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THE PRACTICE OF REASON IN ANCIENT INDIA

1. Early recognition of a 'practice of reason'

Reason can be used or abused. A cautionary episode in the *Mahābhārata* illustrates the point. Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that there is nothing more worth having than wisdom. Wisdom, he declares, is the greatest good, the refuge of all living things, the ultimate acquisition, and is considered by the virtuous to be heaven itself (12.173.2). But then, in case his point should be misunderstood, he recounts the story of Indra appearing in the form of a jackal (12.173.45-8):

In my former life [says Indra], I was scholarly, a reasoner, a slanderer of the Vedas. I was without a goal, addicted to criticism and argument. I used to utter words based on reasons. Indeed, in assemblies, I always spoke of reasons. I used to talk irreverently about the declarations of the śruti and address brahmins in domineering tones. I was an unbeliever, sceptical about everything, and though stupid, I felt proud of my learning. The status of a jackal that I have obtained in this life is the consequence, O Kāśyapa, of those sins of mine.

The terms in which Indra deprecates himself are important ones, for they gradually came to be associated with the practice of philosophy itself in India. Indra was a *haituka*, a 'reasoner'; he was addicted to the study of critical inquiry (*ānvīkṣikī*) and to the science of argument (*tarka-vidyā*). That free thinking of this sort was seen as

embodying a danger to the stability of orthodox brahminical learning is only too clear. In another epic narrative, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma advises his brother Bharata to steer well clear of such people (2.94.32–33):

You do not, I hope, associate with brahmins who are materialist (lokāyata), dear brother. Their only skill is in bringing misfortune; they are fools who think themselves wise. Although pre-eminent texts on righteous conduct (dharma) are ready to hand, these ignorant fellows derive their ideas from critical inquiry alone and so propound utter nonsense.

These ‘reasoners’ represent a challenge and a threat to the existing tradition. They will assent to the deliverances of reason whether or not it agrees with the scriptures and the authorities on what is considered to be proper conduct. The Lawmaker Manu therefore advises (*Manusamhitā* 2.11) that a brahmin who has adopted the science of reasoning, treating with contempt the twin authorities on proper conduct (the scriptures and the texts on righteous conduct or *dharma*), should as an ‘unbeliever’ and a ‘slanderer of the *Vedas*’ be driven from the company of the virtuous.

It is not that in the great epics reason as such is condemned, but only its capricious use. The ‘reasoners’ are condemned for lacking any goal other than the use of reason itself, they believe in nothing and are sceptical of everything. They use reason to criticise the scriptures but have no doctrines of their own. Reason, the message seems to be, is misapplied when it is used in a purely negative, destructive way. In other words, the proper use of reason should be to support, and not to undermine, one’s beliefs, goals and values. The objection to the reasoners as they are represented in the epics is that for them the use of reason has become an end in itself. It is goalless, capricious, ungrounded.

The idea that the use of reason must be purposeful or goal-directed is taken up in the Treatise on Material Gains/Goals/Goods (*Arthaśāstra*), a famous book on government, politics and economics which dates from around 300 B.C. Its author is Kauṭilya, supposed to have been the chief minister in the court of Candragupta, a Mauryan ruler who came to power at about the time of Alexander’s death. Kauṭilya’s purpose in writing the *Arthaśāstra* was to educate future

kings in the necessary skills required for a successful and prosperous rule. He states that there are four branches of learning in which a young prince should be trained: the religious canon composed of the three *Vedas*; the sciences of material gain, primarily trade and agro-economics; the science of political administration and government; and finally *ānvīkṣikī*, the discipline of critical inquiry, of which Sāṃkhya, Yoga¹ and Lokāyata are listed as the principal branches. Significantly, he rejects explicitly the claim of Manu and others that the study of critical reasoning is tied exclusively with a religious study of the self and its liberation (*ātmavidyā*). Critical inquiry is an autonomous discipline (1.2.11):

Investigating by means of reasons, good and evil in the Vedic religion, profit and loss in the field of trade and agriculture, and prudent and imprudent policy in political administration, as well as their relative strengths and weaknesses, the study of critical inquiry (ānvīkṣikī) confers benefit on people, keeps their minds steady in adversity and in prosperity, and produces adeptness of understanding, speech and action.

