Reason (Hinduism)

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Synonyms

Anumāna; Buddhi; Manana; Nyāya; Tarka; Vicāra; Yuktī

Definition

The category of reason is used in Hindu spirituality and philosophy in different senses. One can discern two broad usages: one, as a faculty of the mind, that is, as an instrument of philosophical reflection and, two, as logic, that is, an instrument of argumentation. There is no exact Sanskrit synonym for the word “reason.” The term buddhi is often used to denote reason as a faculty of the mind, and words like manana and vicāra are used to denote the act of reflection or contemplation. Anumāna is inference; it is one of the six pramāṇas or valid means of knowledge and is accepted by all the six schools of Hindu philosophy (darśana). The word Nyāya, after which is named one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy, means logic. Tarka and yuktī are also words used to denote logic. These different words are used to denote different dimensions of reason.

Introduction

When we talk about reason as understood in Hinduism, we run into two problems. The first problem is one of translation, as is the case with so many other Indic concepts. The second problem is one that exists at a more general and universal level: reason as such has many facets – so which aspect(s) are we to take into consideration? As pointed out by J. N. Mohanty: “A concept of rationality of a culture is a highly stratified concept and in any case a higher order concept whose field consists in lower order concepts of various levels” ([1], pp. 260–261). Reason is one of the faculties of the mind. This power of ratiocination is manifested at one level as an instrument of cognition and at another level, as logic or an instrument of argumentation. This essay will examine both these aspects and a few other issues related to the nature and use of reason in Hindu philosophy and spirituality.

Concepts of Reason, Indian and Western

The first thing that comes to mind with regard to reason in Hinduism is its supposed contrast with reason in Western philosophy. This binary is a product of orientalist constructions that, broadly speaking, posited Hindu philosophy as the antithesis of reason. This has been the case with critics as well as admirers of Hindu philosophy. The critics are of the opinion that Hindu philosophy
is lacking in rigorous rational enquiry; the admirers (not all of them though) claim that Indian and Western rationality are so radically different that any comparison between the two is not possible. The first approach undoubtedly takes Western rationality as the benchmark; the second approach too perhaps implicitly accepts the Western paradigm as the reference framework against which Hindu philosophy is posited as the “other.” In this context, what Jonardon Ganeri has pointed out is particularly relevant: “If the objection is simply that ‘rationality’ is a western concept imperiously misapplied, my response would be that it is no more western than perception, thought, language or morality. The mistake here is in thinking of such philosophical concepts as internal to a theory, when in fact they are concepts about which there can be many theories…” ([2], p. 4). Mohanty too cautions us against these approaches: “The relativist may so sunder (Western and Indian philosophy) that it would seem impossible to understand the one from the perspective of the other… The absolutist commits the opposite error: he mistakes the task of understanding as simply being one of translation” ([1], p. 271). It is, of course, one thing to understand Indian and Western thought in a comparative framework and quite another to use Western rationality as the norm against which every other rationality is to be judged. Mohanty would have it that the Western and Indian thought-worlds are neither coincident nor mutually exclusive – they intersect and overlap.

All essentializations are not mere social constructs; there are some palpable differences between Western rationality and rationality as viewed in Hindu thought (of course, it should be remembered that here we are speaking in broad general terms, and there are always differences even within a single tradition). One difference is related to the proper place of reason as also its limitations. Another difference is regarding the dimension of practical application of reasoning. In some ways, these two aspects are related. The second aspect will be dealt with in this section and the first one in subsequent sections of the essay.

Indian philosophy in general has for some time been accused of subordinating pure theory to its relevance vis-à-vis practice. Mohanty points out that this attribute, however, should not be taken to mean that the drive for theoretical thinking itself is lacking in Indian philosophy. “It was theoretical thinking with an eye on practice – at a certain level, on a possible transformation of life, but, to be sure, without ever sacrificing the rigor of thinking. The Hegelian thesis that Indian thinking remained at the level of immediacy and did not rise to the level of conceptual mediation, is equally wrong. The conceptuality of the Indian philosophies, in its sheer conceptuality, parallels that of Western thought, it never mistook immediacy of experience for thinking” ([1], pp. 270–271). The approach that reason cannot be for the mere pleasure of debate but has to address the larger issue of its practical application in life with a view to moral and spiritual uplift should not be taken to mean that reason served only a utilitarian purpose in Indian philosophy. It only means that the scope of reason is not completely autonomous or absolute. Tarka or reasoning is baseless by itself (apratiṣṭhā); it is meaningful only within a given framework of higher ideals and accepted truths.

