

Columbia College, Columbia University in the City of New York

The Ends of Epistemology: *reading and restoring the project of the Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya*

Angela Theresa Vettikkal
Prof. Dhananjay Jagannathan and Prof. Sheldon Pollock
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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
1. Success in Action: Knowledge, Desire, and Error of Mind in the Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya	
1.1 Inquiry as Action	2
1.2 arthavat pramāṇam: An Interpretative Problem	4
1.3 Success in Moral Action	7
1.4 Acting without Desire	9
1.5 Desiring to Know	11
2. Why Knowledge Is Not Enough: The Need for Epistemology	
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Understanding the True Nature of Things	13
2.3 The Stakes of Epistemology: Vīgrahanyavartāni	14
3. How to Know Everything: The Form and Method of the Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya	
3.1 The Form and Method of the Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya	16
3.2 Conclusion	17

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Introduction

Possibly no lineage of philosophers in the Sanskrit world investigated into the reality and conditions of knowledge more deeply than Nyāya, the other major contender being their skeptical opponents, the Buddhists. After the *Nyāyasūtras* of Akṣapada Gotama (c. 100 B.C. - 150 A.D.), which inaugurated Nyāya by making epistemology the principle question of philosophy, the next extant work in this tradition, and thus our primary example of the early development of Nyāya, is Vātsyāyana's *Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya* (c. 350 A.D. - 400 A.D.), a work which takes the form of a commentary on the incredibly condensed language of the *Nyāyasūtras*.¹ The aim of this paper is to identify and explicate the project of the *Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya*, which has not been addressed directly nor fully, to the detriment of our understanding of underlying principles in the work and the nuances of the epistemology it advances. It will argue that this project is at once a study of knowledge and a map for the path to moral perfection.

The first *sūtra* of the *Nyāyasūtras* declares that the highest good (*nīḥśreyas*) is reached through understanding the true nature (*tattvajñānam*) of epistemology and objects of knowledge along with the things that relate to knowing, such as dialectic and logical fallacy.² Despite the fact that Vātsyāyana holds this *sūtra* to articulate “in brief the purpose of the whole treatise (*tantrārthā*),” the significance of the *sūtra* to the project of the *NSB* is yet to be understood.³ There are several readings of the project of the *NSB*, but none is able to integrate, in the way that is enunciated by this *sūtra*, Vātsyāyana's engagement with epistemology with his recurrent concern with the highest good.

¹ Bimal Krishnan Matilal, *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, in *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), 76-80.

² Vātsyāyana and Akṣapada Gotama, *Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya*, in *Nyāyadarśanam*, ed. Amarendra Mohan Tarkatirtha and Taranath Nyāyatarkatirtha (Calcutta: Metropolitan Printing and Publishing House Ltd.: 1936), 28.

I will hereafter refer to the text in this edition as *NSB* and cite the relevant *sūtra* under which the citation falls followed by the page number where the text is found, e.g. *NSB* 1.1.1 (28):

प्रमणप्रमेयसंशयप्रतोजनदृष्टान्तसिद्धान्तावयवतर्कनिर्णयवादजल्पवितण्डोहेत्वाभासच्छलजातिनिग्रहस्थानानां तत्त्वज्ञानात्
निःश्रेयसाधिगमः

The highest good is reached through an the understanding of the true nature of [first] (1) the ways of gaining knowledge (*pramāṇas*), and (2) the objects of knowledge (*prameya*); of [the pattern of sound investigation, whose components are] (3) doubt, (4) purpose, (5) example; (6) thesis, (7) components of inference and syllogism, (8) philosophy, (9) and demonstrated truth; [of the variety of philosophical debate, which is classified as] (10) proper debate, (11) improper debate, and (12) eristic debate; [of the moves in false reasoning to be identified, avoided, and counteracted, whose categories are] (13) logical fallacies (14) verbal fallacies (15) counter-argumentative fallacies, and (16) argumentative weaknesses.

³ *NSB* 1.1.1 (32).

