

# Critical Examination of Pramana and Inference in Nyaya Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

The Nyayasutrya of Gautama begins with the statement that the highest good is to be attained through the right understanding of the nature of sixteen selected categories (padarthas). In the list of the categories pramana is mentioned first. pramana must be connected with its object (arthavat). Gautama also points out that without admitting the validity of pramana the opponent cannot prove his thesis at all. Inference, anumana, is accepted as a pramana by all the systems of Indian philosophy, except the Carvaka. Inference is generally said to be of two forms, svartha and parartha. The controversy over the forms of anumana Nyaya established inference (anumana) must be accepted by all philosophy.

**Key Words :** Pramana, Arthavat, Trikalyasiddhi, Prameya, Anumana, Svartha, Parartha, Vyapti, Svalaksana, Samanyalaksana

## INTRODUCTION

The Nyayasutrya of Gautama begins with the statement that the highest good is to be attained through the right understanding of the nature of sixteen selected categories (padarthas)<sup>1</sup>. In the list of the categories pramana is mentioned first, because the importance and indispensability of pramana can hardly be over emphasised. A system of philosophy cannot be developed without pramana. Accordingly, the different systems of Indian Philosophy develop their own theories of pramana.

It is however not to be assumed that there was no opposition to pramana. There was a strong antagonism to pramana in both early and late periods. As notable examples we may mention two names, Nagarjuna, the famous Buddhist Philosopher (200AD) and Sriharsa (1150AD) the well known scholastic philosopher.

The opponents contend that the right knowledge of categories through pramana is not possible, because the

right understanding of the nature of pramana itself is not possible as there is no means for ascertaining its validity. It cannot be said that pramana is the source of right awareness. When an awareness is produced it is not possible to ascertain that it is valid. Before actually entering into the explanation of Nyayasutras, Vatsyayana, the commentator of Nyayasutra, replies to this objection as an introduction. He says that it is possible to determine the validity of pramana by inference, namely, successful activity results when an object is cognized by a pramana; as such, pramana must be connected with its object (arthavat)<sup>2</sup>. A person cognises an object with the aid of a pramana and desires either to obtain it or to avoid it. His effort becomes fruitful; either he obtains the desirable or avoids the undesirable. This is possible only on the strength of a pramana. A pramana indicates an object to be of a particular nature and of a particular kind; the object, in reality, also is exactly of the same nature and of the same kind and there is no exception to this. This invariable

(1) “Pramana-pramaya-samsaya-proyojona-dristanta-siddhanta-avayaba-tarka -nirmaya-vada- jalpa-vitanda-hettyavasa-chhala-jati-nigrahasthananamtatta-jnananisrayasasadhigama”-Nyayasutra (2-1-1).

(2) Pramanartho-pratipattopravittisamarthyavatpramanam.-Vatsayan Bhasya.

connection of pramana with its object constitutes the validity of pramana. It may be asked, what proves the validity of this inference itself? In case a further inference is suggested for the purpose, the process would have to continued endlessly with the result that it will never be possible to establish the validity of pramana in general. Even if anybody is ever confronted with a doubt regarding the deviation of the hetu it can be removed by a suitable *reductio (tarka)*.

Gautama himself takes up the problem in the second chapter of the Nyayasutra (2.1.8-20)<sup>3</sup>. The main ground of the opponent as noted by Gautama is pramana's ineffectiveness in the three times (*trikalyasiddhi*)<sup>4</sup>. From Nagarjuna's deliberation in the *vaidalyaprakarana* and *Vigrahavyavartani* it is clear that these objections are raised by the *Madhyamikas*.

The contention is that, between pramana and its object, only three forms of time-relation may be conceived: pramana is prior to, or posterior to, or simultaneous with, the object<sup>5</sup>. But none of them is logically justifiable. Hence, it is not possible to claim that pramana has anything to do with the object. The point may be illustrated with the help of *Pratyaksa-pramana* (following Vatsyayana)<sup>6</sup>.

First, if pramana is supposed to be prior to its objects, there can be no perception resulting from sense-object contact. According to this alternative, an object, e.g. a jar, will be proved only after its perception has taken place, *i.e.* there may be a perception of the jar before it has been proved. But then, it cannot be claimed that the said perception is due to a contact between the visual organ and the jar, for it has been accepted that the jar with which a contact is required is not yet proved so long as the perception itself has not taken place. So this alternative is not acceptable.

Secondly, if pramana is supposed to be posterior to its object, the object cannot be determined by pramana, because it implies that one has to admit that pramana does not exist while the object exists. In that case, the object cannot be proved by the pramana, since the pramana itself is yet to come into existence. So this alternative also cannot be accepted.

Thirdly, if pramana and its object are supposed to be simultaneous, then, different cognitions will take place, not successively, but simultaneously. If, for example, a contact of the visual sense with colour and a contact of the olfactory sense with smell coexist, both the cognitions of colour and smell will be produced at the same moment. But actually simultaneous cognitions are not possible. The third alternative is unjustified because it goes against experience.

Though Vatsyayana illustrates the objections only with perception, the implication is that they may be shown to be applicable to the other pramanas also.

As against all this, Gautama says in the first instance that the same charge of ineffectiveness in the three times may be levelled against the opponent also. It may be shown that 'refutation' cannot be prior to, posterior to, or simultaneous with 'refuted' thus the position of the opponent becomes invalidated.