**Limits of Reason**

**The Purpose of Reason**

Broadly speaking, many Hindu philosophers and thinkers viewed reason as an instrument that could be used or abused. The Nyāya philosopher, Gautama, for instance, distinguished between different kinds of arguments – vāda, where reason is used in a constructive way to arrive at a correct understanding, and jalpa and vitandā, two types of argument where reason is used in an improper way (discussed in detail later in the essay). The idea that reason must be directed by a goal or purpose is also highlighted by Kautilya in his *Arthaśāstra*. The *Mahābhārata* too cautions against that use of reason which is just for the sake of demolishing others’ arguments and is not guided by a higher purpose. “It is not that in the great epics reason as such is condemned, but only its capricious use. The ‘reasoners’ are condemned for lacking any goal other than the use of reason
itself; they believe in nothing and are skeptical of everything. They use reason to criticize the scriptures, but have no doctrines of their own. Reason, the message seems to be, is misapplied when it is used in a purely negative, destructive way” ([2], p. 8).

Reason and Scriptural Authority
Many questions remain regarding the scope of reason in Hindu philosophy. Given the status of infallible authority that the Vedas enjoy, how could any autonomous reasoning have developed in India? On the other hand, some strands of Hindu spirituality do emphasize upon direct mystical experience that transcends reason. Given this, what is the status that reason enjoys in Hindu spiritual life?

The position of the six schools of Hindu philosophy vis-à-vis the dynamics between reason and scriptural authority vary to a certain extent. For instance, in Vedānta, spiritual experience or anything that is based on spiritual experience is accorded greater authority than pure rationality. That is why śruti (the Vedas) – the record of what has been received through spiritual experience that transcends the limitations of subjective identity – enjoys such an authority. However, it would be wrong to assume that Vedānta advocates merely a blind adherence to the scriptures. The Vedantic triad śruti-yukti-anubhūti clearly expresses the axis – (1) the Vedas are the testimony (precisely because they are based on suprarational spiritual experiences); (2) in order to understand the real purport of the content of śruti, one has to apply yukti or reasoning; (3) the final goal of all these exercises is anubhūti or one’s own spiritual realization. In Vedānta, there is a great place for manana or vicāra which is a particular practice of rational reflection on what is “real” (sat) and what is “unreal” (asat), with spiritual progress as the ultimate goal in mind. As far as scriptures other than śruti are concerned, reason can also be used to make special judgements, like resolving issues related to inconsistency or assessing the relevance of a dictum in an altered context, but that reasoning too should be aligned with the fundamental principles as laid down in the śruti. Therefore, in this framework, reason is good so long as it aids in one’s spiritual life. This subordination of reason to spiritual experience in Vedānta is due to a specific understanding of the nature and limitations of the mind; however, it is in no way fair to argue that Vedānta is antirational. Furthermore, as pointed out by Bina Gupta, what one notices in the Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara, for instance, is not necessarily a criticism of reason itself but of a particular mode of reasoning ([3], p. 103).

The Mīmāṃsā philosophers, on the other hand, were interested in Vedic rituals (yajña) and the performance of duties (dharma) as encoded in the Vedas. However, they too, being a school of hermeneutics, used reasoning to extract the correct meaning of the relevant Vedic verses. In this context, there was no dichotomy between scriptural authority and the use of reason. As far as the other four schools of Hindu philosophy are concerned, they, however, laid a somewhat greater emphasis on reasoning, albeit while adhering to the scriptures as well. Of these four, Śāmkhya especially has been looked upon as a system, heavily based on reason. The nineteenth-century Indologist Richard Garbe was one of the first to insist that Śāmkhya is predominantly a rationalistic philosophy (in fact, in this respect, some scholars point out its difference from Yoga, which lays more emphasis on direct mystical experience). At the same time, Mikel Burley reminds us: “There is nothing inherently inaccurate about attributing rationalism to Śāmkhya if ‘rationalism’ is understood in the weak sense of a propensity to employ rational arguments in support of propositions. For Śāmkhya undoubtedly does have such a propensity... The attribution becomes problematic, however, when ‘rationalism’ is taken in a stronger sense to imply that Śāmkhya’s methodology relies exclusively upon reason...” ([4], p. 43).