First, from a certain (older) tradition, we have a reading on which the claim exhibits the general soteriological orientation of all thought in Sanskrit. To these readers, this orientation precludes it from ever achieving the kind of inquiry into things for their own sake, or the purely theoretical viewpoint, that could be the beginning of any sort of real philosophy.⁴ The idea is that any philosophy that seeks a world-transcendent highest good, such as the particular good that Vātsyāyana propounds as the highest— emancipation from the transmigration of souls — is religion before it is philosophy. Thus, they argue that Vātsyāyana cannot be said to be doing epistemology proper because his philosophy inevitably reduces to a defense of doctrinaire religious views. Motivated to show that Nyāya is real philosophy, others deny that there is any substantial practical orientation in these works. Some of these new readers dismiss the mention of the highest good all together, chalking it up to the intellectual conventions of the period. Others within this group of readers recognize that there are distinctly practical and moral sections in these texts, but insist that these sections are virtually independent from the real focus, which remains epistemology. The first reading, which I will call the *soteriological* reading, wrongly takes Vātsyāyana’s orientation toward the highest good to exclude his commitment to knowledge; the second, which I will call the *analytic* reading, rescues Vātsyāyana’s epistemology at the expense of occluding Vātsyāyana’s concerns in the domain of action and morality. Operating on the assumption that we cannot take both Vātsyāyana’s commitment to the highest good and to knowledge seriously, neither of these readings can account for *Sūtra 1.1.1*, nor its primacy. On the new *integrated* reading I give here, this assumption will be shown to be unwarranted and the project of the *NSB* explained.⁵

In §1, I will argue that there is a dialectic at work in the *NSB*, which begins with the claim that the ways of gaining knowledge have an object or purpose, and, through further inquiry into what that means, ends in the conclusion that *understanding of the true nature of things* leads to the highest good. The subsections of §1 follow this dialectic and correspond to the states of knowledge and success that lead up to the highest good, dealing with interpretative and philosophical issues that arise along the way. On the basis of this reading of Vātsyāyana’s views on action, desire, and knowing, in §2, I explain why epistemology is necessary for achieving the highest good by defending this interpretation against two objections. The first objects that epistemology is overkill: one does not need philosophy to have the kind of knowledge one needs to do good. The second objects that Vātsyāyana’s discussion of epistemology goes into matters far outside the realm of the practical and the moral. How could it be that he thinks that *all* epistemology serves the highest good? In §3, I conclude by examining how the structure of the *Nyāyasūtras* confirms my reading of the project of the *NSB*.

1. Success in Action: Knowledge, Desire, and Error of Mind in the *Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya*

1.1 Inquiry as Action

The first line of the *Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya* received serious philosophical engagement in its own time, producing, for example, nearly one-hundred lines of theorization in the next extant work of *Nyāya*, Uddyottakāra’s *Nyāyavārttika* (c. 600 A.D.). We will see in the sections that follow how this claim lays the groundwork for the whole project of the *NSB*, since it posits that epistemology serves the practical aims of all living beings. However, before we get into the dialectic that starts here, we must resolve an interpretative difficulty present in the line.

⁴ The *soteriological* and *analytic* readings are general categories which I have used to single out the two most significant strands of thought on the topic of Sanskrit philosophy as a whole. However, none of these readings address the project of the *NSB* directly. For instances of what might follow the *soteriological* reading see Hegel 1892, Husserl 1836, and Flew 1971; for the *analytic* reading see Mohanty 1995. Other mentions of the Nyāya project can be found in Chakrabarti 2017, Ganeri 2001, and Matilal 1977.

⁵ All translations of the *NSB* have been adapted from primarily Jha 1939, with consultation with Ganeri 2011 and Matilal 1977, with a large number of, at times minor and at times major, changes.

A single, crucial word in the line— *arthavat* — is the source of the interpretative problem. I have translated it here neutrally as “have an object,” but will go on to argue that the term express the purposive nature of knowledge and inquiry.

The ways of gaining knowledge (*pramāṇa*) must be regarded as having an object (*arthavat*) insofar as there is only capacity for success in action (*pravṛtīḥ-sāmarthyam*) when there is ascertainment (*pratīpattih*) of the object (*artham*) through a way of gaining knowledge (*pramāṇa*).^{6 7}

Even leaving aside the conclusion that the ways of gaining knowledge (*pramāṇa*) must be regarded as *arthavat*, Vātsyāyana’s reasoning is revealing. He tells us that “there is only capacity for success in action” when there is knowledge, or “ascertainment (*pratīpattih*) of the object (*artham*) through a way of gaining knowledge (*pramāṇa*).” It seems reasonable to Vātsyāyana to claim that at least one reason why we act successfully in the world is because we have actually acquired some basic knowledge about it— we have attained beliefs that are faithful to the way things are. The logic is as follows: if I, desiring a particular fruit on a tree, went to pluck that fruit, and got it down from the tree and held it in my hand ready to eat, then I must have acquired at the very least some basic knowledge of the world in order to do so. I knew, for example, where the tree was, where to climb, and that it was a fruit and not something else. Vātsyāyana makes it clear in the next line that he upholds the view that knowledge is necessary for success in action:

As a matter of fact, there would be no cognition of the object without the ways of gaining knowledge (*pramāṇa*), nor would there be a capacity for success in action without cognition of the object.⁸

If we accept that success in action is a relatively common occurrence, we must give an explanation for this. Vātsyāyana’s own explanation for this common phenomenon is that it is neither primarily chance nor God but knowledge that makes success in action possible.

