

Understanding Cognition and Accounting for Error in Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā Philosophy

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Abstract

Different philosophical systems accept various means of attaining cognition according to their systemic frameworks. Accordingly, the notions of validity and invalidity of cognitions, and the means of determining them vary in the individual philosophical systems. In the present paper, we concentrate our study only on Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā philosophy, regarding the above. The Prābhākara system considers knowledge to be self-expressive and self-evident. That is, knowledge manifests itself on its production, and cognition as such is intrinsically valid. Such an epistemological claim requires philosophical investigation. Further, the question arises that, since knowledge as such is intrinsically authentic, then from such an epistemological position, how error is accounted for, as encountered in our everyday life. The paper in concern aims at delving into the said issues with a critical approach.

Keywords: *Cognition, error, validity, appearance, linguistic usage.*

Introduction

Studies on the origination of knowledge, ascertaining the nature of cognition, means of cognition, object of knowledge, and discourses on authentic and inauthentic cognitions constitute the very task of epistemology. Different philosophical systems accept various means of attaining cognition according to their metaphysical and epistemological frameworks. Accordingly, the notions of validity and invalidity of cognitions or usages, and the means of determining them vary in the individual philosophical systems. In the present paper, we concentrate only on the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā school of philosophy, regarding the above. The relevance of studying the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā system lies in the fact that they consider knowledge to be self-expressive and self-evident. That is, knowledge manifests itself on its production, and any cognition as such is intrinsically valid. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the nature of cognition according to the concerned system. Further, the question arises that from such an epistemological position, how error is accounted for, as encountered in daily life. The paper in concern aims at critically delving into the above.

Prābhākara View of the Nature of Cognition

Knowledge being essentially intentional in any philosophical system in the Indian tradition, necessarily presupposes an object. Thus, any cognition as such manifests its object. According to Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas, knowledge not only manifests its object, but itself too. Cognition is self-expressive (*svapṛakāśa*). Knowledge from the moment of its origination manifests itself as well as its object. Further, they hold that all cognitions as such are intrinsically valid, and any error that might be encountered is not inherent in knowledge, rather in the object of cognition. According to them, the marks of knowledge are - *svataḥpṛāmānya*, *agr̥hitagr̥hitva*, *arthāvyabhicāritva* and *abādhitatva*. That is, self-evidence, novelty, correspondence and non-contradiction respectively. Knowledge is such that it has to be valid intrinsically, and any error would lie in the extraneous conditions. Also, its subject matter should be unknown before, thus, providing novelty. Further, the object should correspond to reality, and it should be such that would not be negated by other cognitions.

Perception is defined in the Prābhākara system as direct apprehension, or immediate knowledge, or distinct cognition. It is held that every act of perception involves the simultaneous production and apprehension of the object, self and the cognition itself. That is, when knowledge is produced it expresses its object (say, a jar), its locus (*ātman*) and itself simultaneously. This is known as the doctrine of tri-nodal perception (*tripuṭi pratyakṣa*). That is, knowledge qualified by tri-fold attributes (*miti-mātr-meḥ*). Thus, the structure of cognition according to them is '*ghaṭam ahaṃ jānāmi*', and never simply '*ayaṃ ghaṭaḥ*'. In case of the object, due to the preceding sense-object contact, the perception of the substance along with its qualities and universal property occurs.¹ In case of the locus, that is, the self, all sorts of cognition are apprehended as forms of perception.² The cognition itself is self-expressive, but the self and the object depend on that cognition to reveal them.

¹ '*meyamātrpramāsu sā. dravyajātiguṇeṣvīndriyasamīyogothā sā pratyakṣā pratītiḥ*'. *Prakaraṇapañcikā*, p. 52.

² '*sarvaśca pratītayah svayam pratyakṣāḥ prakāśante tāsāṃca yuktam eva svātmani pratyakṣatvam*'. *Prakaraṇapañcikā*, p. 52.

Unlike other schools, the Prābhākaras do not consider that the cognition itself requires other cognitions for its revelation.³

At this point, an important objection is raised by the opponents, that, if the knowledge is considered to express the object, the self (knower) and itself simultaneously, then there would arise the difficulty of subject-object contradiction (*kartr-karma virodha*), that is, the knowledge would act as both the subject and the object in case of its expression. The objection is expressed by the analogy that, just as one cannot touch the tip of one's own finger by the tip of the same finger, similarly, the same cognition cannot manifest itself along with its object and the self simultaneously. Further, the opponents argue that an acrobat, however skilled they might be, can never ride upon one's own shoulder. Thus, the admission of self-expression of knowledge is as absurd hypothesis.

In response to the first criticism, Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas point out that a case of cognition is not a case of causality at all. The cases of cognition are those of ascertainer-ascertained relationship (*jñāpya-jñāpakabhāva*). Unlike the Naiyāikas and others, the Prābhākaras do not consider the cases of cognition to be instances of causality. Thus, the agent-object thesis does not hold in their cases. Accordingly, the question of subject-object contradiction does not arise at all. Further, to the second objection, they point out that the nature of cognition being analogous to a lamp, the spontaneous expression of the object, the locus of cognition and the cognition itself is the most natural phenomenon. So there is no scope for absurdity in it. Rather if some other knowledge would have been required for the expression of the knowledge produced, then there would have been no difference in nature between knowledge as such and that of a jar.