Reason as “Buddhi”

What is that faculty of the mind in Hinduism that can be called the rational faculty with reference to a higher-order reason and not mere logic? The term that is generally used to denote this faculty
is buddhi. Buddh, in fact, means intellect, but it is this faculty that comes closest to the concept of a higher-order reason. However, there are differences between schools regarding their conception of buddhi. Here, it is worth noting what Vedānta and Sāmkhya, for instance, mean by buddhi. Their respective definitions overlap at certain points but are also divergent in some respects.

In Vedānta, antahkaran is the inner instrument of cognition. It has four aspects or functions, which are referred to as the antahkaranacatuṣṭayāḥ. These four functions are vṛttis, that is, modifications of the mental state. One of these vṛttis is buddhi, and the other three are manas, citra, and ahaṃkāra. Citra is the function of retrocognition or memory; ahaṃkāra is the function that imparts a sense of “I”-ness to things; manas is that aspect which sways between possibilities without being able to determine (saṃkalpa and vikalpa); finally, buddhi is that mental function which evaluates and determines with certitude (niścayātmikāvṛtti). Gupta is of the opinion: “it appears that the buddhi of Advaita Vedanta includes both the Kantian understanding and speculative reason. Taken in this sense, buddhi... is an appropriate designation for reason as a faculty... Buddh makes judgments, evaluates every object as favourable or unfavourable” ([3], p. 95).

In Sāmkhya, buddhi is the first element that emerges out of creation (which, in Sāmkhya, essentially means transformation of prakṛti, the primordial substance out of which the universe has evolved). Individuals undergo the process of transmigration and suffering because they falsely identify the puruṣa, pure consciousness, with buddhi. Eventually, according to Sāmkhya, it is buddhi that, under the influence of right knowledge, enables one to realize that puruṣa and prakṛti are absolutely different; and it is this realization that leads to kaivalya or release from bondage. Hence, in Sāmkhya, buddhi is the instrument of final realization. That is, however, not the case in Vedānta.

**Reason as Logic**

In Hindu philosophy, Nyāya itself means logic; one of the six philosophical schools is named thus. In the Nyāyasūtra, a philosophical debate is called kathā (speech; discussion). According to Nyāya, there are 16 padārthas (categories). A few among these categories have to do with reasoning, and they are classified according to certain characteristics. One of these is tarka. Gupta thus explains this category: “When the truth of a theory has not been determined and the subject matter is doubtful, tarka removes the doubt and therefore gives the confidence that the pramānas can be applied to this subject matter... It is perhaps in the kind of reasoning known as ‘tarka’ that the cognitive process achieves a clearly noticeable freedom from the constraints of sensory input” ([3], p. 83). The other categories, related to reasoning and argumentation, are:

- Vāda, an analytical debate, where the principal purpose is ascertainment of truth
- Jalpa, a wrangling of sorts, where the goal is victory over the opponent and not necessarily the establishment of truth
- Vitanā, a kind of debate where a contender is only interested in refuting the opponent’s position, without establishing his own
- Hetvābhāsa, a “pseudo” hetu
- Jāti, arguments of the kind that instead of refuting the opponent’s position, actually undermine and contradict one’s own position
- Nigrahaṣṭhāna, different kinds of arguments that finally lead to the defeat of one of the parties (Gautama lists 22 such kinds of arguments)

What is clear, therefore, is that a rational debate has to follow certain codes. Given that there is so much of analytical consideration even of the digits of analysis, it is indeed surprising that Indian philosophy is accused of a lack of theoretical rigor. The pramāṇa theory itself points toward how rational Indian philosophy is. Gupta, however, points out that “the pramāṇa theory is not a theory of pure reason” as there is “an admixture of
the logical with the psychological and the empirical” ([3], p. 60).

Cross-References

▶ Anumāṇa
▶ Citta
▶ Darśana, Overview of Six Schools
▶ Manas
▶ Mīmāṃsā as Introspective Literature and as Philosophy
▶ Nyāya (and Navya-Nyāya)
▶ Orientalism (Hinduism)
▶ Prakṛti
▶ Pramāṇa
▶ Puruṣa
▶ Sāṃkhya

References