But, what does Vātsyāyana mean that, in virtue of knowledge’s role in successful action, the ways of gaining knowledge must be regarded as *arthavat*? To resolve this issue we have to first understand Vātsyāyana’s views on the actions of living beings. The needed background is found in the paragraphs that follow *Sūtra* 1.1.1., there Vātsyāyana tells us that *prayojanam*, or purpose, “pervades all living beings, all actions, and all sciences”— henceforth referred to as the *Universal Principle of Purpose*.^{9 10} Pervasion, for a Nyāya philosopher, is the rule of invariable inherence: if x is pervaded by y , then it is impossible to find x where there is no y present. Thus the principle expresses the strong claim that all living things, all actions, and all sciences are striving for something, i.e. they have some purpose— without exception. Purpose, or *prayojanam*, is the category of reasons why living beings act and the many whats that drive their very living activity. It includes why we pursue knowledge and what drives inquiry. Implicit in this model of life activity is the idea that actions contain within them the conditions for their own success. The end, or purpose, that got the action going in the first place determines what success looks like for that action. When the end of the act is achieved, we have success in action.

What might be harder to appreciate is the claim that the same kind of purpose that inheres in action inheres in all pursuits of knowledge. There are two assumptions at work in this claim. The first is that the pursuit of knowledge is something that only living beings can do; it does not exist separate from their activity. The second assumption is one that has already been stated: that purpose inheres in the actions of all living

⁶ NSB preface to 1.1.1 (1): प्रमाणतो अर्थप्रतिपत्तौ प्रवृत्तिसामर्थ्यादर्थवत् प्रमाणम् ।

⁷ I have followed Ganeri 2011 in translating *pramāṇa* as way of gaining knowledge. The critical term is also translated as source of knowledge, means of knowledge, and epistemic instrument. It refers to the set of different “ways” we might get knowledge, such as perception and inference— each which has its own particular epistemological character and related puzzles.

⁸ NSB preface to 1.1.1 (21): प्रमाणम् अन्तरेण नार्थप्रतिपत्तिः, नार्थप्रतिपत्तिः अन्तरेण प्रवृत्तिसामर्थ्यम् ।

⁹ See NSB 3.1.56 (935-936): At the beginning of the discussion of the sensory faculties, Vātsyāyana recognizes explicitly that *artha*, or object, can mean *prayojana*, or purpose.

¹⁰ NSB 1.1.1 (38): तेनानेन [प्रयोजननेन] सर्वे प्राणिनः सर्वाणि कर्माणि सर्वाश्च विद्या व्याप्ताः

beings. Insofar as pursuing knowledge is just something living beings *do*, inquiry is just a specialized form of action, and as such it must also be pervaded by purpose. Like all other actions, inquiring must also have an end toward which it strives and determines what it means for it to achieve success. What might this end be? The ultimate end of a particular inquiry is the reason the living being doing the inquiry is seeking knowledge about a particular matter. This ultimate end informs the proximate end: the immediate object of inquiry, i.e. the question into which the agent is going to inquire or the doubt she would like to resolve. Accordingly, when she attains knowledge of the object of inquiry and her reason for seeking this knowledge is thus satisfied, she achieves success in the act of inquiry.

There are several further commitments that follow from Vātsyāyana's commitment to the *Universal Principle of Purpose*, some of which have already been stated. Each of these subsidiary commitments is essential to understanding the first sentence of the *NSB*. The first is a normative consequence of the principle, which also captures the conditions for success implicit in the idea of purpose; this is the *Normative Principle of Success in Action*:

All actions are seeking their own success, and all living beings are striving for success in their own actions.

The second is a psychological consequence of the principle, which captures the characterization of human behavior inherent in the pervasion of purpose in all life activity; this is the *Psychological Principle of Motivation*:

A living being cannot undertake action if they have no motivation to do so.

