

Theory of Error and Nyāya Philosophy: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract: *In this paper, I propose to discuss the theory of error or Khyativāda with special reference to Nyāya philosophy. The error is an epistemological concept. As such it is contrasted with the truth. Philosophers, while dealing with the concept of error, have analyzed it from logical, metaphysical and psychological perspective. The problem of error in Indian philosophy is discussed in the different theories known as the Khyativāda. According to Nyāya School error is known as anyathākhyativāda. Here 'anyathā' literally means 'otherwise' or 'else-wise'. When shell is perceived as silver, the erroneous cognition consists in the fact that the shell is perceived otherwise i.e. as other than what it really is. Error is an instance of erroneous judgement resulting from mischaracterization. Naiyāyikas bring in jñānalaksana pratyaksa to account for perceptual error. And the later Naiyāyikas are trying to explain the perceptual character of illusory experience, undoubtedly, an illusion, there is the attribution of false character to a perceived fact.*

Keywords: *Khyativāda, Nyāya Philosophy, Anyathākhyativāda, Perceptual Error, Illusory Experience*

I. Introduction

Every school of Indian Philosophy developed its own theory of error (known as Khyativāda) made to fit its epistemology and metaphysics. The Concept of Error (Khyativāda) in Indian Philosophy is a discussion of the illusory or false knowledge (Aparmā) as against True knowledge (pramā). The concept of error is a very important one to the philosophers of India as it is related to the problem of knowledge (Mohanthy, J.N.,2000).

Khyativāda, include the discussion of various theories pertaining to the problem of error in Indian philosophy. Since Khyati denotes knowledge, Khyativāda may be inferred as the theory of knowledge. However, the question arises here as to how the theory of knowledge is inferred to be the theory of error in India philosophy (unlike as in the western tradition).

Since knowledge includes both true and false perceptions and as the discussion of Khyativāda are made only when it comes to Brahma or falsity, every theory happens to be an opinion about the nature of the cognitive content of the knowledge that is erroneous.

“Indian Philosophical schools try to reason and explain the phenomenon of the erroneous perception. In this regard, various arguments of Khyati have been put forward by various groups. Some of them are *Satkhyati, Ātmakhyathi, Akyati, Anyathākhyati, Asatkhyati, Anirvacaniyakhyati, Viparitakhyati, Alaukikakhyati, Yathārthakhyati and Sadāsadhkhati* are some of them.” (Gnanakumaran, N.,2015:52)

Indian philosophers come under two groups viz: 1. The idealists and (2) The realists. As regards reality, they have separate outlooks. These two groups give separate explanations towards reality and the various problems concerned with it.

There are two heads under which the main theories of error are classified:

1. Satkhyati
2. Asatkhyati

Satkhyati: In this theory, which hinges an existence, there is an objective reality in error which is the basic datum of an illusory object. This error happens to be the cognition of existence. Ramānuja, Prabhākara and the Nyāya school of philosophy, as well as the Sāmkhya and Kumārila schools, hold this same view. Since the ground of illusion as the mental idea is not denied by the Yogācāra school of Buddhism, but only its external nature is rejected, this group may also be considered as followers of Satkhyati. Thus the Satkhyati theories of error include the following:-

- Yatharthakhyativāda of Ramānuja,
- Akhyativada of Prabhākara Mimāmsakas,
- Anyathākhyativada of the Nyāya School,
- Kumārila Bhatta's Viparita Khyativāda,
- Sadāsadhaktivāda of the Sāmkhya School,
- Ātmakhyativāda of Vijñāna-vāda School.

Asatkhyati: Non –existence is the meaning denoted by the word, 'asat'. This purports the idea that the content of illusory experience is pure non-entity. Thereby error is treated as the cognition of the object that is non-existent. This view is also followed in the Sunyavāda of Nāgārjuna.

Thus to view on the basis of the classification mentioned at the beginning herein. The idealists' groups of philosophy include (1) the Asatkhyativada of Nāgārjuna, (2) the Ātmakhyativāda of Vijñāna-vāda and (3) the Anirvacaniya khyativāda of Advaita Vedānta while the remaining theories belong to the Realists schools of philosophy.

II. Nyāya Philosophy and Anyathākhyativāda

Nyāya School of Philosophy most likely had its origin in its attempt to formulate canons of argument for the use in debates, which pervaded the Indian philosophical scene for a long time. The Nyāya was first systematized by Gautama, also known as "Aksapada", in his Nyaya Sutras (250-450 CE), which belong to the post-Buddhistic period (Gupta, B., 2012:171).

