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Bespr. von Mark Siderits, Seoul.

This book presents the arguments of Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha (ca. 950–1000 CE) for the distinctively Śaiva Siddhānta view of the self. Rāmakaṇṭha stands on the side of the Brahmanical tradition in opposing the Buddhist theory of

non-self. Indian Buddhist philosophers held that “I” is nothing more than a convenient designator for a complex causal series of psycho-physical elements, none of which lasts longer than a moment. In their view the belief that there is an enduring self is like the belief that there is a forest existing over and above the individual trees that are collected under the name “forest”. The Brahmanical schools of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā, Sāṅkhya, and Advaita Vedānta all devoted considerable effort to attempts at refuting this position. What sets Rāmakaṇṭha’s work apart from that of these other schools is his claim that the Buddhist position holds its own in the face of their attacks. Watson represents Rāmakaṇṭha’s dialectical strategy as one of first siding with the Buddhists against other Brahmanical self-theorists, and only then trying to show that the Buddhist position itself leads inevitably to the sort of theory of a self embraced by Śaiva Siddhānta. While this book is not likely to be turned into a film any time soon, the narrative of the story Watson tells is philosophically compelling.

The book contains a lengthy introduction laying out necessary background information concerning Rāmakaṇṭha, Śaiva Siddhānta, and its rivals’ views on the self; this is followed by four chapters of detailed examination of Rāmakaṇṭha’s writings on the subject. These are mostly drawn from the first chapter of *Nareśvaraparīkṣāprakāśa* (NPP), supplemented in Chapter 4 by one passage from *Mataṅgavṛtti*. Watson is selective in his examination of NPP 1, focusing only on those parts that present Buddhist responses to rival Brahmanical views on the self, and Rāmakaṇṭha’s attempt to turn the Buddhist position into an argument for the self-theory of Śaiva Siddhānta.¹

In Chapter 1 Watson examines that part of NPP 1 where Rāmakaṇṭha has the Buddhists introduce their position on the self and fend off the attacks of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and Sāṅkhya. The upshot, embraced by Buddhists and Rāmakaṇṭha alike, is that the self cannot be known to exist through inference. But the establishment of this result depends on the claim that while the existence of cognition cannot be denied, its existence does not require the existence of a cogniser; in general, inferences to the existence of a substance always fail. What Rāmakaṇṭha holds is that the self just is cognition, and not a substance that has cognition as a property or mode. Buddhists agree that cognition exists, and they hold that in general the occurrence of a property (*dharmā-*) does not require the existence of a property-bearer (*dharmīn-*). Rāmakaṇṭha’s disagreement with them hinges on the question whether cognition is momentary or is something that endures.

The subject of Chapter 2 is the claim that the self is known through perception, namely through the reflexive awareness (self-illumination, *svaprakāśa-* or *svasamveda-*

na-) that Yogācāra-Sautrāntika and Rāmakaṇṭha agree characterises all cognition. The key issue here is precisely whether cognition endures. Rāmakaṇṭha argues that the alternative is incompatible with the claim that the self-illumination of a cognition is intrinsically veridical: he takes this to mean that cognition cannot be mistaken about its own nature. Chapter 3 takes up a further argument for the enduring nature of cognition (and hence for the existence of a self), this time by way of the verbal cognition expressed as “I see a pot”.² The argument here seems to be that to the extent we are able to make any cognition the content of such an I-cognition, the “I” component of such a cognition must have a real referent, and this must be something that endures.

Chapter 4 takes up the question how, if the self *qua* cognition is permanent (the arguments for which were discussed in Chapters 2 and 3), there can be such change as that involved in first being aware of yellow and then of blue. Such change presents no difficulty for the Naiyāyika, who holds that the self is the permanent substance in which impermanent cognitions (such as the successive cognitions of yellow and blue) inhere. It also presents no difficulty for the Buddhist, for whom there are just the impermanent cognitions, first of yellow and then of blue, and no owner of these cognitions. But it appears to be a problem for Rāmakaṇṭha, for whom it must be one and the same cognition that is aware of yellow and later of blue. It is one thing to say that a substance such as a pot might first be yellow and then blue; it is another thing entirely, if one eschews all talk of substances, to claim that one and the same cognition can first be of yellow and then of blue. Rāmakaṇṭha’s response is that the determinative cognition of yellow is a modification not of the self but of the *buddhi-* or intellect, something material in nature; the self whose nature is cognition is a mere unchanging witness of the changing states presented to it by the intellect.³

As the preceding description of its contents might suggest, this work takes philosophy quite seriously. There can be no question that Watson is doing philology: he does such things as give the Sanskrit text before providing his translation, discuss variant readings, and locate Rāmakaṇṭha’s work in its historical context. But he also points out that Rāmakaṇṭha, like philosophers everywhere, sought to arrive at the truth through rational argumentation and critical analysis. To understand his text we must therefore enter into his arguments, and this means doing philosophy. To treat his arguments as mere historical artifacts is to risk getting their interpretation wrong; one crucial constraint on

¹ Rāmakaṇṭha might seem somewhat less of a crypto-Buddhist were one to read NPP 1 straight through.

