

Pramāṇatva of Perception: Coherence of Dignāga's Conception of Nirvikalpa Pratyakṣa

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that Dignāga's conception of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa addresses a fundamental problem in the Nyāya pramāṇa theory, which threatened the pramāṇatva of perception. We have called this the problem of initiation of pramākaraṇ. This explains the compulsion to incorporate the *concept* of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa by rival schools even while they reject Dignāga's *theory* of perception. This systemic dimension of the significance of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa has been ignored in most discussions including the recent one starting with the paper by Chakravabarti (2000).

Nyāya inaugurated a new discourse of pramāṇa which eventually became a common mark of Indian philosophies. We make a case that Dignāga's deconstruction and reconstruction of Nyāya pramāṇa theory is based on uncovering the dynamic of experience underlying the process of knowledge. We begin by examining the basic framework of pramāṇa theories in general and the question of its legitimacy. We suggest that the methodological requirement of non-violation of ordinary experience is what enables pramāṇa theories to transcend their parent darśanas and serve as the basis of dialogue and contestation among various darśanas. This methodological requirement enables Dignāga in the formulation of his Buddhist pramāṇa theory to operate from the broader standpoint of conventional reality (saṃvṛtisat) and thus deepen his own tradition. We thus present Dignāga as having creatively brought together the pramāṇa tradition of analysis of knowledge and the Abhidharma tradition of analysis of experience to propound his pramāṇa theory, which eventually transformed both these traditions.

We end by arguing against a pervasive mis-construal of Dignāga's concept of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa as sensation in modern interpretations. Apart from being inaccurate, this interpretation also undermines the pramāṇatva of perception.

1. Introduction

Pramāṇatva of perception is taken for granted in our ordinary lives. Every step that we take, every move that we make, is based on an implicit belief in the truth of our perceptions. In fact, our ordinary experience of the world is suffused with a sense of its own truth. This is

what gives us our sense of reality. This sense of reality is not limited to the external world but extends to our own bodies and our own thoughts and feelings. All of this is premised upon the faith that we have in the truth-bearing character of our own experience. We are indeed aware that sometimes our experience can be illusory and mistaken but in ordinary circumstances, this does little to shake our perceptual faith¹ or our sense of reality. We take steps to correct the errors and are alert to avoid the deception to which we may be occasionally victims.

It is also true that there are philosophical and scientific theories which challenge this faith of ours. They claim that we are mistaken about the veridicality of our experiences. There are theories that claim that not only our experiences can be illusory occasionally, but that our experiences are pervaded by a kind of falsehood which misleads us into wrong beliefs and misguided actions.

One example of such a philosophical theory especially relevant to this paper is the Buddhist theory of ‘Two Truths’.² In this view, there are two classes of truths. There are *paramārtha satya* which are ultimately true and then there are *samvṛti satya*, or conventional truths, which are consensually and practically true. Our ordinary experiences, our language, and indeed our reasonings, provide us with truths which are shared with others, but they are at the same time a source of falsehood and misunderstanding. They are the product of a primordial ignorance, *avidyā*, which results from our lack of awareness of the processes through which our ordinary experiences are produced. Buddhist philosopher has the task of showing how truth and falsehood both reside in our ordinary experiences and discourses.

In the fifth-century, Buddhist philosopher Dignāga propounded a theory of perception in the form of his idea of *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa*, which seeks to address the conundrum of truth and falsehood of experience (Hattori, 1968). Unlike Abhidharma, he does not theorise from the standpoint of ultimate truth but from the standpoint of conventional truth. His point of departure is the conventional world of ordinary experience. Articulating a theory of *pramāṇa* demands such a starting point. A *pramāṇa* theory entails an examination of experience and knowledge in ordinary lives with regard to its truth or falsehood. The conception of *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* is born out of the need to give an account of the *pramāṇatva* of perception that is consistent with Buddhism and with our ordinary experience as well.

Theory of *pramāṇa* is a theory about the means of knowledge in the realm of ordinary world and ordinary lives. It cannot presume metaphysical truths about some underlying reality. It is rather a theory which would produce grounds for the truth of such metaphysical propositions and philosophical systems which propound them. A theory of *pramāṇa* though is entitled to do so only if it can give an account of the whole spectrum of knowledge that exists in the context of a shared world of ordinary experience.

Pramāṇa theories have been charged with circularity and with lack of proper foundations in modern discourses. It is alleged that they presume the very philosophical conceptions

¹ We borrow the term ‘perceptual faith’ from Merleau-Ponty (1968).

² See for an interesting collection of articles on the theory of ‘Two Truths’, Cowherds (2011).

which they are supposed to justify. This is claimed to be the reason that various Indian philosophical schools have different theories of *pramāṇas* consistent with their own metaphysical presuppositions. We will argue that *pramāṇa* theories do manage to transcend the alleged circularity.

Of course, Buddhism is not alone among philosophical theories which challenge the truth of our ordinary experiences. One can indeed argue that there would be no need of philosophy if our experiences are supposed to give us all the truth that we need. And yet, these philosophical theories must be able to explain our ordinary experience starting from their own premises. It is our contention that theory of *pramāṇas* serve exactly this purpose by being a bridge between philosophical theories and ordinary experience. In doing so, *pramāṇa* theories also serve as critiques of experience from differing philosophical standpoints.

A theory of *pramāṇa* was originally propounded in *Nyāya Sūtra* of Gotama³. This is the seed text of *Nyāya Darśana*. *Nyāya* school is in fact identified by this theory even though it consists of much more. Subsequently, various philosophical schools articulated their own theories of *pramāṇa*, and this arguably created the conditions for a common Indian philosophical discourse to take shape.

Dignāga's articulation of a Buddhist theory of *pramāṇa* is sometimes credited with a major contribution towards creating a more rigorous philosophical discourse in India.⁴ As a key concept of this theory, Dignāga's conception of *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* as cognition devoid of conceptuality is a controversial notion. Even though it has faced many criticisms since its inception, it has proved irresistible. While Dignāga's *theory* of perception as *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* was contested and rejected by other schools of philosophy in India, the *concept* of *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* found its way into other philosophical schools. These schools sought to incorporate *nirvikalpa* as the first stage of perception, and not perception itself. For Dignāga, *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* is perception, and what follows is perception-like (*pratyakṣābhās*), but not perception.

We wish to show the source of the necessity of *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* for *pramāṇa* theory. To do so we will have to consider the nature of *pramāṇa* theories as well. Dignāga's recasting of the original *pramāṇa* theory propounded by *Nyāya* is a major feat of creative philosophising and we offer a brief account of the main points of this reconstruction beginning with the idea of *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa*. In our perspective, what is fundamentally at stake whether in the discussion of *pratyakṣa* or *pramāṇa* is the truth-bearing character of experience.

2. Perception and the Plenum of Experience

Two traditions of thought are brought together in Dignāga's work. On the one hand is the discourse of *pramāṇas* which was initiated in *Nyāya Sūtra*. The other is the Buddhist *Abhidharma* discourse or those emerging from it. The former is about establishing the 'means

³ Vidyābhūṣana (1990). Published originally in 1930.

⁴ McCrea and Patil (2010, 5).

of right knowledge’ in order to dispel what is called *mithyā jñāna* or ‘wrong knowledge’ in Nyāya Sūtra.⁵ The latter is a deconstruction of experience into elementary constituents with a view to overcome ‘*avidyā*’ which is immanent in experience. In Dignāga’s enterprise of articulating a Buddhist theory of *pramāṇa*, conceptual shifts are effected in both these streams of thought.

Despite their differences, these two traditions of thought are operating in a partially shared universe of discourse. It is well known that knowledge is conceived in Indian philosophical tradition as a cognitive episode (*jñāna*), which can be true or false. As B. K. Matilal says: “... *it may be said that Indian philosophers viewed a world or constructed a world of a series of cognitive events rather than collected a mass of true propositions*”⁶. Not only knowledge but the whole mental universe is analysed in terms of various mental episodes which are causally related. *Praśastapād*, for example, lists six principal mental ‘occurrences’ – cognition, pleasure, pain, will or desire or attraction, repulsion, and effort to act – all of which are episodic in character⁷. This string of mental occurrences, or ‘string of experiential episodes’, is temporally sequential and each moment harbours only one such episode. This string, or *pankti*, is what we are calling the plenum of experience following Navjyoti Singh’s cue.⁸

Dignāga expounds his theory of *pramāṇa* in the work called *Pramāṇasamuccaya* along with an auto-commentary *Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti* (PSV). It is a work where he collected all his previous writings on the topic of *pramāṇa*.⁹ This is the most comprehensive and influential of his works wherein he propounds his theory of two *pramāṇas*, *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*, with their own objects *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānya lakṣaṇa*. The first of the six chapters of this work, which is on Perception, consists of an initial section where his conception of *pratyakṣa* as a cognition devoid of conceptuality is set forth. Subsequent sections of this chapter engage with and critique rival notions of *pratyakṣa*. He discusses five of these rival notions or definitions of perception. The first is the definition of perception as

⁵ These expressions like ‘right knowledge’ or ‘wrong knowledge’, or ‘true knowledge’ and ‘false knowledge’, stem from the basic difference in philosophising knowledge in Indian and western traditions. We have tried to avoid it as far as possible by using ‘cognition’ instead of ‘knowledge’, or by using ‘truth in knowledge’ rather than ‘true knowledge’, but occasionally it is unavoidable, like in this instance. We cannot translate ‘*mithyā jñāna*’ as false cognition because *jñāna* here is used as a generic word meaning knowledge in ordinary usage. Even in Indian philosophical literature *jñāna* can indeed be true or not. It is perhaps because of the episodic nature of the conception of knowledge. In our opinion, *jñāna* is cognitive experience, or the experience of knowing. Even when it is not true, it is oriented toward truth or, in other words, it is truth-like.

