

CHAPTER 1

Epistemology from a Sanskrit
Point of View

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1. A CASE OF FALSE COGNATES

It is far from uncommon when reading translations of Sanskrit philosophical texts into English to encounter the neologisms “true knowledge,” “false knowledge,” “valid knowledge,” and “invalid knowledge.” At first sight these phrases seem to indicate something amiss in the translator’s understanding of the concept of knowledge, for if knowledge is factive, then surely phrases like “false knowledge” and “invalid knowledge” are oxymorons (as in “faith unfaithful kept him falsely true”)? If it is a conceptual truth about the English verb *know* that “S knows that *p*” entails or presupposes that *p*, then the “true” in the phrase “true knowledge” is redundant. In fact, these curious neologisms are very revealing about variations in the use of epistemic terminology between English and Sanskrit, something that becomes clear when one looks to see which Sanskrit terms are getting translated in this way. The key term being translated as “knowledge” is the Sanskrit noun *jñāna*, derived from the verb *jñā*. This noun is cognate with Latin *cognosere*, with Greek *gnosis*, and so with English *knowledge*. In everyday Sanskrit usage, it is indeed often rightly translated as “knowledge,” and that is also the meaning one will find if one looks it up in a Sanskrit–English dictionary. Yet, and this is where confusion comes in, there is another meaning of *jñāna*, more common in the philosophical literature but also current in popular usage, where a better translation would

be *cognition*. Unlike *to know*, *to cognize* is not a factive verb, and when an event of cognition arises, there is a further question as to whether it is true or false. When used this way, the contrast being emphasized is with affective and conative states. A similar confusion has been noted with regard to the translation of Latin *cognitio* as used in early modern European works. Jonathan Bennett (1984) notes, for example, that the translation of *cognitio* as “knowledge” rather than as “cognition” “has negatively affected scholarship on Spinoza” (). Thus, in philosophical Sanskrit, *jñāna* is a false cognate of English *knowledge*.

This fact is significant because the same term is inherited in many modern Indian languages including Hindi. So when experiments are conducted whose aim is to test the Gettier intuitions of Hindi speakers, and when the experimental questionnaire is translated from English into Hindi using *jñāna* as a translation for *knowledge*, the apparent discovery that Hindi speakers do not share anglophone intuitions about Gettier cases may be an aberration resulting from the use of a false cognate rather than constituting a genuine experimental finding about cross-cultural variation. There is an even greater risk of confusion when the test is performed in English on Indians speaking English as a second language. For what happens then is that the subject mentally translates the English word *knowledge* in the test scenario into Hindi *jñāna*, and is willing to say of a case that there is knowledge, but meaning only to assert thereby that there is cognition (see also Turri 2013, 9–13, and Seyedsayamdost 2015 for evidence that earlier reports of differences in Gettier intuitions among South Asians are not borne out by empirical study).

In philosophical Sanskrit, *jñāna* is distinguished from another epistemic term, *pramā*. The noun *pramā* is derived from the verb *pra+mā*, meaning “to measure.” This noun, unlike *jñāna*, is indeed used factively; indeed, in standard works it is explicated as meaning an experience that represents things as they are (*yathārtha-anubhūti*). It is *pramā* which ends up being translated as “true knowledge” or “valid knowledge” by translators wishing to preserve this point and nevertheless regarding *knowledge* as a true cognate of *jñāna*. Matilal (2002) has summed up the whole situation rather well:

The Sanskrit term *pramā* is usually translated by a careful translator today as “knowledge.” This is certainly an improvement upon the older and wrong translation of *pramā* as “valid knowledge.” It may be of some interest to see why such a mistaken phrase was offered by earlier (mostly Indian) scholars as a translation of *pramā*. A *pramā* is usually regarded as a special kind of *jñāna* whose truth is guaranteed. This is mostly, though not always, true in Sanskrit (classical) philosophical literature. The word *jñāna*, however, is sometimes used

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for “knowledge” in ordinary Sanskrit. A knowledgeable person is called *jñānin*. Even in philosophical Sanskrit the distinction between *jñāna* (which can be better translated as a cognitive event or an awareness-episode) and *pramā* is not always maintained, and hence we see *jñāna* used indiscriminately for *pramā*; and it is left to us to gather from the context whether an ordinary cognitive event or a piece of knowledge is being referred to. This interchangeability of *jñāna* for *pramā* has apparently led modern interpreters of Indian philosophy to confuse the issue, and most of them have felt the need for some adjective like “valid” to qualify “knowledge” in order apparently to gain the full force of *pramā* which is distinct from ordinary awareness. This was at best misleading and at worst a blunder that perpetuated misunderstanding of Indian philosophical doctrines by English readers. (150)

