



## ADVAITA EPISTEMOLOGY

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### *Lecture Three*

These lectures were delivered in Michaelmas Term (Oct.-Dec. 2003). They are intended to introduce the basic tenets of Advaita tracing it from the period of Gaudapada through Sankara to the present day Advaitins. They examine the philosophical subtleties of Advaita, its enrichment through productive dialogue with other schools and also its impact on the society. These are designed for students in Indian Philosophy, Theology and Religious studies and do not require in-depth understanding of Indian scriptures. However, they could also be of particular interest to advanced students of Indology and Sanskrit studies.

### **Introduction**

An important and common axiom of Indian Philosophy is that any given object of knowledge empirical or otherwise, is determined by a definite process of knowledge. All objects of knowledge can be subsumed under the individual (jiva), the world (jagat) and God (Isvara). Since objects of knowledge correspond to the means by which we come to know them, means that are under the direct command of the mind, knowledge necessitates an examination of the mind prior to that of a given object. Epistemological tools are designed to determine the nature and status of objects as well as metaphysical realities. In Indian Philosophy, the technical term used in this context is pramana, meaning, a means or source of knowledge. The generic term for epistemology in Sanskrit is thus pramana-vicara.

Why should we begin with pramana-vicara? Questioning the way knowledge is obtained is necessary prior to investigating and attempting to determine the nature of objects and phenomena. This is done through establishing the means of knowing or pramana. Any claim to knowledge must be supported by authority, which is pramana.

The Mimamsaka claim about the existence of heaven (svarga) is based on the authority of Vedic revelation (Sruti-pramana). The claim of the presence of a fire on a mountaintop, where smoke alone is seen, is based on the authority of inference (anumana-pramana). In fact, any claim to knowledge must be grounded in some pramana. The knowledge obtained through a pramana is called prama.

The term jnana is often coined with the same meaning as prama. However, strictly speaking, jnana means cognition and does not always denote--as in the case of prama--valid knowledge. If prama always refers to valid knowledge, jnana does not. The latter may indicate valid, invalid, or doubtful knowledge (samsaya jnana, asamsaya-jnana viparyaya- jnana). The number of pramanas varies from school to school. For the materialist school (Carvaka), perception (pratyaksa) is the sole accepted source of knowledge. Buddhist and Vaishesika schools accept two pramanas, perception and inference. The traditions of Samkhya and Yoga accept the latter two pramanas as well as testimony (sabda). The Nyaya school accepts the last three and comparison (upamana) too. In the Purvamimamsa tradition, the teacher Prabhakara accepts the above four pramanas and adds postulation (arthapatti). The teacher Bhatta accepts a sixth pramana called non-cognition (anupalabdhi). The Advaita school of thought also accepts these six pramanas but only from the viewpoint of empirical reality (vyavahare bhattachanayah). The Vishistadvaita and Dvaita schools of Vedanta accept three pramanas, i.e., perception, inference, and testimony, with the latter including Sruti and Smrti texts).

Each of the above schools discusses, at great lengths, the reasons for its accepting or rejecting certain means of knowledge. The interpretive and reasoning tools that the Mimamsa and the Nyaya schools provide respectively, are particularly relevant to the study of scriptures and thus, important to all schools of Vedanta.

In interpreting texts, one must consider the law of parsimony, that is to say, the economy in the use of words. When violated, it may lead to fallacies (doshas) named laghava (too narrow) or gaurava.<sup>1</sup>

Different views with regard to the definition of prama:

1. In Buddhism - prama corresponds to the western pragmatic theory of truth/knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> . ativyapti, avyapti asambhava-rahitatvam laksana-laksanam.

2. In Nyaya - prama parallels the correspondence theory of truth.
3. In Samkhya- prama relates to the coherence theory of truth.
4. In Advaita - none of the above.

The Buddhist view - A true cognition is one which leads to successful activity (arthakriyakaritvam). This view is reminiscent to the pragmatic theory of truth of William James. This view is fallacious since a cognition that leads to successful activity may turn out to be false. For instance, we all mistakenly perceive the sun as rising and thus proceed to act. Every case of successful activity is thus not correlated to a true cognition.

