Comment and Discussion: Pramāṇa Are Factive - A Response to Jonardon Ganeri

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Recently, Jonardan Ganeri reviewed the collaborative translation of the first chapter of Gaṅgeśa’s Tattvacintāmaṇi by Stephen H. Phillips and N. S. Ramanuja Tatacharya (Ganeri 2007). The review is quite favorable, and we have no desire to dispute his kind words. Ganeri does, however, put forth an argument in opposition to a fundamental line of interpretation given by Phillips and Ramanuja Tatacharya about the nature of pramâna, knowledge sources, as understood by Gaṅgeśa and, for that matter, Nyāya tradition. This response is meant to answer the argument and reassert an understanding of pramâna as factive, that is, as knowledge sources that are inerrant. We argue that this is the best reading of Gaṅgeśa himself and of Nyāya tradition, and is defensible on purely philosophical grounds.

Ganeri summarizes Gaṅgeśa’s approach to epistemology as understood by Phillips and Ramanuja Tatacharya under a few headings. Gaṅgeśa is a naturalist; that is, he seeks to understand pramâna as “natural processes, part of the universe’s causal web” (Phillips and Ramanuja Tatacharya 2004, p. 7; cited in Ganeri 2007, p. 350). He is furthermore a fallibilist about cognition. Cognitions may be true or false, veridical or non-veridical, and a cognition that an individual initially acts on as though veridical may be shown to be non-veridical later. Finally, Gaṅgeśa is an infallibilist about pramâna: “no cognition that is produced by one of the attested sources of knowledge can be false” (Ganeri 2007, p. 350). This last notion troubles our critic. Ganeri asks “is the infallibilism on offer compatible with naturalism?” His answer is no:

Such a picture of the sources of knowledge seems to be at variance with a naturalist account, in which they are “natural processes” and “part of the universe’s causal web.” As natural organisms, we are certainly equipped with mechanisms and processes that put us in cognitive contact with the world we inhabit, processes which serve pretty well in a variety of circumstances, but are by no means infallible. (p. 351)

Philosophers who search for infallible sources of knowledge are led away from ordinary perception, inference and language” and instead towards “the natural light of reason” or “clear and distinct ideas” or “authorless Vedic revelation.” (p. 351)

If there are infallible natural causal processes that generate only true awarenesses, and if these processes can be typed in any significant way and so made subject to causal laws and generalizations, then they must be very different in character from ordinary perception, inference, and language. I doubt that there are any naturally infallible causal cognitive processes; but even if there are, they will not be discovered by the philosophical
methods Gaṅgēśa employs in his work, nor will they have anything much to do with the sources of human knowledge he describes. (p. 353)

Claiming that there is incoherence in trying to understand pramāṇa according to their operation within the natural world along with thinking of them as factive, Ganeri insists that one or the other must be jettisoned: either the naturalism or the infallibilism must go. His preference is clear: get rid of the factivity requirement and keep the naturalism. He suggests further that classical Naiyāyikas take this route, mentioning the Navya-Nyāya search for excellences (guṇa) and faults (doṣa) that impact cognition-forming processes as well as a putative distinguishing on the part of some Naiyāyikas, between correct and incorrect pramāṇa (guṇa-ja and doṣa-ja pramāṇa).

Ganeri also appeals to the work of other scholars such as Sibajiban Bhattacharyya and Sukharanjan Saha. The latter is quoted: “We are of the opinion that pramāṇa is to be understood here as only a truth-conducive and not as a truth-ensuring factor” (Saha 2003, p. 61; cited in Ganeri 2007, p. 352). Ganeri implies that Gaṅgēśa himself does not provide enough information to determine whether or not he embraces the factivity thesis, that is, that any genuine pramāṇa must produce cognitions that are true. Therefore, the brunt of Ganeri’s case is his sense of the incompatibility of naturalism and infallibilism. He suggests that since the factivity requirement would be problematic philosophically, we should assume that such an astute and influential thinker as Gaṅgēśa would not make the mistake.

