

Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 03

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Datta's Paper

Testimony

Why Start With Indian Philosophy?

1. On this topic, it's the earliest instance of work that feels like contemporary epistemology.
2. Get to see how many of questions arise across multiple traditions.

Pramāṇa

- All knowledge comes from some knowledge-generating method, or pramāṇa.
- There only a handful of pramāṇas, and it's a central question to identify and explain them.

Pramāṇa and Proof

- The word 'pramāṇa' literally means proof. So if you know something, you have a proof of it.
- This makes them sound infallibilist, and I think that's basically the right way to read them.
- But it's a very distinctive kind of infallibilism.

Scepticism

- Main response is pragmatic.
- We know we know stuff, because we know we act sensibly, and sensible action requires knowledge.

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Academic Scepticism

- But you could do the same thing, and have a false belief.
- Response: No, you wouldn't do the same thing.
- No false believer follows a pramāṇa.

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Pyrrhonian Scepticism

- This leads to a regress.
- Response 1: Pramāṇa are self-certifying.
- Response 2: Don't need to know that you're using a pramāṇa, just that you are using one.

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Perception

I'm going to mostly break off the history here.

- What I want is to note some questions about perception.
- And note that each of these were live questions in Classical Indian philosophy, without getting into who was on what side.

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Question One: Content

Do we see **that** things are true?

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Two Answers

1. Yes, and perceptual knowledge is when one simply accepts these contents.
2. No, and that's why illusions are so prevalent; all 'perceptual' belief involves cognition, which is always fallible.

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A (C17-C20) Western Answer

- Yes, and that gives us an analysis of what illusion is.
- It's when the content is false.
- I don't think that's available to most of the schools, since it would be very close to a false pramāṇa.

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Question Two

Assume the yes answer from now on, though we'll still talk about the no's.

- Does the content include individuals?
- Or is it just properties, which we might (cognitively) use to identify individuals?

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Question Three

Does the content include properties?

- I think this probably has to be yes if you think there's content, but I'm including it here for completeness.

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Question Four

Which properties can be contents of perception?

- Presumably I can't simply **see** that someone is *honest*, or *the grand-nephew of a prince*.
- Is perception really thin, just shapes and colors?
- Or does it include things like *being a policeman* or, for that matter, *being male*.

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Cognition and Perception

- Of course we can believe that someone is honest, a policeman, and the grand-nephew of a prince.
- But do we need to use cognition to form those beliefs, or can we just take perception at face-value.

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Question Five

How do we acquire concepts for these properties?

1. Innate
2. Cognition
3. Perception

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Dhirendra Mohan Datta

- His name is, I'm fairly sure, misspelled in the *Mind* article you're reading.
- Lots of reasons to think the author of this piece is the prominent 20C Indian philosopher Dhirendra Mohan Datta, not "Dhirendron Mohan Datta".

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Dhirendra Mohan Datta

- Has lots of books you can find through <archive.org>.
- These include a textbook on Indian philosophy, and a book on epistemology that came out in two editions.
- The first was in 1933, the second in 1960.

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Dhirendra Mohan Datta

That's a big gap. What happened?

- Indian independence.
- Datta took a long break from academic philosophy to work closely with Ghandi from a fairly early stage in the movement.
- And after it was done, he wrote a book on Ghandi's philosophy.

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Festschrift

I'm getting a bunch of this info from a festschrift for him that was published in 1960 as *World Perspectives In Philosophy Religion And Culture*.

- The volume includes a lot of prominent figures in English language philosophy, including William Frankena, one of the most prominent members of UM's philosophy department in the 20th century.

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Dhirendra Mohan Datta

- Datta was well known among people who worked on comparative philosophy because he was so interested in connecting Western and Indian philosophy.
- But as far as I can tell, the results of going into comparative philosophy was that he ended up more interested in Indian/Chinese work than Indian/Western work.

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Testimony as a Method of Knowledge

Obviously the title is not literally "Testimony is a pramāṇa".

- But it kind of means that.

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Testimony as a Method of Knowledge

One of my pandemic projects was using big data tools to build a model of what happened over time in leading philosophy journals.

- You can see the results at <http://lda.weatherson.org>.
- And I was particularly interested in the history (since the 1870s) of work in theory of knowledge.

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Testimony as a Method of Knowledge

- The model said there was precisely one (1) pre-WWII article (out of 6000) that it had real confidence (probability greater than 0.4) that it should be put with modern work on knowledge.
- It was Datta's.

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Is Testimony a Pramāṇa?

Structure of the paper.

- Float arguments for no.
- Offer replies.

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Two Thoughts

- Not sure I see much of a positive argument here, but that's probably ok.
- Lots of appeal to **overgeneration** arguments.

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First Objection

- Need to double check what people say.

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First Reply (to First Objection)

- We don't in fact double check.
- But this isn't much good as a reply, since arguably we should.

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Second Reply (to First Objection)

- Anything might need double checking.
- If this worked, perception, inference, etc would not be methods.

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Third Reply

I'm not sure I quite understand the move on page 2 (i.e., 355).

- Datta makes a distinction between knowledge of a fact and knowledge of validity.
- What exactly is that distinction?

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Third Reply

- At times it seems like the difference between knowledge, and knowing that one has knowledge.
- At other times it seems like the 'difference' between knowing something, and knowing that thing is true.
- And that seems bad to rely on; knowledge is knowledge of truth.

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Second Objection

- Testimony isn't an independent source because it relies on some other method for the speaker to get knowledge.

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Reply to Second Objection

- It might still be independent for the hearer.

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Third Objection

- Testimony requires perception, since you have to use perception to know what words are spoken.

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Reply to Third Objection

- All knowledge is holistic.
- When we say something is a method, we mean it can be the last step.
- Relatedly, no one denies inference is a method though by definition it has other inputs.

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Evaluation

- This is a good thing to worry about, and sometimes gets ignored in the recent discussion.
- But it does make me worry that the whole talk about methods is on shakier footing than it appears.

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Fourth Objection

- Testimony can't be ultimate, because sources sometimes conflict.
- That is, different people will tell you different, and sometimes inconsistent, things.

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First Reply to Fourth Objection

- Any source may involve conflict.
- Sometimes the same thing looks different from two angles.
- So this also overgenerates.

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Second Reply to Fourth Objection

- Some knowledge from testimony is beyond dispute.
- E.g., that a command was given.
- I'm not sure this should count as genuinely testimonial though; feels more perceptual.

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For Next Time

- We'll look at a (very) modern form of what Datta calls "the ordinary answer".