⁶ Matilal (1986, 105-6).

⁷ Matilal (1986, 106-7).

⁸ Singh (2003, 111).

⁹ “There is little doubt that Dignāga’s literary activity ended with the composition of the *Pramanasamuccaya*. At the beginning of that work he expresses his intention of uniting together the theories which he had already expounded in scattered form in various works.” Hattori (1968, 3).

given in an earlier Buddhist work called *Vādaśāstra*, whose authorship is disputed. The other four definitions which are contested by Dignāga are from the non-Buddhist schools – Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya and Mīmāṃsā.

It is instructive to compare PSV with an earlier short (but influential) work of Dignāga called *Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti* (APV)¹⁰. This work also dwells on the topic of perception. Here Dignāga examines the question of the object or support (*ālambana*) of perception. The rival positions that Dignāga discusses in this work all belong to Buddhist schools. The notion of *pratyakṣa* or *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* is absent in this work. Perceptual cognition is denoted by the term ‘*vijñāna*’. Moreover, the discussion in AP (V) limits itself to cognition by the senses whereas *pratyakṣa* in PS (V) is not restricted to the sense faculties though it includes them too.

This is not to imply that the sense perception that is being discussed in AP(V) is or is not *nirvikalpaka*. Reason for the absence of *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* is to be sought in the difference in questions that were posed in the two works. Unlike in *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, the question in *Ālambanaparīkṣā* is not about the conditions of *true* cognition. The inquiry is regarding the condition of cognitive experience, which is denoted in *Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti* by the term *vijñāna*. Truth or falsity of cognition is not in question in APV.¹¹ What is examined in this short work is the nature of the cognitive object in sense cognition. *Abhidharma* in general sought to analyse the production of experience rather than reflect on the conditions of truth in experience.

In APV, Dignāga provides an analysis of perceptual *experience* unlike in PSV where an analysis of perceptual *knowledge* is provided. APV analyses the structure of perceptual experience in terms of cognition (cognitive consciousness), its object, and the sensory capacity. This reminds of the passage on perception in the *Madhupindika-sutta* which speaks of ‘meeting of the three’ – eye, the visible object, and the visual consciousness.¹² A cognitive experience need not be veridical, it can be non-veridical as well. Conceiving of knowledge in terms of cognitive episodes has this important implication that we can clearly distinguish between cognitive experience, which is the experience of knowing, and knowledge understood as true.

In the formula given in *Madhupindika Sutta*, ‘meeting of the three’ denotes just the birth of cognitive consciousness. ‘Meeting of the three’ is the condition of *Sparśa* or contact, which is then followed by *Vedanā*, *Sañña*, and *Papañca*, usually translated as feeling (sensation), perception, and (conceptual) proliferation, respectively. *Sañña* would be what corresponds to *savikalpa pratyakṣa* in the *pramāṇa* discourse of perception. It is difficult to see what exactly corresponds to *nirvikalpa pratyakṣa* though. *Abhidharma* analyses of this whole process led to

¹⁰ A recent English translation and discussion of Dignāga’s text and translations of several interpretive works on this text of Dignāga is available in Duckworth et al (2016).

¹¹ “Neither the canonical literature nor the early *Abhidharma* schools provide detailed accounts of the means by which we may discriminate between veridical and non-veridical states of cognitive awareness” Coseru (2012), 85.

¹² Bhikkhu Thanissaro (1999),

many different views regarding various aspects of this process. The intense debates regarding these issues were fundamental in the emergence of various schools or sampradāyas of Buddhism like Sarvastivāda, Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Yogācar etc.¹³ While we do not enter into these intra-Buddhist debates, these debates do underline the central importance of the process of perception in Buddhism.

Pratyakṣa is conceptually distinct from vijñāna¹⁴. Vijñāna has a long history as a technical term in Buddhism¹⁵. Viewed as one of the five aggregates it is seen to furnish the bare cognition of an object. This is the meaning which continues into the later Abhidharma discussions of sense perception. Pratyakṣa, on the other hand, is a word of ordinary language and has certain flexibility in its meaning. Dignāga refers to this ambiguity in PSV:

The word “pratyakṣa” (perception) may be applied to a means of cognition (pramāṇa), to a cognition (jñāna), and to an object (viṣaya). Of these the application to a means of cognition is primary (mukhya), to the others secondary (upacāra). Among these [secondary applications], an object is called “pratyakṣa” in the secondary sense since it is cognised by pratyakṣa. Cognition is figuratively called “pratyakṣa” since it occurs in dependence upon the sense (akṣaṃ prati vartate) and therefore is equivalent to [the sense faculty which is] a means of cognition.¹⁶

Vijñāna as cognition is equivalent to one of the secondary senses in which pratyakṣa is used. The primary sense of pratyakṣa is as a pramāṇa. Pratyakṣa as a pramāṇa encompasses a class of cognitions. This class is not limited to sense perception, though that is included in the class. As a pramāṇa, pratyakṣa is defined as cognition without conceptuality. Dignāga lists four kinds of pratyakṣa. He states that his distinguishing of various kinds of perception is in response to the view of others. “However, all [kinds of perception] are indeed free from conceptual constructions”.¹⁷

The absence of the considerations of truth or falsity of cognition in Abhidharma analyses does not mean that the Abhidharma enterprise is devoid of any idea of truth or falsehood. In fact, the whole conceptual apparatus is oriented toward the experience of enlightenment wherein the true nature of reality is revealed. But this is the parmārtha satya, the ultimate truth. The conditional, consensual truth of our ordinary lives is analysed in order to understand and overcome the avidyā which is immanent in such experiences. We can say that the production of truth and its embeddedness in our ordinary existence is the object of analysis for Abhidharma rather than the discrimination between truth and falsehood in ordinary experience. Pramāṇa theory, however, is regarding truth-claims in ordinary world,

¹³ See Dhammajoti, Abhidharma doctrines and controversies on Perception.

¹⁴ Waldron (2003) discusses the theoretical background of vijñāna.

¹⁵ vijñāna: ‘consciousness’, is one of the 5 groups of existence (aggregates; *khandha*, q.v.); one of the 4 nutriments (*āhāra*, q.v.); the 3rd link of the dependent origination (*pañiccasamuppāda*, q.v.); the 5th in the sixfold division of elements (*dhātu*, q.v.). Nayanatiloka (1980), 357.

¹⁶ Hattori (1968, 68).

¹⁷ Hattori (1968, 27).

and parmārtha satya is only one component of the range of truth-claims that we encounter in the world. Through his idea of the pratyakṣa pramāṇa as nirvikalpa, Dignāga puts a substratum of non-denominational unconditional truth akin to parmārtha satya in all our ordinary experiences and this accounts for our robust sense of reality. Like any pramāṇa theory, Dignāga's pramāṇa theory seeks to provide a complete analysis of the ways in which we encounter truth in this world.

3. The Discourse of Pramāṇas

Pramāṇa is a discourse of the measure of knowledge. The question here is not 'what is knowledge', but rather 'what are the conditions of truth in knowledge'. In its original form in Nyāya Sūtra it would be more appropriate to say, 'what are the instruments, means or sources of knowledge'. In the Nyāya Sūtra, ultimate context of knowledge is 'release'. "*Pain, birth, activity, fault, and false knowledge – on the successive annihilation of these in the reverse order, there follows release.*" (NS 2) Going in the reverse order, the first step is annihilation of false knowledge. This knowledge is not the knowledge of a specific domain. Pramāṇa is not concerned with some specific domain of knowledge. It is concerned with all knowledge.

While this discourse on means of knowledge originated with Nyāya, with the passage of time it became a part of every philosophical school in India. Each of the darśanas felt it necessary to articulate their own version of pramāṇa theory. Pramāṇa became a discourse of justification which various philosophical or metaphysical viewpoints came to employ for their own justification vis-à-vis the others.

A question can be, and has been, raised at this point. What is the basis of various pramāṇa schemes expounded by various darśanas? How are they justified? If the justification ultimately draws upon the philosophical viewpoints or tenets with which they are aligned, then we are moving in circles. If that is the case, if pramāṇa theories are nothing but logical extensions of respective metaphysical tenets, then the discourse of pramāṇa would be quite lame.

In other words, the question is what justifies the pramāṇa discourse itself. With some exceptions, notably Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi, this question has not been raised in the tradition. In modernity, this question always casts a shadow over theory of pramāṇa. Let us ask the other related question: What is the criterion which allows for the possibility of different pramāṇa theories, and therefore different philosophical standpoints arguing with each other? Pramāṇa theory did in fact create such a ground for a diversity of darśanas to engage in dialogue and contestation with each other and thus helped in creating a shared universe of discourse which we call Indian philosophy. What made this possible?