He reiterates an old couplet (1.2.12):

The study of critical inquiry is always thought of as a lamp for all branches of knowledge, a means in all activities, and a support for all religious and social duty.

The intended domain of application for critical inquiry encompasses any situation in which one sets about achieving one's aims in a reasoned way. There is a reasoned way to go about making a profit, or to rule a country. The study of what such reasoning consists in is one thing, the philosophical investigation of the nature of profit or rule quite another. So *ānvīkṣikī* in Kauṭilya's sense is a study of the generic concept of rationality, as that concept features in questions about how rationally to think, how rationally to act, and how rationally to speak. A person is rational when he uses rational methods to reach his aims.

1. In addition to denoting Patañjali's school, 'Yoga' appears to be an early name of the Vaiśeṣika system; ref. Kangle, etc.

(Kauṭilya wanted kings to become philosophers, not as Plato that philosophers be made kings.) Bertrand Russell² said that ‘reason’ “... signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing to do with the choice of ends.” The epic horror of the reasoner concerned the aimless use of reason, using reason capriciously or solely to subvert the goals of others. Kauṭilya’s defence makes rationality instrumental and therefore goal-directed. It follows, however, that a tyrant can be just as rational as a ruler who is beneficent, an atheist as rational as a believer. If rationality is instrumental, then to act rationally is not the same as to act well. Followers of reason alone still face the charge of immorality, hereticism and untruth.

2. *Rationality in the Nyāyasūtra*

Gautama Akṣapāda’s *Nyāyasūtra*, the redaction of which took place in the first or second century A.D., deals with such themes as the procedures for properly conducting debates, the nature of good argument, and the analysis of perception, inference and testimony in so far as they are sources of knowledge. There is a detailed account of the causal structure of the mind and the nature of its operation. Certain metaphysical questions are addressed, notably the reality of wholes, atoms, and universals. At the beginning of his commentary on this remarkable work, Vātsyāyana Pakṣilasvāmin (c. 400 A.D.) wonders what is it that makes the Nyāya system distinctive. He answers as follows:³

Nyāya is the examination of things with the help of methods of knowing (pramāṇa). It is an inference supported by observation and authority. This is called a ‘critical inquiry’ (anvikṣā). An anvikṣā is the critical inquiry of things desired, supported by observation and authority. The discipline of ānvikṣikī is the one which pertains to it, and is also called the science of nyāya or the writings on nyāya. But an inference that contradicts observation and authority is only a bogus-nyāya.

2. Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. viii.

3. *Nyāyabhāṣya* 3, 11–14 [references are to page and line numbers in Thakur’s 1997 critical edition].

Vātsyāyana agrees with Kauṭilya that the study of critical inquiry is one of the four branches of study, but he insists that it has its own procedures or methodology. He claims that if critical inquiry did not have its own procedures then it would “merely be a study of the soul’s progress, like the *Upaniṣad*.” This is a rather important remark. Reasoned inquiry and scriptural studies are now claimed to have the same eventual goal or purpose; where they differ is in method. That marks a departure from Kauṭilya’s purely instrumental conception of rationality, in which the use of reason could equally well serve any end. For Vātsyāyana wants to claim that there can be rational goals, as well as rational means, and so to distance the Nyāya system from the free-thinkers in the epics.

