

CAN AN EMPIRICIST TALK ABOUT THE WORLD ?

In philosophy the problem of the method of deducing a conclusion is more crucial than the conclusion itself. Once we take certain methods as typically philosophical, the task of arriving at a conclusion remains simply the consistent and the correct application of the method. The prime importance of a method in philosophy also lies in the fact that it is the method which characterises a discourse as philosophical. The contrast between different systems of philosophy is primarily due to the difference of methods or in the mode of application of a method. A method in a general sense consists of certain initial beliefs and certain formal steps. So far as formal steps are concerned there is little difference among different systems of philosophy, but so far as initial beliefs are concerned, one system of philosophy widely differs from the other. Now it is often held that an empiricist because of the 'peculiarity of his initial beliefs *cannot significantly talk about the world*. At best an empiricist can make a kind of 'generalizations' which is not the same thing as asserting certain philosophical views about the world. However, the problem whether an empiricist can significantly talk about the world is not a closed chapter. This question can be most interestingly discussed with reference to the Indian philosophers who are said to be rigorously committed to empiricism (in its modern terminology) and yet to have propounded certain philosophical conclusions about the world. They have accepted certain propositions about the world which have more far reaching consequences than it is possible for empirical propositions to have. So naturally the question arises : what enables the Indian philosophers to talk about the world with their strong empirical bias ?

I specially have in mind Nyaya-Vaisesika's attempt at a discovery of fixed kinds of categories and the abstract entities of the world. The distinction between apriori and aposteriori knowledge being not made in this system, at least explicitly, empirical flavour being too apparent to be ignored of, it seems extraordinary how Nyaya-Vaisesikas could speak of fixed kinds of categories. One possibility is that, one may be a rigorous empiricist but can talk of the world just arbitrarily, hitting at random ! An empiricist

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also can say 'there are only such and such things' but may provide no reason whatsoever. But can there be non-trivial methods which (certain concession being granted!) would allow even an avowed empiricist to talk quite significantly about the world? I think there are certain non-trivial methods which are adopted quite implicitly by Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophers to talk about the world quite successfully, or meaningfully, whether or not truly. *And there lies the ingenuity of Indian philosophers.* Along with strong empirical bias—e. g. strong belief in the perceptual evidence as primary source of knowledge, Nyaya-Vaisesika takes certain 'clues' and 'insights' for granted and these 'clues' or 'insights' help them inspite of their rigorous commitment to empiricism to *talk significantly about the world.* There are different kinds of these clues which they often innocently assume in their fervent attempt to establish certain conclusions about the World. The following 'clues' among many others, I think, are very much implicit in their modes of philosophising: '*doubt must be positively oriented*', '*categories of the perceptual world apply*' ('*Unrestrictively*'), '*infinite regress is untenable*,' '*parsimony is preferable to complexities*', '*there is degree of weight of evidence*'. (See '**Bhasaparichheda**' together with **Muktabali** by Viswanatha).

I may here first attempt at an abstract sketching of the ways these clues are made use of in actual philosophising. This would enable us to have a better grasp of the concrete illustrations of their actual use to be made available latter. These clues for a better understanding of them may be classified into two groups, (A) and (B.) In group (A) desire to include the most fundamental clues '*doubt must be positively oriented;*' and '*the categories of the perceptual world apply*'. In group (B) I include the rest.

First, a philosophical statement is made and whenever a philosophical statement is made it is not rejected or questioned simply because there is no evidence for it, important thing is not whether there is evidence for it or not, but *whether there is some alternative conclusion, or concrete evidence against the given statement.* In other words, first of all it is considered if actual doubting of the original statement is possible or not, that act of doubting must also be grounded on certain facts. It must not be merely a case of a prior or possible (Hume). If no actual doubting is possible against a given philosophical statement, or if the maker of the