We can find a clue to this in the primacy that is accorded to perception among all pramāṇas in all pramāṇa theories. Even though there is no agreement on the nature of perception, perception is the only pramāṇa accepted by all systems, and it is always the first pramāṇa. Uddyotakara says:

We emphasise perception, for all *pramāṇas* are (in some way or other) preceded by (sensory) perception.¹⁸

This primacy of perception translates into the fact that a *pramāṇa* which contradicts experience cannot be a *pramāṇa*. Tenth century Buddhist thinker Jñānaśrīmitra makes it explicit in his *Apoha* treatise:

When something is contradicted by experience, one needn't think about other ways of proving it, since every means of valid awareness [*pramāṇa*] derives its power from experience alone. This is because it arises from experience and culminates in it.¹⁹

Based on these clues, our conjecture is that the starting point of *pramāṇa* theory is ordinary experience, or rather the truth in ordinary experience. *Pramāṇa* assumes the truth-bearing character of experience and tries to specify it. Different *darśanas* come out with different analyses of the truth-bearing character of experience. *Pramāṇa* theories build a train of arguments between ordinary experience and specific *darśanas*. At the same time, it is also a questioning of experience in order to determine the exact nature of truth in experience. And this questioning is done from a specific philosophical standpoint. We can say that *pramāṇa* theory stages a confrontation and reconciliation between the truth of experience and the truth of a *darśana*.

This is possible if ordinary experience and ordinary language, on the whole, is independent of any particular philosophical system. In other words, we have to recognise that ordinary experience is consistent with a multiplicity of *darśanas*. Of course, the world of ordinary life is neither unified nor fixed. It changes with time and place. There are contradictions, conflicts and ambiguities in ordinary experience. In a given time and place though, there is large sphere of experience about which there is broad agreement. In other words there is a realm of experience and knowledge which is *lokasiddha*, i.e., 'proven in the world'. Our conjecture is that non-violation of this sphere of conventional or pragmatic consensus, which is the world of ordinary life and ordinary experience, constitutes a benchmark, which enables *pramāṇa* theories to overcome the alleged circularity. The fact that the *loka* is neither unified nor unchanging can be seen as a weakness in one sense. Or this could be its strength, which allows the *pramāṇa* theory to function as it does.

J. N. Mohanty contemplates a similar question in a paper (Mohanty, 1980). He poses the question in terms of relation between the *pramāṇa* and the *prameya*, between the epistemological and the ontological. While discussing the difficulty of finding a 'beginning' of Indian philosophical systems, he writes:

Should the beginning be in the epistemological theory of *pramāṇa* or means of knowledge (with which the classical expositions began) from which the ontology, or theory of *prameya* (or objects of such knowledge) then follows? Or, is the theory of *pramāṇa* itself a consequence of the implicitly presupposed metaphysics? Or, as may appear not unlikely to readers of Sanskrit philosophical texts, do the philosophers begin with ordinary

¹⁸ As translated by Matilal (1986, 22).

¹⁹ McCrea and Patil (2010, 49).

experience and ordinary language, lokānubhava and lokavyayahār, and then unravel their implications by a peculiar combination of description, analysis and transcendental argument?²⁰

He gives some examples and states that:

This is not to say that the ontological framework was derived from ordinary experience, but the system tried to validate the framework – perhaps developed a priori – by reference to ordinary experience and usage.²¹

He takes up Nyāya and Advaita to explore the implications of this idea and reaches an intermediate conclusion that “*the two theories may be seen as implicates of ordinary language sentences.*”²² He refers to Nyāya commitment to “*methodology that would be consistent with the implications of ordinary language and ordinary cognitive as well as practical experience*”. He assumes though that the Buddhists have no reason to accept ordinary language and experience as authoritative without giving any further argument. We would contest this assertion, or rather qualify it. Mohanty goes on to examine the pre-predicative perception in both Nyāya and Advaita and concludes that ‘*an extra-systemic evidence eludes our grasp*’.²³ What is meant is that certain issues that he examines, like that of pre-predicative perception, are settled by appeal to the system itself rather than to an extra-systemic evidence. Methodological commitment to ordinary experience is no help. After brilliantly exploring some of the issues very germane to our conjecture above, he arrives at a conclusion which he finds unsettling:

Pramāṇas were used to certify the ontology, but the doctrine of the pramāṇas itself was incorporated into the latter.²⁴

So indeed, there is a circularity! The conclusion that he stated provisionally at the beginning seems to have been justified:

In fact, it does seem that metaphysics and epistemology, theory of pramāṇa and theory of prameya, depend upon each other; and the use that is made of scriptural text is determined by, rather than determining, these commitments.²⁵

He finds that pramāṇa is not ‘the beginning’ of Nyāya system. On the contrary, it is derived from ontology. Our contention is that it may indeed be derived from ontology, but it drops its anchor in experience.

²⁰ Mohanty (1980, 205)

²¹ Mohanty (1980, 207)

²² Mohanty (1980, 213).

²³ Mohanty (1980, 215)

²⁴ Mohanty (1980, 217)

²⁵ Mohanty (1980, 205).

Mohanty's concern in this paper seems to be the choice among ontologies offered in Indian philosophies and the failure of *pramāṇa* to provide a conclusive reason, an extra-systemic evidence, to prefer one over the others (for which he looks to *nirvikalpa* in these systems). He presumes that there is a way of judging the standpoints without a standpoint of one's own. Indeed, the *pramāṇas* are formulated by different systems in ways which are consistent with their own ontologies. This does not disturb our conjecture. Our problem is different. Despite *pramāṇas* and ontologies being dependent on each other, how can the *pramāṇa* theories create the ground for dialogue and contestation among different ontologies? There must be another constraint on *pramāṇa* theories besides being consistent with their respective ontologies. *Pramāṇa* theories do not merely postulate sources of knowledge which is in keeping with the requirement of the system. This further constraint arises from the fact that *pramāṇa* theories must explain the whole range of knowledge that is available to us and not just some extra-ordinary knowledge offered by their own systems. *Pramāṇa* theory is not contained in the parent philosophical system and yet is one part of the system. Each *pramāṇa* theory judges all other *pramāṇa* theories from the standpoint of its own system. In its place, would we want a single *pramāṇa* theory to stand in judgment over all the others, without being judged itself?

First part of Mohanty's paper provides excellent articulation of what I am calling *my* conjecture. After having brilliantly characterised in several ways in which the Nyāya system tries to find an anchor in ordinary experience and ordinary language, he seemed to lose interest in this question.²⁶ Perhaps because he takes it as a specific characteristic of the Nyāya realist system rather than of *pramāṇa* theory as such. His exploration of *loka* is in order to find a beginning of the Nyāya system. He wants to find a 'beginning' for Indian philosophical systems. According to him a *darśana* is a close-knit unit with sharply defined boundaries. He says that "*in such a system, it is often a frustrating experience to look for an absolute beginning.*"²⁷ Then he considers *pramāṇa* as a candidate for this 'beginning' and finds it wanting. Then he looks for the 'given' which would provide an extra-systemic 'beginning' for Nyāya and Vedānta but finds that these 'givens' are constructed in terms of the ontology of the same system and thus are not extra-systemic. In this paper, Mohanty does not specify what exactly he means by 'beginning'. We can surmise that the idea of a '*beginning*' derives from the Greek *arche*, or from a kind of Cartesian foundational project, or from Husserl's own project of philosophy as a rigorous science. Mohanty's paper seeks a 'beginning' for Indian philosophies which can provide a ground for judging among different ontologies which do not have 'a beginning' of their own. As we said, he wants to judge the multiple standpoints in Indian philosophy assuming a position outside all standpoints.²⁸

²⁶ There are two of his papers of 1988 (Mohanty, 1988a, 1988b) which deal with the issue of *pramāṇa* but do not take up the issue of ordinary experience and practice.

²⁷ Mohanty (1980, 205).

²⁸ In a critical essay on the International Conference on Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy held in New Delhi in 1988 in honour of J. N. Mohanty, Singh (1990) critiques exactly such an assumption of a position beyond all standpoints by phenomenology when dealing with Indian Philosophy. It includes a critique of Mohanty's paper (Mohanty, 1988b) cited in the previous footnote which was the opening address of the conference.

Indian philosophies seek their ‘beginning’ in seed texts which are supposed to encapsulate the contents of an insight-full summarising experience (samādhi) or enlightenment. Ordinary life, in contrast, is conceived as without ‘a beginning’. It contains residues of innumerable ‘beginnings’. In other words, ordinary experience and ordinary language reflect within themselves fragments of many philosophical systems. No philosophical system, or system of knowledge, however, can supplant or replace ordinary experience, just as no formal language can supplant or replace ordinary language. Many ‘beginnings’ exist simultaneously in ordinary life and different forms of life get organised around them.

