



Nyāya view of valid knowledge

Prahalad Chandra Biswas

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar College, Nadia, West Bengal, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26649845.2019.v1.i1a.138>

Abstract

The Nyāya school of Indian philosophy provides a profound analysis of valid knowledge (pramāṇa), focusing on the intricate relationship between cognition and reality. This paper explores Nyāya perspectives on the validity of knowledge, specifically through the views of key philosophers like Gautama, Vātsyāyana, and Uddyotakara. The discourse delves into the distinction between valid and invalid knowledge, the role of inference in establishing knowledge validity, and the exclusion of doubt and error from valid cognition. The Nyāya approach underscores the significance of non-deviation (avyabhicāra) and definiteness in knowledge, offering a unique philosophical framework for understanding the nature of truth and reality.

Keywords: Nyāya philosophy, valid knowledge, pramāṇa

Introduction

Validity of pramāṇa

Gautama, the author of the Nyāyasūtra, does not offer any general definition of either pramāṇa or pramā, though he speaks of four kinds of pramāṇas, and defines and discusses the four types of pramā. In some of the statements of Vātsyāyana, however, we find some hint as to what is to be regarded as validity of knowledge.

Before entering into the actual explanation of the Sūtras, Vātsyāyana adds an introduction of his own in which he begins with the very defence of pramāṇa, establishing the fact that it is possible to ascertain the validity of a piece of cognition. According to him, it can be done by inference and the inference specifically is: *pramāṇa arthavat pravṛttisāmarthyāt*. The term standing here for the inferable property (sādhya), namely, arthavat, is significant.

Vācaspati Miśra has brought out its significance. He says that the suffix *matup* in the term is in the special sense of *nityayoga*. But the question is how we to dissolve the compound in the expression *nityayoga* are? First, it may be taken as a Tatpuruṣa compound with the sixth case-ending, *nityayor yogah*, i.e. a relation between two eternal things. But this meaning is not acceptable in the present context. In some rare case a pramāṇa and its object may both be eternal, but generally the case is just the opposite.

Secondly, the compound may be regarded as a Karmadhāraya, *nityo yogah*, i.e. an eternal relation. According to Nyāya, such a relation would be none other than the relation of inherence (*samavāya*). But this meaning also cannot be accepted. The relation of inherence is possible only in certain specific cases and a pramāṇa and its object are not mutually related through inherence. Vacaspati Miśra, therefore, comments that the eternality (*nityata*) we are to understand non-deviation (*avyabhicāra*). Pramāṇa is said to be arthavat because of the fact that it is non-deviating in respect of its object.

It is further pointed out that even then there may be an objection. This meaning also is not really applicable in the present case. The term non-deviation actually means a relation of being the pervader and the pervaded (*vyāpya vyāpaka-bhāva*). But there is no such relation between pramāṇa and a prameya or vice versa. Vacaspati Miśra,

therefore, specifies the exact meaning of non-deviation here in the following terms an object as proved to be of a specific nature by a pramāṇa is never found to be otherwise even in a different time, place and condition, and this non-contradiction (*avisamvada*) between the object and its presentation by a pramāṇa constitutes non-deviation. In short, a valid knowledge is capable of revealing an object as it actually is (*bhūtārtha-paricchedaka*). Thus, we get the most essential characteristic of valid knowledge, namely, non-contradiction.

The view of Uddyotakara

Vātsyāyana has explained that a general definition of pramāṇa is available from the grammatical analysis of the term itself. A pramāṇa is the instrument for acquiring an awareness (*upalabdhi*). Following this line of interpretation, Uddyotakara defines pramāṇa as the cause of awareness (*upalabdhi-hetu*). But the term *upalabdhi* stands for any kind of awareness irrespective of whether it is valid or false. In that case the instrument of each and every awareness would have to be considered a pramāṇa. But this is not an acceptable position. A doubt (*samsaya*) or a contradictory cognition (*viparyaya*) also represents a kind of awareness, but the instrument producing either of them is not accepted as a pramāṇa.

