The Ascertainment of Truth of Knowledge in the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika

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The problem of truth or falsity of knowledge occupies a most important and indispensable part of Indian epistemology, common to all philosophical systems, next to the scrutiny of essential character of knowledge in general and means thereof. Though the Nyāya and the Vaiśeṣika developed as sister-schools, yet with a view to trace argumentation on this line common to the both, we want to confine main sources to some texts ascribed to the later syncratic school 'Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika'.

This article is intended to clarify the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas' theory about the 'ascertainment of truth of knowledge' (pramāṇya-jñāpati), as compared with that held by the Mīmāṁsakas. This problem is rather of later development, and the Mīmāṁsakas, so far as we know from available sources, was the first to take it up. They succeeded best, with reference to the validity of verbal testimony only, in formulating the self-evident character of knowledge. In later period, however, the problem of truth relating to other kinds of knowledge also, with a natural process, has come into consideration for all philosophical systems.

‘Truth’ (prāmāṇya) or ‘falsity’ (aprāmāṇya) is a property or truth-value ascribed to true knowledge (pramāṇa) or erroneous knowledge (apramāṇa) respectively, and is determined in accordance as cognition corresponds to facts. In traditional Western logic, ‘true’ or ‘false’ is usually used to characterize a proposition which is materially true or false, while the term ‘valid’ or ‘invalid’ is used to denote a proposition as logically true or false. Accordingly, judging from the nature of correct knowledge (yathārthānubhava), we prefer to use ‘true’ in a sense that they take it as the correspondence with reality. On the other hand, ‘valid’ is meant by us to refer
to means of knowledge (pramāṇa) as a process or operation having logical
necessity, though both ‘truth’ and ‘validity’ are expressed by Sanskrit term
pramāṇya.’ True knowledge is regarded as a presentative knowledge as it
is, and the truth lays its objective basis on the relational correspondence
and its subjective criterion on the empirical utility, though they differ
from those idealists who advocate a material correspondence, i. e., external
flow of cognition into the shape of object. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas define a
true knowledge as ‘a knowledge that has a reference to a substantive pos-
sessed of a particular attribute which is also a feature in that knowledge’.

The truth of knowledge is viewed from different standpoints, that is,
what elements condition the truth of knowledge, and how do we appre-
hend the knowledge as well as its truth? The former refers to its origi-
nation or constitution (utpatti), while the latter concerns the ascertainment
(jñapti). The bone of contention regarding the truth of knowledge centres
about (1) the causal elements which objectively originate and constitute
the truth of knowledge (janaka-kāraṇa-visayaka) and (2) The factors that
make the knowledge intelligible (jñāpaka-kāraṇa-visayaka), which has again
two aspects, i. e., factors which apprehend the knowledge and factors
which make known its truth. And furthermore, with regard to the varied
aspects of knowledge as above-mentioned, Indian thinkers hold two kinds
of view, namely, truth is self-proved (svatah pramāṇa) or is proved by
other extraneous conditions (paratah pramāṇa). Such being the case, with
regard to the ascertainment of knowledge possible alternative topic shall
be fourfold, each system holding either of these views.

According to the theory of svatah pramāṇa which is advocated by
the Mīmāṁsakas and the Advaita-vedāntins etc., every knowledge is con-
ditioned as true by the same constituent elements that condition the know-
ledge, and its truth is also cognized by the same cause which appre-
hends that knowledge. And in the theory of paratah pramāṇa, as is held
by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas and the Buddhists etc., the truth of knowledge is
conditioned by other causes than the constituents, elements, and is again
made intelligible by resorting to the apprehender of knowledge. In case
of ascertainment (jñāpti) of truth, the distinguishing criterion of para-
tastva from svastvastva is to be sought in something subjective, that is, apprehender of cognition (jñāna-jñāpaka-sāmagrī). It is because that the apprehension of knowledge as a locus of its truth-value is of an imperative necessity to any school, whatever view they may take, prior to the ascertainment of truth of knowledge. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas contend that such apprehender is after-cognition or inner perception (anuvyavasāya), which is a necessary resultant from cognition, and, as such apprehends the knowledge as a mere knowledge but does not cognize it as true.

By the term pramāṇya-svastvastva the author of Tarkasamgraha means ‘truth being apprehended by the same entire body of means which apprehend the knowledge, but do not prove its falsity’. And in this definition are implied, i. e., (1) that the truth of knowledge is apprehended by the same means which cognizes the knowledge, (2) that the means should include everything that is instrumental in apprehending the knowledge, and (3) that the means should not include anything that affects the truth of knowledge. Here the second condition is applied to include an inference which sometimes serves to apprehend the truth of knowledge, though it may also be known by other sources like verbal testimony (āptavākya). The third is intended for exclusion of any subsequent contradictory cognition which thwarts the truth of the first cognition and thus establishes its falsity. With regard to such apprehender (jñāna-grāhaka-sāmagrī) as is consistent with the above definition, the Mīmāṃsakas are divided into different opinions.

According to Prabhākara, in every act of cognition, the knowledge, the knower and the known are altogether revealed simultaneously. Any cognition, being of self-luminous nature, always takes a form ‘I know a pot as characterized by potness’ (ghaṭatvena ghaṭam aham jānāmi), and such experience brings forth three presentations, that is, (1) the subject ‘I’ (aham-vitti), (2) the object, say, pot (viśaya-vitti) and (3) itself as the consciousness of awareness (sva-saṃvitti). For him, any cognition which always come to us determinate in a triple presentation (trīpūṭ-saṃvīt)
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in a sense, a combination of cognition and after-cognition.