Mohanty’s stance, however, cannot be attributed only to the promise of presupposition-less beginning. Mohanty harbours a discomfort about system-bound nature of philosophical practice in India which is expressed towards the end of paper (Mohanty, 1980). The systems seem to be circular in the sense that a clarification of some part of the system calls upon the conceptual apparatus from the rest of the system. Even when an innovation is introduced, the conceptual integrity of the system is inviolable. Mohanty thinks this prevents dealing with substantive issues; one is always trying to ‘fit’ them into the system. It is as if the system grows around a centre which is the seed text. The circle may keep expanding but it retains an internal circularity among its parts. He contrasts it with the philosophical practice in modern times, where substantive issues are dealt with head on. Origins of such discomfort with the system-bound philosophising can also be seen in his early work on Gaṅgeśa’s theory of truth²⁹. After having explored the two apparently opposed theories of svataḥ and parataḥ prāmāṇya in that work he concludes that these theories are incommensurable, rather than opposed to each other. They are talking about different things and may be ultimately complimentary. He seems to attribute this state of affairs to the system-bound nature of argumentation in Indian philosophising, though not in so many words.

We will leave this issue here. According to our conjecture, despite their roots in the parent system, pramāṇa theories transcend their own roots through the methodological requirement of non-violation of ordinary experience. And this is true not only for Nyāya Pramāṇa theory. The very form of a pramāṇa theory assumes truth-bearing character of experience, even if it may be understood differently by different systems. If systems are represented by circles with their seed texts at the centre, then the boundary of the circle represents ordinary experience. There is a well-known essay written by A. K. Ramanujan called ‘Is there an Indian way of thinking?’³⁰. He characterises this way of thinking as ‘contextual’. At the end of the essay, one is left with the impression that Indian culture is inimical to dealing with generalities, even though it is not stated explicitly anywhere. To correct that impression, if we were to ask “Is there an Indian way of thinking about knowledge”, it seems to me that pramāṇa theory encapsulates an answer.

For our part, we will work with our conjecture in showing that even a Buddhist pramāṇa theory with its apparently radical divergence from ordinary experience, still abides with this requirement. Dignāga’s choosing to articulate a Buddhist pramāṇa theory entails a methodological commitment to the world of ordinary experience. To use Buddhist

²⁹ Mohanty (1989). First edition was published in 1966.

³⁰ Ramanujan (1989).

terminology, he must speak from a conventional standpoint. He cannot adopt the parmārthic standpoint of traditional Abhidharma.

4. Dignāga's Pramāṇa Theory

After the customary salutary verse where Buddha is described as the personification of pramāṇa (pramāṇa-bhūta), the first chapter of Dignāga's Pramāṇasamuccaya, which is the chapter on perception, starts with the following statement of his thesis:

The means of cognition are perception and inference.

They are only two because the object to be cognized has [only] two aspects.

Apart from the particular and the universal there is no other object to be cognized, and we shall prove that perception has only the particular for its object and inference only the universal.³¹

After a few more verses, Dignāga defines perception by stating:

*pratyakṣam kalpanāpodham*³²

Or, “perception (*pratyakṣa*) is free from conceptual construction (*kalpanā*)”³³

The verbal construction in this definition uses the term ‘apoha’ which gives the meaning of ‘removal’, ‘exclusion’ or ‘giving up’.³⁴ Hattori's translation ‘free from conceptual construction’ obscures the active sense of removal or exclusion of *kalpanā* or conceptual construction. While ‘apoha’ is central to the theory of formation of word meanings or universals expounded in the fifth chapter of Pramāṇasamuccaya, the use of *apoha* in this definition of perception is also significant.³⁵ *Kalpanā* is always already present in experience and only by conceptually excluding it, or removing it, can we indicate an aspect of experience or knowledge which is free of conceptual construction. Conceptual experience is the default state.

³¹Hattori (1968).

³²Note 1.25, Hattori (1968, 122).

³³Hattori (1968, 25).

³⁴Avasthi (1997), entry on ‘apoha’.

³⁵ Stcherbatsky (1962) takes the occurrence of ‘apoha’ in this definition seriously. “The Buddhist theory of names, which can be called Buddhist Nominalism (*apoha-vāda*) or the Buddhist Dialectical Method, will be treated later on. We mention it now, because the definition of sense-perception is framed with an evident reference to it.” Stcherbatsky (1962, 147). Also see his gloss on Dignāga's definition of *pratyakṣa* and his conception of two mutually exclusive *pramāṇas*, which is a little different from what is presented here (Stcherbatsky, 146-148).

Therefore, nirvikalpa is negatively characterised as that which is free from conceptual construction or kalpanā. We have a conceptual discourse of knowledge, which is the discourse of pramāṇa, reaching out to the non-conceptual and only conceptual resource it has for this task is negation. Therefore, the concept of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa is the self-negation of the conceptual in the self-identified cognitive domain. The cognitive domain is marked by conceptuality by default. A moment of non-conceptual cognition is posited as the first moment of knowledge which is true by default. This non-conceptual cognition is called perception by Dignāga.

What is disconcerting about this definition is the immense narrowing down of what we normally call perception. Most of what we think of as our perceptual experience, what is known in tradition as savikalpa pratyakṣa, is no longer perception in this new definition. Dignāga calls them pratyakṣābhās, what seem like perception, but are not in fact perception because they are permeated by constructs of kalpanā. Its imaginative nature, its nature as conceptualisation, is concealed from us. There is a reversal of the act of ‘removal’, ‘exclusion’ or ‘giving up’. Whereas the conceptual was set aside in order to define nirvikalpa, now nirvikalpa is pushed back in the arising of Vikalpa.

Dignāga is defining what perception is as a pramāṇa, as a class of true cognitions. He is not describing empirical perceptions. The empirical phenomenon of perception has two components. One is the nirvikalpa pratyakṣa. Second part is the conceptual constructions that follow, which constitute our ordinary perceptual experiences. Our ordinary perceptual experiences seem like perceptions because there indeed is in the beginning of each experience a perception without any conceptuality which is true.

There is another class of true cognitions which is anumāna or inference, which is operative exclusively in the sphere of kalpanā, or conceptuality. There are only two pramāṇas and there are only two kinds of cognitive objects corresponding to the two pramāṇas - objects characterised by conceptuality and those not so characterised – sāmānya lakṣaṇa and svalakṣaṇa.

In Dignāga’s formulation, anumāna or inference is the mode of knowledge where we move from one Vikalpa to another. In other words, anumāna, as a procedure of moving from one ‘imaginary object’ to another ‘imaginary object’, is a valid source of knowledge. Inference works on the principle of similarity and difference. We infer fire from smoke based on similarity and difference with other instances. But this process also culminates in access to a reality. On the basis of such an inference we are eventually led to ‘fire’ which burns our finger or cooks our food.

There is a tendency among interpreters of Dignāga to undervalue or undermine the pramāṇatva of anumāna.³⁶ There is a fallacious logic in going from the fictitious nature of conventional objects to questioning the pramāṇatva of anumāna. While the objects in anumāna may be fictitious or only conventionally real, inferring one object from the other could still be genuinely free from error. Dignāga leaves us in no doubt regarding the

³⁶ A recent example: “A distinctive feature of Dignāga’s philosophy is its radical distinction between conceptual and perceptual awareness. His position is that only perceptual awareness can be genuinely free from error”. McCrea and Patil (2010, 1).

pramānatva of anumāna. There is no equivocation here, or even a qualification. There are two pramāṇas – pratyakṣa and anumāna. It is a thing of wonder really, to conceive of truth in the movement from one ‘fiction’ to another. There is a difference between the two pramāṇas though. Nirvikalpa is the locus of unconditional certitude, whereas anumāna is open to revision.

Whereas Dignāga’s definition of perception was what shook up the Indian pramāṇa theories and proved more significant for the future debates, it is the affirmation of anumāna pramāṇa which is more revolutionary in the context of Buddhism. It amounts to establishing the truth of reason in the conventional world. Dignāga’s pramāṇa theory provides a convincing reason for the appellation of ‘Two Truths’ to this ancient theory.

What is notable is the mutual exclusivity of the two pramāṇas and their objects that is termed pramāṇa vyavasthā in tradition, as opposed to pramāṇa samplava where there is ‘mixing’ of pramāṇas and their objects. For example, in the Nyāya scheme of pramāṇas, the same object can be known by perception, by anumāna, and by other pramāṇas. Does this mean that for Dignāga the world is constituted by two kinds of objects, that there are two ontologically distinct realms existing side-by-side, corresponding to the two pramāṇas?

What the two pramāṇas and their respective objects indicate is that on the one hand there is a world of objects accessible to concepts, and on the other a singular non-world, not consisting of objects, a reality accessible only, and always, in experience, to each one of us. The world of objects is a shared world. But this shared world is not characterised by unlimited plurality (otherwise it would not be shared), nor by unity. It is a differentiated world. Nonconceptual experience is a realm of privacy. Whatever be the ontological descriptions of the non-dual reality we may attempt, Dignāga’s pramāṇa theory is very clear: we encounter two kinds of truth in our experience and there is no epistemic highway to move from one to the other. These two kinds of truths and the unbridgeable cognitive gap between them together constitute the condition for our world of knowledge, and indeed of our world, to exist.

This unbridgeable gap is the space of imagination and action where the whole drama of embodied human existence takes place. A new experience arises in the form of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa. This new experience gets immediately ‘covered’ by vikalpa as conceptualisation begins and memory intervenes. According to Jñānasrīmitra, this same process of conceptualisation is called determination when viewed from the perspective of action.³⁷ We have a motion which starts from nirvikalpa, goes to vikalpa and sankalpa, which leads to a transformation in the world, i.e., kalpa.