In answer, it is pointed out that the term arthavat is to be added to the definition and thus, the implication would be that an instrument would be a pramāṇa only when it gives rise to an awareness which has invariable connection with its object. A doubt or a contradictory cognition, though a form of awareness is not invariably connected with its object. The former points to an object as sharing two opposite characteristics, e.g., a thing is presented as a post or as a human being. But an object characterised by the properties of both does not exist anywhere. Similarly, an object is presented by the latter as something which it is actually not, e.g., a piece of rope is presented as a snake. None of these two kinds of awareness can lead to any fruitful activity (*arthakriya*). Therefore, none has invariable connection with an object.

Doubt not a form of valid knowledge

From the above it follows that knowledge in the form of doubt is to be excluded from the category of valid knowledge by the addition of the term *arthavat* to the definition as suggested, by Uddyotakara. Though all the schools of Indian philosophy are unanimous on the point that doubt is not a form of valid knowledge, there is some difference of opinion as to how it is to be excluded. The simplest way to do so is to start with a classification of knowledge into the two categories of *yathārtha* and *ayathārtha*, and then classify the latter further into various types, one of them being doubt. For example, as we actually find, *Prāsaṅgikā* divides knowledge into two classes, *vidyā* and *avidyā* and includes doubt under the latter. But such an enumeration does not point to any ground for excluding doubt from the category of valid knowledge. If the above line of interpretation is followed an answer is possible, namely, just like illusion, doubt also is deviating in respect of its object and hence it is included in invalid knowledge. This line of thinking seems to be accepted by the *Bhāṭṭas* also, when they insist that a valid knowledge must reveal a real object (*tattvārtha*).

However, some authorities exclude doubt by expressly adding a clause that valid knowledge is something other than doubt (*asandigdha*). *Jayanta Bhaṭṭa*, for example, subscribes to such a view. *Vācaspati Miśra* in his *Tattvakaumudī* also explains the definition of valid knowledge in the same way. Commentators point out that though it is true that in many cases a doubt refers to an object which is contradicted (*bādhita-viśayaka*) and as such, it may be treated as a case of error (*viparyaya*), there may be some cases of doubt which are not so (*bhrametara*). For example, a doubt in the form: Is or is not the tree characterised by conjunction- with-monkey (*kapi-samyoga*)?

This doubt consists of two alternatives: (i) the tree is characterised by conjunction-with-monkey and (ii) the tree is not characterised by conjunction-with-monkey. One of these alternatives is true and hence, the doubt cannot be simply declared to be an error. Thus, at least partly, it may be said to point to a real object just like a piece of valid knowledge. So that even such a doubt is not included in the category of *pramā*, it is necessary to add the clause something other than doubt.

Evidence of the Nyāyasūtra

In this connection it would perhaps be interesting and relevant to note how the commentators of *Gautama* explain the significance of the term *avyabhicarin* in the definition of perception given by him. According to *Vatsyayana*, the term is included to exclude a case of perceptual error. Thus, he says:

"During the summer the flickering rays of the sun intermingled with the heat radiating from the surface of the earth come in contact with the visual organ of a person at a distance. Due to this sense object contact, there arises, in the rays of the sun, the awareness that it is water. Even such an awareness may be taken for a valid perceptual knowledge. Hence, (*Gautama*) says 'invariably connected with the object'. An erroneous perception is the perception of an object as something which it is not. A right perception is the perception of an object as it actually is." (Com. on NS 1.1.4) According to him, the applicability of the definition to doubt is prevented by a different term, namely, of a definite character (*vyavasāyātmaka*). Doubt is not excluded by the former term. Since *Vātsyāyana* says that a right perception

is the perception of an object as it actually is, a doubt also may be considered non-deviating.

