The Epistemology of the Cārvāka Philosophy

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The Cārvāka/Lokāyata philosophy, called materialism in Indian thought, holds the doctrine that perception is the only source of valid knowledge and does not allow inference etc. as the source of valid knowledge.¹⁾ They say that knowledge means whatever we can perceive through our sense organs, and that is the only right knowledge.

According to the Cārvākas, perception is held to be two kinds, (a) External and (b) Internal, that means perception is produced by external sense organs or by the inner sense, mind.²⁾ The external perception means the contact between five sense organ and the objects. But they don't admit the mind as an independent sense organ, so they don't admit internal perception through mind³⁾.

The Cārvākas don't admit the inference as a means of valid knowledge.⁴⁾ They argue that if inference is to be regarded as a means of valid knowledge, it must presuppose knowledge about which we can have no doubt and which must be true to reality. But inference can not fulfill these conditions, because when we infer, for example, the existence of fire on a mountain from the perception of smoke, we take a leap in the dark, from the perceived smoke to the unperceived fire. A logician perhaps will point out that such a leap is justified by our previous knowledge of the invariable relation between smoke and fire, and that the inference stated more clearly would be: all cases of smoke are cases of fire, but the Cārvākas refuse it and argue that this contention would be acceptable only if the major premise stating the invariable relation between the middle term "smoke" and the major terms "fire" are beyond doubt.⁵⁾ But this invariable relation can be established only if we have a knowledge of all cases of smoke

in the presence of fire. However, this is not possible because we can not perceive even all the cases of smoke and fire existing in different places all over the world now, to say nothing of those which existed in the past or will exist in the future.⁶⁾ So no invariable universal relation can be established by inference. Neither can it be based on another inference, because it will involve a fallacy, since in the case of this inference we should also require another inference to establish it, and so on, and hence would arise the fallacy of an adindefinitum.⁷⁾

Also invariable relation can not be based on testimony of reliable persons who state that all cases of smoke are case of fire. For the validity of testimony itself requires to be proved by inference. They argue that "we can not infer by testimony, since we may allege in reply, in accordance with the Vaśeṣika doctrine of Kaṇāda, that this is included in the topic of inference; or else we may hold that this fresh proof of testimony is unable to leap over the old barrier that stopped the progress of inference, since it depends, itself, on the recognition of a sign in the form of the language used in the child's presence by the old man, and moreover, there is no more reason for our believing another's word that smoke and fire are invariably related, than for our receiving the ipse dixit of Manu etc., which, of course, we Cārvāka reject"⁸⁾. And again, if testimony are to be accepted as the only means of the knowledge of the universal proposition, then in the case of a man to whom the fact of the invariable relation between the middle and major terms had not been pointed out by another person, there could be no inference of one thing as fire on seeing another thing as smoke; hence, on your own showing, the whole topic of inference for ownself would have to end in mere idle words.⁹⁾

The Cārvākas don't admit any constant class characters like 'smokeness' and 'fireness' which must be invariably present in all instances of smoke and fire respectively. They insist that even if we grant a perception of a relation between smokeness and fireness, we can not know there from any invariable relation between all individual cases

of smoke and fire. If it is possible to infer a particular fire, we must know that it is inseparably related to the particular smoke. In fact, it is not possible even to know by perception what "smokeness" or the class characters universally present in all particular instances of smoke are, because we do not perceive all cases of smoke that are found to be universally present in the perceived cases of smoke, but may not be present in the unperceived ones.¹⁰⁾ Moreover, they insist on an another counter argument that due to the inherent nature of things that they possess particular characters such as fire is hot and water is cool. No supernatural principle need to be supposed to account for the properties of experienced objects in nature.¹¹⁾ There is neither any guarantee that uniformity perceived in the past would continue in future. We can not base our knowledge of the invariable relation between smoke and fire on a causal relation between them. Because, a causal relation being only a kind of invariable relation, can not be established by perception owing to the same difficulties.¹²⁾ They point out that a causal or any other invariable relation can not be established merely by repeated perception of two things occurring together. For one must be certain that there is no other unperceived condition on which this relation depends. If a man perceives a number of times fire accompanied by smoke, and another occasion he infers the existence of fire on the perception of smoke, he would be liable to error, because he failed to notice a condition, namely, the wetness of fuel, in the presence of which alone fire is attended with smoke. So long as the relation between two phenomena is not proved to be unconditional, it is an uncertain ground for inference, and absence of conditions can not be established beyond doubt by perception, as some conditions may always remain hidden and escape notice.¹³⁾ It is true that in our life we very often act unsuspectingly on inference. But that only shows that we act uncritically on the wrong belief that our inference is true. It is a fact that sometimes our inference happens to be true and leads to successful results. But it is also a fact that sometimes inference

leads to error. Truth is not then an unfailing character of all inference, it is only an accident, and a separable one, we find only in some cases.¹⁴⁾ Inference etc. cannot be regarded, therefore, as a valid source of knowledge.

Thus they demonstrated a new path to Indian philosophers for new thinking and the evaluation of their doctrines. It may be noted that the contribution of the Cārvākas epistemology is not insignificant to other Indian philosophers and it has also helped to make them more logical and rational. The Cārvākas view that no inference can yield certain knowledge is the view of many contemporary western thinkers such as the empiricists, pragmatists and logical positivists.

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- 1) Sāyana Mādhavācārya, Sarvadarśanasamgraha, edited by V.S. Abhyankar, 3rd ed., Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1978, Cārvāka chapter, p. 3. Guṇaratna, Tarkarahasyadīpikā, ed., L. Sauli, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1986, p. 306; Śaṅkarācārya, Sarvasiddhāntasamgraha, Madras: Government press, 1905. p. 5; Kamalaśīla, Pañjikā, commentary on Tattvasamgraha, Baroda: GOS no. 30, 1926, commentary on kārikā 1680; Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, Nyāyamañjarī, ed., Gaurinath Sāstri, vol. ii., Varanasi, 1983, p. 207-208. 2) Sarvadarśanasamgraha, op. cit., p. 8. 3) Ibid., p. 9. 4) Tattvasamgrahapañjikā, p. 425; Gautama, Nyāyasūtram, The Calcutta Sanskrit series, sūtra 37 and its Bhāṣya. Haribhadra Sūri, Saḍ-darśanasamuccya, with Guṇaratna's Commentary Tarkarahasyadīpikā, p. 425. 5) Sarvadarśanasamgraha, p. 8. Tarkarahasyadīpikā, p. 306. 6) Nyāyavārtika on sūtra 37, p. 524. Śāntarākṣita, Tattvasamgraha, and Kamalaśīla, Tattvasamgrahapañjikā, Kārikā 1460 and its pañjikā, p. 426. Sarvadarśanasamgraha, pp. 7-8. 7) Nyāyavārtika on sūtra 37, p. 525. Sarvadarśanasamgraha, p. 9. 8) Sarvadarśanasamgraha, pp. 9-10. 9) Tattvasamgraha, karikā 1465-66 and its Pañjika, p. 427. Sarvadarśanasamgraha, p. 10. 10) Nyāyavārtika on sūtra 37, p. 525. Sarvadarśanasamgraha, p. 12. Tattvasamgraha, kārikā 1465 and its pañjikā, p. 427. 11) Sarvasiddhāntasamgraha, Madras: Government press, 1905, sūtra 4-5, p. 5. Sarvadarśanasamgraha, p. 13. 12) Ibid., pp. 7-8. 13) Ibid., pp. 10-11. 14) Ibid., p. 13.

⟨Key Word⟩ Cārvāka, Pratyakṣa, anumāna

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