

A Critical Appraisal of the Concept of Natural Epistemology – from the Perspective of Navya Nyaya Philosophy

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Abstract

The connotation of the term “epistemology” is the science of knowledge. While science having two broad branches i.e., normative and positive, knowledge comes under the normative perspective. Thus normative concept of epistemology is although disregarded by many philosophers like Quine, however Quine’s theory was later criticized by Colin McGuinn. In my paper I have first explained some points of Quine’s theory from the perspective of Navya Nyaya and then made a comparative analysis of Quine’s theory and Navya Nyaya theory of knowledge. Finally, I have come to the conclusion that, logically true sentence i.e., analytic statement is established by inference, which is claimed both by Quine and Navya Nyaya.

Keywords: Epistemology, justified true belief (JTB), cognition, analytic statement and synthetic statement.

This presentation attempts to show critical side of the concept of natural epistemology. The term ‘epistemology’ means ‘science of knowledge’. The term ‘science’ can be understood in two different ways – i) as a normative science; ii) or a positive science. Knowledge as usually defined as justified true belief (JTB), may be interpreted as a normative study, justification can be interpreted as logical justification. It is common to consider logic as a normative science. So, knowledge as justified by logic should mean the logically correct type of justification.

This normative concept of epistemology is disregarded by many philosophers, especially by Quine. Epistemology studies the actual formation of knowledge by men, without aspiring to certify those processes as rational or even apt to yield truth. Natural epistemology would blend into the psychology of learning. Quine’s theory is that epistemology should study a person’s experience-input and his belief output.

However Quine’s theory has been criticized by Colin McGuinn. He explained that while the facts may vary the stimulation may stay constant. To ascribe the same beliefs to the subject though the world failed to match those beliefs is wholly wrong. Thus Quine’s theory leaves upon the possibility of global error, and thus leads to skepticism. This is also supported by Quine’s theory of indeterminacy of translation, if the method of discovering some one’s beliefs can incorporate some conception of the processes that lead to belief formation. Thus radical interpretation becomes related to epistemology. In Quine’s method our evidence for what the subject believes is the subject’s evidence for believing that he does. This theory is not justified.

This is a criticism of Quine by a contemporary philosopher of the Western country. Now I shall try to explain some points of Quine from the *Navya-Nyaya* point of view.

First I shall explain some terminological point. Although the Sanskrit word '*jnana*' is philologically cognate with English 'knowledge' through the Greek 'gnosis', still the syntactical behavior of the two words is very different.

The Sanskrit word '*jnana*' is usually translated as 'cognition'. This word is semantically at once wider and narrower than 'knowledge'. It is wider because cognition includes doubt, supposition, illusion, memory and also the usual perception, inference, testimony. It is narrower than 'knowledge' because 'cognition' is always used in the episodic sense, never in the dispositional sense. In Western philosophy, the word 'knowledge' is used both episodically and dispositionally. For 'disposition' Nyaya uses the term '*samskara*' which means both memory traces and traces of action. Usually, however, the term is used to denote only memory traces.

Now after this terminological explanation, we come to the *Navya-Nyaya* theory of cognition. Excepting the first two, doubt and supposition, cognition always involves belief. When we do not include doubt and supposition, we shall use 'belief' (only in the episodic sense) instead of 'cognition'. Now belief may be either true or false, veridical or illusory. Moreover, the object of belief is always a matter of fact, for in *Nyaya* is there is no conception of proposition. Belief is directly related to objects which are complex. In determinate cognition the object is complex, there is a property-possessor and a property. For example, when we perceive a table, the table is cognized under the mode of table-hood, a universal. The word 'property' is used in *Navya-Nyaya*, almost in the legal sense. Thus a house may be a property. A property, therefore, is not always an abstract entity. When we cognize something in determinate cognition, we usually cognize three factors, a qualificand, a qualifier, and a qualification (or relation), all of which are real in the same sense. Thus when we cognize a 'table' we bring it under the general property of being a table (tablehood), which is related to the table by the relation inherence (*samavaya*). There is also no difference between the two expressions. 'The table is red' and 'the red table'. There is no difference between a predicative use and an attributive use, of a property. Both these expressions produce the same cognition, namely, of a table which is the qualificand and the red colour which is the qualifier and inference between the red colour and the table is the relation. It is easy to see the difference between Quine's theory and the *Navya-Nyaya* theory of cognition. There is no question of having the same experience producing the same belief if realities are different. According to *Nyaya* belief of an object is not necessarily caused by the object. Although it is true, in the case of perception, that the object is the cause of its perception, it cannot be true of an inference. Inference may be about a past or future object which does not exist at the time of the inference. Therefore, the non-existent object cannot be a cause of such inferential cognition. So also in the sense of testimony a word may denote a non-existent object which, therefore, cannot be a cause of the cognition produced by the word.