The salient point here is that reason must have a purpose, and the question is what that purpose should be. Vātsyāyana’s answer is clever. He argues that a goal is a rational one if it is the rational means to some further goal. And he claims that whatever one’s goal is, the rational way to achieve it is through the acquisition of knowledge - knowledge about the constituents of one’s goal and how it might be achieved. So the acquisition of knowledge is always a rational goal. Indeed it is the rational goal par excellence, for knowledge is instrumental in the rational pursuit of any other goal. Kauṭilya said that the study of critical inquiry is the study of the notion of ‘investigating with reasons’. Vātsyāyana tells us what a ‘reason’ (*hetu*) is. It is a method of acquiring knowledge, a *pramāṇa*. For a ‘reasoned’ inquiry is one which is based on the acquisition of knowledge.

Let us look more closely at the characteristic method that constitutes a rational inquiry. The opening verse in the *Nyāyasūtra* is a list of sixteen items which, according to its author, comprise the subject matter of the Nyāya system. The first two items are the various methods of knowing and the domain of knowables. They constitute the Nyāya epistemology and metaphysics. The next seven are the theoretical components in the process of critical inquiry: doubt, purpose, observational data, doctrinal bases, a “syllogistic” demonstration, suppositional reasoning, and a final decision. The final seven are terms of art in the theory of debate. *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.1:

The highest goal in life is reached through knowledge of the nature of knowables, methods of knowing, doubt, purpose, observational data, doctri-

nal bases, the parts of a demonstration, suppositional reasoning, final decision, truth-directed debate, victory-directed debate, destructive debate, false reasoning, tricks, checks, defeat situations.

A properly conducted inquiry, adds Vātsyāyana, is that process by which we move from an initial uncertainty about the nature of the thing or concept under investigation, to an ascertainment of its properties. The inquiry is permitted to draw upon such data as are incontrovertible or accepted by both parties in the dispute, and it proceeds by adducing evidence or reasons in support of one side or the other. The first element here is the existence of a doubt (*saṃśaya*) which initiates the investigation. A doubt is said to be a mental state whose content is of the form “Does this object have a certain specified property or not?” Typical doubts discussed in the *Nyāyasūtra* are “Is the soul eternal or non-eternal?” and “Is a whole object identical with the sum of its parts?”

An inquiry must have a purpose. The assumption is that any form of rational behaviour must have some motivating purpose, the point for which one wishes to resolve the doubt. The inquiry can appeal to shared background doctrinal principles and empirical data. Here, by ‘empirical data’, what is meant, are the observational facts to which all parties can appeal. The background principles are called ‘doctrinal bases’ or ‘proved doctrines,’ and might correspond to a category of a priori truths or principles. Gautama actually mentions several kinds of doctrinal base. In particular, there are those which everyone must accept, for example that objects of knowledge are established via means of knowing. Other doctrinal principles are in the form of conditionals, where both parties agree on the truth of the conditional, but dispute the truth of the antecedent. Also mentioned are assumptions which are merely for the sake of argument. One or both sides might grant some principle, simply to facilitate the inquiry. In any case, having initiated an inquiry for some purpose, taken into consideration both empirical evidence and such doctrinal or a priori considerations, the investigation concludes with the decision, which is a resolution of the initiating doubt.

Similar characterisations of the general structure of problem-solving are offered in the contemporary literature of formal heuristics ⁴.

4. Herbert Simon and Allen Newell, *Human Problem Solving* (Englewood

There a problem is defined as one in which the following features are specified and delimited: a goal – a criterion of judging outcomes; an initial state, consisting of a situation and the resources available for the solution; a set of admissible operations for transforming states; constraints on states and operations; and an outcome. It would seem that the Nyāya account fits rather nicely this characterisation of the structure of a problem-solving set-up. The doubt is an initial state of uncertainty, the purpose is the goal, the admissible operations are the sanctioned methods of reasoning by ‘syllogistic’ demonstration and supposition (*tarka*, for which see chapter 6), the constraints are the observational data and doctrinal bases to which all parties agree, and the outcome is the final decision. A critical inquiry, then, is a formal heuristic for problem-solving.

3. Rationality and the ends of life

The early Naiyāyikas have linked the pursuit of rational inquiry with the final ends of life. *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.1 states that it is by understanding the nature of reasoned inquiry, epistemology and debating theory that one attains the ‘highest goal’ (*niḥśreyasa*). *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.2 amplifies the point, adducing an exact sequence of causal relations between knowledge and liberation (*apavarga*).