It is recognized by *Normative Principle of Success in Action* that a person might unintentionally move toward something or utter some syllables. However, it establishes the norm that, unless she has an end in mind that directs the doing, what she is doing is not action (*pravṛttiḥ*) in the strict sense. Moreover, if the *doing* does not have an end, it cannot be said to succeed or fail in any intelligible way. The *Psychological Principle of Motivation* is important here to the specific action of inquiry. Since inquiry belongs to the genus of end-driven action, it is necessary for anyone undertaking it to have a purpose in doing so. This becomes significant to the project of the *NSB* insofar as the burden falls on Vātsyāyana to give a sufficient motivation for why anyone would commence the present inquiry into epistemology with him. Though it is not initially obvious, it becomes clear that Vātsyāyana's dialectic functions by making the very reason for why someone should take up epistemology the ultimate end of his own inquiry, the end in view of which Vātsyāyana is conducting his pursuit of knowledge. As a matter of fact, serving the practical concerns of living being informs the entire endeavor of epistemology for Vātsyāyana.

Right after presenting the *Universal Principle of Purpose*, Vātsyāyana reveals that this principle forms the basis of all reasoning and investigation, which for him is identical with Nyāya itself.¹¹

1.2 *arthavat pramāṇam: An Interpretative Problem*

Coming back to our interpretative problem, what does it mean that the ways of gaining knowledge “have an object?” There are two possibilities here, both of which are captured by the ambiguity of the English word “object.” The first takes it to mean objects in the world. On this reading, to claim that ways of gaining knowledge have an object is to say that they are successful at actually getting onto real objects in the world. The second takes “object” to mean purpose or aim. On this view, to claim that the ways of gaining knowledge have an object is to say that they have an intention or purpose. The first reading is suggested by Jonardon Ganeri. He takes the sense of *arthavat*, “to have an object,” to be epistemic accuracy. That is, the ways of gaining knowledge are accurate at hitting their target: knowledge about objects.¹² The logic of this reading is as follows: when we witness our own successful actions, we are seeing the ways of gaining knowledge actually getting onto things in the world and providing cognition for us. On his view, the stress of the line falls on proving that the *pramāṇas* are effective means of gaining knowledge against the skeptical critique that the *pramāṇas* provide no real knowledge of objects.

However, there is an alternative to reading *arthavat* as epistemic accuracy. A more plausible reading of the line given the context is the following: insofar as knowledge is instrumental to successful action, “the ways

¹¹ *NSB* 1.1.1 (38): [तेनानेन [प्रयोजननेन] सर्वे प्राणिनः सर्वाणि कर्माणि सर्वाश्च विद्या व्याप्ताः] तदाश्रयश्च न्यायः प्रवर्तते.

¹² Jonardon Ganeri, “The Possibility of Inquiry,” in *The Lost Age of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 123.

of gaining knowledge must be regarded as having an object,” i.e. in the sense of having a *purpose*. Against the background of the *Universal Principle of Purpose*, we can identify what this purpose is. The immediate utility of the ways of gaining knowledge is to give us cognition of the object; but, insofar as “there is no capacity for success in action unless there is cognition of the object,” the ultimate purpose served by the ways of gaining knowledge is to make possible success in action.¹³ On this reading, Vātsyāyana side-steps the skeptical critique that we do not actually get onto objects in the world because he takes knowledge for granted. Instead, he focuses on building from the assumption that there is knowledge to the conclusion that there must be some ways of gaining knowledge, which, moreover, are instrumental to all living beings.

Previously, we saw that purpose pervades all living beings, all actions, and all inquiry. In light of his commitment to the *Psychological Principle of Motivation* which follows from this *Universal Principle of Purpose*, we can see why Vātsyāyana would be motivated to establish that the ways of gaining knowledge, and, by association, the endeavor of epistemology, serve some purpose. For only if this endeavor has a purpose can he motivate others to partake in the pursuit of knowledge. In light of the *Normative Principle of Success in Action*, we can see, secondly, why he would choose a specific purpose that applies to all living beings by definition: the final aim of achieving success in action.

The problem with the first reading is that it proposes a line of argumentation that is not taken up later in the text. If we imagine with the first reading that, in Vātsyāyana’s mind, there is a skeptic who is charging him with the problem of epistemic regression as follows:

If the ways of gaining knowledge are justified by objects in the world, and if objects in the world are justified by the ways of gaining knowledge, you have a problem of infinite regression!

And, thus take the first line of the *NSB* to be Vātsyāyana’s response in the form:

I do not have a problem of infinite regression, because I use success in action, and not objects themselves, as the criterion for determining what ways of gaining knowledge are accurate and which are not. Therefore, the ways of gaining knowledge are accurate to objects in the world (*arthavat pramāṇam*)!

— then we would expect that Vātsyāyana would build or at least reiterate this argument later when he discusses the ways of gaining knowledge in depth and deals with skeptical critiques against them. However, Vātsyāyana does not take this approach.¹⁴ By contrast, Vātsyāyana does discuss the purpose and role of knowledge in achieving success throughout the entire text, in fact, using the claim as the starting point of the dialectic that structures the treatise. Thus, the second reading is stronger. The claim *arthavat pramāṇam* is not a conclusion about the accuracy of the ways of gaining knowledge, but one about the exigency of the project of epistemology.

