

Advaita Concept of Pramā in Dharmarāja's Vedānta Paribhāṣā

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Abstract

Vedāntaparibhāṣā of Dharmarājādhvarīndra (16th Century) is the only systematic original text on Advaita epistemology. In this text, Pramā has been defined as anadhigata-abādhitārtha-visayaka-jñānatvam. The word 'anadhigata' in the definition excludes smṛti (memory) and the word 'abādhita', excludes bhrama (false knowledge) from the area of true knowledge. According to the Advaitin, knowledge is that which dispels ignorance. As memory and false knowledge are avidyāvṛtti, they cannot dispel ignorance. So memory and false knowledge are not at all knowledge.

Keywords: Pramā, anadhigata, abādhita.

As a follower of Advaita line of thought Dharmarāja has dealt with the concepts of Brahma (in the Vicayapariccheda) and mokṣa (in the prayojanapariccheda), but the greater part of Vedāntaparibhāṣā is concerned with the analysis and explication of the pramā, pramāṇa and the related epistemological concepts.

It is objected that Dharmarāja, has totally followed the epistemology of the Bhāmma Mīmāṃsā. But this should not be taken as an offence on the part of Dharmarāja, because in dealing with the matters of practical world one should follow the principles of the Bhāmma (vyāvahāre bhāttanaya). So while explaining the nature of empirical knowledge (pramā) and its different sources (pramāṣa) Dharmarāja has been found to be indebted to the Bhāmma line of thought.

After completing the portion of epistemology, Dharmarāja has made a distinction between two broad types of objects of knowledge-objects of knowledge about the empirical order (vyāvahārika tattvedakatva) and objects of knowledge about the philosophical order (pāramārthika tattvedakatva). Dharmarāja states that the validity of the means of knowledge that have been described in the above manner is of two kinds - as setting forth conventional reality and as setting forth absolute reality.¹ Knowledge about things, persons, events-the empirical knowledge as a whole comes under the former. Knowledge account the basic framework of human knowledge and understanding, that is account the most general and

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pervasive features of the entire system of human concepts come under the latter. Knowledge pertaining to the empirical order helps the man to meet the practical ends of his life. Knowledge pertaining to the philosophical order or the absolute reality e.g. Brahman liberates man from the riddles of thought that torment him in his practical life in this empirical world. Thus, his primary concern is to disseminate the nature of empirical knowledge. In dealing with the concept of prama or true know/edge he has to take up this empirical standpoint.

Dharmarāja states the Advaita definition of pramā as anadhigata-avādhithārvicayaka-jñānatvam.² It means that true knowledge is the apprehension of an object that is not already known and which is not contradicted. In *Vedāntakaumudī*, Rāmādvaya accepted smṛti (memory) as a true knowledge, since a few philosophers recognize smṛti as true knowledge.³ To include the opinion of Rāmādvaya, Dharmarāja has given another definition of pramā as abādhithārvicayaka-jñānatvam. It means a true knowledge is that the object of which is uncontradicted. The first definition excludes smṛiti from pramā and the second includes. But traditionally the first definition given by Dharmarāja has been well-accepted by the Advaitins as they generally reject smṛti as a pramā. So we shall take into account the definition anadhigata-abādhithārtha-vicayaka-jñānatva as the Advaita definition of pramā or true knowledge. Dharmarāja has reminded us of one thing that here the term ‘abādhita’ (not contradicted) has a special meaning. It means “not contradicted during transmigratory period (saṁsārakale abādhita). Since it is fact that when a person overcomes the transmigratory period and attains the knowledge of Brahman by realizing “I am That” (soāham), worldliness disappears.

Let us analyze the definition of pramā as anadhigata-abādhithārthavicayaka-jñānatva. The word ‘anadhigata’ is inserted in the definition of prama to exclude memory from the area of true knowledge and accordingly to remove fallacy of over-coverage (ativyāpti). This indicates that novelty is a mark of true knowledge. On the other hand, the word ‘abādhita’ in the definition, is used to exclude false knowledge from the area of true knowledge and accordingly to remove the fallacy of another over-coverage (ativyāpti). This indicates that certainty is a mark of true knowledge. Hence we see novelty and certainty or uncontradictedness, according to the Advaitins, are the two essential characteristics of pramā or true knowledge.