statement can meet all grounds of doubt against his proposition then his proposition must find its acceptance. This procedure might remind us of Popper's criterion of falsifiability. But whereas the criterion of falsifiability primarily applies to scientific proposition, this procedure of establishing a proposition, through 'an attempt to doubt factually' applies to philosophical proposition as well. Clearly this is different from Cartesian doubt. Now there are different ways in which certain doubts against a proposition can be raised (and an alternative proposition can be proposed) as well as the doubt be quashed away and an alternative proposition be rejected. *Actual doubt can be raised against a proposition in several ways.* Sometimes there may not be any concrete fact against a given proposition, but doubt can be raised against this proposition by showing that the acceptance of the proposition leads to an infinite regress, or that the given proposition hurts the sense of parsimony (there is alternative parsimonious proposition). A proposition may be doubted also because there may be an alternative proposition with stronger reason (degree of weight of evidence). Of the two conclusions, both of which have some evidence for them, one conclusion may have a stronger evidence for it and hence the alternative conclusion may be put to doubt. Similarly, possible doubt against a conclusion can be quashed away by showing that those concrete ways of raising doubt do not apply to it.

The first clue of the group (A) is primarily negative in its character though negative application of this may yield positive conclusion. *Simply by showing that a conclusion cannot be doubted in a concrete way, one may make a plea for its acceptance.* But the second clue of the same group, 'the categories of the perceptual world apply' is primarily positive and helps us to establish certain conclusions about the world directly. The significance of the clue is this. *The mode of explanation or description of the perceptual world in terms of, for instance, object (of Knowledge), substance, relation, causality must be extended to any universe of discourse whatsoever.* To take an example, if we say that God has knowledge, then we must also say that something is his object of knowledge, there is a difference between God and his object of knowledge and so on. Of course certain concessions may be allowed. We may postulate *different types of those categories* e. g. substance of different sort, relation of different kinds, if the

universe of discourse so demands. The frequent use of analogical argument in Indian Philosophy may be accounted for by this firm belief in the unrestricted application of these categories. This clue of the group (A) is made use of by Nyaya-Vaisesika mainly to prove the existence of entities of different kinds e. g. non-existence, inherence, universal (One thing must be remembered that these clues are not explicitly stated in establishing concrete conclusion, but one may easily gather them from the implicit use of them made by the Nyaya-Vaisesika schools in talking about the World, — specially in talking about different kinds of categories of the world (see, specially Bhasaparichheda).

Let us now look at some typical controversial conclusions that the Nyaya system entertains and see how this system attempts to talk about The World from an empiricist standpoint. The Nyaya-Vaisesika accepts some typical propositions. Acceptance of such propositions clearly shows that this system seriously wants to talk about The World. The following are some of these typical propositions about the world :-

- (1) " There are seven kinds of knowables. "
- (2) " Non-existence is a kind of knowable. "
- (3) " God has no body, yet he is the cause of the world ".
- (4) " Magnitude and not the plurality of object is the cause of the perception. "

I shall discuss only (1), (2), (3).

In Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophy the question is raised 'how many kinds of things are there in the world.' The answer given is 'there are only seven kinds.' But question may be raised, How can an empiricist come to such a conclusion about the world ? Or why one should restrict the number of categories to seven ? Is it not an arbitrary decision ? The Kantian approach to the discovering the categories from an analysis of possible forms of judgement is ruled out of court here. Moreover there are other schools of philosophy which in fact recognize more than seven kinds of padarthas. Let us see how the question is tackled by Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophers. In Bhasa-parichheda the question is raised: " Why are the knowables only of seven kinds ?" Why are 'power' and 'similarity' also not to be regarded as additional categories ?