Having resolved this interpretative problem and brought to light the practical orientation of the first line of the *NSB*, we can see the twofold significance of this first line to the project of the *NSB*. First, it provides a dialectical hook into the pursuit of epistemology; from the outset Vātsyāyana operates on the principle that we undertake epistemology with a view to exploring success in life activity. The thesis in its nascent form is simple. We should inquire into those things, whatever they are, that enable us to know, because knowing is essential to succeeding in action. This is enough to get the *NSB*’s project going, i.e. to get us inquiring into knowledge. Second, the line shows us how Vātsyāyana establishes a moral psychology here so that he can later propose a highest good developed from this basic good of success in action. This twofold move of providing a dialectical hook and establishing a moral psychology is crucial since the investigation it engenders into knowledge, knowers, and knowing activity results in the major claim we are trying to understand: that the highest good is reached through *understanding of the true nature of things*. By investigating

¹³ see footnote 6

¹⁴ *NSB* 2.1.8-2.1.20 (419-449): While in this section, “The Examination of the *pramāṇas*,” we see Vātsyāyana use both the argument that the ways of gaining are self-verifying, like a lamp which illuminates an object as well as itself, and a sort of coherentist argument in which the ways of gaining knowledge and the objects of knowledge are mutually-supporting but not identical in kind, like a weighing balance and the gold that it measures, Vātsyāyana does not argue that successful action can be used to determine that there really is knowledge and when we have attained it.

the claim that basic knowledge serves a purpose in success in action, Vātsyāyana will arrive at the conclusion that the highest state of knowledge leads to the highest success possible for an active being.

However, it is important, before continuing, to reiterate that, in this nascent form, the claim that the ways of gaining knowledge have a purpose is rather open and indeterminate. Although Vātsyāyana takes as fundamental the fact that knowledge is what makes success possible, at this early point in the work he has not specified just how this knowledge which allows us to act is gained. He has merely stated that there is “no cognition of the object without the ways of gaining knowledge.” Employing an idea deeply ingrained in the classical Sanskrit intellectual world, that the elemental anatomy of language can be used as a framework to model the deep structures of thought and of the reality, Vātsyāyana supposes that if there were to be cognition of the object by an agent, there would have to be some valid *means by which* that knowledge was gained; if cognition is understood using the basic semantic parts of a sentence, then it is reasonable to think that along with the agent (the cognizer), the verb (cognizes), and the patient (the object of cognition), there would also be an instrument (the way of gaining knowledge, or cognitive instrument). However, although Vātsyāyana makes this assumption, he does not specify precisely what these means are.¹⁵ It is only after inquiring into those means — the ways of gaining knowledge— using proper dialectical form replete with arguments, counter-arguments, questioning, and defense that we will discover what they are and if they are valid.¹⁶

The possibility that the concept ‘*pramāṇa*,’ or ways of gaining knowledge can refer here to diverse and contradictory epistemologies is undeniable when the concept is understood in the context of Sanskrit epistemology. As McCrea and Patil rightly note:

The principal rubric within which epistemological debate took place [in the Sanskrit philosophical world] was that of the “sources of knowledge,” that is, means of valid awareness [i.e. the *pramāṇas* or ways of gaining knowledge]. Rival philosophical text traditions differed over the number of distinct sources of knowledge, the precise nature of each, and the sorts of things that could be known through them.¹⁷

The possible ways of gaining knowledge available to a classical Sanskrit philosopher include perception, inference, testimony, and analogy. Using this rubric, some philosopher and his opponent may, for example, agree on the fact that perception is a valid way of knowing, but then disagree about its nature— for instance, on the question of whether our sensory perception is pre-conceptual or already conceptualized.

To recognize that at the start of the investigation Vātsyāyana has not already determined what the valid ways of gaining knowledge are going to be, nor their nature, is to recognize that the end of the inquiry, the true nature of things whose understanding is *tattvajñānam*, while foreshadowed is not predetermined. Despite the firmness with which it will come to its conclusions, the *NSB* commences as an investigation into the possibility and conditions of knowledge and not simply a defense of doctrine.

