda was never seen with a gloomy face. As long as our mind continues to be the locus of ignorance it remains sensitive to suffering and pain. But when the ignorance of our mind is replaced by true knowledge then our same mind turns as suffering and pain proof. In this situation, our mind remains indifferent to pain and suffering. The man having such type of mind is called *sthiprajñā* in the terminology of *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*. This type of person attains a state which is absolutely devoid of pain and suffering. This type of person is attributed to as *jīvanmukta*.

Now let us go to the criticism of Cārvāka ethics. The Cārvāka ethics, we have already seen, is called egoistic hedonism. In this context we have come across their famous slogan, 'yāvatjīvet...'. I think the Cārvāka egoistic hedonism is impossible to implement in a true society. What I am claiming necessarily follows from the Cārvāka ethics. If the Cārvāka hedonistic ethical principle is taken as a premise then my following observations are logically deduced as conclusions from it. Being motivated by the slogan mentioned above everyone will be interested to take debt from others. But one can take debt only when someone will be interested to give the same. In fact, no one will be interested to give debt to others because it contradicts the slogan in question and thereby it goes against the ethical principle of the Cārvāka School. Why someone will take debt? The simple answer is that it ensures the pleasure of life and therefore it corresponds to the Cārvāka ethical hedonistic principle. But one's act of giving debt to others, in no way, ensures one's pleasure, rather it ensures one's pain. Because there is every chance of not getting back the same. So, the act of giving debt to others directly goes against the ethical principle of the Cārvāka School. Our logical analysis of the Cārvāka ethical principle clearly

shows that it can only advise to take debt, but it cannot advise to give the same to others since it directly contradicts the very spirit of this principle. But if none is interested to provide debt to others then the advice to take debt is pointless. Thus, the Cārvāka famous slogan mentioned above is proved as absurd. Here one may raise the question: Why am I claiming that no one will be interested to offer debt to others? If one gets interest for the money given to others as a loan then it will surely promote pleasure for him. In response to this, I like to request him to examine whether the principle of Cārvāka ethics allows giving interest for the money taken from others as debt or loan. According to the Cārvāka egoistic hedonism, an act is good and therefore should be done if and only if it promotes a balance of pleasure over pain. But the act of providing interest for the money taken from others as debt or loan, in no way, promotes pleasure rather it turns to be the cause of pain and suffering. This shows that the Cārvāka ethical constitution does not include any principle like providing interest for the money taken from others. We all know that providing interest and taking the same are relative concepts. One is meaningful in terms of another. The absence of the former makes the latter absurd. Our further analysis shows that the Cārvāka ethical constitution does not and cannot contain even the principle of repaying the money taken from others as debt, for the same reason that instead of promoting pleasure it ensures pain and suffering.

Secondly, according to the Cārvāka egoistic hedonism, the only end of human life is to the fulfilment of individual pleasure. The Cārvāka slogan mentioned above implies two things. (a) The end justifies the means and (b) the end can be fulfilled by hook or by crook. If so, then even stealing, cheating, lying, murdering, raping etc. in a word, any kind of action, can be taken as means to ensure our end, i.e., pleasure. But the society where all these types of activities are allowed to do is bound to be chaotic and undisciplined and therefore there cannot be any pleasure, peace and happiness. Thus, the Cārvāka project is bound to be doomed.

No ideal society can be constructed following the Cārvāka ethical principle. The Cārvāka ethical principle called hedonism is purely egoistic and therefore individualistic. In an individualistic society, there cannot be any social bond. In the absence of a social bond, no society in the true sense of the term is possible. A true society is one where a group of people lives together being closely related with each

other having a feeling of co-operation and self-sacrifice. But there in an egoistic and individualistic society cannot be any true social bond, since, there can be no fellow-feeling of co-operation and self-sacrifice. A building is not merely a collection of some bricks one upon another. The most important thing of a building is the cementing relation among the bricks. The more this relation becomes stronger the more the building will be long lasting. More or less the same is true in the case of a society. A society is not only a sum total of a number of people living in a particular place. The most important thing is the organic relation underlying the people living in a certain place. Here the thread which is the cementing factor is the disinterested universal pure love and self-sacrifice for others. But so far as the Cārvāka egoistic hedonism is concerned there is no room for love and self-sacrifice for others. It strictly encourages the satisfaction of self-interest. Thus, the Cārvāka ethics goes against the ideal of a true society. From the immediate preceding argument another strong objection arises. We know that ethics or morality is meant for the people living in a society. But we have just seen that Cārvāka ethics cannot help to construct a true society, rather it goes against the ideal of a true society. So, Cārvāka ethics is useless and absurd.

