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COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

Pramāṇa Are Factive—A Response to Jonardon Ganeri

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Recently, Jonardon 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 *pramāṇa*, 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 *pramāṇa* 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 *pramāṇa* 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 *pramāṇa*: "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 Gaṅgeśa 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 Gaṅgeśa 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 Gaṅgeśa 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 Gaṅgeśa 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 succeeds 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 *hetv-ābhāsa*, 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*).¹ Jayanta defines *pramāṇa* as “the cause of a veridical cognition” (*pramā-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” (*vyavasāyātmakam*), should be carried over (to the definitions of all the *pramāṇa*). For they

apply in general to the set of four (perception, inference, analogy, and testimony). (*Nyāya-mañjarī*) (Varadacharya 1969, p. 73)²

Another clear expression of this notion is found in the following passage from Vācaspati's *Tātparyaṭīkā*. He is commenting on the term *arthavat* in Vātsyāyana's opening statement, "A *pramāṇa* is *arthavat* since successful action follows from *pramāṇa*-born cognition of an object" (*pramāṇato 'rtha-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-vārtika* 1.1.1; Nyāya-Tarkatirtha and Tarkatirtha 1936–1944, pp. 7–8) speaks of *pramāṇa* as prompting apprehension of an object (*artha-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. Vātsyāyana 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 *prācīna-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 *Tattvacintāmaṇi* 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 (*pramā*) 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 *apramā*, 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 cognition 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 happens 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 connections 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 contemporary 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 reliabilist approach, an argument by appeal to track record. Jayanta, for example, suggests that an individual’s veracity and authoritativeness 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, inference, 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-sannikarṣa-utpannam jñānam avyapadeśyam avyabhicārī vyavasāyātmakam pratyakṣam.*
- 2 – *aśuddha-pramiti-vidhāyinas tu prāmāṇyam prasajyata iti smṛti-saṁśaya-viparyaya-janaka-vyavacchedāya pratyakṣa-sūtrāt artha-utpannam iti avyabhicārī iti vyavasāyātmakam iti ca pada-trayam ākrṣyate tad hi pramāṇa-catuṣṭaya-sādhāraṇam.*
- 3 – *tathā hi pramāṇam arthavad iti, nitya-yoge matup. nityatā ca avyabhicāritā. tena artha-avyabhicārī ity arthaḥ. iyam eva ca artha-avyabhicāritā pramāṇasya, yad-deśa-kāla-antara-avasthā-antara-avisamvādo 'rtha-svarūpa-prakārayos tad-upadarśitayoḥ.*
- 4 – *na ayam anumāna-vyabhicāraḥ, ananumāne tu khalv ayam anumāna-abhimānaḥ.*

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