We have two points to make in response, the first meeting the philosophical challenge by arguing that the alleged incompatibility does not exist, the second making a textual case. We shall close with some reflection about elements of Nyāya and Western epistemology that may have led to what we take to be Ganeri’s (and others’) misunderstanding of pramāṇa in the views of Gaṅgēśa and Nyāya tradition.

1. There is no incompatibility between the conception of pramāṇa as factive and Ganeri’s (or any version of) naturalism, including Nyāya’s individuation of pramāṇa as natural kinds (perceptionhood, inferencehood, and so on). Many biological and cognitive processes are what they are with respect to specific outcomes that are essential. A specific outcome—“success” from an evaluative standpoint—is intrinsic to the process, a non-occurrence of which means that something other than the process proper has occurred. Sexual reproduction provides a good example. Although an act of sexual intercourse may fail to produce a child (indeed, it often does), this does not prevent us from conceiving of the outcome-inclusive “producing a child” as a natural process par excellence. In fact, it would be strange (and to our classical thinkers bizarre) to think of the fundamental natural process “sexual reproduction” as having two sub-divisions: successful and non-successful child-production. One fails to understand the deep nature of the sexual act and of sexual organs without understanding their role in child-production. The successful function is the natural function, and is conceptually prior to failure, in that the latter presupposes that the former as a counterfeit copy presupposes the real McCoy. Without the former, the latter would be impossible, but not the reverse. Non-child-producing sexual intercourse may be understood as an abrogation—it only exists when childbirth fails to occur.
This does not entail that sexual intercourse always succeed in producing a child, but if there is genuine sexual reproduction, then childbirth does occur. Similarly, as a pramāṇa, perception (for example) invariably generates a true cognition, although there are aberrant processes, perception-like, that produce false cognitions.

The term pramāṇa itself allows us to identify ideal cognitive processes. By definition, if a non-veridical cognition is produced, the producing process is not a pramāṇa but an abrogation, regardless of phenomenal similarity between a false and a true cognition generated. Furthermore, Nyāya philosophers study knowledge-sources because our efforts to employ them allow us and everyone to answer questions, resolve doubts, and proceed in philosophy. Our attempts to employ knowledge-generative processes are not infallible. But that we sometimes mistake an inference-imitator, for example a hetvābhāṣa, a non-genuine inferential sign, for a legitimate prover (hetu) does not mean that the pramāṇa inference is fallible. Similarly, in everyday English we say, “Well, I thought I knew. But it turned out that what I believed was false.” Knowledge is factive. The phrase “I know that, but I am wrong” is semantically erroneous. In Nyāya’s terms, it breaks the rule of yogyatā, semantic “fittingness.” We do not use the word “knowledge” or its variants in regard to error; the word has a success grammar. Yet few people think of knowledge as an unnatural state. The same holds for pramāṇa. “My cognition is pramāṇa-produced, but it is false” is a precise parallel. A pramāṇa produces a cognition whose objectivity (or intentionality) hits the mark. We do not have to be infallible judges of whether a pramāṇa or a mere imitator has occurred. This is the key to Gaṅgeśa’s fallibilism as mentioned above. The factivity of a pramāṇa is not, therefore, deployed by Nyāya as a magical bulwark against skepticism or in any other way that unjustifiably depends on the success grammar of the concept.

If anything, this aspect of Nyāya’s pramāṇa theory is best captured by modern epistemological disjunctivism, the view that the mental states of knowledge and error are metaphysically distinct despite the possibility of exact phenomenal similarity between them. While Nyāya’s epistemology does not hold that pramāṇa-produced cognitions may be fallacious, it does recognize that from the first-person perspective, the difference between knowledge and error may be imperceptible (especially in the absence of reflection). Moreover, Nyāya holds that the processes that generate knowledge and error are similarly distinct despite phenomenal similarity.

2. The notion of the factivity of pramāṇa is as old as the Nyāya-sūtra itself and finds much support by thinkers of the early school. Sūtra 1.1.4 famously states that a perceptual cognition (pratyakṣa) must be inerrant (avyabhicārī). Jayanta defines pramāṇa as “the cause of a veridical cognition” (pramāṇa-karaṇam pramāṇam) and argues that qualifications like inerrancy, given in sūtra 1.1.4, range over the definitions of other pramāṇa types.

