

Indian Philosophy—Reading group 2

In the second chapter of his book, Perrett turns to epistemology. This is a highly developed sub-field of Indian philosophy; one reason for this has to do with the centrality of the goal of *moksa* ('liberation'; discussed last time). *Moksa* was regarded as being worth pursuing as everyday life was considered to be characterised by suffering (*duhkha*); one cause of such suffering was considered to be ignorance. Hence, there arose a rich field of the study of ignorance, knowledge, and the conditions under which both the former and latter obtain.¹

Note: the part of Indian philosophy concerned with the nature and sources of knowledge is called *pramanavada*.

Pramana theory

The *pramanas* are the means of knowledge, and include perception, inference, and testimony² (p. 50). Different Indian philosophers had different views on the number and nature of the *pramanas*. Most, however, agreed that perception and inference are the most important.

There's also a debate regarding the 'apprehension of truth'. Here's how Perrett puts the issue:

The central issue that the theory of the apprehension of truth (pramanyavada) addresses is whether the truth of a cognition is apprehended intrinsically (svatah) or extrinsically (paratah): in other words, whether a cognition and its truth are apprehended together, or whether it is only through a second cognition that one apprehends the truth of the first cognition.

... Intrinsic theorists all agree that there is no criterion of truth, even if there are criteria of error. That is, since a cognition as such is true or apprehended as true, no criterion can prove its truth (even though a criterion of error may prove error to be error). Extrinsic theories oppose these claims and insist that no cognition is true on its own account. Nyaya holds that the truth of a cognition depends upon its correspondence to reality; the Buddhist logician Dharmakirti instead defines truth pragmatically in terms of 'successful activity' (arthakriya). (Perrett p. 51)

¹It's worth noting that some Indian philosophers also noted non-soteriological reasons to study knowledge—see p. 50.

²Perrett suggests at several points in the chapter that testimony is unfamiliar to much of Western epistemology—but I'm not convinced that's true.

When it comes to the apprehension of truth and the apprehension of falsity, there are four different possibilities (p. 55) (This classification follows Bhatta, *Slokavarttika*, II.33-61):

1. Truth is apprehended intrinsically but falsity is apprehended extrinsically.
2. Both truth and falsity are apprehended intrinsically.
3. Both truth and falsity are apprehended extrinsically.
4. Falsity is apprehended intrinsically but truth is apprehended extrinsically.

On pp. 56-7, Perrett classifies various Indian philosophers with respect to which of these four positions they endorse. We'll see more on the apprehension of truth below.

Indian and Western epistemologies

Although there are many points of similarity and shared concern between Indian and Western epistemologies, there are also key differences. One of the most significant is this: "In the Indian context ... knowledge is treated as a species of awareness or cognition (*jnana*), not of belief, and hence knowledge (*prama*) is episodic rather than dispositional" (p. 52). (For comparison: perceptions and inferences are also regarded as being episodic in character.)³

Only cognitive episodes which yield truth are knowledge episodes. Perrett writes:

Whereas Western epistemology typically takes truth to be a property only of propositions, statements or beliefs, Indian theorists take truth to be a property of some (but not all) episodic cognitions. ... For the Indian epistemologists knowledge is a special kind of momentary mental episode: a true cognition revealing the nature of reality as it is, via a reliable causal route (a pramana). (Perrett, p. 53).

Question: Is there any reason to prefer one of these conceptions of knowledge over the other?

Note that the reliability of the *pramanas* is generally understood on externalist lines.

³Nick Clanchy pointed out that it would be nice to know more about the role of belief in Indian philosophy...

Truth

In the Western canon, there are three main rival conceptions of truth:

Correspondence: a statement is true if, in some sense, it corresponds to reality.

Coherence: “a statement is true if it coheres or fits with the system of other statements we affirm” (p. 55).

Pragmatism: “a statement is true if it ‘works’, in other words, if we can act successfully on the basis of it” (p. 56).

Amongst those Indian philosophers who take it that truth is apprehended extrinsically (see above), all of these views can be found. For example, Nyaya endorses the correspondence theory (p. 57); some Buddhist philosophers argued for a pragmatic conception of truth (p. 58). (Against the latter, Nyaya rejoined along fairly familiar lines: “Successful activity may be a plausible *criterion* of truth, but it cannot be an adequate account of the *nature* of truth.” (p. 58).)

Perception

There are three main views on the nature of perception (this terminology from the Western canon):

Direct realism: “the epistemological view that we directly perceive external objects, not just their sensible qualities” (p. 60).

Representational realism: “the view that perception is an indirect way of acquiring knowledge about the external world based on a causal inference from the sense data that are all we directly see” (p. 60).

Phenomenalism: “the view that ‘external’ objects are simply logical constructions out of the sense data that we all directly see” (p. 60).