² Śaiva Siddhānta recognises perception, inference and speech (*śabda-*) as three distinct *pramāṇa-s* or means of reliable cognition; Watson’s first three chapters can be seen as treating each in turn.

³ This view has clear resonances with Sāṅkhya and Advaita Vedānta uses of the notion of *cittavṛtti-* to solve a similar problem.

a good interpretation is the philosophical strength of the arguments that our reading attributes to Rāmakaṇṭha.

Judged by this standard, Watson has produced a good interpretation. But it is the duty of a reviewer to test the validity of the views put forth in the work under review. In the present case this means, among other things, looking into whether Watson's Rāmakaṇṭha really has a coherent theory backed by good arguments. Has Rāmakaṇṭha succeeded in refuting the reductionist view of persons espoused by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti? I shall suggest that he has not. I do this not to point out major defects in Watson's work, but just to continue the conversation that Watson has begun.

I begin with the central claim of Chapter 4, that a self whose nature is cognition can be said to perceive yellow and blue in succession without itself undergoing change. Watson does appear to suspect that Rāmakaṇṭha's solution – having the change occur not in the self but in the intellect – is not entirely satisfactory. But he also expresses regret that the Indian debate over the existence and nature of the self excluded the possibility that selves undergo change (p. 67). So it is worth exploring why Rāmakaṇṭha's solution may not work. We ordinarily think that an enduring person can be aware of – can be 'witness' to – two successive events. The simplest way to conceptualise this is to take the awareness of each event as itself a transitory modification of the person. This is the Nyāya way of understanding the situation: the person, as cognising subject, is just the self as eternal substance, with cognitions as transient qualities temporarily inhering in the self. But this model is vulnerable to the objection that the notion of a substance as the locus of qualities is a mere conceptual construction. A bundle theorist like the Buddhist will invoke Ockham's Razor to dismiss all such things from our ultimate ontology, and Rāmakaṇṭha appears willing to follow them in this, at least with respect to cognition. But then what is the transient cognition of yellow? Suppose we understand cognition in terms of the analogy of illumination. A Buddhist self-illumination theorist might then say that it is the occurrence of illumination having the form of yellow – that it is (speaking metaphorically) the occurrence of yellow light. A self-theorist will object that illumination must be for a subject, but is this subject identical with or distinct from the cognition? To make the subject identical with the cognition is to make the subject impermanent, hence not the self that Rāmakaṇṭha wants. Yellow light is, after all, not blue light, so when the latter occurs the former must have ceased. To make the subject distinct from the cognition (as Rāmakaṇṭha does by making the determinative cognition of yellow a modification of the intellect and not the self) is to then raise the question how the self is affected by this event. Is the self illuminating this illumination-event in the intellect? If so, then how is it that the self does not undergo change when it transitions to illuminating the subsequent blue illumination-event? Either its illuminating the event in the intellect is for a

subject, or else its illuminating the event is just its coming to have the form of that event. The first alternative takes us back to the Nyāya model, while the second has the self undergo change. And notice too that if the self is also the agent (something Rāmakaṇṭha affirms), and agents act on the basis of their cognitions, the self must undergo change in accordance with its cognising: if it is the blue and not the yellow button I must push, then this "I" must be in different states when there is the cognising of blue and of yellow. While common sense would have it that a witness can be unchanged by the changing events they witness, it is difficult to see how to make good philosophical sense of this claim without adopting the property-bearer model of the self.

One major argument Rāmakaṇṭha uses for the permanence of cognition involves comparing diachronic synthesis of cognitive content with synchronic synthesis. (This is the subject of Chapter 3.) It is agreed on all sides that a single cognition can have as object the two different colours of a piece of multi-coloured cloth. The Buddhist insists, however, that successive cognitions, e.g., of first yellow and then blue, involve distinct cognitions. But here too there may be synthesis, as exhibited by the awareness of there being a succession of colour cognitions. If in the synchronic case a single cognition is required to explain our awareness of the two colours, why is a single cognition not equally required to explain our awareness of the two colours in the diachronic case? And, claims Rāmakaṇṭha, the single cognition in the diachronic case must be something that endures from the moment of seeing yellow to the moment of seeing blue.

Watson gives a lucid explanation of this argument, but questions can be raised about its cogency. As Rāmakaṇṭha is well aware, the Buddhist will reply that the synchronic case involves conceptualisation: one has the awareness of the multi-coloured cloth by bringing two separate cognitions – one of a yellow part and one of a blue part – together under the concept "multi-coloured". Rāmakaṇṭha rejects this on the grounds that one is immediately aware of the two colours upon opening one's eyes. This shows an endearing faith in the powers of introspection, but Buddhists have long been suspicious of such appeals. And with good reason, it turns out: we now know, for instance, that the intuition that one directly sees colour throughout the visual field is wrong. Given that there are no colour receptors in the parts of the retina involved in peripheral vision, it can only be through a process of scanning and synthesis that one comes to be aware of any colour at all around the edges of the visual field. While we may be convinced that when we open our eyes we are immediately aware of colours not only at the centre but also at the periphery of the field, careful testing shows that it is only after the eyes have scanned the whole field that one can say what colours are present. While the Buddhists probably knew nothing about the neurophysiology of colour vision, there is empirical evidence supporting their

claim that synchronic unity involves conceptualisation of prior cognitions. The results of introspection cannot be taken at face value.