In *Navya-Nyaya* there is no concept of experience in Quine's sense. Although *Navya-Nyaya* philosophers distinguish between indeterminate (*nirvikalpaka*) and determinate (*savikalpaka*) perception still in indeterminate perception we never cognize sensory qualities. There are three theories in *Nyaya* of what is cognized in indeterminate perception. Gangesa's theory is that we cognize a universal like jarness in indeterminate perception. Jarness when not mentioned by any word is cognized in and through itself. The second theory is that we cognize just something (pindamatra) without knowing any qualifier. The third theory is that in determinate perception we do not know anything new that was not already cognized

in indeterminate perception. This means that every determinate perception has got to be preceded by an indeterminate perception. Thus in indeterminate perception of jarness, we also cognize the jar and the relation of inherence. But all these factors remain separate. Only in determinate perception, we cognize a relational whole with a structure, when all the factors are put together. Now this theory is not accepted by all *Navya-Nyaya* philosophers. For neither the jar, nor the relation of inherence can be cognized in and through themselves. Gangesa has stated that even in the determinate perception of a jar qualified by jarness in the relation of inherence, only the jar is cognized in the fashion of determinate perception, for it is cognized only through jarness. As the language used is only ‘a jar’ there is no mention of jarness which is known in and through itself, i.e., in the fashion of indeterminate perception. But there is no theory where we cognize only sensory qualities out of which an object is constructed. There is no construction in cognition according to *Navya-Nyaya*.

There is also no conception of reason in Indian philosophy in general and *Nyaya* in particular. In Western philosophy, reason has been conceived in two ways; rational intuition of universals, as in Plato; or, the faculty of interring. According to *Navya -Nyaya*, objects which are perceivable have universal which are also perceived. Inference is mediate cognition produced by the cognition of pervasion. Thus inference is explained causally in Indian philosophy in general and in *Navya-Nyaya* in particular. So there is no faculty of reason in Indian philosophy.

We have no way of cognizing the beliefs or cognitions of others unless they express them in words. In case of persons who cannot use words, one has to infer their beliefs from their behavior. This inference is not analogy, but inference, pure and simple. Of our own beliefs, we are aware directly in introspection.

Moreover in Indian philosophy there is no distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences, an identity sentence like ‘a jar is a jar’ is not meaningful. Here the subject and the predicates are the same. (*ghato ghatah*) The sentence, ‘*ghato ghatvavan*’ is also senseless, for here, the limitor of the subject is the same as the predicate. Now although the sentences are pointless and therefore need not be made, one can cognize truly that ‘a jar is a jar’ or that ‘a jar possesses jarness. Thus *Navya- Nyaya* philosophers make a fundamental distinction between sentences and cognitions. In making a sentence some extra-conditions have to be fulfilled. It must not repeat which everyone knows as true. But cognition is different. One can cognize any truth at all.

Quine distinguishes between classes of analytic sentences. One type is logically true. Quine gives the example:

No unmarried man is married.

Then he gives a second class of analytic statement which involves synonymous terms. He gives the example of:

No bachelor is married.

The Quine points out that all attempts to define synonymy fail. So he denies the possibility of defining the second class of analytic sentences.

Now, according to *Nyaya*, even the so-called logically true analytic sentences are to be proved by inference. For example, the sentence expressing the belief that no earth is non-earth (earth has difference from non-earth), according to Western logic, is the obverse of the identity statement ‘earth is earth’. Even though the sentence is logically true. *Nyaya* establishes it by an exclusively negative inference (*kevala-vyatireki*). According to *Nyaya* the belief expressed in the so-called logically true sentence has to be established by inference.

We have already discussed the *Nyaya* distinction between an analytic sentence and a cognition expressed in an analytic sentence. No logical truths are devoid of contents according to *Nyaya*; so they have to be established like any other truth.

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