The realm of conventional truth is the space of construction and reconstruction of truth. Even the parmārtha satya, if they must be spoken of at all, need to be conceptually articulated. Philosophical endeavours are also made possible in this space. When we speak of the conventional truth, or the world of concepts, we may tend to assume that it is a stable world. In Buddhist view though, the conventional world cannot but be unstable. The very search for stability makes it unstable. Another assumption is that conventions are arbitrary. This judgment also needs to be qualified.

³⁷ McCrea and Patil (2010, 88)

5. Dignāga's Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Nyāya Pramāṇa Theory

5.1 Pramākarana

Nyāya has an intimate relationship with the world of ordinary experience and ordinary beliefs. It takes the world of ordinary experience for granted. In this world, experience and language are not exactly indistinguishable, but they always go together even though the relation between them is conventional. In this world of ordinary experience and ordinary language, there is a broad area of agreement about what is true and what is false. There are areas where beliefs may differ and may even conflict with each other. There would be occasions when doubt and uncertainty may enter our minds and we are unable to come to a decision about what is true and what is not. It is in such a scenario that the Nyāya enterprise of pramāṇa theory defines its role as delineating a secure process of knowledge. The pramāṇa theory though is part of a philosophical system and serves to justify the system. As such it is a theoretical enterprise.

Theories of pramāṇa conceptualise the process of knowledge as a causal process which shows how different means of knowledge generate true cognition. Perception comes to acquire a special place in the pramāṇa scheme. Realism about the world of ordinary experience is one reason for privileging of perception by Nyāya. But this privilege is consolidated once a causal description of the process of knowledge is adopted. Perception is the first pramāṇa in the causal scheme of knowledge with other pramāṇas following it. Inference, comparison, and 'word', they all presuppose the knowledge as it is given through perception. This fundamental feature of pramāṇa theory, a pramāṇa being the cause of resulting cognition, is what we refer to as pramākarana.

Nyāya pramāṇa theory presupposes a realist ontology. It ontologises the world of ordinary experience. Relying on the pramāṇas which are supposed to follow perception, like inference, comparison and 'word', Nyāya shows this ontology to have a basis, a justification, in terms of pramāṇas. This created a new manner for establishing the authority of a darśana which was inaugurated by Nyāya.

Then another darśana comes along with a different set of presuppositions about reality. It also seeks justification in terms of showing how its presuppositions are true. It gives a different pramāṇa theory. The process of Pramākarana has to be shown to generate the widely shared aspects of the world of ordinary experience as well as a different set of ideas about the nature of reality. In other words, this darśana has to show that the world of ordinary experience is consistent with another set of presuppositions about the nature of reality, and not consistent with Nyāya presuppositions. This entails a reformulation of the process of knowledge itself. Pramāṇa theory is not only about some ultimately true knowledge of special kind. It must be able to formulate a general process of the creation of knowledge in general.

This picture of the process of progressive generation of true cognitions by different *pramāṇas*, which is *pramākarana*, purports to be a true representation of knowledge process. Nagarjuna reasoned that this picture itself would require to be authenticated again. He alleged that this would lead to infinite regress and therefore the whole idea of *pramāṇa* is incoherent. Later commentators of Nyāya Sūtra attempted to deal with the objections of Nagarjuna. However, Nagarjuna did not have an alternative conceptualisation or criteria to offer, apart from saying that all conceptualisations are ultimately incoherent and truth is conventional and practical. Nagarjuna shows the emptiness of conventional/conceptual but leaves the conventional world as it is.

Embracing the *pramāṇa* formalism, Dignāga chooses to operate from the standpoint of the conventional and the conceptual. Despite the rejection of *pramāṇa* theory by his illustrious Buddhist predecessor, Dignāga proposed an alternative *pramāṇa* theory. Dignāga was coming from radically different Buddhist presuppositions about reality which are quite contrary to realist assumptions of ordinary experience. Buddhism comes with the presupposition that the world of ordinary experience/ordinary language is pervaded by a primordial illusion which is called *mukhya bhrānti*. This is in addition to the occasional illusions that our experience is anyway subject to. He had the challenging task of explaining the modes of generation of truth, and illusion, in the world of everyday life starting from Buddhist assumptions. The fact that Dignāga was able to formulate a Buddhist *pramāṇa* theory which can do that shows the power of *pramāṇa* theorization as well as the brilliance of Dignāga. Of course, Dignāga was by no means the first to follow Nyāya in formulating a *pramāṇa* theory based on presuppositions different from Nyāya. In Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, we find him taking up for critique, besides the Nyāya *pramāṇa* theory, an earlier Buddhist theory and Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, and Mīmāṃsā theories. However, Dignāga's reformulation of *pramāṇa* theory was more fundamental and more far-reaching in its consequences.

5.2 Pratyakṣa and the Problem of Initiation of Pramākarana

The process of *Pramākarana* is initiated in *pratyakṣa*. Other *pramāṇas* like Inference and *Upamāna* depend upon the truth of perception. Since it is a causal theory of the generation of true cognition, the truth of the true cognition must be causally explained. *Pramāṇas* may not always lead to truth, but when they do, there is a causal explanation for that.³⁸ There would be occasions when *pramāṇas* do not lead to truth, and this could be explained by certain deficiency in the causal chain.

According to Nyāya, our cognitive experience of perception has the structure of an object qualified by properties, which exactly mirrors the structure of reality. If we were to use a contemporary turn of phrase, we would say that according to Nyāya all seeing is seeing-as. This seeing-as is experienced independently of language even though this experience corresponds to language through convention.³⁹ Perception is defined in Nyāya Sūtra as the

³⁸ In Navya Nyāya terms, "Veridical awareness is due to reliability grounding causal conditions or excellencies (*guṇa*)". Phillips (1997, 129).

³⁹ This is a position different from Bhartṛhari for whom all experience is inherently linguistic.

cognition generated by the contact of sense and object, which is unnamable or verbally inexpressible (avyapdeśya), unerring (avyabhicārin), and determinate (vyavasāyātmak).⁴⁰

The structure of reality gets represented in the cognitive episode that is perception, which is occasioned by sense-object contact. Dignāga's criticism of the Nyāya definition of perception focusses first of all on the superfluity of the qualifiers that are used in the definition - inexpressible, unerring and determinate. The argument is that a cognition produced through contact of sense and object has no room for it to be expressible. It cannot be erroneous because an erroneous cognition necessarily has for object an illusion produced by the mind (mano-bhrānti). As regards the third qualifier, vyavasāyātmak or determinate, Dignāga thinks it is superfluous because such cognition always results in definite descriptions like 'cow' etc. Moreover, there is no possibility of a cognition resulting from sense and object to not correspond to reality, since every sense cognition apprehends its own object without superimposing anything upon it.⁴¹

If we were to paraphrase Dignāga, we could say that if the truth of perception is caused, and ensured, by sense-object contact, then there is no room for linguistic expressions, error, or indeterminacy to enter perception defined as such. If this is true, the question arises how is a deviation from truth possible in perception? Nyāya has tried to produce theories of error in the course of its development but it called for a great deal of invention. Nyāya explanations of perceptual error had to posit 'extraordinary contact' with absent objects to account for error of perception.⁴² But the real point is not just having a theory of perceptual error, but to have a theory of perceptual truth. This is essential to establish pramāṇatva of perception. Our ordinary experience is home to both truth and illusion and a pramāṇa theory has to account for both.

Initiation of Pramāṅkaran requires a source of truth and for this Nyāya depends on a genuine correspondence of reality and knowledge, which does not obtain in illusory perception. Nyāya seems to have proceeded from its realist conviction of the truth of our ordinary experience and supposed that the reality as perceived is cause of the truth of perception thereby requiring no distinction between reality as it is and reality as perceived. If we try to explain the origin of truth based on correspondence between perceptual experience and the object, then illusion becomes difficult to explain. If we try to explain illusion, then the causal origin of truth in the 'object as perceived' becomes untenable.

Dignāga's conception of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa offers a way out of this conundrum. The process of Pramāṅkaran is indeed initiated with perception, but it is not the ordinary perception with its qualifier/qualificandum structure. Perception is defined as nirvikalpa, i.e., as a cognition without conceptuality. There is indeed no need to distinguish reality as it is from reality as perceived if we take perception to mean nirvikalpa pratyakṣa. It is unconditionally true. The process of knowledge does not take off without true perception. That there is truth

⁴⁰ NS 1.1.4. Vidyābhūṣana (1990, 3).

⁴¹ Hattori (1968, 36).

⁴² "...then it should be conceded that sense-object contact does not invariably lead to the cognition of that specific object with which the sense is in contact. This amounts to admitting that when the sense is in contact with one object the knowledge of an entirely other object can arise". Rao (1998, 64).

in experience is not denied by either Nyāya or Dignāga. What distinguishes perception from other means of knowledge is that it is given in our experience. There is no separation of knowledge and experience in perception. Experience comes with a claim of disclosing reality. This claim of disclosure is phenomenally present in experience. A claim of its own truth is implicit in experience though we may sometimes resist it, and it may indeed turn out to be a false claim subsequently. The truth of experience is part of the perceptual experience.