¹⁵ *NSB* 1.1.1 (24-25): तत्र यस्येप्साजिहासाप्रयुक्तस्य प्रवृत्तिः स प्रमाता, स येनाऽर्थं प्रमिणोति तत्प्रमाणम् योऽर्थः प्रमीयते तत् प्रमेयं, यद् अर्थविज्ञानं सा प्रमितिः, चतसृषु चैवंविधास्वर्थतत्वं परिसमाप्यते । किं पुनस्तत्त्वम् ? । सतश्च सद्भावोऽसतश्चाऽसद्भावः । सत्सदिति गृह्यमाणं ।

Among these parts of the cognitive episode, the person, impelled by the desire to acquire or to reject the object, *who acts*, is the ‘cognizer,’ and that *by means of which* the person obtains cognition of the thing is the way of gaining knowledge (*pramāṇa*). That thing which is cognized is called the ‘cognized object,’ or ‘object of knowledge.’ What is knowing the thing, that is the ‘cognition.’ Thus, it is in all four of these factors that the real nature of things (*arthatattvam*) is completely grasped. *Now, what is this true nature of things (tattvam)?* It is being (*sadbhāvaḥ*), or existence, in the case of *that which is* (or exists); and non-being (*asadbhāvaḥ*), or non-existence, in the case of *that which is not*.

¹⁶ Proper dialectic form is itself a major subject of investigation in the *NSB*.

¹⁷ McCrea, Lawrence, and Patil, Parimal, “Introduction” in *Buddhist Philosophy of Language in India: Jñanasrimitra on Exclusion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010: 7-9.

On my reading, Vātsyāyana claims that the ways of gaining knowledge serve a purpose for all living beings insofar as they are instrumental to successful action. This claim is supposed to be enough to motivate anyone to take up the project of inquiring into these ways, to take up epistemology, insofar as success in action is an aim which all living beings, all sciences, and all actions share. However, a problem remains. If part of the grounds for why I should take up epistemology is that the ways of gaining knowledge are pragmatically successful, then is it not the case that insofar as I think I have succeeded in my actions, I must already have knowledge, even without engaging seriously with epistemology? If there is success in action without understanding the *pramāṇas*, why would I inquire further into them? It is true that part of the strength of Vātsyāyana's argument is that it capitalizes on our pre-theoretic acceptance of the fact that there is success in action, however frequent or rare. His intervention is to suggest that it must be knowledge primarily that makes this possible. Vātsyāyana seems to bet that if I am ready to attribute my success in action to my knowledge of the world, I might be equally ready to attribute my failures to lack thereof, and thus be prompted— as a striving being— to inquire further into the possibility and conditions of knowledge. I am motivated to do epistemology because I hope to attain higher degrees of success. It is the promise of the highest degree of success in action that is made in Sūtra 1.1.1 when Akṣapada Gotama and Vātsyāyana claim that the highest good is reached through attaining *understanding of the true nature of things*, the aim of the philosophical work. However, before understanding what it means to attain the highest degree of success, we must examine the intermediate degrees of success that an agent could attain and the corresponding degrees of knowledge.

1.3 Success in Moral Action

There is another more powerful solution to the quandary posed at the end of §1.2. The charge is worth recalling. If the *pramāṇas* function to give us cognition of objects and make success in action possible without us having to inquire into them, what motivation do I have to do the hard and time-consuming activity of philosophy? Above, the suggestion was that the very fact that the ways of gaining knowledge are instrumental to successful action is enough to motivate further inquiry on the promise that greater degrees of success many follow from greater knowledge.

However, there is another response available and Vātsyāyana takes it up. To the reluctant knower, the philosopher could say: 'Ah! You may be succeeding in achieving the things you think you want. But, you only *think* you are succeeding in action. You have misunderstood what you actually want and are confusing it with what you actually do not want. In fact, you are successfully achieving what you do not want. If you were to *know* things properly you would know what it is you are really striving for, and you would desire to know how to achieve *that*.' The ingenuity of the retort is that it both grants that the knower has achieved some success in action through his pre-theoretic use of the ways of gaining knowledge— perhaps, he rightly knew by means of perception that there was a mango on the table that would satisfy his present desire for something sweet— but it also presents the possibility that the knower has not really grasped the world or what he wants — despite his correct perception of the existence and location of the mango, he, for example, has not realized that he himself is not a being that is ultimately going to be satisfied by pursuing pleasure: even though he can fulfill it, his desire is misplaced.

The picture of desire that makes this reply work is the idea that our desires are products of our knowledge, or lack thereof, of our selves and the world. What we think is desirable and not desirable are cognitions determined by the rest of the things we believe. The second part of this picture is that, not only are our desires determined by what we think, insofar as our selves, our desires, our pain and pleasure are just objects in the world, we can think *wrongly* about them. Just as we can have an illusory perception of an oasis in a desert, we can have illusory cognition of our aims.

