

Ethics of Knowing: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intricate convergence of epistemology and ethics in classical Indian philosophical traditions, with a central focus on how truth (*satya*), belief (*pratyaya*), and duty (*dharma*) are conceptualized and operationalized within indigenous logical systems. Taking the *Nyāya* school as the principal framework – renowned for its rigorous epistemological and logical apparatus – the article delves into how the pursuit of valid knowledge (*pramā*) is not a value-neutral endeavor but is imbued with ethical responsibility.

The analysis extends to include comparative insights from the *Mīmāṃsā*, *Buddhist* and *Jaina* Traditions, each of which offers distinctive understandings of cognitive authority and moral obligation. For instance, while *Nyāya* emphasizes *pramāṇa* (means of valid knowledge) as vehicles of both epistemic and ethical import, *Mīmāṃsā* integrates epistemic correctness with scriptural duty and *Buddhist* thought interrogates belief and truth from a soteriological perspective. *Jaina* epistemology, with its doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (many-sidedness), foregrounds intellectual humility and pluralism as epistemic virtues.

The paper ultimately argues that Indian logical traditions are not solely concerned with abstract metaphysical precision or formal correctness but are deeply ethical undertakings. They aim at cultivating responsible cognition, right belief, and moral action. By framing knowledge acquisition as a form of ethical engagement, these traditions challenge modern dichotomies between knowing and valuing and offer a holistic model of epistemic agency.

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Introduction

In the tradition of Indian philosophy, epistemology (*Pramāṇa-śāstra*) is not merely a theoretical or abstract exercise – it is fundamentally rooted in ethical and existential concerns. The act of Knowing (*jñāna*) is intricately bound to the practice of right living (*dharma*), reflecting a worldwide in which the acquisition of valid knowledge (*pramā*) is regarded as both a cognitive imperative and a moral obligation. This perspective contrast sharply with the often compartmentalized treatment of epistemology and ethics in some strands of Western thought – particularly since the Cartesian turn, where epistemological inquiry became increasingly detached from moral considerations.¹

Indian philosophers such as *Nyāya* thinkers emphasized the ethical importance of *pramāṇa*, or means of the valid knowledge, as necessary tools not only for correct reasoning but for right action. B.K. Matilal explains, “The Indian tradition has always linked the theory of knowledge with the practical and ethical concerns of life. To know rightly is to act rightly.”² Here, epistemology becomes a part of one’s moral cultivation, inseparable from the duties of the self (*ātman*) in its journey toward liberation (*mokṣa*).

Moreover, this integral link between knowledge and moral action contributes to what may be called an indigenous form of “epistemic ethics” – a framework where the discernment of truth is not only intellectually virtuous but ethically necessary. Kisor Kumar Chakrabarti notes that “*Nyāya* insists on the veridicality of cognition not for its own sake but for the sake of successful and ethically grounded activity.”³

In Indian Philosophical discourse, the pursuit of *pramā* is a moral act. It serves as a bridge between the domains of logic and ethics, resisting the dichotomy that often defines them in Western analytic frameworks. As such, epistemology in the Indian functions as a normative enterprise, aligning the search for truth with the obligations of virtue and ethical living.

Truth (*Satya*) as an Ethical and Epistemological Ideal

In classical Indian philosophy, particularly in the Vedic and post-Vedic traditions, *satya* transcends mere factual correctness to encompass a broader ethical and metaphysical significance. *Satya* refers to truth that never changes, much like *Ṛta*, the eternal cosmic order. In the context of knowledge, *satya* means knowing what is real. In the sphere of values, it reflects *ṛta*, the natural law that keeps the universe in order. When the mind understands *ṛta*, it realizes *satya*. The old saying “Truth always wins, not falsehood” suggests that those

who live by truth and follow the order of universe will ultimately succeed. This is a central message found in many Indian epics and myths. Since *ṛta* is a rule that cannot be broken, it always supports truth and justice. Anyone who attempts to go against this cosmic order will fail or destroy themselves.⁴

Logically, within the *Nyāya* epistemological framework, truth is defined as knowledge that corresponds to reality (*yathārtha-jñāna*). According to *Nyāya* philosophy *Pramā* means valid knowledge or understanding. *Pramāṇa* the first and most important category among sixteen topics that help a person attain liberation (*mokṣa*). The word *Pramāṇa* comes from the Sanskrit root *mā*, meaning “to measure”, and the prefix *pra*, meaning “right” or “correct”. Thus, *Pramā* means “right knowledge” or “correct measurement”. It refers to an accurate understanding of reality, rather than false or mistaken ideas. The *Nyāya Sutra* does not directly define *Pramāṇa*, but it explains that *Pramāṇa* is the means or instrument through which true knowledge is obtained. Just as a measuring tool helps us know the correct length of something, *Pramāṇa* helps mind know things as they truly are. Thus, in *Nyāya* philosophical thought, *Pramā* is true cognition that arises through valid means like perception, inference comparison and testimony.⁵ Therefore, the pursuit of truth in Indian philosophy is dual-faceted: it is both an ethical obligation and a logical necessity for liberation.