This phenomenal ‘fact’ of experience is recognised in modern philosophy as well but without conceding that experience makes a cognitive claim. In Husserl’s conception of natural standpoint, for example, ordinary experience is analysed into two parts - experience as presentation and an implicit judgment about the existence of objects as given in experience. It is the ‘existence assumption’ about the objects of experience which is suspended in phenomenological *epoche*. On the analytical side, we find the notion of a pre-theoretical “realist assumption” as for example in Strawson which is neither experience as such or theory proper but is always associated with experience. In both cases, the cognitive claim is analytically differentiated from the experience underlying it.

Both Dignāga and Nyāya recognise the claim of experience. Nyāya interprets this claim as a claim about the reality of the objects of perception. Nyāya takes ordinary perception defined through sense-object contact as *pramāṇa*. Since perception can be illusionary, the definition has to include the term ‘unillusionary’. Another criterion has been added here to secure the *pramāṇatva* of perception. Dignāga calls this redundant. Dignāga understands the claim of experience as a claim of truth. The experience of perception includes the givenness that the perception is true, but not the givenness of what the truth is, except as a phenomenal presence. This complex phenomenal experience of perception forms the basis of Dignāga’s definition of perception. He identifies a layer of experience where there is no separation between knowledge and experience, not only phenomenally but in reality. Experience and knowledge both begin in a cognitive experience which is born in a direct encounter with reality. Dignāga sees perception as givenness of a primordial knowledge in experience, which is the condition for existence of all subsequent knowledge as well as illusion, truth as well as falsehood. This is the world of ordinary experience where truth and knowledge are bound up with illusion and falsehood.

5.3 Process of Experience Underlying Pramākarana

In order to reconstruct the *pramāṇa* theory, Dignāga looks at the process of experience which is presupposed in *Pramākarana*. It is on this process of experience which goes from *nirvikalpa* to *vikalpa* that the process of knowledge plays out. The causal *Pramākarana* process is deconstructed to reveal the process of experience which underlies it. Dignāga is known as a philosopher of knowledge. But he is also a philosopher of experience. Experience in his conceptualisation is composed of two discrete components – nonconceptual perception and imagination, or *nirvikalpa* and *vikalpa*. There is no epistemic bridge between the two

components of experience. This has far reaching consequences for conceptualising the conditions of knowledge. The concept of nirvikalpa introduces a vacuity, a discontinuity, in the process of experience which disrupts the process of pramākaraṇ as conceived in Nyāya. Vikalpa that follows nirvikalpa is discontinuous with it. There can be no ‘agreement’ between the two. The savikalpa thus arisen is not a pramāṇa. It is not pratyakṣa but seems like pratyakṣa, it is pratyakṣābhās.

Having shifted the causal origin of truth in perception to an experience which cannot be illusory, why can’t we move on from there to build up a process of knowledge which is completely secure? If the knowledge in nirvikalpa can be articulated in language and inferences drawn based on this articulation we could have a completely secure process of knowledge. We can still have our ‘realist’ universe. The problem is that origin of error will again become unexplainable.

What follows nirvikalpa is not anumāna. Nirvikalpa is followed by vikalpa, or the conceptual experience, and vikalpa creates the conditions for anumāna to operate. Unlike in Nyāya where anumāna follows upon pratyakṣa, the latter building on the former, there is no causal chain of pramāṇas in Dignāga’s conception. The two pramāṇas nirvikalpa and anumāna, for Dignāga, are operative each in their own sphere.

Nirvikalpa is a new experience. This new experience appears in the always already (beginning-less) meaningful world, i.e., in an already existing world of concepts. It is new in that it is unlike any other. And it has an object unlike any other: svalakṣaṇa, characterised by itself. The moment after it appears it is substituted by constructs of kalpanā. The moment of that cognition without conceptuality, which is nirvikalpa, has passed and nirvikalpa is absent from the subsequent experience and knowledge except as an immanent sense of reality.

Nirvikalpa pratyakṣa explains our robust sense of reality with which we are almost always endowed with. Our confident sense of being in the world, and our secure sense of location and movements of our bodies and thoughts could only be based on the unconditional certitude that an experience of nirvikalpa could provide. It cannot be rooted in a belief, or set of beliefs, which can always waver. In fact, belief, and doubt, presuppose the prior unconditional certitude that nirvikalpa affords. It is that part of experience which is taken for granted and is beyond question, doubt, or reason. It is assumed. It is based on this that we question, doubt or reason.

On the other hand, the unconditional certitude of the nirvikalpa, where true knowledge is given in experience, gets transformed into false ascription of reality to the conceptual constructs which appear in subsequent moments covering the nirvikalpa with vikalpa. The trace of nirvikalpa is phenomenally present in the following experiences as a sense of reality that we now attribute to conceptual constructs that pervade our experience. This according to Buddhists is an illusion – ascribing reality to conceptual constructs, and this illusion is caused by nirvikalpa itself. Nirvikalpa pratyakṣa explains why we regard our experiences as true even when they are pervaded by conceptual constructs. Our intuition about perceptual experience giving us knowledge of reality is not untrue. The error consists in regarding all those experiences as perception which seem like perception (they seem as if they have been given by experience alone) but are actually constructed conceptually. In Dignāga’s perspective seeing-as is not seeing.

In this way, nirvikalpa pratyakṣa with its unconditional certitude is the source of both the robust sense of reality grounded in truth that is given in experience, and the error of regarding conceptually constructed experience as perception, and therefore as depictions of reality. It is the condition of possibility of knowledge as well as illusion. The process of experience underlying the process of knowledge is fundamentally the process of conceptualisation starting from a moment of nonconceptual experience. This is the process of imagination and action and constitutes the condition for the production of the world of ordinary experience. This process is not explicitly theorised in Dignāga's treatise. Elaboration of this process requires placing Dignāga in the context of Abhidhārma discussions that preceded him and the commentarial tradition from Dharmakīrti to Jñānasrīmitra that his text inaugurated.⁴³ We have relied on a phenomenological reconstruction of this process which should ideally be supplemented with a reconstruction of Abhidharmic phenomenological insights along with the analytical insights of the commentarial tradition on Dignāga.

The process of conceptualization results in the constitution of 'object in the world' in a world of objects. This is an 'imaginary' or conceptual object and the world is the world of ordinary experience. This is the world from where the pramāṇa theory begins in order to determine the conditions of truth in knowledge which would help us in discriminating truth from falsehood in knowledge. This world is always already there, or to use the Indian conceptual vocabulary, this world is beginning-less. This world is real for Nyāya and only conventionally real for Buddhists. In this world there is a correspondence between knowledge and reality, words refer to an anterior reality, and so on. In this way Dignāga seeks to show the Nyāya pramāṇa theory as a special case applicable to the conceptualised world of experience, with the difference that what is pratyakṣa for Nyāya is only pratyakṣābhās for Dignāga.

It may appear that Dignāga does not give a theory of discriminating between conventionally true and conventionally false. The 'instrument' for such discrimination is the anumāna pramāṇa through which we make judgments among imaginary or conceptual objects. Unlike Nyāya, our ordinary perceptions are not pramāṇa. The world of Nyāya gets reproduced here in the form of conventional world, but without perception as pramāṇa. What is truly perception, the nirvikalpa, is present in this world though only as an experience of truth immanent in our experience.

The conventional world is a space of judgments. Judgments are not restricted to judgments of knowledge, or judgments about objects. One of our constant preoccupation is making judgment about actions, our own as well as others'. We make judgment of values. One class of judgments is regarding knowledge where we make judgments between the conventionally true and the conventionally false. These judgments are regarding facts and their interrelations. Anumāna is knowledge through judgment. It is the knowledge of reasons and was known as hetu vidyā.

⁴³ See the introduction of McCrea and Patil (2010) for a brief exposition of developments in the commentarial tradition following Dignāga.

5.4 Necessity of Nirvikalpa or Nyāya Against Itself

After Dignāga, the concept of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa found its way into other systems of Indian philosophy including Nyāya. Nobody accepted Dignāga's equation of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa with pratyakṣa itself. The dominant strategy was to split perception into two parts – nirvikalpa and savikalpa. The exact way in which nirvikalpa pratyakṣa was defined varied from one school to the next, and even from one thinker to the next within a school.

Post-Dignāga Nyāya tradition shows a variety of views about the nature of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa. Amita Chatterjee lists five different views⁴⁴ within Nyāya as to the object of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa ranging from 'an undifferentiated content' (piṇḍa-mātra) to universals which appear as qualifier in the savikalpa. She points to other differences among Nyāya thinkers regarding nirvikalpa pratyakṣa:

While the Old Nyāya philosophers maintain that an indeterminate perception is always true (an awareness can be erroneous only in respect of its qualifier, and an indeterminate perception is qualifierless), the New Nyāya philosophers think that it is neither true (pramā) nor false (apramā)...⁴⁵.