Gautama also points out that without admitting the validity of pramana the opponent cannot prove his thesis at all. In fact, his position is self-contradictory. On the one hand, he denies the validity of all pramanas and on the other, he relies on an inference to establish his thesis. Moreover, an inferential argument comprises of five inference-components, the first four of which are each based on a pramana. One cannot therefore deny the validity of pramana as such and at the same time take resort to an inference.

Finally, it is pointed out that, not ineffectiveness, but rather effectiveness in the three times, is actually proved. The object may be posterior to pramana, e.g. the illumination of the seen for objects being produced; prior to pramana, e.g. the light of a lamp just lighted for objects already existing; simultaneous with pramana, e.g. when fire is known from smoke. It is wrong to think that there are only three forms of time-relation between pramana and prameya. In different cases, the time-relation may be different.

#### **“Inference” (Anumana):**

Inference, *anumana*,<sup>7</sup> is accepted as a pramana by all the systems of Indian philosophy, except the *Carvaka*.

(3) See Nyayasutra (2-1-8-10).

(4) *Trikalayasiddhapratisadanupapatti Nyayasutra* (2-12-73).

(5) See Nyayasutra (2-15-76).

(6) See Nyayasutra (2-8-69-70).

(7) *Tatpurvakamanumanam* see Nyayasutra (1-1-5).

The meaning of *anu* and *mana* are respectively 'after' and 'cognition'. So inference means 'a cognition taking place subsequent to some other cognition'. This 'other cognition' is a particular type of perception, though about its nature there is controversy.

Inference is generally said to be of two forms, *svārtha* and *parārtha*<sup>8</sup>. Some object that this division is not proper, because in both these the inferential process is the same. In answer, it is said that *parārtha* is so called because the other person is able to infer here through the words of one who has oneself ascertained the *vyapti* etc. necessary for inference.

According to Nyaya, a *parārtha* inference consists of five propositions, namely, thesis (*pratijna*), reason (*hetu*), exemplification (*udharana*), application (*upanaya*) and conclusion (*nigamana*). Of these, the thesis is a statement of what is sought to be established. The reason is a statement giving the ground that establishes the *sadhya* in the *pakṣa*. The exemplification states the *vyapti* between *hetu* and *sadhya*, along with an instance in which the concomitance is proved beyond doubt. The application characterizes the *pakṣa* as similar nor dissimilar to the instance according to the nature of the instance cited. The conclusion is a re-statement of the thesis as proved.

There is great difference of opinion regarding the exact number of the inference-components. From some remarks in the Nyayasutra and the Vakyapadiya it appears that, according to some, perception too should be considered a form of inference. Perception is defined to be knowledge resulting from sense-object contact. But it is not possible to have a contact with the whole object; there can be contact with some parts of an object only. For example, one's visual organ can be conjoined with only the parts in front only, and not with the entire tree. Actually the knowledge of the tree is inferential like that of fire from smoke in the hill. The answer to thesis that the knowledge of the parts at least cannot but be perceptual and hence, perception cannot be denied. Vatsyayana also gives some independent arguments.

It is claimed by some that perception is the most supreme one among the *pramanas*, because others are vitally dependent upon it, and perceptions yields the most certain knowledge. No other *pramana* is possible without a specific form of perceptual knowledge. When an object is determined by perception, generally no doubt is raised. However, the Buddhists, Jains and others reject the view.

They argue that perception and inference have equal capability and there are even cases where inference is to be considered stronger.

Lastly, some brief remarks about the opponents of inference may be made. The Carvakas are traditionally held by one and all to be the opponents of inference; they deny the validity of all inferences. Their basic argument is that the ascertainment of *vyapti* between *hetu* and *sadhya*, the most important precondition for inference, is not possible. For example, it may be known that in some cases smoke and fire coexist, but it cannot be known that the two coexist in all cases. However, there are scholars who point out that it is really not the cases. The Carvakas actually do not deny that the validity of inferences in ordinary life; they reject the validity of such inferences as are offered by some to establish the 'other world', a soul distinct from the body etc. It is also to be noted that Koutilya mentions the Lokayata as one of the branches of *Anviksiki* which is admittedly based on inference.

Though a Grammarian, Bhartrhari (Vakyapadiya-1,30-42) devotes a number of verses to show that inference is incapable of yielding true knowledge of the nature of an object. One who tries to carry on activities on the basis of inferences resembles a blind person relying on the tactual sense alone tries to walk in an uneven path and stumbles constantly. Some of these verses are quoted as representing the Carvaka view opposing inference, without any reference to their author, by Jayanta and others.

The Buddhists have admitted and defended the validity of inference strongly, but their attitude towards inference is significantly different from that of the others. According to them, *premayas* are of two kinds, *svalaksana* and *samanyalaksana*. The former is real, but the latter is unreal. Perception reveals *svalaksana* only and inference reveals *samanyalaksana* only. If inference reveals the unreal only, how can it be called a *pramana*? The Buddhists Answer that inference leads to the real indirectly; first it leads to the construction and next, science the construction is but an imposition upon the real, to the object itself which is the ultimate foundation. For example, a man takes the lustre of a gem for the gem itself, rushes to the spot to collect the gem and actually gets it. The cognition is false, yet it leads to the real thing. Similar is the case of inference.

(8) Ibid.

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