But the difficulty arises in connection with the insertion of the word ‘anadhigata’ (not previously known) in the definition Dharmarāja, the author of *Vedāntaparibhācā* has dealt with this problem and tried to solve first in the Bhāṭṭa line of thought and then he has mentioned

the Advaita point of view in this regard.

The problem is this. There is a type of *pramā* or true knowledge, which is called *dhārāvāhika jñāna* or continuous perception. Should a continuous perception of something be treated as valid or not? *Dhārāvāhika jñāna* is a perceptual knowledge which lasts for a several moments. Should the perceptual knowledge of something, say a pot, of the second or third moment be granted as *pramā*, if *pramā* be a knowledge of the object which is previously unknown (*anadhigata*)? Certainly not. Since the object of knowledge (the pot) of the second or third moment has already been known in the first and subsequent moments. But nobody can deny the truth of a continuous perception of a pot. The Advaitin replies that the knowledge of the pot of every moment is novel knowledge, because though the pot of all such cognition is identically the same, yet it is cognized as existing in a different moment of time in each. The existence of the pot in a subsequent moment cannot be apprehended by its cognition in the preceding moment. So as novelty, an essential mark of true knowledge is already there in different moments of a *dhārāvāhika jñāna*, the knowledge of each moment of it must be granted as true knowledge of *pramā*.

One may object that though there is a difference among the successive moments of time in the case of continuous perception, yet it cannot be cognized, because time has no form (*nīrūpa*) and it is too subtle. The answer is that such statements as “I have been seeing this thing since morning till now”, “I saw the thing just in the preceding moment” and the like become unintelligible if the different moments or fractures of time is not perceived. In such cases we have a direct consciousness of time. It is true that time has no form or shape but perceptibility has nothing to do with shape. Hence, we may easily come to the conclusion that *dhārāvāhika jñāna* or continuous perception can not be excluded from the range of *pramā*, although *pramā* is defined as the knowledge of previously unknown object (*anadhigata*).

The above solution of the problem is according to line of thought of the *Bhāmma Mīmāṃsā*. After offering this solution *Dharmarāja* has put the Advaita point of view by stating that *kinca dhārāvāhika-buddhisth le na jñānabheda*.⁴ Accordingly, there is no difference of cognition in the different moments of a *dhārāvāhika jñāna*. What really the Advaitin wants to say is that even in the case of *dhārāvāhika jñāna*, so long as a different mental state does not arise, any mental state is not to be considered as momentary but as remaining even the same. So long as we continue to perceive one thing there is no reason to suppose that there has been a series of mental states. So there is no question as to the knowledge of the subsequent moments being

referred to the knowledge of the previous moments, for so long as any mental state has any one thing for its object it is to be considered as having remained unchanged all through the series of moments. When I see the same pot for two seconds, my mental state representing the pot is not changed every second. Hence there can be no such supposition that I am having separate mental states in succession each of which is a repetition of the previous one. Because of the fact that so long as the general content of the mental state remains the same there is no reason for thinking that there has been any change in the mental state. The mental state or the state of knowledge thus remains the same so long as the content is not changed.

In this way, Dharmarāja has refuted the charge against the definition of *pramā* given by him in connection with his insertion of the word ‘*anadhigata*’ in it. Hence according to the Advaita Vedānta *pramā* or true knowledge is the knowledge of some previously unknown object, since it is different from *smṛti* (memory), which, to the major section of Indian philosophers, is false knowledge. The contention that *pramā* is *anadhigata-vicayaka jñāna* emphasizes that an essential criterion of such knowledge is novelty or newness. Every true knowledge is new knowledge.

The second essential criterion of true knowledge, according to the Dharmarāja is non-contradictedness (*abādhitatva*). This criterion distinguishes true knowledge from false knowledge. In Advaita Vedānta this criterion may be recognized as the basic and most important criterion of true knowledge, as it has metaphysical implication.

Attainment of true knowledge of Brahman or self is the highest end of Advaita Vedānta. That knowledge is the knowledge of *pāramārthika sattā* or highest reality. The Advaitin speaks of three grades of reality-*pārmārthika sattā* (highest or ultimate reality), *vyāvahārika sattā* (relative or conventional reality) and *prātibhāsika sattā* (illusory reality). *Pratibhāsika sattā* (snake in a rope) is contradicted by the knowledge of *vyāvahārika sattā* (object of true knowledge of the empirical reality, like the rope after the illusory knowledge, snake in a rope). The *vyāvahārika sattā* is contradicted by the knowledge of *pāramārthika sattā* or Brahman, the highest reality. The sole criterion of this *pāramārthika sattā* is that it is never contradicted (*trikālābadhitatva*). That is why it may be said that non-contradictedness (*abādhitatva*) is the most essential and important criterion of true knowledge.

