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**Pramāṇa**

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**Abstract**

In Indian philosophy, a *pramāṇa* is an epistemic instrument or doxastic practice that results in a veridical cognition (in an event of *knowing*). For just about all Indian thinkers, perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*) are the foundational *pramāṇas*, although they debated energetically over how to characterize the content of the resultant cognitions and how to explain the basis for the authority of these *pramāṇas*. Debate also includes the relationship of knowledge to religious liberation, the role of scripture in knowing, and the possibility of omniscience.

**Keywords**

epistemology, Indian philosophy, knowledge

**Main Text**

In Indian philosophy, a *pramāṇa* is an epistemic instrument or doxastic practice that results in a veridical cognition: an agent's knowing-event. As knowing is an action, *pramāṇa*-theorists employ an analytical framework that identifies contributors (*kāraṅkas*) to actions—a framework due to Sanskrit grammatical theory. A knowing action (*pramiti* or *pramā*) thus has an agent (*pramātr*), an object (*prameya*), and an instrument (*pramāṇa*). *Pramāṇa*-theory inquiry proceeds along these structural lines.

There is individuation of *pramāṇas* in virtue of their nature qua instrument—as it is the tool, not object or agent, which determines an action's nature (one cuts wood with an axe and paints it with a brush). The most frequently discussed candidate *pramāṇas* are perception, inference, testimony, analogy, postulation, and cognition of absences. For nearly all Indian thinkers, perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*) are foundational *pramāṇas*, though Cārvāka <EOPR0068> accepts only perception. Buddhists <EOPR0063> and Vaiśeṣikas <EOPR0401> usually consider testimony as reducible to inference, not an independent *pramāṇa*. As for analogy, Mīmāṃsakas (Prābhākara and Bhāṭṭa), with Advaita Vedāntins <EOPR0405> and Naiyāyikas <EOPR0274> accept it as *sui generis*. But Naiyāyikas depart from these traditions in understanding postulation—the positing of some unperceived entity to resolve something otherwise incongruent or subject to doubt—as reducible to inference. Finally, only Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsakas and Advaita Vedāntins accept direct cognition of absences. Jaina thinkers

have different lists of *pramāṇas*, which only partially overlap with the above: perception, testimony, yogic perception, telepathy, and omniscience (see < EOPR0187>).

There is also debate about the property in virtue of which which *pramāṇas* are effective as instruments—about, that is, the basis for their status as “being *pramāṇas*” (*prāmāṇya*). In this regard, there are two principal positions: *pramāṇas* are knowledge-conducive either intrinsically (*svataḥ*), or extrinsically (*parataḥ*). On the first view, an agent who has a *pramāṇa*-caused knowledge-event need not be in a position to ascertain external evidence about that event's nature in order for it to count as knowledge. On the second view, agents do not count as “knowing” without reference to a further awareness to the effect that the first cognition was indeed a knowledge-event.

There is discussion of the conditions—relative to agent, instrument, and object—that give rise to the action of knowing. ‘*Pramāṇa*’ is a success term, including only genuine epistemic instruments. Thus philosophers distinguish between “pseudo” knowledge events and genuine ones based on appropriate conditions, which may include phenomenological considerations along with external features and the structure of cognition.

Many discussions involving *pramāṇa* directly bear on religious topics. For instance, thinkers in the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā <EOPR0243> tradition argue that testimonial knowledge, an important *pramāṇa* in both ordinary and religious contexts, is reducible to inference, though they clarify that this only applies to ordinary speakers, and not to the Veda <EOPR0404>. For Mīmāṃsakas, the Veda is authorless, lacking any “speaker,” whether divine or human. Its testimony thus cannot be a matter of inference, which in ordinary linguistic testimony is to the truth of an utterance on the basis of a speaker’s authority and trustworthiness (see <EOPR0338>).

Faultlines over controversial *pramāṇas* relevant to religious knowledge cut across boundaries of traditions. Brahminical philosophers such as Mīmāṃsakas align with materialist and skeptical Cārvākas in denying that yogic awareness <EOPR0423> is a *pramāṇa* leading to knowledge of supernatural states of affairs (such as reality’s nature and *dharma*). Although many Indian thinkers (both Buddhists and Hindus) defend yogic perception, Mīmāṃsakas argue that to attribute such powers to ordinary people is unreasonable, and, too, yogic perception is used to justify a range of mutually incommensurable views (McCrea 2009). They instead ground Vedic authority in the apparently eternal chain of communal textual transmission, which lacks any epistemically vulnerable initial revelatory breakthrough (divine or human).

Debate also occurs over the limitations of *pramāṇas* for religious knowledge, as when the Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara paradoxically claims that the effect of a *pramāṇa* is to cause the person qua knowing agent to cease, once they have achieved the highest level of knowledge. For Advaitins, who elevate knowledge above ritual action as a means to liberation (*mokṣa*), the ultimate unity of everything in the absolute reality of *brahman* precludes any real distinction between knowers and objects of knowledge. This apparent tension in Advaita epistemology garners attention, both within Vedānta and from opponents outside of the tradition (see EOPR0178; EOPR0213; EOPR0214).

Buddhist thinkers also closely link religious emancipation (*nirvāṇa*) with knowledge, emphasizing connections between *pramāṇa*-based insight into reality’s nature—refined by meditative practices—and attaining the proper viewpoint on the (non-existent) self. In his reduction of all other putative *pramāṇas* to perception and inference, the seminal 5<sup>th</sup>-century CE thinker, Dignāga <EOPR0104>, distinguishes between particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*) known by perception, and universals (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) known by inference. Only perception grasps

ultimately real particulars, which are momentary and unique. Any subsequent conceptualization (e.g., “I see a red apple”) has unreal universals as its content. Dignāga’s student, Dharmakīrti <EOPR0101>, along with other later Buddhists such as Śāntarakṣita <EOPR0351> and Kāmalāśīla <EOPR0200>, attempts to explain how, despite these limitations, certain persons can directly grasp the ultimately real by yogic perception, in a manner freed from conceptualization through meditative habituation (McClintock 2010). The Buddha is a paramount example of such a knower, sometimes characterized as being a *pramāṇa* himself. The distinction between real particulars and unreal universals is also relevant to Buddhist scripture, insofar as scriptural testimony is a form of inference—with unreal universals for content.

Jaina philosophers, who argue that reality admits of apparently contradictory predications, claim that it is possible to attain omniscience, at which point one can directly apprehend reality (see <EOPR0281>). Traditionally, founders of Jainism did just this, and their scriptural testimony is useful for others who seek to be liberated. However, scriptural testimony and perception are still indirect means of knowledge. Further, ordinary knowledge is always attained and evaluated from a particular standpoint (*naya*). Analytically speaking, our statements about the world should thus be prefixed with the logical operator *syāt* (“perhaps”), which relativizes them contextually. Kundakunda (3rd century CE) and later Jainas identify seven hierarchically-ordered types of *syāt*-statements (see <EOPR0017>).

Modern Indian philosophy, especially the Indo-analytic tradition tracing from B.K. Matilal, finds significant points of contact between classical Indian epistemology outlined above and Anglophone philosophy (Matilal 2005).

**SEE ALSO:**

EOPR0008  
EOPR0017  
EOPR0068  
EOPR0063  
EOPR0101  
EOPR0104  
EOPR0168  
EOPR0178  
EOPR0187  
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EOPR0213  
EOPR0214  
EOPR0243  
EOPR0264  
EOPR0274  
EOPR0281  
EOPR0338  
EOPR0351  
EOPR0401  
EOPR0404  
EOPR0405  
EOPR0423

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