The necessity of nirvikalpa has been felt by all after Dignāga, but there is no unanimity regarding its nature, even within Nyāya. In a much-discussed paper⁴⁶, Arindam Chakrabarti has argued that Nirvikalpa should be eliminated from Nyāya pramāṇa theory. He produces a series of cogent reasons to show why nirvikalpa pratyakṣa is not in keeping with the spirit of Nyāya. It is in dissonance with the conceptual structures and realist commitment of Nyāya. It results in ad hoc formulations. These are convincing arguments for the *desirability* for Nyāya to dispense with nirvikalpa. They do not show, or not as convincingly, that Nyāya indeed can dispense with the concept of nirvikalpa. Chakrabarti's paper makes it even more urgent to inquire into the reasons for post-Dignāga Nyāya tradition (and other parallel traditions) to incorporate the idea of nirvikalpa into the framework of its own pramāṇa theory despite its dissonance with native conceptual structure. He does drop some hints at some possible reasons for incorporating nirvikalpa within Nyāya while dismissing them summarily. 'It all started with the adjective "nonverbal" (avyapdeśyam) in the Nyāya Sūtra definition of perception', he says.⁴⁷ It did not really start there though, it started more likely with the formulation of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa by Dignāga. Seeking a support for the idea of nirvikalpa post-facto in older text in order to induct it into Nyāya system is rather a symptom of the systemic need for nirvikalpa rather than for the dispensability of the concept. Chakrabarti sends out a call to Naiyāyiks and Nyāya scholars to explain 'the need' for Nyāya to have nirvikalpa pratyakṣa as a part of the system.

⁴⁴ Chatterjee (2006, 273).

⁴⁵ Chatterjee (2006, 273).

⁴⁶ Chakrabarti (2000, 1-8).

⁴⁷ Chakrabarti (2000, 5).

Stephen Phillips has responded to this call in a paper⁴⁸ that seeks to show ‘*not so much why indeterminate perception is needed by Nyāya but why it is identified as a causal factor necessary to the arising of some (not all) determinate perception defined as “perception of an entity as qualified”*’.⁴⁹ Phillips does not reflect on why the Nyāya tradition has found it necessary to adopt and adapt this concept which was originally absent. He takes up the most sophisticated of the Nyāya theories of nirvikalpa, that of Gaṅgeśa and produces a defence in the face of seven reasons for jettisoning nirvikalpa from Nyāya that Chakrabarti has advanced. Many of Chakrabarti’s reasons are indeed formulated against the concept of nirvikalpa in Gaṅgeśa’s philosophy. Our interest in this highly technical exchange between them is regarding the systemic necessity for introduction of nirvikalpa into Nyāya. Chakrabarti contends that there is no such systemic necessity. Phillips accepts the necessity of nirvikalpa in the form of a ‘direct awareness of a qualifier’ for Gaṅgeśa but argues that nirvikalpa is a theoretical posit of secondary significance in order to fill an explanatory gap in Gaṅgeśa’s account of savikalpa pratyakṣa. It is of secondary significance because it is not the chief causal factor. This explanatory gap is identified as the lack of a proper explanation of awareness of the qualifier. In his earlier book (Phillips, 1997) he refers to Śrīharṣa’s criticism that the earlier Nyāya explanation suffers from infinite regress and how a direct awareness of qualifier has been called upon by Gaṅgeśa to stop the regress.⁵⁰

The exchange between Chakrabarti and Phillips is restricted to discussion of perception and does not touch on the question of pramāṇa, or pramāṇatva of perception. We located the necessity for nirvikalpa in the problem of initiation of Pramāṅkaran. Nirvikalpa does seem to play this role of initiation of Pramāṅkaran in Gaṅgeśa’s system too. Perception becomes a two-stage process. Nirvikalpa is the direct cognition of qualifier which sets the ball rolling for a savikalpa perception in which the whole complex object with its qualificandum-qualifier structure is apprehended. Therefore, nirvikalpa is a causal condition for subsequent cognition, even if it is not the chief instrumental cause. Distinction between the chief instrumental cause (karaṇa) and a causal factor or condition is important for Gaṅgeśa and is one of the contested points between Chakrabarti and Phillips. The point is important because Gaṅgeśa defines pratyakṣa as a cognition which is not caused by another cognition. Accepting nirvikalpa as the karaṇa would undermine this definition, which is a new definition different from the one given in Nyāya Sūtra. What really matters for initiation of Pramāṅkaran though is whether the truth of perception is caused by nirvikalpa. It seems to be so if we consider that “A true cognition is a cognition having *that* as its qualifier of a *that*-possessor”.⁵¹ Cognition of a *that*-possessor depends on cognition of *that*. But for Gaṅgeśa nirvikalpa is that special type of cognition which is neither true nor false. This is because veridicality in Nyāya demands a predicative structure. Of course, nirvikalpa delivers the qualifier unerringly, so we can consider it as certain, even if not true. It is a cause for the

⁴⁸ Phillips (2001, 104-113).

⁴⁹ Phillips (2001, 104).

⁵⁰ However, there is a footnote mentioning the pressure of Buddhists being instrumental in Gangesa’s theory of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa.

⁵¹ Bhattacharyya (1996, 36).

generation of truth as well as error in the savikalpa. Qualifier is grasped directly, and it is grasped not as qualifier, but only as itself.

The nirvikalpa of Gaṅgeśa is a very special kind of cognition within the Nyāya context, standing apart from the system of cognitions, the four pramāṇas. It is unlike other cognitions in several respects - it is unverbalizable, it is neither true nor false, it cannot be apperceived. Towards the end of his paper, Phillips raises a question of his own: “Why call this causal factor responsible for delivering the qualifier a perception, a cognition?”⁵² We can ask a counter-question: What else could ‘direct awareness of qualifier’ be if not a cognition? Phillips veers towards characterising nirvikalpa as pre-cognitive. That is like introducing a new category - pre-cognitive - to account for the ambiguous character of nirvikalpa within the Nyāya - is it a cognition or not a cognition? In the tradition there is no mental episode called pre-cognition. There is only jñāna - an episode of knowledge. While the ‘oddity’ of this cognition stands out within the Nyāya system of cognitions, Gaṅgeśa’s nirvikalpa is overall consistent with Dignāga’s nirvikalpa, with some differences. One difference is the object of nirvikalpa, which is vikalpa, a universal. A universal, however, is grasped not as “*a universal or as anything except itself*”. If we remember, svalakṣaṇa is perceived as itself and as nothing else. It would seem that if you take nirvikalpa, svalakṣaṇa comes with it. If you have a non-conceptual cognition, its object cannot have general characteristics. It can be characterised only as itself – svalakṣaṇa. For Gaṅgeśa, svalakṣaṇa is constructed as universal or ‘vikalpa’. We should not forget that vikalpa is a possible object of nirvikalpa for Dignāga too. As we read in Pramāṇasamuccaya⁵³:

If the self-awareness of desire, etc., is perception, then even the awareness of conceptual construction (*kalpanā-jñāna*) should be considered as perception. Indeed it is so.

Then the commentary:

even conceptual construction, when it is brought to internal awareness, is admitted [as a type of perception]. However, with regard to the [external] object, [the conceptual construction is]not [admissible as perception], because it conceptualises [the object].

Gaṅgeśa’s conception is not very different. Unlike Gaṅgeśa though, the cognition of vikalpa is only one of several types of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa for Dignāga. Gaṅgeśa’s nirvikalpa is neither true nor false. But it is unerring in its aspect as direct awareness of qualifier ‘as itself’. It is a cause of error (and truth) “with regard to the [external] object”. What comes through in these considerations is that the concept of nirvikalpa in Gaṅgeśa is not that different from what it is in Dignāga. This again indicates that nirvikalpa pratyakṣa has come to play a systemic role in pramāṇa theory, as it does in Gaṅgeśa’s theory. It also indicates that nirvikalpa pratyakṣa is presupposed by the savikalpa pratyakṣa of Gaṅgeśa. The greatest difference between Dignāga and Gaṅgeśa is that while nirvikalpa pratyakṣa is the pramāṇa for Dignāga, savikalpa is the pramāṇa for Gaṅgeśa.

⁵² Phillips (2001, 112).

⁵³ Hattori (1968, 27).

Dignāga's nirvikalpa is placed outside of the old Nyāya Pramāṇa system at the beginning of Pramākarān in order to initiate the system. Nyāya lacked causal explanation for the generation of the truth of perception and mere possibility of illusion precludes 'the object as perceived' being such a cause. An unerring direct cognition is needed and that is exactly what is provided by Gaṅgeśa's nirvikalpa too. Gaṅgeśa's nirvikalpa may be tucked away as an odd subclass of a class of cognitions, but it plays the same role. This role is essentially as it was conceptualised by Dignāga. Given this it is not surprising that nirvikalpa seems to disrupt the conceptual integrity of the rest of the Nyāya pramāṇa system.

This is what Chakrabarty's seven reasons for eliminating nirvikalpa from Nyāya underline. Philipps' reply misses the mark by simply pointing out the explanatory gap that nirvikalpa fills. The question is why it is necessary to choose a concept which is in obvious dissonance with the system. Chakrabarti himself does not address this question. He assumes Nyāya can do without nirvikalpa. He dismisses the repeated attempts by Nyāya thinkers to conceive of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa in a manner consistent with Nyāya. It must have been understood in the tradition that there is a certain necessity to include nirvikalpa in their own conception of pratyakṣa. As to why it was not forthrightly stated even if understood in tradition, can we take Mohanty's cue and point to the system-bound nature of philosophizing? For the moderns, pramāṇatva of perception is not so important probably because pramāṇa theory seems to lack proper foundations. It seems to lack foundations probably because we do not appreciate enough the underlying assumptions and the conceptual space of Indian philosophies which are quite different from the Greco-European tradition.