The idea may be explained as follows. On perceiving, for example, the common characteristics of dust and smoke in a distant object, one has the doubt, is it dust or is it smoke? If the object is really dusting the awareness is non-erroneous in its first part and if the object is really smoke, the perception is non-erroneous in its second part. Since the object is either dust or smoke, the awareness may be said to be invariably related to the object or non-deviating. So it is necessary to exclude doubt by a different term.

Therefore, *Vātsyāyana* contends that the term *vyavasāyātmaka*, of a definite character, has been added by *Gautama* to exclude doubt from the category of valid perception. So he remarks: "On perceiving with the eyes an object at a distance, a person cannot decide whether it is smoke or dust. As such, an indecisive knowledge (*anavadharana jñāna*) resulting from sense-object contact may be taken for perceptual knowledge. Hence, (*Gautama*) says of a definite character." (NS 1.1.4)

Of course, it may be pointed out that, strictly speaking. Non-deviation should be considered a property of valid knowledge in general and not of perception only. It may therefore be asked what is the need for the use of the word *avyabhicarin* in the definition of perception to exclude cases of error? Perception is already admitted to be a form of *pramā* and by definition it should be non-deviating or non-illusory. Cases of error will be automatically excluded from the category of *pramā*. Moreover, even if the term be included in the definition of perception, it should also be included, on the same ground, in the definitions of all the other forms of valid knowledge like inference and others. But the fact is that *Gautama* has not done so.

The point does not escape the notice of *Vācaspati Miśra*. After some discussions he answers that actually the non-deviation of all the other forms of valid knowledge is derived from the non-deviation of perception, which ultimately lies at the root of them. All the forms of valid knowledge are indirectly dependent upon perception and if this perception is deviating, they also cannot be non-deviating. *Gautama* uses the word *avyabhicarin* in the definition of perception only to indicate this speciality of perception. In support of his contention, he also quotes the authority of *Kumārila Bhaṭṭa*

Position of Vācaspati

While giving the definition of valid knowledge in the *Tattvakaumudī*, *Vācaspati Miśra* adds two separate terms, namely, *asandigdha* and *aviparīta* to exclude doubt and error respectively. But while explaining *Gautama's* definition he does not agree with *Vatsyayana* that doubt and error are excluded by two separate terms, but argues that the single term *avyabhicarin* excludes not only error but also doubt. He contends that a knowledge in the form of doubt cannot actually lead to the attainment of an object as indicated (*vikalpyamāna*) by the knowledge. Since it cannot make one attain what pointed to it cannot be considered as corresponding to reality (*samvadaka*) and since it is not *sapadaka*, it cannot also be considered *avyabhicarin*. Thus, both doubt and error are excluded by the same term.

What, then, is the significance of the term *vyavasāyātmaka*? It is used to indicate the fact that, according to *Gautama*, determinate perception also is a kind of valid knowledge, though it is not accepted as valid by the Buddhists. In fact, according to *Vācaspati*, *Gautama* gives not only the definition of perception but also refers to its classification. The terms *angapadeiya* and *vyavasāyātmaka* respectively

indicate the two forms of perception admitted by Nyaya namely, indeterminate ((*mirvikalpaka*) and determinate (*savikalpaka*). The rest of the Sūtra gives the actual definition of perception.

However, it has been pointed out that it is difficult to accept Vācaspati's interpretation. It neither agrees with the views of Vatsyayana and Uddyotakara nor is it justified by anything in the Sūtra itself. As a matter of fact, Vācaspati's zeal to refute the Buddhist view which does not recognise the validity of determinate perception leads him to see in the Sūtra a reference to the two forms of perception and this, as he himself mentions clearly, is in accordance with the line of interpretation suggested by his preceptor Trilocana. The famous Jaina logician Hemacandra remarks, in his *Pramanamimāṃsā*, that Trilocana and Vācaspati have evolved a novel explanation of the Sūtra disregarding the views of the earlier commentators.