The response to the reluctant knower relies on this picture. The belief that the reluctant knower has mis-cognized his aims is what informs the retort. 'You have misunderstood what you *actually* want and are confusing it with exactly what you do not want.' This is Vātsyāyana's own view. He tells us:

There are many kinds of false knowledge for the possible objects of knowledge are several: the self, body, sense-organs, objects, apprehension, mind, action, moral error, re-birth, pain, the result of action, and the ultimate good....In the case of pain, when it is regarded as pleasure, there is false knowledge — likewise when the non-eternal is regarded as eternal, the non-safe as what is safe, the

dangerous as free from danger, the detested as what is desired, and what is to be abandoned as not to be abandoned.¹⁸

Corroborating this interpretation, is Vātsyāyana's use of the exact same formula for true cognition and false cognition in the case of moral judgements such as what is to be desired and when he speaks of truth and the cognition of truth in general. When asked, "Now, what is this true nature of things (*tattvam*)?", he defines truth as follows:

It is being (*sadbhāvaḥ*), or existence, in the case of *that which is* (or exists); and non-being (*asadbhāvaḥ*), or non-existence, in the case of *that which is not*. That is to say, when something that is, or exists, is apprehended as being, or existent, so that it is apprehended as what it really is, and not as something that it is not (*aviparītam*), and that which does not exist is apprehended as not existing, then that which is apprehended is the 'true nature of the thing' (*tattvam*) in such a way as to be actually what it is (*yathabhūtam*) and not something that is not (*aviparītam*).

The same formula that regarding x as x and not as not- x is to grasp the truth of x is carried over into the discussion of value-laden objects such as the self and action. When discussing true cognition of the desirable, it is to know that what is the desirable *is* desirable and what is not is not desirable. Accordingly, a knower has false cognition when these are confused, e.g. when the undesirable is thought to be desirable.¹⁹ Thus is confirmed the idea that Vātsyāyana believes that the right value-laden cognitions, such as what is really worthy of desire and thereby worth striving toward, are themselves correct cognitions that directly follow from understanding the way things are.

For Vātsyāyana, having the right cognitions and thereby the right desires is the next possible degree of success in action, one in which the knower not only is able to get what she wants, but also knows what it is that she *really* wants. Through proper cognition of the world, her desires have come in to better conformity with the way things are. What has not been discussed is that to have one's desires conform to the truth of things and then to act from the disposition produced by these desires is nothing but to act *morally* for Vātsyāyana. It is to do actions in accordance with and conducive to *dharma*: norms or the ways things truly are. Immoral action, thus, is to do actions from a disposition informed by false cognition of the ways things are. Following his explication of the kinds of false knowledge people are inclined to have, e.g., that the non-eternal is eternal, Vātsyāyana tells us:

From these kinds of false knowledge arises attachment to the [merely] agreeable, and repulsion to the [merely] disagreeable, and from this attachment and repulsion arises the moral errors such as lack of restraint from falsehood, envy, deception, and greed.²⁰

Here he confirms that moral error is born from false cognition. That moral error is nothing but a cognitive error for Vātsyāyana is corroborated by his discussion of the moral errors later on in the text. Having claimed that there are three kinds of moral error— desire, hatred, and error of mind— he further notes that error of mind is special as the source of all such error:

Error of mind (*mohaḥ*) is evil. It is said to be even more evil than the other two. *Why?* Because for a person who is not erroneous mentally, the other two errors do not arise. That is to say, unless one is affected by mental error, desire and hatred do not arise. Moreover, desire and hatred *do* arise for a

¹⁸ NSB 1.1.2 (71-76): तत्रात्माद्यपवर्गपर्यन्तप्रमेये मिथ्याज्ञानम् अनेकप्रकारकं वर्तते— आत्मनि तावन् नास्तीति, अनात्मनि आत्मेति दुःखे सुखम् इति अनित्ये नित्यम् इत्य् अत्राणे त्राणम् इति सभये निर्भयम् इति, जुगुप्सिते ऽभिमतम् इति, हातव्ये अप्रतिहातव्यम् इति, प्रवृत्तौ नास्ति कर्म, नास्ति कर्मफलम् इति.

¹⁹ NSB 1.1.2 (71-76): तत्रात्माद्यपवर्गपर्यन्तप्रमेये मिथ्याज्ञानम् अनेकप्रकारकं वर्तते— आत्मनि तावन् नास्तीति, अनात्मनि आत्मेति दुःखे सुखम् इति अनित्ये नित्यम् इत्य् अत्राणे त्राणम् इति सभये निर्भयम् इति, जुगुप्सिते ऽभिमतम् इति, हातव्ये अप्रतिहातव्यम् इति, प्रवृत्तौ नास्ति कर्म, नास्ति कर्मफलम् इति.