The final aim of life is the permanent elimination of *duḥkha*. *Duḥkha* is a difficult term in Indian soteriology. Its meaning is: suffering, pain, discontent, frustration, displeasure. What then is the source of all this discontent? One source has already been mentioned by Vātsyāyana in the passage quoted before – the frustration of one’s plans. Obtaining one’s goals is an end in itself, but so too is the pleasure or contentment that success instils. It is not just that in obtaining the piece of silver, I gain as well the pleasures that go with possessing a valuable thing. It is also that fulfilling one’s projects is a form of satisfaction in its own right. Vātsyāyana stresses, however, that the final aim of life must involve a separation from pleasures as well as pains.

Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 71–105. Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 163–174.

For pleasure is invariably attended by pain, as if it were honey mixed with poison! So the ultimate aim in life consists in the elimination of any attachment to the success or failure of one's projects, or the rewards or discomforts such projects bring.

Can a life of reason help one achieve this? Kauṭilya perhaps thought so, for he said that pursuing one's goals by means of rational inquiry helped to keep the mind steady in both adversity and prosperity. The Naiyāyika thinks so too [1.1.2]:

Liberation results from the removal of the next member when the immediately preceding member is removed in the sequence of: wrong belief, bad qualities, actions, birth, suffering.

This is the pan-Indian *karma* theory, a causal theory of moral retribution. There is a direct causal link between the moral quality of one's present actions and one's future contentment or frustration in this birth or another (a commentator⁵ points out that by 'actions' here what is meant is righteous and unrighteous conduct, since it is such conduct that is the cause of birth and rebirth). We observed earlier that with a purely instrumental conception of rationality, it is no more rational to do good than to do evil. To be rational is simply to set about one's aims in a reasoned way. In the context of a causal theory of moral retribution, however, it is rational to strive to do good. For given that one's final aim in life is to avoid frustration (presumably including the frustration of one's future plans), one has a reason to behave well now and do good. At least, one has a reason as long as one knows that there is a direct causal link of the sort described. After all, acquiring knowledge about the sources of frustration and suffering is the rational way to accomplish one's aim of eliminating them!

The rational life is a life best suited to eliminate at least one source of suffering, namely the frustration of having one's plans fail. So if one's ultimate end in life is to avoid suffering, and the main source of suffering is due to the frustration of one's plans, one has a reason to live a rational life. Moreover since, when one examines the general causes for suffering and frustration, what one finds is that

5. Uddyotakara. *Nyāyavārttika*, 24, 3.

future frustration is caused by past immoral deeds, one has a reason to have only moral deeds as one's goal. Someone who believes in the *karma* theory of moral retribution has a reason to strive to do good and not to do evil. One final link is needed to complete the picture. It is that bad or immoral deeds are the result of false beliefs. Once one knows this, one has a reason to strive for only true beliefs. For if one has only true beliefs, then one cannot do wrong, cannot incur the moral cost of future frustration, and so will succeed in life's ultimate goal of eliminating such frustrations. One has, therefore, a reason to strive to minimise false beliefs, and so to study the sources of true belief and knowledge. And, in so far as a study of the Nyāya system is the best method of achieving one's highest goals, one should study it through repeated reflection, discussion with others and by engaging in friendly debates [4.2.47–9].

This then is the reason why the study of epistemology and critical inquiry, in short of the Nyāya philosophy, is instrumental in achieving one's final aims. There is an elegant explanatory closure here. One might not be inclined to agree with every step in the explanatory chain. While it is plausible that there is a dependency between the degree of success or failure of one's plans and the extent of falsity in one's beliefs, it is less easy to see that the dependency is mediated by the moral value of one's actions. However, even if one were to omit that link, and with it the relationship between rationality and moral behaviour, the remainder of the explanatory scheme could stand.

