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Whom should we believe? The Nyāya epistemology of verbal testimony and the problem of misinformation

Arpita Sarkar

Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University, Kolkata – 700032, West Bengal, India

Abstract: Most of what any of us knows has been learned not by seeing or by reasoning but by being told, and yet the digital age has thrown this great unsung source of human knowledge into open crisis. This paper argues that classical Indian epistemology, and the Nyāya theory of *śabda* (verbal testimony) in particular, offers a precise and still-usable framework for the question the crisis forces upon us: whom should we believe? It sets the Nyāya account beside the long Western debate between reductionists, who would reduce our trust in testimony to inference from experience, and anti-reductionists, who hold testimony to be a basic source of knowledge in its own right, and shows that Nyāya's defence of testimony as an independent means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*), irreducible to inference, both anticipates and in some respects sharpens the modern anti-reductionist position. It then recovers two doctrines of immediate contemporary value: the analysis of the *āpta*, the trustworthy speaker, as one who combines competence, honesty and the intention to communicate what they know; and the conditions of linguistic understanding — *ākāṅkṣā*, *yogyatā*, *āsatti* and *tātparya* — by which a hearer interprets and appraises what is said. Brought to bear on algorithmic amplification, manufactured context and synthetic media, these doctrines reveal our present disorder to be a systematic collapse of the very conditions the Naiyāyikas identified, and supply a diagnostic vocabulary the contemporary discussion largely lacks. A closing section connects the Nyāya criterion of reliability, which turns on knowledge and honesty rather than on social rank, to recent work on epistemic injustice.

Keywords: testimony, *śabda-pramāṇa*, Nyāya epistemology, misinformation, epistemic injustice, Indian philosophy

I. Introduction

Pause to consider how little of what you know you have found out for yourself. Your own date of birth, the shape of continents you will never visit, the existence of atoms and of distant cities, the events of history, the findings of every science you have not personally conducted — almost the whole of it reached you on someone's word. Testimony is the quiet foundation beneath the greater part of the edifice of human knowledge; remove it, and what is left is a small clearing of private perception and personal inference, scarcely enough to live by. And yet testimony is also the source we have lately learned to distrust. Talk of misinformation, fake news, manufactured consensus and synthetic media has become the background noise of public life, and with it a widespread sense that the ground beneath shared knowledge has begun to give way.

The contemporary discussion of this predicament is often conducted as though the problem were unprecedented and as though the philosophical tools for handling it had to be improvised from nothing. Neither assumption is correct. Long before the printing press, let alone the platform, classical Indian philosophers devoted centuries of close and adversarial argument to precisely this question — what it is to know something on the strength of another's words, and under what conditions such knowledge is genuine rather than spurious. The Nyāya school, the great tradition of Indian logic and epistemology, built around the notion of *śabda*, verbal testimony, a theory of unusual rigour and, I shall argue, of continuing usefulness.

My aim in this paper is to bring that theory into contact with our present circumstances, and I argue for two claims. The first is philosophical: that Nyāya's defence of testimony as an independent means of valid knowledge — a *pramāṇa*, or instrument of valid cognition, in its own right, and not a disguised form of inference — is more faithful to the phenomenon than the reductionism that has long dominated Western treatments of the subject. The second is practical: that the Nyāya analysis of the trustworthy speaker, and of the conditions under which words convey knowledge, furnishes a diagnostic vocabulary for the misinformation age that the current debate conspicuously lacks. I write as a student of Indian philosophy persuaded that its classical resources are not museum pieces to be admired and shelved, but live options that can still earn their keep. The argument proceeds by first setting out the Western problem of testimony, then reconstructing the Nyāya position against it, then drawing from that position the two doctrines — of the *āpta* and of the conditions of understanding — that the closing sections turn upon our own disordered information order and upon the justice of how credibility is distributed.

II. Testimony as a Source of Knowledge: The Western Problem

Western philosophy was, for most of its history, oddly silent about testimony. The sources of knowledge it examined with care were perception and reason; learning from others was treated, when treated at all, as a second-rate affair, a borrowing of beliefs rather than a genuine acquiring of knowledge. The modern debate crystallised around a question David Hume

raised in his discussion of miracles: why, and how far, are we entitled to believe what we are told? Hume's answer is the classic statement of what later writers would call reductionism. We are entitled to trust testimony, he held, only because and insofar as experience has taught us that testimony of the relevant kind tends to be true; our confidence in a report is, at bottom, an inference from an observed correlation between what people say and what turns out to be the case (Hume, 1748/2007). Testimony, on this view, is no independent source of knowledge at all, but a province of inductive inference.