It may be proposed that irregular producers of veridical cognition would be pramāṇa. So to exclude producers of memory, doubt, and wrong cognition, three words from the Perception Sūtra (of the Nyāya-sūtra, 1.1.4, perception being the first pramāṇa defined), “caused by the object” (artha-utpannam), “inerrant” (avyabhicārī), and “determinate” (vyavasāyatmakam), should be carried over (to the definitions of all the pramāṇa). For they
Another clear expression of this notion is found in the following passage from Vācaspati’s Tātparyaṭīkā. He is commenting on the term arthavat in Vyāsāyana’s opening statement, “A pramāna is arthavat since successful action follows from pramāṇa-born cognition of an object” (pramāṇato ṛtha-pratipattau pravṛtti-sāmarthyād arthavat pramāṇam):

“A pramāṇa is arthavat,” employs the possessive affix (vat) which indicates necessary linkage (nitya-yoga). The condition of necessity (nityatā) means non-deviation. The import is that a pramāṇa does not deviate from its object. A pramāṇa’s non-deviation amounts to the fact that there will never be a contradiction anywhere, anytime, in any other conditions, between the nature of the object and the mode of presentation provided by the pramāṇa. (Tātparyaṭīkā 1.1.1; Nyāya-Tarkatirtha and Tarkatirtha 1936–1944, p. 3)³

Vācaspati’s understanding of pramāṇa as factive is complemented by the distinction between pramāṇa and pramāṇa-ābhāsa (semblance of a pramāṇa). Uddyotakara (Nyāya-vārttika 1.1.1; Nyāya-Tarkatirtha and Tarkatirtha 1936–1944, pp. 7–8) speaks of pramāṇa as prompting apprehension of an object (arthā-paricchedaka). He further notes that a second thing, an imposter of a pramāṇa (pramāṇa-pratirūpa), is possible. This imposter, called pramāṇa-ābhāsa, is distinguished from the real thing in that the former is arthavat and the latter anarthaka (useless), being spoken of under the heading pramāṇa only in a figurative sense. Vyāsāyana illustrates this distinction in a discussion of inference (Nyāya-bhāṣya 2.1.38; Nyāya-Tarkatirtha and Tarkatirtha 1936–1944, p. 516): “It is not the case that there is an inference that deviates. Rather, there has been no inference at all—this is erroneously considered an inference.”⁴

The preceding suffices to illustrate the view of pramāṇa factivity held by leading thinkers of prācıṇa-nyāya. Our reading of Gaṅgeśa is that given the traditional view of the matter, such factivity is presupposed by him. Indeed, it is thematic and organizational for the Tattvacintāmaṇī as a whole (each of the chapters taking up in turn one pramāṇa, in the traditional order—perception, inference, analogy, and testimony). Still, there are occasions where Gaṅgeśa is explicit:

And such veridical cognition (pramāṇa) occurs in four varieties, in that the perceptual, the inferential, the analogical, and the verbal are distinct. In this way, there are proximate instrumental causes for the four—i.e., “means to veridical cognition,” pramāṇa—in four varieties, in that perception, inference, analogy, and testimony are distinct. (translation in Phillips and Ramanuja Tatacharya 2004, p. 327)

We suggest that the burden of proof is on those who challenge the interpretation above to produce passages from traditional texts that speak of pramāṇa as producing apramāṇa, as such would be required if pramāṇa are merely truth-conducive and not factive.

