

Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 02

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2022-08-31

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Where and When

Pramāṇa

Scepticism

Perception

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Don't Hope for Precision

- We don't have nearly as good a sense of where and when the classical Indian texts were written as we do for a lot of Western texts.
- It's a lot more like the situation with Homer and Hesiod (or the Bible) than with Plato and Aristotle.

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Roughly

- The foundational works are mostly written pre 0 CE, or not that long after.
- But a lot of the more developed works are late first millennium CE or early second millennium CE.

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Where

- I'm calling this all "Indian philosophy", but don't think that this means that it all came from within the present-day country called **India** any more than "European philosophy" all comes from within what we now call Europe.
- On the latter, plenty of important documents from antiquity are from Asia (at least from Asian parts of Turkey) or North Africa.

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Where

- Mostly within present-day India.
- But some from within present-day Nepal and Bangladesh.
- And maybe some from within present-day Pakistan and perhaps Bhutan.

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Common Assumptions

- All knowledge come from a pramāṇa of some form or another.
- There are finitely many of these.

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Etymology

- Pramāṇa literally means proof.
- So to know something is to have a proof of it.
- This suggests that there is a connection between knowledge and certainty.
- And yet most schools do not think that pramāṇas can only lead to very abstract mathematical knowledge.

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Infallibility

- A knowledge-source produces knowledge.
- So if something does not produce knowledge, it produces false beliefs or lucky guesses, then it isn't a knowledge-source.
- So we may not be able to tell from the inside whether we are using a knowledge-source or not.

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Two Cases

1. Sumeet tells me that it's raining and it is raining, and indeed he just came in from the rain. I come to know that it's raining by the pramāṇa Śabda (or Word).
2. Sumeet tells me that it's raining but he's playing a trick, and just wants me to stay inside away from the nice weather. I don't get knowledge, so I must not be using Śabda.

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Transparency

- The schools differ some on this, but most accept that we don't always know what method we're using.
- For every pramāṇa, there is something that we might call a psuedo-pramāṇa, that feels a lot like it from the inside, but is crucially different.

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- In contemporary epistemology of perception, this kind of position is sometimes called **disjunctivism**.
- The idea is that perceiving an apple and hallucinating an apple are fundamentally different kinds of experience, even if occasionally one may not be able to tell the difference.
- What philosophers used to call "Having an apple-like experience" is a disjunction: you're either seeing an apple **or** hallucinating an apple.

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- There were sceptics in classical Indian philosophy; indeed, there were entire sceptical schools.
- But most of them were not sceptics.
- The reason for rejecting scepticism was quite distinctive.

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- A lot of contemporary philosophers adopt disjunctivism as a way of responding to the sceptic.
- They say the sceptic doesn't realise that things like appearances of an apple are disjunctive.
- A real perception of an apple isn't the same thing as a hallucination, so we don't have to worry about confusing them.

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- A lot of these philosophers were disjunctivists, but this doesn't seem to have been a big part of the response to scepticism.
- Instead, the response is **pragmatic**.

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1. Some actions are sensible and some are stupid.
2. The difference between sensible actions and stupid ones is that sensible ones are properly grounded in knowledge.
3. So some people at least, the ones who perform sensible actions, know a lot.

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Ordinary Language

- There is a strong default across the schools that things we ordinarily say are true unless proven otherwise.
- I can't stress enough how much everything I've said so far is extremely commonplace in Anglophone philosophy post-circa-1950, and miles outside the European mainstream for the preceding several centuries.

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Ordinary Language and Scepticism

There is another anti-sceptical argument around here.

1. We talk all the time as if people know stuff.
2. What we say is usually correct.
3. So lots of people know stuff.

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Ordinary Truth

- A hallucination wouldn't be a hallucination of an apple unless we often saw apples.
- The words in a lie wouldn't have the meaning they have unless they were usually used in true sentences.
- Both suggest that vision and speech must usually be accurate.
- And this might have epistemological consequences.

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A Thought Experiment

- There is a world that is physically just like this one, down to the atomic level.
- But in it the word 'cat' means dog and 'dog' means cat, so when people say "The cat is on the mat", they usually speak falsely.
- Is this coherent?
- If not why not?

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Two Sceptical Arguments

- In Ancient Greek/Roman epistemology, there are two sceptical arguments.
- These are known as Academic Scepticism and Pyrrhonian Scepticism.
- Rather than filling them out, I'll set up the very brief versions of each.

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A Philosophical Strategy

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Academic Scepticism

1. For any belief p , you could have had the same inputs while $\neg p$.
2. ????
3. Therefore, you don't know that p .

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Pyrrhonian Scepticism

1. For any belief that p , you only know p if you know you acquired the belief via a good method (a pramāṇa).
2. So if you know p , you must know something else.
3. ???
4. So, you don't know that p .

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Back to India

- Both these sceptical arguments are in the Indian tradition.
- What's distinctive (a bit distinctive at least) is how anti-sceptics respond.