Another charge may be raised against the Cārvāka theory of ethics, that it cannot prove the superiority of human being. It brings down the human being to the level of animal. It completely destroys the dignity of man. We all claim human being to be superior to animal. This view is substantiated by our *śāstra* also. Some of the *śāstras* go one step ahead and claims that man is superior even to God. Chandidas beautifully expresses the same, '*sabaruparemanussatya, taharuparenai*'. But the question is: What does the superiority of human being consist in? I think the answer to this question can be derived from our common sense as well as from our *śāstras*. First let us appeal to our common sense. Human being shares some properties in common with animal. Among them the most fundamental ones are the food and sex. But man has some uncommon properties as well where lies the superiority of him. These uncommon properties are the rationality and the attitude of self-sacrifice. Two dogs are seen to fight for a simple piece of meat. But we have come across some people in our day-to-day life who have sacrificed even their lives for the sake of others. Khudiram, Binoy, Badal, Dinesh and many others are the living examples of

the same. Keeping this in view, John Stuart Mill beautifully says, 'It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than to be a pig satisfied'. Now let us go to our *śāstra*. Our Hindu *śāstra* says, '*Dharmenahīnāpaśubhisamāna*'. It is worthy to note that here *dharma* means self-sacrifice for others and the sense of morality. The Bible says, 'Man cannot live by bread alone'. Ramkrishna says, '*janmechhisyakhan dag rekheya*'. Thus, it is seen that man is superior to animal because an animal lives for food and sex alone and therefore it lives for itself, but a true man lives for others, he finds the meaning of life in the self-sacrifice. A man is not superior to animal so far as his physical urges are concerned. But there is something additional, in the terminology of Tagore 'surplus' in man which makes man different from and superior to animal. This surplus consists in a number of things like rationality, conscience, the sense of morality, the sense of aesthetics etc. But in the kingdom of the Cārvāka ethics there is no space for self-sacrifice. It is strictly self-oriented. So, this ethics is the ethics for animal, and therefore it is not an ethics at all in the true sense of the term.

The base of the Cārvāka egoistic ethical hedonism is psychological hedonism. But psychological hedonism, I think, does not necessarily imply egoistic hedonism. From the fact that we want happiness or satisfaction for ourselves does not necessarily follow that that happiness always comes from the satisfaction of our own individual and personal interest, sometimes we have more mental satisfaction and peace if we can do something for the betterment and well-being of the society (*vahujanahitāya, vahujanasukhāya*). Here lies the superiority of man. Keeping this in mind Mill and Bentham conclude ethical universalism or altruistic hedonism from psychological hedonism. Egoistic hedonism is also called crude hedonism. It does not know any qualitative difference of happiness; it knows only the quantitative difference of happiness. But as a matter of fact, the qualitative difference of happiness cannot be denied. The pleasure derived from eating meat is not the same as the pleasure attained from reading literature or listening to the song. Only a human being can understand this difference. That is why we consider the latter type of enjoyment as superior to the former one. Mill and Bentham also agreed upon this view.

The aim of the Cārvāka hedonism is to make our life happy and enjoyable. But, in fact, instead of making our life happy and enjoyable it makes our life unhappy and miserable. The Cārvākas say that the crow of today is superior to the peacock of

tomorrow. It implies that one should always give priority to the present rather than the future. We should enjoy our life today as much as possible because there is no guarantee that I shall not die tomorrow. But our day-to-day experience shows that most of the people who do not bother to think of their future run through an unhappy and miserable life. In fact, there is always a disparity between our demand for enjoyment and the wealth we have. We all are quite conscious of the fact that enjoyment cannot come out of nothing. The Cārvākas also realize this truth. Keeping this in view they recognize *artha* also as a *puruṣārtha*. They hold that *kāma* is the end and *artha* is the means to fulfil this end. So, without *artha* our *kāma* can never be satisfied. But it is worthy to note that our *kāma* does not know any limit, it is always limitless, on the contrary, our wealth is always limited. So, our unbalanced maximum enjoyment of the present life leads to the scarcity of the wealth or *artha* of our future life which in turn makes our life unhappy and miserable. Our past, present and future life are causally connected. Our past life is the foundation of our present life, and our present life is the foundation of our future life. The implication of this fact has beautifully been expressed by the statement, 'As you sow so shall you reap'. If all seeds are consumed today then we cannot sow anything tomorrow and we will have nothing to reap the day after tomorrow which obviously throughs our life into the sea of misery and unhappiness. That is why our *śāstra* says, '*Āpadārthedhanamrakṣet*' (keep aside your wealth for your ill days).