The Nyaya view- More or less, Nyaya sees knowledge in a way that is suggestive of the correspondance theory of truth.<sup>2</sup>

A true cognition is that in which a given object is cognized as it is and at the place which it actually occupies (yatra yadasti, tatra tasya anubhavah prama). In the West, philosophers who belong to the school of realism have also formulated this theory. This formulation is not without difficulties. How can there be real correspondence between knowledge and objects? Similarity or correspondence between two objects outside of ourselves is possible, even two ideas can be compared. But how can knowledge and an object be compared when knowledge is only subjective and the object solely objective. No comparison is possible between these two.

### **The Samkhya view - Coherence theory of truth:**

Cognition is true if it coheres with the cognition of others--there should be concurrence between the cognitions of a given object (samvada)--or if it coheres with a system of knowledge which one already has. In the latter case, the question may be asked as to how there can be agreement between two things when they are not seen simultaneously. In the case of knowledge cohering with a previously acquired knowledge, there is no guarantee that the latter is true. If, at some point, the already obtained knowledge were to be found untrue and thus negated (badhite sati), then what would the criterion for testing the truthfulness of the new knowledge be?

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<sup>2</sup>. Vishistadvaita gives its own formulation of prama as yathavasthitta-vyavahara-anugunam jnanam prama.

Because of this defect, Advaita posits unsublatability (abadhyatvam)--a cognition is true if it remains unsublated--as the sole reliable criterion to determine true knowledge. Advaita also posits that in addition to being abadhyatvam, the knowledge needs to be anadhigatatvam, that is, of a new and unique object. The most frequently used example that illustrates abadhyatvam is the rope-snake. The knowledge of a rope-snake is not true because it becomes sublated when it is correctly apprehended as a rope. When a person perceives a rope in lieu of a snake, he thinks "This is a snake." "This," temporarily assumes the form of a snake until the knowledge of the snake as a rope arises. Upon the realization that "this" was and is nothing but a rope, the false apprehension of the snake is definitely canceled. As a result of the erroneous cognition of a snake, various physical and psychological reactions ensue, i.e., fear, shivers, etc., (bhayakampanadikam). The outcome of the correct cognition is the subsiding of all these reactions. These two cognitions cannot coexist, the latter sublating the former. The subsequent cognition is called badhaka jnanam. It is worth keeping in mind that although the initial cognition is proven to be untrue, its actual content (visaya) was always the snake. What is thus removed, by the correct and final apprehension of the rope, is the false idea of its being a snake. Cognition itself can never be sublated but its being apprehended as something other than it is. Thus, sublatibility (badhyatva) solely applies to cases of erroneous perceptions.

From the standpoint of our ordinary experiences, however, since the cognition of the world is never sublated, it may be argued that the world of plurality is true! This is a false assessment; the cognition of the world does get sublated when, for instance, one cognizes the state of dream. One has to verify the truth about this assertion for himself or herself.

Advaita holds that the knowledge of the ultimate reality is a unique cognition that is not subjected to elimination.

Since it is enduring and unalterable, its content must be true.

This unique and permanent knowledge about which scriptures speak, has been vouchsafed by those who, with a pure mind, have realized and are established in such knowledge. According to Advaita, the attainment of this unique knowledge is the goal of the Upanishadic inquiry.

### **Instances of sublation:**

-All cases of erroneous perception in waking and dream. The perceptual experiences in both dream and waking are taken to be true during the entire course of these states. Sublation occurs in one and the same state. The rope-snake becomes the rope. Here, the rope-snake, an apparent object (Pratibhasika-vastu) is sublated or contradicted by a valid pramana.

-All cases of waking objects. All waking objects suffer sublation and are, therefore, false. All cognitions of waking objects are proven false at once when the transition from dream to waking or from waking to dream occurs, both cognition and cognitum being eliminated.

For Advaitins, the waking state does not enjoy any privileged status. This does not mean that there is no difference between the false phenomena occurring in the waking alone (mirages, etc) and the falsity of both the contents of waking and dream objects.

