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Faith and Reason in Indian Philosophy

ABSTRACT

While understanding the relative roles of faith and reason in the systems of Indian philosophy, the paper deals with two main questions:

1. How does inference operate in establishing beliefs? Can we say that a belief is rational (and not an article of faith) if it is argued through inferences? In response to this question it is shown that some metaphysical systems use some forms of reasoning in dual way: to support common sense beliefs and also to transcend common sense in favour of some transcendent metaphysical beliefs. It was Cārvākas who tried to restrict the scope of reasoning to empirical world and this-worldly way of life.
2. Generally we talk of āgama or śabda (authority, or testimony) as pramāṇa when it is a question of supporting faith. But there are systems in which inference and verbal testimony operate together. So there is a question about the relation between the two sources of knowledge. What kind of relation between the two supports rationality and which relation supports faith? It is shown in the paper that the reason oriented systems even question the authority of scriptures through reasoning whereas the faith oriented systems try to restrict the scope of reasoning by adhering to scriptural authority.

Hence while considering the roles of faith and reason in the systems of Indian philosophy we get a spectrum of views. At one end we have the extreme criticality of the sceptics; next to that we have adherence to this-worldly common sense view of the learned Cārvākas. Then we have Buddhism which allows critical appraisal of faith. It is followed by Jainism which appreciates rival metaphysical views as partial truths. Then we have the systems like Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, which justify common sense, but also try to establish metaphysical views by applying non-empirical inference. On the other side of the spectrum, we have the systems like Pūrvamīmāṃsā and Vedānta. These systems not only emphasize verbal testimony against inference, but they claim themselves to be rooted in verbal testimony, that is Vedic scriptures. In this group of systems we have also to include Vyākaraṇadarśana as expounded by Bhartrhari in Vākyapadīya and also Dharmaśāstra as expounded in the works like Manusmṛti. These systems follow different ways of defending Vedas and subordinating reason. The paper finds a problem with both the extremes: Sceptical application of reason which question common sense and uncritical adherence to faith which disallows rational appraisal.