Again, all three of these views can be found in the Indian canon: see pp. 60ff. for classifications and discussions.

There is also the question (more particular to the Indian canon) of whether perceptions are 'determinate' or 'indeterminate': "Roughly speaking, the issue is whether we can distinguish in perception the bare presentation from the elements read into the presentation by the mind" (p. 62). One might here classify the options as follows (p. 63):

1. All perception is determinate (Bhartrhari, Jainas, Navya-Nyaya).
2. All perception is indeterminate (Dignaga, Dharmakirti).
3. Perceptions are of two kinds: determinate and indeterminate (Nyaya, Mimamsa, Advaita).

The theory of error (*khyativada*)

Indian epistemologists typically conceived of the problem of perception as being how to explain how knowledge arises in a subject as a result of sense perception. But they also were much concerned with a closely associated problem: how to explain how a subject fails to have knowledge. This latter problem generated the body of theory Indians call khyativada, or the theory of error. (Perrett p. 65)

Suppose that one initially mistakes a rope for a snake, before realising one's error. As Perrett writes, "A plausible theory of perceptual error ... should surely be able to capture ... the way in which such error arises out of something real but misconstrued and the way in which our false cognition becomes transformed though still remembered" (p. 65).

One prominent question regards the ontological status of the objects of error (here: the snake). Vimuktatman classifies the options here as follows (p. 66):

1. Theories where the object of error is real (*sat-khyativada*).
2. Theories where the object of error is unreal (*asat-khyativada*).
3. Theories where the object of error is neither real nor unreal (*anirvacaniya-khyativada*).⁴

Perrett considers some of the arguments which have been offered against (1) and (2). On (2): "in cases of error like that of the rope and the snake it is not true that the object of error (the snake) is unreal, for if it were then it could not appear to exist" (p. 66).

⁴Cf. Meinongianism.

Question: Is this argument too fast?

Arguing against (1) is more involved, and there are three important sub-views here (p. 66):

- 1.1. The theory of self-cognition (*atmakhyati*).
- 1.2. The theory of cognition of non-cognition (*akhyati*).
- 1.3. The theory of cognition as another (*anyathakhyati*).

On (1.1): the Yogacara Buddhists held this view, according to which “the illusory snake is just a real mental state projected outside” (p. 67). But the theory of self-cognition is an idealist view, according to which “*all* objects are cognitions wrongly taken for external things”—and this threatens to collapse the distinction between real and fictitious objects.

On (1.2): according to this view, “the supposed erroneous cognition is really two distinct cognitions that the perceiver fails to discriminate” (p. 67). In our example: “One of these distinct cognitions is a perception (of a rope) and the other a memory (of a snake).” Here are two problems for this view:

- (a) How to explain why this purported failure to discriminate between a perception and a memory occurs only on some occasions?
- (b) It is not clear that non-discrimination is a necessary condition for error—“for surely we can be in ignorance though fully discriminative” (p. 67).

On (1.3): according to this view, “erroneous cognition involves a confusion between two distinct cognitions” (p. 67). Here, “The object of error ... is real enough, but its connection with the time and place in which it is seen is unreal. This theory, however, faces the problem of offering a plausible explanation of how the absent object (the snake) gives rise to its cognition here and now” (p. 68).

On (3), the idea here is that objects of error are “neither non-existent nor real” (p. 68). Absent further details, this is opaque... (JR: Maybe free logics can help, as in the case of fictional objects?)

Scepticism in Indian and Western epistemologies

In the Western canon, Cartesian-style universal scepticism is “built on the premise that anything that is contingent is uncertain and hence doubtful” (p. 71). However,

Since the Indian philosophers do not acknowledge this distinction between necessary and contingent objects or facts, for them nothing possesses any property that in itself makes it liable to be doubted. Meaningful doubt requires that suitable epistemic conditions are satisfied, and radical Cartesian-style scepticism is ruled out as in pragmatic contradiction with everyday life. (Perrett p. 71)

Question 1: Why is it that Indian philosophers do not acknowledge this distinction between necessary and contingent objects or facts?

Question 2: To what extent can one assimilate the idea that “meaningful doubt requires that suitable epistemic conditions are satisfied” to Quine’s naturalisation of epistemology?⁵

Although some Indian philosophers, such as Nagarjuna, Jayarasi and Sriharsa are sometimes identified as ‘sceptics’, the real sense in which this is so is that “whereas most Indian epistemologists agreed that we can only know anything by having a means of knowledge (*pramana*), our three ‘sceptics’ all reject this conception of the role of the *pramanas*.” (p. 71)

⁵Nick Clanchy pointed out another potentially interesting connection: to that of the Austin/Cavell distinction between generic and specific objects. It seems, here, that we have only objects in the specific sense—so there is no possibility of Cartesian-style universal scepticism.