The objects belonging to the waking level are called empirical objects (vyavaharika vastus). They seem to last longer than the objects that pertain to the dream state (pratibhasika vastus), yet, they are still false (mithya) because they do not endure.

Now, Advaitins affirm that the Self is ever cognizing and fully independent from these states and their contents. The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad tells us, with no ambiguity, that the cognizing nature of the Self never stops. The reasons why the cognition of the Self (Atma-vastu), unlike the cognition of any other object, cannot be sublated, are as follows:

- 1)-The cognition of the Self is that of the ultimate reality, expressed in terms of the identity of Brahman and Atman.
- 2)-The cognition of the Self occurs through the pramana of Sruti that is authorless (apauruseya), free from errors of omission and commission. For Advaitins, therefore, the authority of Scriptures is unquestionable. Advaita accepts the eternal validity of self-cognition because it originates from Scriptures. All other pramanas are valid within the sphere of vyavahara. Sruti is the pramana par excellence for it constitutes the means of knowing the sole thing worth knowing, Brahman-Atman.
- 3)-If anything is to suffer sublation, it must be contradicted by a pramana. The cognition of the Self is not contradicted by any other pramana - na nasyati na vedanam pravalam manam iksate (Pancadasi) and so it can never be negated. All

pramanas other than Sruti have value in so far as empirical objects are concerned. Ordinary pramanas are of no worth since Brahman-Atman is not an object of cognition, being one's own very subject of being. Empirical pramanas and Sruti-pramana can never contradict each other because their referents are different. The permanent cognition of Reality--Brahman-Atman--is absolutely real and is technically named paramarthika. The impermanent cognitions of dream as well as waking objects and phenomena are false and are referred to as vyavaharika.

**Anadhigatatvam, the second criterion to the determination of the real:**

Anadhigatatvam means that which is unique, novel, which is not already known. This second criterion excludes memory as a pramana. Memory is recollecting previous experiences; it is the recollection of whatever is already known. It represents something that has already been ascertained through a pramana and thus memory is not itself a pramana. Someone's previous experiences remain stored up in the mind in the form of impressions (samskaras), which are responsible for the phenomenon of recollecting. Memory is defined as that which is caused or produced by impressions (samskaramatra janyam jnanam smrtih). Although there is nothing new about a memory-born knowledge, it is still valid, that is to say, dependable. However, memory-born knowledge is not prama, for the definition of the latter is anadhigata abadhitartha visayam jnanam prama. With this definition, we proceed to analyze the pramanas beginning with perception.

**Perception (Pratyaksa):**

1) The Buddhist view: -Perception is the instrument or source through which we cognize unique things, particulars. "Pratyaksa" is used in two senses, i.e., as an instrument (karana) and as knowledge (prama). Buddhists use the word "svalaksana" to indicate particulars. Every particular has some unique properties, which are known through pratyaksa. According to Buddhism, everything in the world is momentary (ksanika). All things and phenomena are conceived to constitute a stream or flux of endless changes. Thus, Buddhism advocates a doctrine of universal change. Each and every object is unique, existing for a moment. Since they are unique and momentary, there is no possibility of comparing objects. Buddhism does not accept

the concept of universals as a valid category.<sup>3</sup> Since everything is momentary and unique, it is through pratyaksa alone that an object is perceived. The knowledge of momentary particulars is real but that of universals is imaginary. Advaitins find this Buddhist view untenable:

If perception can give us the knowledge of a unique particular that is momentary, then, that knowledge is only a sensation and cannot be an instance of complete knowledge. True knowledge requires sensation and interpretation of that sensation. For example, one hears a noise, a sensation, and interprets it as a being produced by a bus horn, etc. Pratyaksa, for Advaitins, is both sensation and interpretation. In the process of interpretation, one always attaches some meaning to the sensation. This interpreted sensation is impossible if phenomena and objects are momentary. Advaitins assert that to interpret any sensation, concepts of universals are necessary. While interpreting, one compares the features of a particular with those of its corresponding universal. If objects are momentary and unique, the concept of universals is impossible and sensations alone are left for knowledge. It is their metaphysical commitment that compels them to define pratyaksa in such a way, which is clearly unsatisfactory in the eyes of Advaitins.