The only evidence that Ganeri gives is usage by later Nyāya philosophers of the terms guṇa-ja pramāṇa (pramāṇa born of excellences) and doṣa-ja pramāṇa (pramāṇa
born of faults). No actual bits of text are cited, but we hazard that among post-
Gaṅgeśa Naiyāyikas awareness of Gettier-like problems of accidentally true cogni-
tion was common; for example, “There is fire on the mountain,” cognized on the
basis of dust mistaken for smoke with respect to a mountain where there really is fire
(unconnected to the haphazard line of dust that leads our subject to have the true
cognition by means of the pseudo-inference). Any accidentally true cognition will
have a pramāṇa, a unique sequence of causal occurrences, in however bizarre a
configuration, that can be said to have generated the cognition that is true. But this
would not be a pramāṇa as a general type, and it is the types, the invariable laws of
knowledge production, that Nyāya philosophers are interested in. Many details about
the operation of these natural processes are unknown to us (e.g., what is happening
at the atomic level in sense-organ / object connection), but we can recognize these
processes by various indications (called guṇa) and deviations from them by other
indications (called doṣa), as well as by success, or failure, in action. And by seeing
pramāṇa as jāti, as “natural kinds,” we are able to distinguish a process that just hap-
pens to generate one time a true cognition, a pramāṇa in a broad sense and strictly a
doṣa-ja pramāṇa, from veritable pramāṇa that operate with all persons and invariably
generate knowledge.

Finally, we would like to suggest three factors that may contribute to Ganeri’s
(and others’, including Saha’s) confusion about the factivity of pramāṇa. First, a virtue
of much recent study of Indian philosophy is that it is carried out by persons trained
in contemporary philosophy. Such training fosters sensitivity for conceptual connec-
tions that are sometimes difficult to specify. A potential danger that philosophers
face, however, is to read various contemporary positions into the classical thinkers.
As Ganeri notes in his review, Phillips has often mentioned this concern and has
criticized some instances of recent scholarship on this account (including his own).
It seems to us that Ganeri rightly appreciates the deep similarities between contem-
porary reliabilism and pramāṇa theory, but reads too much of reliabilism into pramāṇa
theory. Most relevantly, he reads into it the non-factivity of methods of knowledge, as
reliabilism holds that our best epistemic methods are fallible but are on the whole
reliable. To such a conception, the notion of factive pramāṇa seems strange. Nyāya
epistemology has much in common with contemporary reliabilism. But there are
limits to the similarity. Reliabilism is concerned with determining the reliability of a
method of knowledge. Nyāya is concerned with distinguishing between genuine
pramāṇa and pseudo-pramāṇa. The approaches to process identification differ
radically.

Second, Nyāya endorses a procedure that has a lot in common with statistical
review of a cognitive method in order to gauge its legitimacy. This is a standard reliabil-
list approach, an argument by appeal to track record. Jayanta, for example, suggests
that an individual’s veracity and authoritativenss may be judged in the light of her
history of assertion-making. He further claims that the authority of the Veda may be
established by such an appeal. But it must be understood that such a review would
not be done, by Nyāya’s lights, in support of pramāṇa types such as perception, infer-
ence, or testimony, whose inerrancy is a conceptual truth. Rather, such a review
would be undertaken to establish (for example) whether or not an individual’s assertions are in fact instances of the pramāṇa testimony and not merely śabda-ābhāsa.

Third, Nyāya often seems to approach justification in an internalist way since so much philosophy is taken to be in dispute and requires the self-conscious employment of inference in particular. But the pramāṇa, and their ability to produce knowledge, require no such reflection in the absence of challenge or reasons for doubt.

Notes

1 – indriya-artha-sannikāśa-utpannam jñānam avapadesyam avyabhicārya vyavasāyātmakam pratyaksam.

2 – asuddha-pramiti-vidhāyinas tu pramāṇam prasajyata iti smṛti-sanśaya-viparyaya-janaka-vyavacchedāya pratyakṣa-sūtrāt artha-utpannam iti avyabhicārya iti vyavasāyātmakam iti ca pada-trayam ākṛṣyate tad hi pramāṇa-catuṣṭaya-sādhāraṇam.

3 – tathā hi pramāṇam arthavad iti, nitya-yoge matup. nityatā ca avyabhicāritā. tena artha-avyabhicārya ity arthah. iyam eva ca artha-avyabhicāritā pramāṇasya, yaddesa-kāla-antara-avasthā-antara-avisamvādo ‘ṛtha-svarūpa-prakārayos tad-upadarsitayoh.

4 – na ayam anumāṇa-avyabhicāraḥ, anumānāne tu khalv ayam anumāṇa-abhimānaḥ.

References