The Advaita definition of *pramā* as *anadhigata-abādhitārtha-vicayaka jñānatva* proposed

by Dharmarāja has usually been accepted in Indian epistemological studies. But some Advaita scholars object that definition of *pramā* given by Dharmarāja is a defective definition. According to them, the best Advaita definition of *pramā* has been given by Madhusūdan Saraswati in his *Advaitaratnarakṣaṇa*. In this text, while defining the *prāmaṇya* of knowledge, Madhūsudana says, *ajñātārtha-niacayātmakatvameva prāmaṇyamasmatpakṣe*.⁵ That is to say *pramā* or true knowledge is that which has the property of being a certain apprehension of an object which was previously unknown.

Why the definition given by Dharmarāja is defective? The objectors opine that defining *pramā*; Dharmarāja has completely followed the Bhamma view and has ignored the Advaita philosophical point of view. According to the Advaita Vedānta, knowledge (*jñāna*) is that which dispels ignorance (*ajñāna*), *smṛti* (memory) and *bhrama* (false knowledge) are *avidyāvṛtti* (i.e. caused by ignorance or *avidyā*), not *pramānvṛtti* (i.e. not caused by the instrument of knowledge). So *smṛti* (memory) and *bhrama* (false knowledge) cannot dispel ignorance and cannot be granted as knowledge. Of course, these two mental states (*smṛti* and *bhrama*) produce desire, so they may be treated as knowledge in secondary sense. In primary sense, *smṛti* or memory and *bhrama* or false knowledge is not knowledge at all. So there is no necessity of inserting the word ‘*anadhigata*’ in the definition of *pramā* (true knowledge) to exclude *smṛti* from it. Again there is no necessity of inserting the word ‘*abādhita*’ in the definition of *pramā* to exclude false knowledge from it, as *bhrama* is primarily not knowledge.⁶

In view of this, some Advaita scholars prefer the definition of *pramā* given by Madhūsudana. According to Madhūsudana the definition of *pramā* is *ajñātārtha vicayaka-niścayatva*. It means *pramā* is certain knowledge of a previously unknown object. This expression as the definition of *pramā* excludes *smṛti* (memory) and *bhrama* (false knowledge) from the range of *pramā*. *Smṛti* (memory) is the knowledge of previously known object, not of unknown object. *Bhrama* (false knowledge) is the knowledge of previously known object, not of unknown object. In the false knowledge of snake in a rope, the knowledge of snake is the knowledge of previously known snake, not of previously unknown snake. Again as *pramā* is certain knowledge (*niścaya*) its *prāmāṇya* or validity is necessarily intrinsic (*svataḥ*). Advaita Vedānta accepts theory of *svataḥ prāmāṇya* in respect of *jñāpti*. Moreover as *pramā* is certain knowledge (*niścaya*), it can account for our successful practical activity. Thus from such detailed analysis the Advaita definition of *pramā* given by Madhūsudana seems better than the definition given by Dharmarāja.

As Professor J.N. Mohanty comments in his *Gaṅgeśa's Theory of Truth*, "Madhusūdana proceeds to define 'Truth' as 'the property of being a certain apprehension of an object which was previously unknown'. Truth in this sense, Madhusūdan claims, satisfies their needs: it serves to distinguish right knowledge from error, it is capable of being apprehended svataḥ as the theory demands, and further it can account for unwavering activity (niṣkampe pravṛtti) as the phenomena demand."⁷

I have said before the definition of pramā proposed by Dharmarāja in his vedānta-paribhācā has been a well-accepted definition in the Indian epistemological studies. Because of the fact that it has stated a clear and faithful definition of true knowledge (pramā) of the objects of empirical world, although it follows the Bhāmma line of thought. We cannot say that Dharmarāja is guilty of following Bhāmma principle in presenting the Advaita definition of pramā, since all Advaita thinkers agree that they follow the Bhāmma line of thought in every practical matter.

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