2. PERFORMATIVE SANSKRIT PRAMĀ VERSUS STATIC ENGLISH KNOWLEDGE

I have noted that *pramā* is, unlike *jñāna*, factive. For Matilal, as we have seen, this brings the term closer to the English term *knowledge*. Recently, however, Pranab Sen has argued that English *know* is not factive (Sen 2000/2007; Hazlett 2012 has more recently also defended this claim, apparently without acquaintance with Sen’s work). If he is right, then one possibility is that *pramā* is actually a better term to capture the normative concept epistemologists are interested in than *knowledge* is; *knowledge* in English would have parochial features that make it inappropriate or unsuitable for use in epistemology. If what we want to investigate is the epistemic credibility of our cognitive life, then perhaps the Sanskrit vocabulary of *pramā* is a better vehicle for doing so than the English vocabulary of *knowledge*. There is also an important difference in perspective encoded in the two vocabularies. This follows from the fact that both *pramā* and *jñāna* refer to cognitive episodes, while the English term *belief* normally denotes a dispositional state. Thus, *pramā* is to be analyzed not as true belief but as a true awareness episode. A consequence is that *pramā*, as a cognitive event, has a causal history, and when one asks if a given cognitive event is *pramā* or not (whether it has *pramātva*, *pramā*-ness), it is natural to seek an answer in the form of a causal explanation. One wonders whether the same causal factors that brought about the cognitive event also bring about its property of being true, for example. More generally, the term *pramā* refers to a successful performance of an act of experiencing, where success is a matter of experiencing things the way they are, hitting the truth, just as success for an archer is a matter of hitting the target with an arrow. In

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Sanskrit intuition, epistemology is to be pictured as the study of cognitive performance.

The rather different picture that English vocabulary encourages is a static one in which there are standing dispositional states, somewhat like virtues, and the relevant question is not whether a performance is successful but whether a standing state is merited. Does the believer have the ability, if demanded to do so, to produce something that would count as evidence or justification for the claim that the belief is true? It would thus be wrong to translate *pramā* as *knowledge*, and then to wonder what counts as justification in the Sanskrit model. The answer is that nothing does, because justification is a parochial feature of a way of thinking rooted in English lexical quirks. A different question must be posed instead: Are there any important epistemic differences between different types of successful (truth-hitting) performances of experience?

3. RIVAL INTUITIONS ABOUT PRAMĀ

Contextualism is a claim about the semantics of epistemic attribution. As DeRose (1992) puts it, “The truth-conditions of ‘S knows that *p*’ vary depending on the context in which it is uttered” (914), context here including the interests, expectations, and so on of knowledge ascribers. As I will now show in some detail, two of the most important classical Indian epistemologists have strikingly divergent intuitions about the attribution-conditions of *pramā*. Śrīharṣa argues that truth alone does not suffice, and he presents a series of cases where a subject has a true awareness episode, but in which he claims no attribution of *pramā* is correct. Gaṅgeśa’s opposing view is that truth is sufficient, even in these cases. What seems to be in question is whether Śrīharṣa’s cases reveal something hidden about the truth-conditions of *pramā*—that more is in general called to ensure epistemic credibility than successful epistemic performance alone—or whether he is in fact manipulating our intuitions, that he is tutoring us into a new and more demanding way of using the term than is the case in ordinary speech.

I mentioned that for the ancients in India, epistemic success was a matter of cognizing nature (*tattva-jñāna*), experiencing things as they are (*yathārtha-anubhūti*). Outside of epistemic success lay not only inaccurate experience but also doubt, dream, hypothesis, assumption, and pretense. The value of epistemic success lay in the escape it afforded from the torments of a cognitive dystopia. It seemed to the ancients that the route to epistemic success was through the ability clearly to tell things apart,

and so through clarification of concepts and formulation of definitions. This included clarity about the concept of epistemic success itself, and the varied provenance of epistemic success. For how could one inquire unless one knew the techniques and targets of inquiry; and only through inquiry can there be clarity, and so in the end peace of mind. The energies of the classical philosophers were therefore spent, and lavishly so, in the search for definitions.

Śrīharṣa, in the twelfth century, saw all this as the height of folly. Mastery of a concept does not require knowledge of a definition, and that is good because nothing anyway can be defined, not even knowledge. Śrīharṣa invents a practice of refutation to set against the practice of definition, but he is not against the things themselves: there is argument and there is philosophy, just as there is experience and there is language; what there is not are definitions. Śrīharṣa was no skeptic, therefore, nor was he a quietist of Nāgārjunian bent. He was perfectly happy to commit himself to large philosophical claims and to make use of the efficacy of argument. Śrīharṣa is not against philosophy but wants a more liberal philosophical method, using concepts but not fixing them. One need not have a definition of aesthetic greatness to appreciate a particular work of art as great. Śrīharṣa's argument that knowledge cannot be defined finds a more recent echo in the work of Timothy Williamson (2000; again, it is unfortunate that Williamson appears to be unacquainted with Śrīharṣa's earlier work).

