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THREE WAYS OF DEBATING ENVISAGED BY ANCIENT INDIAN PHILOSOPHERS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the three different ways of debating envisaged by the philosophers from ancient India. The Nyāya school of Indian philosophy propounds three kinds of debates, namely, vāda, jalpa and vitaṇḍā. The intention of the participants and the way in which the discussion is conducted are different in each of them. Vāda is considered as the truth-seeking debate of two participants based on the proper use of logic. The participants in jalpa and vitaṇḍā show less concern for arriving at truth than getting oneself to win over the other. Vitaṇḍā is unique in its mandate for the participants. One of the participants needs to put forward a thesis and the opponent is expected to refute the thesis without any attempt to propose an anti-thesis. The long tradition of Naiyāyikas debate upon the forms of debate. The philosophers from other schools like Buddhism, Jainism etc. also share their views on the merits and demerits of these ways of debating. The paper gives an exposition of some of the characteristics of the three forms of debate conceived in the Indian philosophical tradition.

Keywords: Debate, Vāda, Jalpa, Vitaṇḍā

1. Introduction

Indian philosophical tradition discusses a lot about various epistemological and logical issues which form the base for a metaphysical discourse. The differences in the theories of the philosophical systems are mainly due to the differences in their epistemological and logical standpoints. What is knowledge? How many sources of knowledge are there? Which of them are certain and trustworthy? What is the status of inference as a productive means to make progress in the search for knowledge? What are the rules which make an inference valid? How do fallacies occur? These are some of the questions dealt with in the texts of the Indian philosophical schools. Knowledge is gained or confirmed and mistaken opinions or beliefs are corrected through philosophical debates carried out by defending and refuting arguments that are constructed using the earlier mentioned sources of valid knowledge, rules of inference etc. Owing to the importance of the debate as an important method of knowledge-seeking, the Indian schools also work out the various ways in which a debate can happen.

The Nyāya school is famous for its system of epistemology and logic. The Nyāyasūtra of Gotama conceives three different ways of debating – vāda, jalpa and vitaṇḍā. Afterwards, many philosophers from the Nyāya school interpret and comment upon the forms of debate, often with disagreements on a few aspects. The topic becomes a problem of discussion for Buddhist and Jain thinkers also. It can be said that the problem of the merits and demerits of the forms of debate develops into a debate on its own. An attempt is made here to provide an account of the three kinds of debate with an insightful exposition of some of their features.

2. Vāda, jalpa and vitaṇḍā in the Nyāyasūtra of Gotama

Gotama defines vāda, jalpa and vitaṇḍā in the first three sūtras of the second āhnikā in the first adhyāya of the Nyāyasūtra. The definitions are given as follows:

Vāda is the philosophical debate in which two persons who have opposite views, i.e., thesis and counter-thesis, on the same topic, proceed by defending one's own thesis and refuting that of the other, using valid instruments of knowledge and hypothetical reasoning, and expressing the arguments in the five-fold syllogistic form without ever going against the main tenet. (Nyāyasūtra 1.2.1) Jalpa is the philosophical debate which has all the said characteristics of vāda but also



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employs the use of quibbling, false rejoinders, and points of censure. (Nyāyasūtra 1.2.2) Vitanḍā is defined as that debate in which there is no establishment of a counter-thesis. (Nyāyasūtra 1.2.3)

The three forms of debate differ in the intentions of the participants and the devices used by them to defend and refute the arguments. Let us have a look at their similarities and dissimilarities.