Thomas Reid set himself against this account, and the opposition between them still organises the field. Reid argued that no individual could possibly accumulate the stock of private observations Hume's story requires; the child believes what it is told long before it could have checked the reliability of any informant, and indeed its very acquisition of language presupposes a prior disposition to trust. He therefore posited two innate principles, a principle of veracity inclining us to speak the truth and a principle of credulity inclining us to believe what we are told, and treated testimony as a basic source of knowledge on a par with perception, not reducible to anything more fundamental (Reid, 1764/1997). The contemporary descendants of this anti-reductionism, most influentially in the work of Coady, have pressed the point that the reductionist programme cannot be carried through even in principle: we have no way of confirming, by observations untainted by further testimony, that testimony in general is reliable, so the attempt to ground trust in testimony upon something firmer than itself runs in a circle (Coady, 1992). More recent writers, Lackey among them, have sought intermediate positions on which both the speaker's reliability and the hearer's own critical monitoring contribute to the resulting knowledge (Lackey, 2008).

The deadlock between the two camps is itself instructive. The reductionist is surely right that uncritical credulity is no epistemic virtue, and that we both do and should withhold belief from sources we have positive reason to distrust. The anti-reductionist is just as surely right that our general reliance upon testimony cannot have been earned by private observation, on pain of circularity: the very evidence by which one might confirm that testimony is by and large reliable — reports of experiments never personally witnessed, records of a past one did not live through, the word of others as to what they have found — is itself overwhelmingly testimonial, so that the reductionist programme quietly presupposes the trust it sets out to justify. The lesson many have drawn is that mature testimonial knowledge involves both a standing entitlement to accept what one is competently told and an ongoing, defeasible watchfulness for signs that the entitlement has lapsed. More recently still, the rise of social epistemology has widened the lens from the isolated knower to the institutions and networks that manufacture, certify and circulate knowledge, and to the ways such systems may be well or badly built (Goldman, 1999). What the whole Western conversation shares, however, is that

it arrived late and has had to build its categories in haste. It is exactly here that the Indian material proves its worth, for the Naiyāyikas had been over much of this ground, and with finer instruments, many centuries earlier.

III. Śabda as an Independent Pramāṇa

Classical Indian epistemology is organised around the concept of *pramāṇa*, a means or instrument of valid cognition, and the schools are distinguished in part by how many such means they admit. The materialist Cārvāka recognised perception alone; the Buddhist logicians and the Vaiśeṣikas admitted perception and inference; the Nyāya school accepted four — perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*) and verbal testimony (*śabda*); and the Mīmāṃsakas and Advaitins admitted more still. The disagreement that matters for us is whether testimony deserves a place on this list in its own right or whether, as the Buddhists and Vaiśeṣikas maintained, it collapses without remainder into inference. The reductionist case was pressed above all by the Buddhist logicians Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, who folded *śabda* into inference, while the Mīmāṃsakas pushed in the opposite direction and treated the Veda as authorless (*apauruṣeya*); the reductionist instinct, in other words, is not a modern European invention but was stated and contested in India long ago.

The foundational Nyāya definition is given in the *Nyāya-Sūtra* of Gautama, who fixes verbal testimony as the instructive assertion of a reliable person:

"Verbal testimony (śabda) is the instructive assertion of a reliable person (āpta)" (Gautama, 1913, Nyāya-Sūtra 1.1.7).

Two features of this deceptively brief formula deserve emphasis. First, it locates the validity of testimony not in the proposition asserted, nor in the hearer's subsequent reasoning, but in a property of the speaker — their being an *āpta*, a reliable or trustworthy person, a notion the next section unpacks. Second, by making testimony turn on the standing of the speaker, Nyāya gives it a structure of its own that inference does not share. The Buddhist reductionist argues that when we accept what we are told we are really inferring the truth of the statement from the trustworthiness of the speaker, much as we infer fire from smoke, so that testimony is a special case of inference and merits no separate listing. The Naiyāyika reply, developed across the tradition and refined in the Navya-Nyāya of Gaṅgeśa, is that the cognition produced by understanding a sentence is not in fact an inferential cognition. When a competent hearer grasps the meaning of an asserted sentence, the resulting knowledge arises directly from the understanding of the words and their relation, not from any inference of the form 'this speaker is reliable, therefore what they say is true.' The hearer ordinarily performs no such inference; the knowledge comes unmediated, in the act of comprehension itself, and the trustworthiness of the speaker functions as a condition of that knowledge rather than as a premise from which the hearer reasons. Stated in modern terms, the Nyāya

position is a sophisticated anti-reductionism, and it reaches that position not by appeal to innate principles in Reid's manner but by a careful analysis of what actually happens when words are understood (Matilal, 1986; Ganeri, 2001).