Śrīharṣa's typical method of refutation was to tie the philosophers' definitions in so many dialectical knots that they eventually choked to death. He claimed to prefer this method because its very complexity discouraged abuse by the disingenuous. When it came to the definition of epistemic success, however, and only in this case, Śrīharṣa introduces a different approach (perhaps this is because Jayarāsi before him had tried the other approach without success). He tells miniature stories, the import of which is that there can be accurate experience which is not epistemic success. His stories serve to test—or perhaps to train—his readers' epistemic intuitions. Let me call such any such story a "Śrīharṣa case." His aim is not to show that the definition of epistemic success requires supplementation but, rather, that the act of defining epistemic success is absurd. This is why a Śrīharṣa case is different in ambition from a Gettier case in contemporary epistemology. A feature of the cases is that there is always an implied contrast scenario, and what is tested are the differential intuitions one has in the two scenarios. The first of four Śrīharṣa cases is the case of the Self-Confident Gambler. This gambler sees the closed fist of his opponent and is immediately convinced that the fist contains exactly five shells. His conviction is a pure guess, but Śrīharṣa is careful to point

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out that the fact that chance is involved does not allow us to respond that he does not really believe; for a farmer, too, is convinced that the scattered seeds will yield a crop, even knowing at the same time that chance events may intervene. And indeed there are five shells in the closed fist; the conviction is correct. The implied contrast scenario is one where all is the same except that there are four shells, not five, and the gambler's conviction is misplaced.

The second Śrīharṣa case is the case of the Deceived Deducer. A deduction is made to the effect that a fire is burning on the far-off mountain, based on the premise that a plume of smoke can be seen rising above it. What is seen, in fact, is a plume of mist in the crisp early morning air: the premise is false, but we are nevertheless to suppose that there is a fire and the deducer is accurate in his firmly inferred belief that this is so. Śrīharṣa says that the inferential belief that there is a fire on the mountain does not fall into the category of epistemic success (*pramā*), and it is not clear if he thinks he is simply reporting the intuition of any competent user of the Sanskrit word *pramā* or if he is actually tutoring those intuitions with the help of the story. It does not make any difference to the case that the deducer is not having a singular thought about a particular fire, and this case does in fact bear a structural resemblance to a standard Gettier case involving existentially quantified belief; and it was Matilal (1986, 135–140) who was the first to point this out—since then, other Indian examples have been found in the work of the Buddhist philosopher Dharmottara, and an extensive Tibetan discussion has also been found (Stoltz 2007). In Dharmottara's vivid example, a swarm of flies is taken as evidence that there is a piece of rotting meat: there is indeed meat there, but what looked like a swarm is in fact just black dust.

A third Śrīharṣa case is the case of the Misprimed Perceiver. A person spots a far-off creature and sees that it is a cow. The categorial perception is a result of the perceiver's exercise of an ability to distinguish cows from other four-legged creatures by the visual cue of having a dewlap. In this case, however, visual cuing is achieved by a piece of cloth that hangs under the cow's neck, not the dewlap; yet the perception is correct. Categorial perception is noninferential: the role of the visual cue is not to provide a premise in a deduction but, rather, to trigger categorization. Śrīharṣa claims that the miscuing undermines the perceiver's right to claim to know (and this example serves, by and by, to undermine Harman's "no false lemmas" strategy against Gettier).

A fourth and final Śrīharṣa case appears only later in the discussion, and for that reason is often overlooked. This is the case of the Lucky Listener. An entirely unreliable witness reports that there are five flowers on the

bank of the river; and indeed there are. A second witness, this one wholly reliable, makes the same report. Here Śrīharṣa explicitly describes a pair of contrasting scenarios. In the first scenario, he seems to suggest, the listener has true belief but not epistemic success; in the second, the listener knows the reported fact. The point is that merely believing what one hears, even when true, is no way to know. Again, the Mādhyamika philosopher Candrakīrti had a similar example (and I wonder if Śrīharṣa knew of these Buddhist examples). Candrakīrti considers two people who testify to witnessing a crime, one actually having seen it happen and the other maliciously lying. Should the judge base a guilty verdict on the testimony of the second person, our intuition is that justice has not been done (Matilal 1986, 104). If fairness is to justice what truth is to epistemic success, then the point of the examples seems to be that conformity to a norm requires more than just getting it right.