Rāmakaṅṭha has an interesting objection to the Buddhist claim that superimposition of concepts explains the widely shared intuition that cognition endures through changes in its object. This objection turns on the point that superimposition of a concept involves a cognition, and like all cognitions this cognition must be self-illuminating (at least according to those Buddhists like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti who are self-illumination theorists). Now the self-illumination of a concept is classified as a kind of perception, and is said by Buddhist epistemologists to be intrinsically veridical (*svataḥ prāmāṇya-*). So even though the cognition is of a conceptual construction, hence is by Buddhist lights in some sense falsifying of reality, *qua* cognition it is unmediatedly aware of itself and not distorting of reality. On Watson's reading, Rāmakaṅṭha takes this to mean that all cognitions, even those that distort the object through conceptual cognition, could not fool themselves about their own nature. So our seeming to ourselves to be enduring cognisers could not be the result of mere conceptual superimposition.

This is a clever argument, but it might rest on a questionable understanding of the intrinsic veridicality of self-illumination. To cognise cognition as something that endures is to cognise it under the concept "enduring entity". Self-illumination, as a form of perception, is said not to involve concepts. So the sense ordinary people have that cognition endures could not stem from the content of a conceptualising cognition's self-illumination. To call cognition's self-illumination intrinsically veridical would seem to be just a way of saying that one's awareness of the cognition as the illumination of a certain content is something about which one could not be mistaken.⁴ This guarantee does not extend to the cognition's content. The content is something about which one can be (indeed often is) mistaken. If I have the sense that my cognition endures, then I cannot be mistaken in taking myself to have that sense. But the belief that cognition endures may still be wrong, the product of conceptual superimposition.

There are, then, holes in Rāmakaṅṭha's attempted refutation of the Buddhist non-self view, if we understand that attempt along the lines of Watson's representation. This may be because Watson has Rāmakaṅṭha right, and Rāmakaṅṭha's arguments and objections fail. Or it may be that Watson has Rāmakaṅṭha wrong, and Rāmakaṅṭha has better arguments and objections that stand a better chance of defeating the Buddhist view. I leave it to others to determine where the truth lies. Part of the importance of this work lies precisely in the fact that it can initiate such a

conversation. Another valuable contribution is the taxonomy of possible views about the nature of the self that Watson develops in order to explain Rāmakaṅṭha's strategy. Those who write on the Buddhist theory of non-self are not always clear about the variety of alternatives that are available. As the case of Rāmakaṅṭha makes clear, Buddhist arguments against, for instance, a Nyāya opponent will not necessarily refute a Sāṅkhyan form of self-theory.

As is only to be expected, this work is not without mistakes and oversights. For instance, Watson at one point calls the self-illumination theory the view of "the Buddhist" (p. 215). The claim that in cognising an object a cognition cognises itself was held by Dignāga's Yogācāra-Sautrāntika school, but was rejected by such other Buddhist schools as Vaibhāṣika, Theravāda and Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, all of which espoused the alternative other-illumination view. Watson also misuses the term "perdurance" (p. 120), which is a technical term in contemporary analytic metaphysics. "Perdure" is not a synonym of "endure" or "persist". To say of something that it perdures is to say that it persists (exists at distinct times) by being a whole made up of temporal parts, so that it exists at any one time only by having a part that exists at that time (and at no other). While Rāmakaṅṭha wants to say that the self endures, it is very much to be doubted that he would want to say that the self perdures.

There may be a more subtle error in Watson's characterisation of the Buddhist view as holding that "we are numerically distinct in every moment" (p. 69). That this is not the Buddhist view can be seen from the fact that it is an extreme form of what the Buddha identified as the error of annihilationism (*ucchedavāda-*). Of course, the Buddha also rejected the view that we persist. But this rejection entails the contrary view that we cease existing at some point (are annihilated) only if it is assumed that "I" refers to a real thing. The Buddhist tradition did eventually come to hold the view that the entities making up what is conveniently designated "I" are numerically distinct in each moment. This is a straightforward consequence of the doctrine of momentariness. But this would mean that I am numerically distinct in each moment only if "I" designated something ultimately real – and this the Buddhist denies.

These are minor flaws, that do not detract from Watson's overall achievement. It is to be hoped that other scholars will follow his lead in combining sound philological methodology with serious philosophical engagement. Also to be applauded is his decision to use "they" as a singular personal pronoun (p. 83). At one time English had such a pronoun, but it was replaced more recently by "he", a usage that can be said to be sexist. Attempts to remedy this by instead using "she", or alternating between "he" and "she", seem forced. "They" feels like a better solution. Other languages manage to make do with homonymous singular and plural pronoun forms, and there is

⁴ Indeed, it is not clear what it could mean to have things appear a certain way and yet doubt that things appear that way.

nothing save linguistic conservatism that stands in the way
of English speakers following suit.