It is worth pausing on how the Nyāya route to this conclusion differs from Reid's, for the difference is not a mere matter of style. Reid secured the independence of testimony by positing innate principles of veracity and credulity — a psychological hypothesis about how human beings are built. Nyāya secures it by analysis of the cognitive event: by showing that the understanding of an asserted sentence is a verbal cognition with its own internal structure, generated by the words through the relation of their meanings, and not an inference drawn from the speaker's reliability as though from a stated premise. The later masters of Navya-Nyāya, refining the doctrine with their famously exacting technical vocabulary, located with precision the point at which the speaker's trustworthiness does its work — as a condition on the knowledge-yielding power of the utterance, not as something the hearer consciously reasons from. The result is an anti-reductionism resting not on a claim about human nature, which might always be doubted, but on a description of what understanding is; and that, I think, is the firmer ground of the two.

IV. The Āpta: Competence, Honesty and the Will to Communicate

If the validity of testimony rests on the speaker being an *āpta*, everything depends on what makes a speaker one. Here the commentator Vātsyāyana, in his *Nyāya-Bhāṣya*, supplies an analysis of remarkable acuity. An *āpta*, he explains, is one who possesses direct and correct knowledge of the matter in question, who is moved by the wish to communicate that matter as it is, and who actually states it accordingly. Three conditions are thus folded into the single notion: competence, the speaker really knows; veracity, the speaker intends to tell the truth as they know it; and communicative adequacy, the speaker succeeds in saying what they mean. A speaker who is sincere but mistaken fails the first condition; one who knows but means to deceive fails the second; one who knows and means well but speaks so carelessly or obscurely as to mislead fails the third. Testimony yields knowledge only when all three hold together (Phillips, 2012).

What is striking, and what gives the doctrine its contemporary edge, is that *āpta*-hood as Nyāya defines it has nothing to do with social position. Vātsyāyana is explicit that a reliable speaker may be a sage, an ordinary person of the cultured community, or a *mleccha*, a foreigner outside the pale of orthodox society; what makes any of them an *āpta* on a given matter is knowledge and honesty about that matter, not birth or rank or membership. A forest-dweller who knows the trails is the *āpta* on the trails. This is a thoroughly functional and, in its quiet way, egalitarian conception of authority: credibility is earned by the possession of knowledge and the willingness to share it truthfully, and it is specific to a domain rather than a general badge worn across all subjects. The implications for an

age that confuses celebrity, confidence and follower-counts with reliability hardly need spelling out. The Nyāya criterion asks of any source three questions and only three: does this person actually know the matter at hand; do they mean to tell the truth about it; and have they in fact said clearly what they know? A source that fails any one of these is, to exactly that extent, no *āpta*, however large its audience.

V. The Conditions of Understanding: Ākāṅkṣā, Yogyatā, Āsatti and Tātparyā

Knowing that a speaker is reliable is only half of what testimony requires; the hearer must also correctly understand what is said. Nyāya, together with the Mīmāṃsā school with which it argued and agreed by turns, worked out with great care the conditions under which a string of words yields a determinate cognition of their combined meaning. Three are classically named, to which later thinkers add a fourth. The first is *ākāṅkṣā*, syntactic expectancy: the words of a sentence must mutually require one another, each leaving a gap that the others fill, so that a mere list of unconnected words conveys nothing. The second is *yogyatā*, semantic fitness: the meanings must be capable of fitting together, for an instruction to moisten something with fire fails not in grammar but in the compatibility of what its words denote. The third is *āsatti* or *sannidhi*, proximity: the words must be presented together, in speech or in mind, without a disabling gap of time or interruption, since meanings too far separated cannot be assembled into one cognition.