Similarly the question may be raised why the knowables can not be less than seven. The way the objection is raised and solved, is instructive. *The objection is not an apriori objection, it is rather aposteriori.* Doubt against the theory is raised from certain concrete considerations. We actually do apprehend similarity and power, (causal efficacy) in the world. Thus the doubt is supposed to be factually grounded. Similarly even the attempt to do away with the doubt, factual conditions are referred to. Now the Nyaya method of dealing with objection seems to be the following : if the actual doubting against a proposition (1) is proved to be impossible then the proposition (1) is a true one. Now the objectors claim is that 'similarity' and 'power' are additional knowbles because 'they can be known' (a) For instance similarity is apprehended through perception (a), while 'power' can be known through inference (a2). Secondly it is argued that the two kinds of additional knowables cannot be reduced to any of the seven classes of knowables (a3). No further argument of any apriori kind is advanced. *Viswanatha has nothing to quarrel against the method of casting doubt on his thesis. But he thinks that the objector is misapplying the method of casting doubt on his thesis.* He will give a different analysis whereby he would show that though similarity is apprehended perceptually it can be reduced to different categories. He also shows that 'power' as an additional category cannot be inferred. Therefore, the objector's doubt does not stand and the original proposition (1) stands as it is. The objector's argument in favour of similarity does not stand for 'similarity' is not a different category. Similarity can be reduced to one of the seven categories. For instance similarity is said to be the 'common properties of two things together with difference among them.' Two things have similarity means, 'some properties which are present in one (x) are also present in another (y), while some properties which are present in one (x) is also sent in another (y). The precise rendering of the Sanskrit equivalent is possible only in symbolic terminology.

So similarity may be thought of as a short-hand description of certain relationship between three things—difference, quality and universal. Now difference being a kind of quality the reduction is complete. Similarly it is shown that 'power' is not known through inference. It is shown that to explain a certain fact (viz. that fire does not burn in the presence of certain kind of stone, but it

burns only in the presence of certain other kind of stone) we need not infer any such entity. The objector thinks that the fact that the same fire does not burn anything in the presence of certain obstacle (e. g. in the presence of Ayaskanta mani) but burns when the obstacle is removed or is counteracted through some other stimulating agent (e. g. suryakantamani), shows only that in the fire there must be besides fire something else, (power) which is held dormant in the presence of the obstacle but which (power) is free to act when the obstacle is removed. But the Naiyayaika thinks that to explain the above fact we need not postulate any sort of extra category called 'Power'. The above facts of fire's burning and fire's not burning can be more simply explained by saying that a cause is a sum total of negative and positive conditions (as much simplified version) only the fire (positive condition) is not the cause of burning anything, but the fire and the absence of negative condition (or counterbalanced negative condition) together are the cause of burning. Hence 'Power' is not known through inference, since 'Power' cannot be inferred validly.

Let us see next, how it is possible for an empiricist to talk about an abstract entity e. g. about non-existence. Here also the author first of all tries to dispel the concrete doubt raised against his view about abstract entity. For the sake of avoiding repetition I shall not discuss the manner in which this is done. But I shall try to show how the 'clue' 'categories of the perceptual world apply' is taken for granted in order to establish that non-existence is a kind of knowable (thing). This clue in its most simple version means that the model we use to explain our experience must be extended to any universe of discourse. Thus if we explain our possibility of knowing table and chair in terms of object, relations, then our knowledge of things of any other universe of discourse must be similarly accounted for even at the risk of postulating object, relation of a different kind. Now, non-existence also is known. (We know, for instance, that fire is non-existent in a lake). It cannot be reduced to something else, for instance, to its bare ground (as suggested by the opponent.) To say that non-existence is simply the existence of a bare ground (e. g. simply the lake) is to impose restriction on the application of some of the categories of the perceptual world. For to say that non-existence is known perceptually and yet that non-existence is simply the bare ground is to imply that non-existence is not known (perceived) through the

application of one of the category of the perceptual world viz. relation (of content and container). For to be able to apply the category of relation in case of knowledge of non-existence, i. e. to be able to say that fire is non-existent in a lake, we require at least two entities, the container (the ground) and the content (non-existence). If non-existence is simply identified with the bare ground there would be thus no scope for applying the category of relation in respect to the knowledge of non-existence. So if we desire to apply the category of perceptual world (relation) unrestrictedly we must say that non-existence, since it is known, is something more than the bare ground. Only if we have belief in 'the unrestricted application of any category of the perceptual world' we have the scope to argue that non-existence is a distinct knowable, being distinct from its bare ground.