Nyāya literally means 'going into a subject', i.e., that analytical reasoning by which the mind is led to a conclusion. The word 'nyāya' popularly connotes 'right' or 'Justice' and hence, the Nyāya system is known as the science of right judgment or true reasoning. Technically the word 'Nyāya' means a syllogism (or a speech of five parts). It is a science of right knowledge, Pramānasāstra (Vidyabhusan, S. C., 1921:40).

However at present Nyāya has two important sects, viz: prācina (the ancient one) and the navina/ navyanyāya (modern). The ancient Nyāya (prācina) developed out of the Gautama Sutras. The Neo-Nyāya (the modern or navyanyāya) begins with Gangesa, the author of Tattvacintāmani, the most remarkable among them being Ragunāth Siromani.

Beginning with Gautama who belonged to the third century B.C, a number of thinkers have dwelt on the Nyaya account of error. There is no explicit mention of the term Anyathākhyati in Gautama's sutras. But there are occasions referring to wrong judgments (Kar, B., 1978:58). Vatsayana (of 300A.D) has commented on the sutras of Gautama. The comments of Vatsayana are defended by Uddyotākara (A.D.635) in his work known as Varttikā. Both Vātsayana and Uddyotākara have analyzed and differentiated wrong judgments from the right ones.

The first occurrence of the term 'Anyathākhyati' can be noted in Vācaspathi's 'Nyāya-Varttika – Tātparyatikā' which appears to be an annotation of Uddyotakara's Varttika. Udayanacarya (of about the 10th century A.D) has commented on Tātparyatikā of Vacaspati in his commentary known as 'Tātparyaparisuddhi'.

Gangesa who lived around 1200 A.D. was the founder of the Neo Nyayaschool. In his work known as Tattvachintāmani, Gangesa has departed from the classical account of error and knowledge. Gangesa has also many followers and commentators among whom, Raghunātha Tarka Siromani, the author of Didhiti are in the forefront.

The etymological meaning of Anyathākhyati:

According to the Nyāya School of Philosophy error is known as Anyathakhyativada. Here 'anyathā' refers to some else from what it is, while 'khyati' denotes false knowledge. Thus this view indicates that the object of illusion is a real object that is seen by error as another real object (Vātsayana Bhāṣya on Nyāya Sutra iv.2.35).

Anyathā khyāti was expounded by Gautama, the exponent of the Nyāya philosophy. Anyathā literally means 'Otherwise' or 'else-wise'. When shell is perceived as silver, the erroneous cognition consists in the fact that the shell is perceived otherwise i.e. as other than what it really is. Error is an instance of erroneous judgement resulting from mischaracterization. What is given out there, is a mere this which is characterised as silver. Error lies in our interpretation of the datum presented before. But it remains a piece of shell all through. The 'that' in the given datum is not denied. What is denied is the predicate 'silver' which is attributed to it.

Every judgement, true or false, does have a referent. Here, 'silverness' is wrongly predicated of the referent 'shell'. Error doesn't mean lack of referentiality (artha sunyatā). Thus, error lies in mispredication i.e. misjudging the shell as silver. In the judgement 'It is silver' the error lies in the predicative part of the judgement but not in respect of the referent. In erroneous cognition, a thing is judged to be what it is not.

Correspondence is the test of truth. A propositional claim turns out to be true when it corresponds with what the world is like. Error ensues when the propositional content doesn't agree with or correspond to what is the case. Error, thus, is a subjective phenomena. According to Naiyāyikas all knowledge is presentative. Even in the illusory perception, silver is perceived.

Such a view leads to the error being defined as the understanding of an object that does not have an attribute as one that possesses that attribute. This is a significant character of the old Nyāya maxim which holds that any judgment holds good so far as its subject is concerned. However, it may differ away from reality where its affirming element is concerned. Thus, the error happens to be a perceptual cognition of an object as distinct from what it is, and so it refers to thing that is outside of it.

The usage of the terms 'elsewise' and 'elsewhere' to denote anyatha is really a matter of error. One perceives a presented object else wise, while the existence of the represented object occurs somewhere else. It is further maintained that by nature anything known is not valid, but due to unrelated conditions (paratahpramāya) it becomes so during validity as well as invalidity. As held by this theory it will be seen that a real object is manifested as a different object which again happens to real. The understanding of an object differently is an error or illusion. In fact, it is the misunderstanding of one object like a shell for another object, like silver. This theory of erroneous cognition is also known as anyathakhyativada.