To these three the tradition adds *tātparyā*, the intention or purport of the utterance — what the speaker means to convey by it, especially where the words alone leave the matter open. A sentence with an ambiguous term is disambiguated by purport: the word that can mean either a river-bank or a financial house is fixed by what the speaker is about. *Tātparyā* is the most context-sensitive of the four, and for our purposes the most important, because it is the condition most easily exploited. Words can be entirely accurate in themselves and yet, wrenched from the purport that gave them sense, made to carry a meaning their speaker never intended. The Nyāya scheme thus identifies four distinct points at which the passage from utterance to understood meaning can succeed or fail, and in doing so it provides something the Western discussion of testimony, fixated on the bare question of trust, has rarely supplied: an anatomy of comprehension itself, and with it a map of the several different ways in which what we are told can go wrong (Matilal & Chakrabarti, 1994).

VI. From Classical Theory to the Misinformation Age

Set this apparatus beside our present circumstances and a diagnosis comes into focus. The disorder we call misinformation is not one failure but a family of them, and the Nyāya framework lets us tell its members apart. Consider first the erosion of *āpta*-hood. The platforms through which most testimony now reaches us are built to maximise attention rather than to track competence or honesty, and they distribute credibility by metrics — virality, follower counts, engagement

— that are at best indifferent to the three conditions Vātsyāyana named and at worst inversely related to them. A confident falsehood travels further than a hedged truth. The very signals by which earlier societies roughly tracked reliability, the slow accumulation of a reputation answerable to a community, are precisely what the new architecture dissolves, replacing the domain-specific authority of the one who knows the trails with a generalised, transferable visibility that knows nothing in particular.

Consider next the manufacture of false purport. A doctored clip, a quotation stripped of its setting, a real photograph paired with a false caption — these are not, in the main, attacks on the truth of any individual proposition, which may be left technically intact; they are attacks on *tātparya*, assaults on the purport that fixes what an utterance means. The words or images are accurate and the meaning is a lie. Much of what is loosely called misinformation is in fact this subtler thing, a corruption not of content but of context, and the Nyāya analysis names it exactly where the cruder vocabulary of true-and-false cannot. Synthetic media press the disorder to a new depth. The deepfake attacks the standing backstop on which testimony has always quietly relied, namely the possibility of confirmation by perception, *pratyakṣa*; when the recording of a person's own face and voice can be fabricated, the last court of appeal beyond testimony is itself counterfeited, and the hearer is thrown back entirely upon judgements of source that the same technology is busy undermining.

A fourth failure compounds the rest. Even where reliable *āptas* exist and speak clearly, the architecture of the new media tends to sort hearers into enclosures within which only congenial voices reach them, so that the testimony of the knowledgeable, though available in principle, never in fact arrives. Here the condition of *āsatti*, proximity, fails at the scale of a whole information ecology: the words that would correct a falsehood are kept too far from the ears that need them, separated not by time but by the silent sorting of an algorithm. What presents itself to any given hearer as a surfeit of testimony is, on inspection, often an engineered scarcity of the right testimony, a flood of the congenial that leaves one parched for the true.

None of this, on the Nyāya view, is cause for the fashionable despair that concludes there is no longer any such thing as knowing whom to believe. The conditions of genuine testimonial knowledge have not been abolished; they have been obscured and attacked, which is a different matter, and naming them clearly is the first step to defending them. The framework yields, in effect, a checklist that is also a critique: ask of any reported claim whether its source actually knows the matter, whether the source means to tell the truth, whether the statement is clear, whether the words mutually cohere, whether their meanings genuinely fit, whether they have reached you intact and in proximity, and above all whether they have been severed from their purport. Each question corresponds to a condition the Naiyāyikas isolated, and each marks a distinct line of defence. Recent empirical work on how false beliefs propagate through

social networks tends to confirm, in its own idiom, what the classical analysis implies: that the problem is less the occasional spectacular lie than the steady degradation of the ordinary conditions under which testimony does its work (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019).

VII. Testimony, Trust and Epistemic Justice

There is a further dimension to the question of whom we believe, and it is a matter of justice as much as of accuracy. Fricker has drawn attention to what she calls testimonial injustice, the wrong done to a speaker when prejudice causes a hearer to assign their word less credibility than it deserves — the woman disbelieved because she is a woman, the labourer discounted because he is a labourer (Fricker, 2007). Credibility, in actual human practice, is not distributed by competence and honesty alone; it tracks the lines of social power, and those already disadvantaged are disbelieved twice over, once in life and again in the economy of knowledge.