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Academic Scepticism

- We've already seen one response to Academic Scepticism that is popular nowadays, but really isn't a big part of European/(West Asian/North African) replies.
- If you know p , there is in fact not another scenario where you use the **same** method and p is false.
- That's because you used a pramāṇa to know p , and would use a psuedo-pramāṇa to falsely believe it.

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Pyrrhonian Scepticism

- Academic scepticism is limited to the external world.
- There isn't a nearby scenario where I reason mathematically the same way, but two plus two is in fact not four.
- But the pyrrhonian sceptical argument is universal; anything is subject to it.

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Slingshot

- This is an obvious problem, since it means that the pyrrhonian sceptic doesn't know that pyrrhonian scepticism is true.
- And this means their position is unstable, a fact that critics on both sides of the Indus river pointed out.
- This is what is meant by saying the position involves a "pragmatic contradiction".

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- But this just shows that the position does go wrong, not where it goes wrong.
- And there is an interesting division among the Indian schools on this point.

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- The threat is that one piece of knowledge requires an infinite amount of knowledge, which we don't have.
- One response, taken by Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta philosophers, is to deny that we need an infinite amount of knowledge.
- At some level, our knowledge that p just is our knowledge that our knowledge that p is known (by that very method).

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Compare these things.

1. Having a sharp headache.
2. Knowing that you have a sharp headache.

Could these be different? Could you have one without the other? If not, perhaps they are just the same thing? The headache is self-certifying, and maybe knowledge is too.

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The other option, which Nyāya philosophers take, is to simply deny step 1.

- To know p requires that the method by which the belief was formed was in fact a pramāṇa.
- But we don't need to know that it was.
- At most, we need to not have good reason to believe it was not.

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- Imagine I see Sumeet walking, perhaps walking in Angell Hall.
- What, precisely, do I see?
- One question: Do I see **Sumeet**, or just a bundle of properties that lets me, cognitively, non-perceptually, identify Sumeet.
- Another question: Do I see walkingness as a property of Sumeet (at that time)? Do I see **that** Sumeet is walking?

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Individuals and Universals

- To see that Sumeet is walking, to see as it were Sumeet under the guise of walkingness, both the individual (Sumeet) and the property (walkingness) have to exist.
- We might have metaphysical reasons for rejecting each of these.

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No Individuals

- If you have a strong no-self view, then perhaps Sumeet doesn't really exist, so he can't be seen.
- Or perhaps you think only momentary individuals exist, and identifying any sequence of them with Sumeet is arbitrary.
- I'm not going to go into the metaphysics of no-self theories; I struggle enough explaining Hindu theories to try and get Buddhist ones.

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Modern European Philosophy

- But this view, at least the perceptual version of it, becomes a really big deal in European philosophy from mid-C18 onwards, thanks to David Hume.
- Who might, maybe, have been influenced by Buddhist thinking, though that's really a story for another class.

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Nyāya vs Yogācāra

The two schools that the SEP article focuses on though do not worry about individuals, but about properties.

- Nyāya philosophers think that one really can perceive proposition like things, like that Sumeet is walking.
- Yogācāra think that we just perceive objects, like Sumeet.
- So they are really the opposite of the Buddhist/Humean position that we only perceive features, not individuals.

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Persistence

- To be sure, I'm not sure it's fair to say the Yogācāra think we perceive continuing things, like Sumeet.
- We just perceive objects, and maybe by cognition (perhaps mistaken cognition) we put these things into continuants.

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Realism vs Nominalism

- One reason they don't want to say that we perceive things like walkingness is that they don't believe in properties.
- They are what came to be called **nominalists**, they don't believe that properties are real.
- Perhaps better is to call them **projectivists**; what we call properties are really patterns that we project onto the world.

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Details

But surely there is a difference between seeing Sumeet standing and seeing him sitting.

- The Yogācāra need not deny that.
- A natural move (no idea if they make it, but it would fit) is to adopt what became known as an **adverbial** position on perception.
- We might see Sumeet “walkingly”, where the adverb modifies the seeing, not the thing seen.

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Two Questions for Nyāya

But the Nyāya position is surely more natural. And it makes sense to focus on why we might give it up.

1. Metaphysical scruples about properties/propositions.
2. Whether the view can account for illusions.
3. How we acquire the concepts we (allegedly) deploy in perception.

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Illusion

The picture here is simple; perception is good and pure, but upset by bad human cognition.

- Perception is simple, but illusion is always complex.

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Acquisition

The Nyāya were not **nativists**, they did not think that concepts like **walking** were innate.

- Instead, they thought that we had a handful of Yogācāra like perceptions as infants, and from those we directly acquired concepts like **walking**.

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For Next Time

- Other pramāṇa, with a little on forms of non-deductive knowledge, but the majority on whether testimony is a pramāṇa.

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