The Upaniṣads emphasize this integration, as seen in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.14), where truth is equated with brahman, the ultimate reality, thereby affirming its ontological and moral centrality. As S. Radhakrishnan notes, “Truth in the Upaniṣads is not only factual but moral and spiritual”, highlighting its role in personal transformation and cosmic harmony.⁶

Belief (*Pratyaya*) and the Ethics of Justification

According to classical Indian epistemology, belief (*pratyaya*) is not regarded as self-justifying or inherently valid. Rather, belief is subjected to rigorous evaluation through the accepted *pramāṇas* or means of knowledge – namely, perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*) and verbal testimony (*śabda*). The *Nyāya* school, in particular, insists that beliefs are epistemically and ethically legitimate only if they are grounded in *pramā*, or valid cognition. To believe without justification is not merely an intellectual lapse but also an ethical one, as unjustified beliefs can lead to harmful actions or false convictions.

As Matilal explains, *Nyāya* philosophy links epistemic justification to practical rationality, arguing that “what is known should guide action and hence knowledge must be both true and justified.”⁷ This emphasis on justification aligns *Nyāya* epistemology with modern concerns about epistemic responsibility.

Buddhist epistemologists such as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti further radicalize the discourse by introducing refined criteria for valid knowledge. Dharmakīrti, for instance, holds that valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) must be both non-erroneous and causally efficacious (*arthakriyākāritva*).⁸ Erroneous belief is not a benign failure – it constitutes a moral failure because it perpetuates ignorance (*avidyā*), which, in the *Buddhist* ethical framework, is the root of suffering and unethical conduct.

The ethical dimension of belief formation is thus central to both *Hindu* and *Buddhist* logic traditions. One is morally accountable not just for one's actions but also for the cognitive attitudes – beliefs and judgments – that underlie them. As B. K. Matilal notes, “beliefs must not be merely psychologically held; they must be epistemologically and ethically justified.”⁹ Indian logical traditions treat belief not as private matter but as a public responsibility. The ethics of belief, deeply intertwined with logic and epistemology, insists on a continuous duty to align one's beliefs with rational inquiry and moral awareness.

Duty (*Dharma*) and the Role of Reasoning

The concept of *dharma* (duty) is deeply intertwined with reasoned interpretation, especially within the *Mīmāṃsā* school. According to the *Mīmāṃsakas*, Vedic injunctions (*codana*) serve as the primary proof of the existence of *Dharma*. To interpret Vedic statements such as “*One who desires heaven should perform a sacrifice*”, the *Mīmāṃsakas* formulated a systematic theory of language and meaning. They maintain that the relationship between a word and its meaning is eternal. A word's meaning and its relation to other words are permanent and independent of human agency; therefore injunctions themselves – not human intention – constitute valid proof of *dharma*, reflecting the eternal order expressed through language.¹⁰

This logical engagement ultimately serves an ethical aim. As Karl H. Potter observes, within *Mīmāṃsā* the role of reasoning is not mere speculation but the determination of proper action.¹¹ In this framework, reasoning functions as a means of achieving moral clarity. It connects scriptural authority with careful rational examination, enabling individuals to interpret sacred teachings responsibly and apply them to practical life. Through this synthesis of reason and scripture, ethical conduct is clarified and guided, ensuring that moral decisions are grounded in both tradition and thoughtful analysis.