Let us see next how the assumption that 'there is degree of weight of evidence' is made use of to talk about the world that transcends the perceptual realm. Above we have seen how the assumption that 'categories of the perceptual world apply' helps *one to talk meaningfully of things which are not given to sense perception*. But sometimes it happens that unrestricted application of some category may lead to certain paradoxes. What is the way out then ? Thus, while the Naiyayika attempts to prove the existence of God through the application of the category of causality, (agency) the Mimāṃsaka attempts to block such an inference by pointing out that the category of causality cannot be applied to God (supposed) for God is said to be without a body. So God cannot be an instrumental cause (Kartā) without a body, for all instrumental causes, a potter, a weaver, have bodies. To get out of this dilemma, the Naiyayikas have referred (implicitly) to the degree of weight of evidence. According to them the assumption that 'category of cause applies' is stronger than the assumption that 'an instrumental cause must have a body'. It would be absurd to think that there is no cause of the world, but it is not so absurd to think that there can be an agent without a body. Therefore, we have to accept the assumption which has a stronger basis, even if the alternative one is not baseless.

I have so far surveyed in a very limited way the method of philosophising adopted (implicitly) by a school of Indian philosophers who would generally be characterised as empiricists from the stand-

point of western philosophy. This characterization would be valid in so far as the term 'empiricist' is taken to mean nothing more than 'believer in the primacy of perceptual evidence.' The term empiricist cannot be attributed to this school of philosophy in the sense in which the term is attributed to the sceptic or to the advocator of perpetual silence (Buddha). The different kinds of conclusions about the world entertained by this school amply affirm my point. This school of Indian philosophy has seriously attempted to talk about the world. (This follows from the fact that they have tried to discover the fixed kind of categories, determine the ultimate cause of the world...). And its attempt to talk about the world whether truly or falsely has been successful (I think) in spite of its firm conviction in the primacy of perceptual knowledge, because besides such conviction it has accepted, quite implicitly though, certain 'clues' as already been specified. This way of philosophising—taking perceptual knowledge as primary and yet accepting certain 'clues' as granted, points to two possible major alternatives estimation of this school, (1) The philosophers of this school are not actually empiricist as it has long been supposed, (2) Philosophers of this school are empiricists in spite of their acceptance of certain clues because of the *special nature of these clues and their attempt to talk about the world is consistent with their empiricism*. I believe that the second alternative is more acceptable for two reasons. Firstly, simply because some clues or other are accepted by a school as a method of approach, that school cannot be characterized as non-empirical. So to say, any school of thought must accept some method of approach. But if any school is to be characterized as non-empirical simply because of its acceptance of a method of approach, then as if analytically, it would follow that there can be no empirical school of thought! *The term 'empiricism' would in that case be a misnomer*, if not a contradictory term; major portion of history of philosophy must had been then a battle over a meaningless or a contradictory term! This may be the case, but as things still stand now this is quite implausible. Secondly, these 'clues' accepted by the Naiyaikas are so *general in nature that both empirical and non-empirical school have to adopt them if they want to talk at all*¹. Only alternative to non acceptance of these 'clues' is perpetual silence. But even if one desires to justify perpetual silence, one must talk and have to adopt a general method of approach. These

clues are also general in the sense that it is very *difficult to think certain alternatives to these clues*. It is very difficult to think of a possible world where certain alternatives to these clues e.g. 'doubt need not be justified' is true, a possible world where to speak of knowledge we need not refer to 'the object of knowledge'. At least we must adopt these 'clues' as possible axioms without taking them to be true or false, justified or unjustified. To the extent these clues help us to talk about the world or talk at all they would be *taken to be progressively self certifying*. Then, the problem of whether these clues are 'apriori' or analytic would not arise. And if the problem as to whether the initial beliefs or clues are empirical or apriori do not arise, a system which embraces these clues cannot be characterises as non-empirical. More acceptance of certain 'clues' (embracing of certain method of approach) cannot render a school of thought non empirical. As has already been argued, this would imply that 'empiricism' is a meaningless term. Then the question also cannot be asked—can an empiricist talk about The World !!

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NOTES

1. It is very instructive to note that when the rival schools of Indian Philosophy oppose one another the opposition is not so much centering round the acceptance of certain very general method of approach by the rival school as it is centering round the application of this very general method to solution of a particular problem.