It is well-known that Jayanta Bhatta, another celebrated commentator of the Nyayasūtra, generally notes and examines exhaustively the various views and interpretations of a term. But in the present case he also does not refer to any different interpretation and himself reiterates exactly what has been said by Vatsyayana. Moreover, he emphatically argues that a single term cannot exclude both doubt and error, because they are different by nature (*svarūpabheda*) and they are produced by different causes (*kāranabheda*). Thus, doubt refers unfixedly to more than one alternative, but error refers to a single and definite alternative. Again, doubt is produced by the recollection of the specific characteristics of more than one thing, but error is produced by that of a single thing only. Therefore, different terms are necessary to exclude different forms of cognition.

Doubt deviating or non-deviating?

The argument of those who claim that doubt cannot be excluded by the term *avyabhicārin* is generally that even in the case of doubt one of the alternatives is true and hence, doubt may be considered as non-deviating. The point may be explained further. In the case of error, one single thing is ascribed to another single thing, and when a piece of knowledge negating the wrong awareness is produced the error is removed. But in the case of doubt though two things are ascribed to a single thing the right awareness removing the doubt does not consist of an awareness negating both the things ascribed. The wrong apprehension of a snake in the rope is removed by the awareness 'this is not a snake. But when there is a doubt in the form (about an object, standing at a distance) 'is it a tree or a man' it is removed by the awareness either it is not a tree' or 'it is not a man' (as the actual case may be), and not by an awareness in the form 'it is neither a tree nor a man'. This indicates that an error and a doubt are different by nature.

As against the above, it is pointed out that there can, in fact, be cases of doubt in respect of which such a contention is not true. For example, in the distant field one may be aware of something and have a doubt, is it a snake or a piece of rope? But actually, arriving at the spot one may find that it is neither a snake nor a piece of rope, but is really a line showing the crack in the dried-up soil. Similarly, in the case of something standing in the middle of the distant field one may not decide whether it is a tree or a man, but on reaching the spot may find that it is really neither, being really an iron-pillar. In such cases a doubt is definitely deviating and can be excluded by the term *avyabhicārin*.

Moreover, doubt though consisting of two alternatives, is a single piece of knowledge and the claim that it is deviating

with reference to one part and it is also non-deviating with reference to another part is not justified. In fact, such a claim would lead to the total denial of the particular form of knowledge called 'doubt itself. For example, in the standard example of a doubt, whether the thing standing at a distance is a tree or man, one may argue that if the thing is really a man the knowledge with reference to the second part may be considered as a true ascertainment (*niscaya*) and with reference to the first part it may be considered as an error consisting of one alternative only. In other words, an attempt at defining the character of the knowledge in the case of a doubt by dividing it into separate parts would be illogical. It should rather be admitted as a distinct form of knowledge, without referring to parts, in which the mind oscillates between different alternatives. Thus Udayana, while commenting on the claim of Vācaspati, remarks that the character of a knowledge, whether it is of a definite form (*niscayākāra*) or of an indefinite form, does not make it valid or invalid. What matters actually is non-contradiction, the possibility of actually obtaining the object indicated. But it is never possible to obtain actually an object which appears to be characterised by two mutually opposite properties. That is why doubt should be considered as deviating.

References

1. Gaṅgeśopādhyāya. *Tattvacintāmaṇiḥ: Śabdakhaṇḍa*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal; c1897. p. 49.
2. Gaṅgeśopādhyāya. *Tattvacintāmaṇiḥ: Pratyakṣa-Khaṇḍa*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal; c1897. p. 67.
3. Viśvanātha. *Bhāṣāpariccheda*, *kārikā* 135.
4. Śālikanātha Miśra. *Prakaraṇapāncikā*. Banaras: Banaras Hindu University; c1961.
5. Viśvanātha. *Bhāṣāpariccheda* of Viśvanātha: *Kārikā* 135. Translated by Battacharya P. Kolkata: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar; c2003.
6. Ghosh R. *Humanity, Truth, and Freedom: Essays in Modern Indian Philosophy*. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre; c2008.
7. Hiriyanna M, Hiriyanna M. *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; c2005.