Vāda is ranked as the ideal form of debate. The two participants occupy opposite positions on the same problem and strive to find the solution that convince both to accept the fitting position and reject the other. The debate proceeds through arguments each structured in the five-fold syllogistic form – (1) the statement of proposition, (2) the statement of reason, (3) the statement that asserts the invariable relationship between the reason and the object to be proved, with an example showing the same, (4) the restatement of the proposition incorporating the reason that has invariable relationship with the object to be proved, and (5) the conclusion. The premises of each of the arguments are supported by evidences developed by the valid instruments of knowledge. The conclusion of each argument is derived from its premises based on the rules of inference. It is taken care that no premise goes against the main tenets accepted by the participants. One participant refutes the argument of the other, if needed, by pointing out the logical fallacies or through the method of hypothetical reasoning. The debate ends only when both parties get convinced that the truth has been arrived at. None of them hesitates to withdraw their own arguments, if proven to be fallacious, or to embrace the cogent arguments of the opponent. All these characteristics of the vāda form of debate give it the label of a truth-seeking endeavor.

However, if the parties taking part in the previously defined debate also resort to (1) quibbling, i.e., distorting the meaning of a term used by one's opponent, (2) futile rejoinders, i.e., raising objections against the opponent's position by constructing arguments based merely on similarities and dissimilarities, and (3) points of censure, i.e., rebuking or censuring the opponent (attacks on the person rather than the argument) at certain stages of the debate, then that debate becomes jalpa. So, jalpa, even though having all the characteristics of vāda, hence differs from the latter only because of the application of certain dishonest means. The employment of such unfair devices casts doubts on the intentions of the participants in jalpa. It is understood that they do not have much affinity towards the ascertainment of truth, or else they would not be willing to put forward false rejoinders. Their sole aim is to win the debate in whatever manner possible. This picture of jalpa is also supported by the eagerness to point out the checks, or to censure or rebuke the opponent.

Vitanḍā is a special kind of debate. Only one of the participants proposes a thesis and the other attempts to refute the same. The latter might not have an anti-thesis of his own or even if he has, he would not take any step to establish his position directly. What he does is merely the refutation of the former's position even if it is revised and refined to meet the objections in each round of the debate. This form of debate is suitable for the sceptics who do not stick to any position but attacks the positions of others. Thus, vitanḍā gets condemned as a mere fault-finding method by almost all philosophical systems who fear the attack of sceptics. However, they have their point that mere refutation does not lead us to truth. Another aspect of vitanḍā also demands attention. The popular exposition of vitanḍā connects it to jalpa, claiming that it has all the characteristics of jalpa except the establishment of a counter-thesis. This means that vitanḍā also concentrates on victory of some sort, and witnesses the usage of tricky devices for the same. On the other hand, another description of vitanḍā connects it to vāda. The advocates of such a version of vitanḍā claims that it is a truth-seeking debate which progresses indirectly by striking out the arguments that are not grounded on strong reasons. This method helps us to realize what is not true so that we can correct ourselves and focus on a better path.

Gotama says in the Nyāyasūtra that jalpa and vitanḍā are useful to safeguard the belief in the tenets of a system, from arrogant and cunning opponents. It is made clear using the example of the thorny fences constructed to protect a sprouting seed. (Nyāyasūtra 4.2.50) According to this picture, jalpa and vitanḍā cannot directly aid in the search for truth but they could help us escape the attacks of opponents. However, there is a chance that the non-readiness to reject our own tenets even if the opposition points out relevant mistakes, might prompt us to somehow gain a win over them by employing jalpa and vitanḍā in its worst forms. Buddhist and Jain philosophers, hence, rejects jalpa and vitanḍā completely, and advocate only vāda as the proper method of debating.



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3. Conclusion

The three ways of debating as envisaged by the ancient Indian philosophers are worth studying. Debates, both formal and informal, in the present world, keep on taking all these shapes according to the context. It may not be that the people agree at first to debate in a particular manner and then proceed accordingly. The debate acquires different forms based on the intentions of the parties. What once started as a truth-seeking debate may later deteriorate into a win-loss focused egoistic effort. However, a careful analysis of the vāda, jalpa and vitaṇḍā forms, contributes to the successful application of their positive features as and when possible and to locate and reduce the occurrences of their bad versions, in our discussions that aim the enhancement of knowledge.

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