In a contrasting yet complementary fashion, *Jaina* philosophy offers a different model of ethical reasoning. Through the doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (non-absolutism), *Jainas* argue that reality is multifaceted and cannot be fully grasped from any single viewpoint. This epistemological stance fosters

syādvāda, a doctrine of conditional prediction, which promotes dialogical engagement and intellectual humility.¹²

This epistemic humility leads to an ethical commitment to *ahimsā* (Non-violence), which stands as the central virtue in *Jaina* ethics. By acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge, individuals become more open to alternative viewpoints and less inclined toward dogmatism or conflict. As Bimal Krishna Matilal explains, recognizing the limitations of human understanding naturally encourages tolerance and restraint in both thought and action. In this way, humility in knowledge fosters a moral attitude that values peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, reinforcing the *Jaina* ideal that non-violence should guide human behaviour at intellectual, verbal, and practical levels.¹³

We can say that both *Mīmāṃsā* and *Jaina* traditions showcase how logic and ethical life are not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing. In the former, logic ensures the correct performance of duty derived from scriptural mandates; in the latter, it cultivates respect for plurality, reducing dogmatism and harm. Both traditions reflect a rich confluence of reason and morality within Indian philosophical ethics.

The Ethical Dimensions of Error:

In Indian philosophical traditions, cognitive error is never viewed as a merely neutral epistemic event. Rather, it is imbued with ethical significance. Both *avidyā* (ignorance) and *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge) are conceptualized not only as failures of the intellect but as morally consequential phenomena. This is particularly evident in the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Nyāya* Schools, where error is linked to suffering, moral disorder and the obstruction of liberation (*mokṣa*).

In *Advaita Vedānta*, *avidyā* – a fundamental, beginningless ignorance – is regarded as the root cause of *samsāra* (the cycle of birth and death). According to Śaṅkara, the misidentification of the self (*ātman*) with the non-self (body, mind, etc.) due to *avidyā* leads to attachment, aversion, and ultimately suffering. Thus, *avidyā* is not a passive state but an active distortion of reality that perpetuates moral error. As Eliot Deutsch notes in *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, “ignorance is not simply not-knowing but a wrong knowing.”¹⁴ The corrective to this ethical-cognitive disorder is *jñāna* – true knowledge – which is inherently liberatory and morally purifying. Liberation is not merely epistemic but also ethical, entailing the dissolution of ego, desire, and selfish action.

The *Nyāya* school approaches error through a more analytical lens but arrives at a similar moral implication. Cognitive faults (*doṣa*) – such as *pramāda* (carelessness), *vipralipsā* (deceit), or *bhrānti* (delusion) – are seen not merely as technical errors but as lapses that involve a dereliction of epistemic

duty. Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, in his *Nyāyamañjarī*, underscores the role of intellectual virtues such as attentiveness, impartiality and the willingness to revise one's beliefs. As Stephen Phillips observes in *Classical Indian Metaphysics*,¹⁵ the *Nyāya* tradition "incorporates a moral dimension to error by identifying certain psychological dispositions – like desire and hatred – as epistemically contaminating and therefore ethically blameworthy."

Thus, both traditions converge on a crucial insight: epistemology is not isolated from ethics. To know rightly is not just to think correctly but to live rightly. The cultivation of intellectual virtues – honesty, openness, and humility – is not only an epistemic imperative but also a moral one. The ethical life, therefore, demands a vigilant and disciplined mind, one that seeks truth not merely for its own sake but as a precondition for just and compassionate action. *Avidyā* (ignorance) and *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge) thus serve as pivotal concepts that bridging metaphysical error and ethical failure in Indian philosophy. Their rectification through *jñāna* and intellectual discipline is not merely an ascent to truth but also a commitment to moral clarity and liberation.

Conclusion

Indian logical traditions do not regard knowledge as morally neutral; rather, they situate the pursuit of knowledge within a framework of ethical responsibility. The search for truth is understood as a moral obligation, where beliefs must be carefully examined and responsibly justified. In this view, reasoning is not merely a technical or intellectual exercise but a disciplined practice that guides individuals toward right understanding, right action, and ultimately liberation.

Within Indian philosophical traditions, epistemology is therefore profoundly normative. It does not limit itself to explaining the sources and methods of knowledge but also prescribes the ethical manner in which knowledge ought to be pursued. The seeker is expected to cultivate intellectual honesty, humility, and moral integrity while engaging in inquiry. Knowledge is valuable not only for its theoretical clarity but also for its capacity to shape character and guide ethical conduct.

This perspective contrasts with approaches that treat knowledge as detached from moral concerns. Instead, Indian traditions emphasize that knowing and being are intimately connected: the way one seeks knowledge reflects and influences one's moral development. Consequently, the pursuit of truth becomes inseparable from the pursuit of virtue. A genuine knower is also expected to embody ethical discipline and responsibility.

In this way, Indian epistemology presents a holistic vision of knowledge. It integrates rational inquiry with ethical commitment and spiritual aspiration,

portraying knowledge not simply as information or belief but as a transformative path toward wisdom and moral flourishing.

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