Kumārila holds that any knowledge, being beyond sense perception, is to be apprehended by means of presumption only, generated by the unintelligibility otherwise of manifestedness, which is another name for the manifestation of the object. The manifestedness (prākatya) otherwise known as cognizedness (jñatata) to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas, is a newly accepted property or guṇa inherent in any cognized object. Therefore presumption as such is the apprehender of the first cognition as well as its truth.

Murāri Miśra, however, differs in opinion from the above predecessors, in holding that when a cognition arises in the form ‘this is a pot,’ after-cognition immediately follows it in the form ‘I know a pot as characterized by potness’ (ghaatatvena ghaṭam ahain jānāmi), and that it apprehends the first cognition and its truth. Though the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas accept, alike Murāri Miśra, after-cognition as an apprehender, yet they differ in opinion from each other about the concept of after-cognition. As for Murāri, after-cognition has the following elements: (1) perception of a pot, (2) perception of potness, (3) perception of inherence between a pot and potness, (4) cognition of inherence (samavaya) as connects a pot and potness, (5) perception of the self ‘I’ as having 1 to 4, as its content. By contrast, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas contend that after-cognition does not cognize the actual relation, i.e., samavaya as connecting pot and potness. The apprehension of a pot as the locus of potness necessarily presupposes a cognition of the objective relation between the two, therefore the substantive (viśeṣya) is to be expressed as ‘something present’ (purovartin) or ‘this’ (idam) and not as the ‘locus of potness’ or ghaṭatva-vat. The cognition of truth is quite a different matter, which is to be inferred on the basis of practical utility, namely, the truth of knowledge is first cognized by us, when we act upon the knowledge or even in the midst of doubt about it, and see the action lead to a conative satisfaction. Now from the fruitfulness of the cognition the truth is inferred, for that which is not true does not give rise to “fruitful action”. In case of the cognition about unfamiliar object (anabhyāsadaśītpanna-jñāna), it is purely negative form.
of inference based on the failure of our attempt. And as regards the object experienced repeatedly (adhyātmarāṣṭrapannajñāna), the inference is positive and negative form, as the truth of the first or second cognition etc. serves as a positive instance and its falsity as a negative one.

But how do we know that the obtained object can really satisfy the conative experience? That is, suppose such satisfaction is further based on perception and sensation of feeling, how do we know them as true? And again how is the inference based on cognition leading to fruitful action known as valid? If it may be said that truth and validity as such are to be ascertained by other sources, above hypotheses involve argumentum ad infinitum.

To meet these difficulties, authors of earlier texts try to test the truth and validity by other sources, even at the risk of arguments in circle. Later authors, however, hold that it is not always necessary to verify the truth or validity. When there is ascertainment of truth by inference, it is quite unnecessary and motiveless to have a doubt so long as it stands uncontradicted and undoubted. Therefore they contend that any knowledge which cannot be reasonably doubted is thought to be as true, and the truth of such knowledge, being based on the relative and empirical standpoint, can be verified by other sources whenever necessary. Later Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas, however, try to interpret this problem by accepting some cases of knowledge which are regarded as intrinsically true. Among such knowledges, they count inference (anumāna), comparison (upamāna) both rather as means for logical process, cogntion of resemblance between two cognitions (jñānagatasadṛṣṭya-jñāna), after-cognition or self-consciousness (anuvyāvasāya) and cognition of anything as mere subject (dharman- jñāna).

It should, however, be borne in mind that the self-evident character of truth or validity in question is accepted tentatively, in a sense that they require no further verifying proof so long as they serve as some sorts of instrument in the course of attaining the final knowledge. Take for instance after-cognition which seems to have the highest certainty among them, it is true or preferably valid so long as ‘I know’ or ‘I feel’ cannot
be doubted, but it is always concomitant with the truth of its content or cognition (vyavāsāya). Thus such self-evident character of truth does not refuse its possibility to falsity, for every necessary knowledge is based on an empirical basis and requires verification by fresh requisition. And the problem under consideration has much to do with the inquiry after the characteristic of knowledge itself.

To sum up: every empirical knowledge, in the final analysis, is based on sensa, which are not only partial in their bearing upon the nature of the object given, but may vary though the object remain the same, like a case of ‘perspectives of the real’ where a coin presents a round and an oval shape according to the position from which it is viewed. Thus admitting such relativity of our empirical truth, as a whole, there is still left for Indian thinkers a higher scope for ‘intuition of the absolute truth’.

(1) Abbreviations: TBh: Tarka-bhāṣā (with Prakāśikā), Bombay ed.; NSM: Nyāya-siddhānta-muktāvali (with Dinākari), Nirmayasagar ed.; TS: Tarka-saṁgraha (with Dipikā and Nilakaṇṭha), Nirmayasagar ed.

(2) NSM ed. § 135: tat-prakāraṇaṁ ya-ja-ja-jaṁ tadvat-viśeṣyaṇam.

(3) Jainas hold unique view, that is, truth is, in its origination, is conditioned by extraneous elements only (pramāṇyaṁparataḥ), while it is ascertained intrinsically as well as extrinsically. cf. Prameya-kamala-mārtanda and Prameya-ratnamala; I, 13.