It is here that the Nyāya conception of the *āpta* shows a quietly radical edge. Because *āpta*-hood is defined by knowledge of the matter and honesty about it, and explicitly not by social station — the sage, the ordinary person and the *mleccha* standing in principle on equal terms, each an authority on what they happen to know — the classical criterion cuts directly against the prejudicial assignment of credibility that Fricker indicts. To follow the Nyāya rule strictly is to be barred from discounting a speaker on the ground of their rank or origin, and required instead to ask the only questions that bear on testimony: do they know, and are they truthful? A society that took this seriously would distribute its trust very differently from the way ours does, withholding it from the merely visible and extending it to the actually knowledgeable wherever they are found. The misinformation crisis and the injustice of misplaced credibility are, in the end, two aspects of a single failure to attend to what makes a speaker worth believing; and the remedy the Naiyāyikas point toward is the same in both cases — a disciplined return of attention from the standing of the speaker in the social order to their standing in relation to the truth.

VIII. Objections and Replies

Three objections deserve a hearing. The first holds that I have shown only that Nyāya agrees with contemporary anti-reductionism, and that nothing is gained by dressing a familiar Western position in Sanskrit. The reply is that the agreement is itself significant — a tradition reasoning independently to the same conclusion is evidence that the conclusion is sound — but that the gain is not merely corroborative. Nyāya supplies what the Western debate has largely lacked: a worked-out criterion of the reliable source in the doctrine of the *āpta*, and a fine-grained anatomy of understanding in the conditions of *ākāṅkṣā*, *yogyatā*, *āsatti* and *tātparya*. These are instruments, not merely theses, and instruments are what a practical crisis calls for.

The second objection is more serious. The *āpta* criterion, it may be said, presupposes that we can already tell who knows and who is honest; but that is precisely what, in the fog of the

misinformation age, we so often cannot do. Has the analysis not simply relabelled the problem? The reply concedes the difficulty while denying that relabelling is all that has occurred. To know that reliability consists in competence, veracity and clarity, and in these alone, is already to know what to look for and what to discard — to be inoculated against the standing temptation to read credibility off visibility, volume or rank. The criterion hands us no mechanical test, for no criterion could; it tells us which questions are the right ones to press, which is the most that epistemology can honestly promise and a great deal more than the prevailing confusion supplies.

The third objection charges that an appeal to an ancient authority is a curious way to argue for vigilance about authority. But nothing in the argument asks the reader to believe the Naiyāyikas because they are venerable. Their analysis is offered for assessment on its merits, and accepted, where it is accepted, only because it survives that assessment — which is exactly the treatment their own theory of the *āpta* would prescribe. To take a classical text seriously is not to defer to it but to argue with it, and that, rather than reverence, is what I have tried to practise here.

IX. Conclusion

I have argued that a tradition often regarded as the preserve of specialists in classical thought speaks directly to one of the most pressing difficulties of the present. The Nyāya theory of *śabda* defends testimony as a genuine and independent source of knowledge, and in doing so corrects the reductionism that has hampered the Western treatment of the subject from Hume onward; its account of the *āpta* supplies a clear and domain-specific criterion of reliability, indifferent to rank and answerable only to knowledge and honesty; and its analysis of the conditions of understanding furnishes an anatomy of the several ways in which the passage from words to knowledge can fail. Laid over the disorder of the misinformation age, this apparatus does what good philosophy should: it replaces a vague sense of crisis with a set of distinct and answerable questions.

Two larger morals follow. The first is that the contemporary problem of misinformation is, at its core, an old epistemological problem about testimony, intensified by new technology but not transformed in kind, and that we are accordingly not without resources in facing it. The second is methodological, and I confess to caring about it as much as about the first. The habit of treating the Western canon as the whole of philosophy has left genuine intellectual resources unused, and the Nyāya theory of testimony is a clear instance: a body of close, systematic argument that anticipates and in places improves upon work done in Europe centuries later. To bring it into the conversation is not an exercise in piety toward the past or in cultural assertion, but a straightforward matter of using the best tools available for a problem that concerns everyone. Whom should we believe? The Naiyāyikas' answer remains a good one: those who know the matter, who mean to tell the truth about it, and

who say clearly what they know — and no one, however loud, who fails these tests.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Arpita Sarkar is an independent researcher affiliated with the Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Her work centres on classical and modern Indian philosophy, ethics and epistemology, with particular interests in theories of knowledge, moral and political thought, and the dialogue between Indian and Western philosophical traditions.