The theory of error put forward by the Nyāya school is realistic and it treats the error as a single unitary perception. However, it has to be understood that all the qualities in the illusory judgment taken severally are real and only any identity presented between them is not real. The commentator of the Nyāya-Sūtra, Vātsayana is of the opinion that no erroneous understanding could be treated as totally baseless. Thus the error in the context of anyathākhyati is not an experience of totally unrelated contents but is the erroneous understanding of two real entities of which one is mistaken for the other.

Nyāya view of erroneous cognition:

An “illusion” according to the Nyāya School is a fact applied to a wrong context. An illusory perception encompasses real and perceived facts which have been wrongly related. An example is the illusory perception where the actual perception is that of a shell. However both are seen as real facts. In this instance, the silver perceived at some other time and locality leads to the occurrence of any errors, being occupied by the perceived shell. Alexander is of the view that error is consisted in the elements of reality getting wrongly combined.

According to the Naiyāyikas, one cannot expect the concept of errors to clarify the perceptual error. But it can only reveal how the error is represented as a false characterization of objects. As done by Vacaspati in his discussion about error Naiyāyikas too mention examples of erroneous perception like the shell and silver. Yet for all the Naiyāyikas explanation of error as mistaking one object for another (*Sadantaramsadantaratmanaghrayate*) is indicative of what the theory logically implies.

According to the Nyāya School, something seen as different from what it actually is happens in an illusion, as in the case of shell being mistaken as silver. Such mistaking could happen due to various causes such as insufficient light, or defective eyesight and the like, whereby the person concerned fails to recognize the actual nature of a nacre and understand it as something bright as silver. It is the effect of a real object being manifested in the form of a different object. The error is not due to the indeterminate perception of the person concerned but due to the determinate perception operated and changed by some elements that presented the object (Mohanthy, J.N., 2000:34).

One who perceives the qualities of silver in shell has an illusion which is a single cognition of a perceptual character. Shell in conjunction with a visual organ, aggravated by some defect and prompted by the recollection of silver tender to appear as silver itself.

The sense of perception is bound to contact with something that is present before it. Although the sense understands the general features such as brightness etc. Which are present in the object before it due to some unforeseen defects, the peculiar and distinctive features of the object are not discerned. The general features of the object are not discerned.

Jñānalaksana Sannikarsa:

The general features of the object being associated with something else, (Silver in this instance) receive the memory images of the special properties of silver is mooted by the revival of its impression by the perception of its interest brightness. This is explained by modern Nyāya through Jñānalaksana Sannikarsa. Hence in the case of illusion, the Jñānalaksana pratyksa is accepted by Naiyāyikas. Through the medium of the idea of silver recalled in memory and extraordinary intercourse related it is when the silver perceived somewhere else is referred to as a predicate to this as its subject that error creeps in giving rise to the ‘illusion’ this is the determinate knowledge as inferred by silverness.

When it comes to a matter of recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) one might refer to another person as the same man who helps him in some problem the previous day. Here one sees how certain elements of presentation and representation join together to produce one single perception. It is an instance of one kind of perception being qualified by a past perception. Here, one sees an object and recollection as to have seen it one some earlier occasion, whereby one is given the knowledge of how present objects are qualified by past events (Radhakrishnan, S., 1983:70)

This way, one knows as immediately that the thing one cognized is the same as that which was cognized earlier. Memory and perception combine to produce such an effect. How a given sensor combines with associated ideas to make up one percept, is generally explicit in any ordinary valid perception.

In the case of an illusive perception (illusion) the relation between the perceived 'this' and 'silver' is not objectively real. It is contra ducted a proved as wrong. Thus it will be clear that an error exists not in the presentations concerned with the perception, but in how one presentation is determined by another offered through association and memory.

Viparitakhyati:

The Viparitakhyativāda or the theory of error is advocated by Jayantha Bhatta, who belonged to the Nyāya School of philosophy. This theory holds that it is the misinterpretation of something that leads to an error or mistake. Other Naiyāyikas are of the view that viparitakhyati is identical with their anyathākhyati.

Jayantha Bhatta presents this theory in the reputation of Prabhākara's theory of akhyati (knowledge). According to him, an illusion is a single cognition similar to a positive false knowledge. It amounts to the false perception of one object in place of a different object. It does not negate the discrimination between two cognitions. It is only a positive misperception, as in the case of shell being mistaken for a piece of silver.

This knowledge makes on to say (this knowledge is expressed as) "this is silver". The question now arises as to how such illusion occurs. What is perceived as per the nacre – silver illusion according to the older Naiyāyikas is that those features of shell are, common to both shell and silver. Due to the defect in the visual organ, one fails to note the peculiar qualities of the shell Thereafter the perception of the common qualities reminds one of the peculiar qualities of silver by association. The perception of silver produced by the recollection of silver caused by some perversion of the mind.

