The Discourse of Pramānas

Avinash Jha (07 Jul 2023)

Pramāna 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. Pramāna 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 darsanas felt it necessary to articulate their own version of pramāna theory. Pramāna 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 pramāna 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 pramāna theories are nothing but logical extensions of respective metaphysical tenets, then the discourse of pramāna would be quite lame.

In other words, the question is what justifies the pramāna 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 pramāna. Let us ask the other related question: What is the criterion which allows for the possibility of different pramāna theories, and therefore different philosophical standpoints arguing with each other? Pramāna 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 prāmāṇas 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 pramānas are (in some way or other) preceded by (sensory) perception.[1]

This primacy of perception translates into the fact that a pramāna which contradicts experience cannot be a pramāna. 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 [pramāna] derives its power from experience alone. This is because it arises from experience and culminates in it.[2]

Based on these clues, our conjecture is that the starting point of pramāna theory is ordinary experience, or rather the truth in ordinary experience. Pramāna 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. Pramāna 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 pramāna 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

---

[1] As translated by Matilal (1986, 22).
[2] McCrea and Patil (2010, 49).

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 pramāna 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 pramāna 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 pramāna 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 pramāna 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 experience and ordinary language, lokānubhava and lokavyayahār, and then unravel their implications by a peculiar combination of description, analysis and transcendental argument?[3]

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.[4]

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.*"[5] 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'*.[6] What is meant is that certain issues that he examines, like that of pre-predicative perception, are settled by appeal to the

---

[3] Mohanty (1980, 205)
[4] Mohanty (1980, 207)
[5] Mohanty (1980, 213).
[6] Mohanty (1980, 215)

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:

Pramānas were used to certify the ontology, but the doctrine of the pramānas itself was incorporated into the latter.[7]

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 pramāna 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.[8]

He finds that pramāna 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.

Mohanty's concern in this paper seems to be the choice among ontologies offered in Indian philosophies and the failure of pramāna 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 pramānas 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 pramānas and ontologies being dependent on each other, how can the pramāna theories create the ground for dialogue and contestation among different ontologies? There must be another constraint on pramāna theories besides being consistent with their respective ontologies. Pramāna 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. Pramāna theory is not contained in the parent philosophical system and yet is one part of the system. Each pramāna theory judges all other pramāna theories from the standpoint of its own system. In its place, would we want a single

---

[7] Mohanty (1980, 217)
[8] Mohanty (1980, 205).

pramāna 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.[9] Perhaps because he takes it as a specific characteristic of the Nyāya realist system rather than of pramāna 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.*"[10] Then he considers pramāna 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 Vedanta 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.[11]

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'

---

[9] 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.

[10] Mohanty (1980, 205).

[11] 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.

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 truth[12]. After having explored the two apparently opposed theories of svatah and paratah prāmānya 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, pramāna theories transcend their own roots through the methodological requirement of non-violation of ordinary experience. And this is true not only for Nyāya Pramāna theory. The very form of a pramāna 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?'[13]. 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

---

[12] Mohanty (1989). First edition was published in 1966.
[13] Ramanujan (1989).

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

References:

Matilal, B. K. (1986). *Perception: An essay on classical Indian theories of knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Mohanty, J. N. (1980). Understanding some ontological differences in Indian philosophy. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 8(3), 205-217.

Mohanty, J. N. (1988a). A fragment of the Indian philosophical tradition: Theory of pramāṇa. *Philosophy East and West*, 38(3), 251-260.

Mohanty, J. N. (1988b). Phenomenology and Indian philosophy: The concept of rationality. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 19(3), 269-281.

Mohanty, J. N. (1989). *Gaṅgesa's Theory of Truth: Containing the Text of Gaṅgesa's Prāmānya (jñāpti) vāda (second revised edition)*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Ramanujan, A. K. (1989). Is there an Indian way of thinking?: An informal essay. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 23(1), 41-58.

Singh, Navjyoti. (1990). Phenomenology and Indian philosophy. *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 7(3), 38-56.