A Nyāya without nirvikalpa that Chakrabarty advocates, would be a welcome development for philosophy, since the question of pratyakṣa pramāṇa is of utmost importance. But nirvikalpa cannot simply be purged from Nyāya if our analysis of the systemic role of nirvikalpa has any validity. In that case, Nyāya without nirvikalpa must be a post-Gaṅgeśa New Nyāya.

6. Nirvikalpa and Ambiguities of Sensation

There is the familiar philosophical distinction between seeing and seeing-as. Conceptualists argue that there is no seeing without it being seeing something as something. When the assured flow of recognition is broken and seeing something as something becomes doubtful, we are forced to assume some 'seeing' prior to 'seeing-as' in order to generate a criterion for distinguishing true from false seeing-as. The umpire sees the ball hit the pad before the bat and he gives the batsman out. Slow motion camera reveals that the ball hit the bat first, and then the pad. The decision is reversed. Seeing-as was wrong, but 'seeing' could not have been, presumably.

This does not establish a pure unmediated 'seeing' prior to 'seeing-as'. After all, what is revealed is another seeing-as, which happens to be true. It is rather that epistemological reflection has to presuppose a 'seeing' within 'seeing-as' in order to explain the very possibility of error.

But what does this ‘seeing’ which is presupposed in ‘seeing-as’ presuppose? Dignāga proposes that seeing (and hearing, etc.) presupposes knowing. Nirvikalpa is the ‘knowing’ that is there in ‘seeing’. It is important to see this point, otherwise it is tempting to identify nirvikalpa with sensation, as is done routinely in modern writings.

In Section 2 of the Pratyakṣa Khand of PS (V)⁵⁴, Dignāga criticises a Buddhist text ‘Vādaividhi’ with regard to its definition of perception. This text defines perception as the cognition which is produced by its object. Dignāga’s discussion for the most part is similar to his discussion of ālamban in AP (V) but leading to a different conclusion relevant for critiquing the Vādaividhi definition of perception. His point is that a cognition can indeed be designated by its object, but only according to a universal feature of this object, for example, its colourness. However, the particularity of the object is inexpressible and therefore pratyakṣa cannot be designated in terms of the object. We can infer from this discussion that nirvikalpa pratyakṣa cannot be characterised in terms of sense-modality. What is identified here is a characteristic of experience which is not to do with whether it is ‘seeing’ or ‘hearing’, but to do with ‘knowing’. The concept of nirvikalpa aims to define the perceiving which is presupposed in seeing, hearing, or any experience.

To support his definition of pratyakṣa as nirvikalpa, Dignāga calls upon an old Abhidharma dictum and quotes: “One who has the ability to perceive perceives something blue (*nilam vijñānāti*), but does not conceive that ‘this is blue’ (*nilam iti vijñānāti*)”.⁵⁵ This does not mean that one is perceiving something as coloured but does not know the name of this colour, i.e., ‘blue’. It means as it says that one ‘perceives something blue’ (blue from a conceptual standpoint), and what one perceives is not characterisable in terms of concepts or words. In perceiving something blue, we have known a reality which is independent of all concepts, and we have known it as it is. When we say ‘it is blue’, it already presumes ‘it is coloured’, ‘it is physical’, ‘it endures’, and so on. The ‘it’ of ‘it is blue’ is already conceptually constructed.

While interpreting the concept of nirvikalpa pratyakṣa as sensation is pervasive in modern interpretations of Dignāga, Richard Hayes, the author of an excellent book on Dignāga’s philosophy of language⁵⁶, is perhaps unique in completely substituting pratyakṣa with sensation in his discussions and translations of Dignāga. At least, he discusses his reasons for doing so.

Hayes begins by talking of the ‘radical distinction between two kinds of things that can be the object of awareness’. He goes on to say:

According to Dignāga, the moment we begin to take the peculiar attributes that are the data of the different sense faculties and synthesize them into multi-proprietyed “objects”

⁵⁴ Hattori (1968, 32-33)

⁵⁵ Hattori (1968, 26).

⁵⁶ Hayes (1988, 133-40).

or “individuals” or to identify those peculiar attributes as individual instances of some class, we are engaged in cognitive activity of a sort different from sensation.⁵⁷

Hayes goes on to transpose the sensation/perception distinction onto Dignāga. *Sensa* are appearances of physical objects being perceived. Object of *nirvikalpa* is *svalakṣaṇa* which is a real element of reality. For Dignāga, perception of physical objects is not synthesised from sensory inputs and physical objects have only a conventional reality. Translating *pratyakṣa* as sensation throughout his exposition, Hayes does not only offer an interpretation of Dignāga’s *pratyakṣa* as sensation but removes *pratyakṣa* from the vocabulary. So much so that there is no entry for *pratyakṣa* in the index to his book. Hayes offers a quote from Hospers’ textbook introducing the quote in these words:

He (Dignāga) would, I think, find no problem in endorsing a view such as that expressed by Hospers in the following passage”.

The quoted passage begins thus:

“Sensing is different from perceiving. We sense sense-data; we perceive physical objects...”⁵⁸

According to Hospers, we move from sensing of data to the higher order of perceiving of physical objects where concepts are in operation upon the data of sensation. What is ‘perceiving of physical objects’ for Hospers, is not perception for Dignāga. Is ‘sensing of data’ perception for Dignāga then? As we have argued, perception, for Dignāga, is presupposed in ‘sensing of data’. ‘Sensing of data’ calls upon a knowing capacity, without which it would not even fulfil its function in the cognitive process, namely making available of ‘data’. But ‘data’ for Dignāga would already be conceptually constructed. It would be ‘data’ about a reality which is conceptually constructed. This conceptually constructed reality is the object of interpretation and organisation, and not *svalakṣaṇa*, the object of *nirvikalpa*, which is withheld from thought. It is not withheld from thought because it all happens too fast or because it is so complex. This withholding is constitutive of the subsequent concept-filled experience.

The choice for defining perception is between Hospers’ ‘perceiving physical objects’ and Dignāga’s ‘perceiving presupposed in sensing’. Identifying perception with sensation, as Hayes does, is not a choice really. Sensation is the name of an experience whereas perception is a discourse about the knowledge in experience, or alternatively, knowledge from experience. Phenomenon of sensation can be understood with the aid of the concept of perception in Dignāga’s perspective. Whereas the phenomenon of perception in Hospers’ perspective is understood with the aid of the concept of sensation. Identifying perception with sensation aborts the whole move to distinguish sensation and perception. This move which was made in modern philosophy was to construct the process of cognition starting from primitive experience. Dignāga introduces a discontinuity in this process, which empiricism has never conceived. Dignāga’s ‘experience’ is not this primitive experience which is a

⁵⁷ Hayes (1988, 133).

⁵⁸ Hayes (1988, 135).

stepping-stone for perception, but an experience with a cognitive claim of its own. This claim is so strong in the case of nirvikalpa that we are claimed by this experience and any reflection presupposes it.

Of course, our account of sensation is a generic one derived from a text book written in last century. Fact is that the concept of sensation has been articulated variously in multiple formulations. This fact only reinforces our argument to stop treating nirvikalpa as equivalent to sensation. It is quite unhelpful to take a concept like that of sensation endowed with such high degree of indeterminacy and try to explain a precisely defined concept like nirvikalpa pratyakṣa on its basis only on the ground of vague similarity. While our brief account of sensation may be simple and even simplistic there are certain fundamental assumptions which are widely shared in the tradition from which it is derived. One of these is that particulars are sensed and facts are known. In contrast, sensory capacity is a knowing capacity for Dignāga and particulars are known.

There are three questions here: Is there an experience which is independent of all concepts and, whether this episode of experience is also a cognition and whether it is a true and certain cognition. Nirvikalpa satisfies all these conditions. Sensation is an experience independent of all concepts, but it is not a true cognition. An statement of that kind will be considered a mixing of categories. Sensation is conceived as free of concepts to account for the experiential element in perception, but reality is not known in this experience. If at all, an appearance is known in that experience. We are talking of the epistemological posit that is sensation, or sense datum, and not about the bodily feelings like pain. In so far as pain is experienced, nirvikalpa pratyakṣa is presupposed here too. Our most elemental sense of reality comes from this elemental knowledge that is presupposed in any experience. It is the reason that our experience is suffused with a sense of its own truth.

In the case of pratyakṣa, the distinction between experience and knowledge, is the distinction between pratyakṣa as a pramāṇa and pratyakṣa as a cognition. This is a distinction made with the purpose of establishing the criterion of knowledge. Nirvikalpa is a mode of knowledge as well as knowledge/true cognition: pramāṇa and pramā. This is another facet of Dignāga's deconstruction of Nyāya pramāṇa theory: pramāṇa and pramā is the same cognitive episode. (As Dignāga says there is no vyāpār, meaning there is no activity) If pramāṇa and pramā are the same episode of experience, why make the distinction at all: what is the point of any pramāṇa theory. Pramāṇa and pramā are discursive instruments to reflect upon criteria of knowledge. They are not substantial entities. In the conventional world we need to discriminate between knowledge and what only appears to be knowledge. There is no truth or falsehood in reality. It is we who need these categories to discriminate between truth and falsehood to perform purposeful actions. Such discrimination requires a point which is placed beyond the conventional or the conceptual. This is provided by nirvikalpa pratyakṣa.

1st March 2023

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