One might be tempted initially to respond that in every case there is a fault in the functioning of the source of epistemic success, but Śrīharṣa argues that appeal to the origins of one's beliefs cannot solve the problem of definition. That is because there is no way to say what the fault is, in terms general enough to cover every case, other than that the fault is that the source of the belief has not yielded accuracy. The proposed definition is now that epistemic success is true belief produced by a source that produces a true belief, and the new condition clearly adds nothing to the original. To give an example, it is certainly useful to know what are the sources of clean water, but one cannot define clean water by saying it is such water as comes from a certain source.

4. GAṄGEŚĀ

For Śrīharṣa, the lesson to be learned is that the very attempt to define epistemic success is absurd. One response is that he has loaded the dice by asking for a context-free definition of a context-sensitive concept. The fourteenth-century Nyāya philosopher Gaṅgeśa, though, draws a different conclusion. The lesson to be learned is that the right response to the Śrīharṣa cases cannot be to go in search of additional conditions on epistemic success. In those cases, something has gone wrong, but Śrīharṣa is manipulating our intuitions when he says that they are cases where epistemic success comes apart from accuracy. The right response, according to Gaṅgeśa, is to reaffirm the original theory of epistemic success as accuracy, and at the same time to diagnose the epistemic problem in the Śrīharṣa cases as having different origins. In every case, there is epistemic

success, but what we need to do is to draw a distinction between epistemic success that is robust and epistemic success that is fragile. Fragile epistemic success is intolerant of even small variation in the parameters of the situation. There could easily have been four, not five, shells in the closed fist, and then the gambler would not have known. Fragile epistemic success is easily broken. This fragility explains why we are reluctant to agree that the gambler has acquired anything epistemically valuable, but acquiring merely fragile epistemic success is nevertheless not the same as failing to acquire epistemic success at all. Every one of the Śrīharṣa cases is an illustration of fragile epistemic success, not an example of epistemic failure. Epistemic success really is nothing more than believing of something that it is what it is, and not believing of it that it is when it is not. The sources of epistemic success generally give rise to robustness, but even when they misfire, one may still be lucky enough to gain fragile epistemic success, although more often than not one will be led only to error or doubt. Epistemic success just is true belief, because when a belief is true its causal history necessarily constitutes evidence for it (truth necessitates evidential etiology; necessarily, when a belief is true, cause equals because). Doubt destabilizes epistemic success, and when doubts have arisen—for example, in contexts of inquiry—what is needed to resolve them is robustness (the Sanskrit term *niścaya* being sometimes used here). Śrīharṣa tries to game our intuitions in such a way that we start to think what we meant all along by “epistemic success” is robustness. Gaṅgeśa’s view is that we ought not even play the game he invites us to play—the game of searching for an additional condition. Epistemic success is a matter of hitting the target, winning the prize (here, truth), so “knowledge-ness consists in truth-hitting character” (Matilal 1986, 141) and how one came to do it or whether one could repeat the feat does not change the fact that one has won.

Recently, a fascinating experiment was conducted. Various standard cases from contemporary epistemology, including Gettier cases and Goldman’s famous “barn” example, were translated into Sanskrit and a very learned traditional Sanskrit philosopher, Paṇḍit Viśvabandhu Bhaṭṭācārya—someone with no training in Western philosophy and very little English—was asked for his reaction (see Bhaṭṭācārya 2000). In every case, he insists that if the awareness is true, then it is proper to attribute *pramā*. His linguistic intuitions concur with Gaṅgeśa against Śrīharṣa. This, however, does not prevent one from distinguishing two different kinds of epistemic performance, with two different standards of success. Viśvabandhu is, however, steeped in the philosophical tradition of Gaṅgeśa, and this may itself have colored his intuitions.

5. CONCLUSION: THE UNIVERSALITY THESIS DENIED

The universality thesis states that “the properties of the English word *know* and the English sentence ‘S knows that *p*’ that have been studied by epistemologists are shared by the translations of these expressions in most or all languages.” I have argued not only that Sanskrit *pramā*, the closest term to English *knowledge*, has different properties, but that *its* properties, rather than those of the English term, are the ones most closely related to what epistemologists are actually interested in investigating. English epistemic vocabulary brings with it a variety of parochial associations, including a static rather than a performative picture of epistemic agency, an emphasis on the “driving license” model of justification which skews discussion about the actual value of our epistemic practices, and even, if Sen is right, a nonfactive semantics quite at odds with the goals and aspirations of epistemology. What we are interested in as epistemologists is the nature of epistemic performance, the importance of epistemic agency, and the concept of epistemic success. The Project Statement that inspired this volume of essays asks “What should philosophers interested in epistemology make of all this?” I suggest that what they should learn is the need to take seriously how epistemology is done in languages other than English.

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