In order to explain illusion, a complicated form of illusion has been introduced by the so-called Navya Naiyāyikas. According to them, through the idea of silver recalled in memory by association the visual perception of silver in shell depends upon the extraordinary relationship. By way of this relationship, the idea of silver recreated in memory by association, produces the visual perception of silver (Devaraja, 1962:128).

In order to explain the perceptual illusion, Gangesa introduces a memory constant that provides the content of prediction and the qualification material. Gangesa analyses non-veridical sensory awareness as a matter of cognition whose predication content does not qualify the object related to the sense organ. The Navya Naiyāyikas hold, that in the illusion the conch – the shell is misperceived as silver which exists elsewhere and is perceived where the shell is actually present.

III. Navya - Naiyāyika point of view

The doctrine of anyathāhyati is also advocated by Gangesa who founded the Navya Naiyāyika School. The appearance in one's consciousness in the form of an illusion, of a real object that exists somewhere else, is being explained by Gangesa. He holds the view that some special inter-connection exists with the visual organ producing the illusory perception of a nacre in silver. He says that through some alliance (Jñānalaksana Sannikarsa) such extra-ordinary connection is mooted (Kar, 1978).

There is no other way to explain an illusion being perceived as a misrepresentation of an object as a different entity. This is explained by Nyāya through what is known as Jñānalaksana pratyksa, according to which it is the revival of the idea of one's past experience of an object that brings in a kind of sense-objects.

Great skill is exercised by the later Naiyāyika School in trying to explain the perceptual character of illusory experience, undoubtedly, an illusion, there is the attribution of false character to a perceived fact. But in this respect, the following questions have arisen.

1. How does one come to ascribe the false character?
2. How does this false character appear as something actually perceived in illusion?

According to Nyāya, an experience of illusion is a single perception. Unlike Prabhākara's opinion, it is not a complex of perception and recollection of which the distinction is blurred by obscuration.

Naiyāyikas bring in *jñānalaksana pratyaksa* to account for perceptual error. There is perception of 'silver' though what is out there are only the silvery characteristics of the shell without there being the silver. Even though shell and silver share the silvery characteristics both remain different from each other on account of their distinctive properties which the individual fails to notice. When the illusory perception of silver is replaced by the veridical perception of shell, what is set aside is the wrong apprehension but not the object.

An erroneous cognition belies the expectations aroused by the cognition itself. When one sees the 'snake' in the 'rope', it is supposed that if one goes near it, it will be seeking to escape or bite back, so on and so forth. Error lies in the mode of interpretation, predication or perception. The object is not perceived as it really is but as something other than itself. When error is replaced by knowledge what is contradicted is not the object of cognition but the cognition itself.

In erroneous cognition of 'rope' as 'snake' what is contested is neither the existence of rope nor the existence of snake but the cognition of rope as something which it is not. In true cognition (*yathārtha jñāna*) a judgement represents the referent in its true nature whereas in false cognition the referent is presented differently. Thus, we find that the logical and epistemological view of Naiyāyikas are tempered by their metaphysics of 'Realism'.

Cognition is dubbed as erroneous when it proves to be inexpedient in practice. Thus, Naiyāyikas are found to fall back upon the pragmatic test of truth. Truth is that which results in useful activity (*arthakriyā kāritva*). Error takes place due to wrong synthesis of the presented and the represented. Error is a cause of misapprehension. Knowledge is not intrinsically valid. Rather both validity and invalidity of knowledge are determined prospectively by extraneous conditions. They include both correspondence and workability. A cognition turns out to be erroneous if it doesn't correspond with the state of reality and the supposition of the fact that the cognition is true doesn't prove to be workable.

IV. Conclusion

Thus as inferred from *anyathakhyati* error is not an experience of totally unrelated entities. It is only the erroneous understanding of two real things of which one is mistaken for the other. It is inflected a subjective conditioning or relationship to the perceiver. Thus, the sublimation of attribute is a correction rather than the rejection of the substance.

It is only in the sphere of description that Nyāya admits error, *Anyathakhyati* in this respect, stands for false judgment in matters where the correct description of the referent is not given by the judgment. From all points of view, to judge something as it exists is true, Deviating from such a standard doubtlessly amounts to falsity. It is therefore clearly revealed that so far as error is concerned, Nyāya is interested in the logical problem of bringing error into a clearly defined formal category instead of confusing the problem of logic either with psychological or metaphysical categories.

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