Prābhākara's Theory of Validity of Cognition

From the above discussion of the nature of knowledge as held by the Prābhākaras, we enter into the critical analysis of the theory of validity of knowledge as admitted by them. It develops from the hypothesis that whether the validity of the cognition is attained and its invalidity is unattained from the same

³ 'svayam prakāśaiva mitiḥ. meyānām mātuśca svataḥ prakāśo nopapadyate'. *Prakaraṇapañcikā*, p. 57.

elements from which the cognition itself is attained or not. If the answer is in the affirmative, then the schools are considered to be *svataḥprāmāṇyavādins*, that is, those who admit the cognition to be self-evident or intrinsically valid, like, all the schools of Pūrva Mīmāṃsakas, though there are differences in their nature of *svataḥprāmāṇya*. And if the response to the above hypothesis is in the negative, then they are considered to be *parataḥprāmāṇyavādins*, that is, those who admit the validity of cognition to be extrinsically verified, like, the Naiyāyikas.

As mentioned earlier that according to Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas the cognition is knowable from the moment of its production. Thus, there being no time lapse in between there is no scope for considering any other element that would cause the cognition and verify its validity. Further, the Mīmāṃsakas hold that if a knowledge is produced, then there cannot be any such apprehensions like, '*jānāmi na vā*' or '*na jānāmi*'. Thus, there is no question of any extraneous source of attaining knowledge and its verification, apart from the elements of the production of knowledge itself. Thus, the cognition, from the moment of its production, is attained as valid. As the validity of the cognition is produced and attained from the same elements from which the cognition is produced, they are *svataḥprāmāṇyavādins* both in the *utpatti* and *jñapti pakṣa*. They further hold that if knowledge is not self-evident then the belief on cognition would be hampered. Such a claim has its origin in the fact that the Mīmāṃsakas consider the *Vedas* to be authorless and hence, self-evident. Thus, the perfect structure of cognition according to this view is '*ghaṭam ahaṃ pramiṇomi*', which is quadra-nodal in nature. That is, the cognition expresses the object, the self/knower, the cognition itself and its validity simultaneously.

Here, the question arises that from such an epistemological stance is it at all possible to explain the errors encountered in our everyday life. To account for that, discussion of the theory of error as admitted by the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas is necessary.

Prābhākara's Theory of Error

The theory of error as admitted by the Prābhākaras is called *akhyātivada*. The term '*akhyāti*' could be understood as either '*nāsti khyātiriyatra*' or as

'*vivekāgraha*'. The word '*khyāti*' literally means knowledge. However, in a technical sense it refers to erroneous cognitions. In that sense, *akhyāti* means those cognitions which are free from errors. It is, thus, interesting to note that the term '*akhyāti*' is being used in the context of explaining errors, and hence, demands explanation.

In an erroneous cognition, say, perceiving silver in case of a shell, an individual utters, - 'This is silver'. The cognition thus occurs is of a qualified nature. That is, silver-ness qualified by this-ness. Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas, however, do not consider it to be a qualified cognition at all. Rather they hold that the cognition of this-ness and that of silver-ness are two separate apprehensions, and are individually correct. One is perception, and the other is recollection. It is due to the lack of apprehension of that-ness in case of recollection, that is, due to *pramuṣṭatattāka smṛti*, the cognition of silver-ness appears to be associated with that of this-ness. Hence, a fallacious apprehension is generated. Due to the swiftness of the production of knowledge, the apprehension of 'that-ness' of silver in our recollection, is not attained. Only the cognition of silver-ness is attained. And that appears to be conjoined with the cognition of 'this-ness' at the moment of perception. It thus produces a sense of qualified cognition, - this is silver. However, it is to be noted here that the error does not actually lie in the cognition, rather in its usage as a qualified one. Hence, the Prābhākaras strengthen their position of the self-evidence of knowledge by stating that '*sarvaṃ jñānaṃ samīcīnam*', that is, all cognitions are essentially valid. And any error committed is necessarily in its usage and not in the cognition itself.

Concluding Remarks

The Prābhākara theory of knowledge along with its explanation of error seems to be a very consistent one and is in consonance with its presupposition of the intrinsic validity of the *Vedas*. However, considering the Mīmāṃsaka position to be that of a realist school, the doctrine of *svataḥprāmāṇya* appears to be subtly inadequate as it does not provide any room for empirical verifiability of knowledge. A realist position must consider the empirical evidence in justifying an empirical cognition which would lead to the strengthening of the epistemology of the entire

philosophical system. Perhaps it is due to that the Mīmāṃsakas admit *parataḥaprāmāṇya* in case of identifying and distinguishing between valid cognitions and erroneous usages. Nevertheless, the important aspect is that the Prābhākara epistemological system pertains to its principle of self-evidence of cognition both in the Vedic context as well as that of the empirical ones. This itself strongly establishes the consistency of a philosophical system.

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