2)-The Nyaya view: It is important to distinguish the earlier Nyaya view on the topic, from that which developed later on. According to the earlier Nyaya thinker Gautama, the operation of the appropriate pramana is required for gaining the knowledge of any object. This does not only involve the use of the sense organs, but also that of the mind and consciousness. For the time being, we shall not differentiate between mind and sense organs, and refer to them both as "indriya". Mind is an internal sense organ and the other five are external. Granting that the other necessary conditions to perception, i.e., proper light and distance, absence of obstacle, etc., are present, cognition necessitates the contact between the indriya (in the sense indicated above) and the object of cognition, the artha. This vital contact between indriya and artha is called sannikarsa.<sup>4</sup>

The view proposed by the later Nyaya follower Gangesha, differs from the above. According to Gangesha, the definition given by Gautama suffers the defects of being

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<sup>3</sup>. The common quality possessed by individuals is what is called as the universal - the jati.

<sup>4</sup>. Indriyarthasannakarsa-janya jnanam pratyaksam.

"too wide" (ativyapti-dosha) or "too narrow" (avyapti-dosha). For instance, to say that the knowledge that results out of contact between senses and object is alone pratyaksa is too narrow since this definition is applicable to anumana also; indriyārtha-sannikararsam is involved in inference also. Even in remembrance there is contact between the senses and the object(s).

Gangesha asserts that perception is immediate knowledge; it is the source through which we get knowledge. The nature of this immediate knowledge concerns external objects like table, chair, etc, (Factors involved in it and mode of gaining this knowledge are not discussed this definition) as well as subjective states of mind like happiness, sadness, etc, which do not necessitate sense-object connection. Even though Mimamsakas and Advaitins broadly accept Gangesha's definition of perception, there are difference to be noted.

**Mimamsa and Advaita view:**

From where does perception arise? What is the role of the sense organs in immediate knowledge? Are indriyas involved in all perceptions? Indriyas do not function in all cases of perception. 1) Indriyas function whenever there is perception of external objects. 2) Indriyas are not present in the perception of subjective states. Hence, indriyas are not the condition sine qua non for immediate knowledge. 3) God, who is omniscient, does not require the use of indriyas. 4) The perception of a snake in the place of a rope is also immediate, but is obtained through avidya-vrtti. The modification that the mind undergoes in keeping with the object perceived with the help of the senses, is technically called vrtti. The cognitions of table, chair, etc, are said to be valid since they are obtained in the normal manner, i.e., through antahkarana vrtti, and that is why they are not sublated (at least as long as the state endures). But in the case of the false cognition of a rope as a snake, the latter is sublated by the subsequent correct cognition of a rope, even though the functioning of indriyas (indriya-vyapara) is common to both cognitions. This is explained by the fact that the perception of the snake is avidya-vrtti and not antahkarana-vrtti. The snake was not there before the perception of the rope as such occurred, and it is not going to be there after its sublation by the subsequent correct apprehension of the rope. Even while being perceived as a snake, it is but a rope that in truth exists. Furthermore, there is no point in time when the rope's nature actually changed. The rope remains as it is throughout the three times. However, can the perception of the snake for he



who sees a snake be denied? Advaitins say that a snake seen in the place of a rope is a projection of avidya. Avidya alone is responsible for the false perception of a snake (avidya-vrtti). Avidya-vrtti can never result in valid cognition, for that is opposed to its nature or power. This avidya-vrtti is known directly by the self which, as the witness, reveals it.

**The five vrttis accepted in Advaita:**

Knowledge/Cognition				
Immediate (pratyaksa)			Mediate (Paroksa) (inference, comparison, postulation, sabda, and non- cognition).	
1	2	3	4	5
Antahkarana- vrtti	Avidya- vrtti	Maya- vrtti	Sakshi-bhasya	Akandhakarana- vrtti

1. Cognition of an external object through Antahkarana-vrtti
2. Cognition of illusory objects through Avidya-vrtti
3. Cognition of Isvara through Maya-vrtti
4. Cognition of mental modes through Sakshi-bhasya
5. The immediate cognition of Brahman through Aparoksa-jnana