²⁰ NSB 1.1.2 (76): एतस्मान् मिथ्याज्ञानाद् अनुकूलेषु रागः, प्रतिकूलेषु द्वेषः रागद्वेषाधिकाराच्चासत्येष्वर्ष्यमायालोभादयो दोषा भवन्ति.

person who is under the influence of mental error in accordance with the conceptions formed in his mind (*yathāsamkalpa*).²¹

Our cognitions determine what we think about ourselves and the world, and what we think determines what we do. Moreover, doing the wrong thing or the right thing is entirely dependent on whether the knower has rightfully grasped the way things are, and in the fortunate case that she does, she has success in moral action. Error of mind thus is evil full-stop; it is the worst of the three possible moral errors, or human faults (*doṣaḥ*), since, as Vātsyāyana, says it is mental error that is the ultimate source of immoral action. However, while in the preliminary discussion of false cognition and moral error doing the right and moral thing consisted in desiring the right thing and striving for that, in this latter passage, curiously, desire itself is taken to be one of the moral errors. What is the problem with desire, given that it is integral to our current model of acting morally? The answer to this question is explored in the next section. Success in moral action, it turns out, is not the highest degree of success one can attain; there is further perfection of both knowledge and aim. As will become clear, this is to act without desire.

1.4 Acting Without Desire

Vātsyāyana's moral agent is the person who correctly ascertains what is desirable and worth striving for and what is not because she has obtained knowledge about the nature of her self and the ways things actually are. Pursuing these proper ends, the moral agent is in the position to successfully achieve these ends as she has already achieved a rather nuanced and deep understanding of the world. If she has correctly cognized these as the proper ends, it is nearly impossible that she has not quite understood the world well enough to attain success in her morally-motivated actions. According to Vātsyāyana, desire is instrumental in moral action. However, as seen above, Vātsyāyana includes desire as one of the three types of moral error, the other two being error of mind and hatred. How can certain desires motivate moral action and yet desire itself be a moral error (*doṣaḥ*)? The goal of this section is to understand the problems with desire for Vātsyāyana and to reconcile these seemingly contradictory claims in the text. This investigation, in turn, will reveal the next stage of cognitive and moral perfection.

There are two problems with desire that inform Vātsyāyana's classification of desire as a moral error. Both problems are derived from the fact that desire is the posture of a being still occupied with the world and its affairs. The first problem is that our commitments and bonds to other people and worldly affairs often lead us to act immorally, whether because we are blinded by our attachments or because we have been brought to impossible dilemmas in action, in which neither possible way of proceeding is free of wrongdoing. The second problem with desire is that it prevents us from transcending our worldly being and acting in accordance with what we actually are: *ātman*, or a mere soul or self.

That the circumstances of the world, even when perfectly understood, do not always offer a perfectly moral action is taken by Vātsyāyana as a law of the way things are in the world. The world, for him, is a place of undeniable suffering, paradox, and frustration.²² Desires that are thus rooted in the imperfect world and bind living beings to it, cannot, in virtue of this imperfection, lead a living being to perfect action. The Sanskrit epic tradition is filled examples that point to the reality that human life is riddled with moral dilemmas.²³ However, one does not need to be part of this tradition to appreciate the impossibility of there being an ideal act in a non-ideal world. Thus it is just insofar as desire is a worldly posture that Vātsyāyana takes desire to be antithetical to perfect action. Moreover, there is an alternative to acting because of desire as I will explain. The singularly cognitive origin of our desires opens up the possibility that through a kind of perfect cognition one could free oneself from desire.

²¹ NSB 4.1.4-4.1.6 (927-928): मोहः पापः, पापतरो वा द्वाव् अभिप्रेत्योक्तम्. कस्मात्? नामूढस्येतरोत्पत्तेः — अमूढस्य रागद्वेषा नोत्पद्यन्ते मूढस्य तु यथासङ्कल्पम् उत्पत्तिः.

²² See NSB 4.1.58 (1013-1014) for a discussion of pain and pleasure which also deems the world to filled which frustration.

²³ For example, in the *Drona Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, a moral ruler, Yudhiṣṭhira, is driven to do an immoral act because of his moral obligation to rule and his compassion for his people.

The second problem with desire is that striving for things because we desire them, even if they are the true desirables such as moral action and knowledge, prevents us from transcending our worldly being and acting from knowledge of what we actually are: *ātman*, or a mere soul or self. The cosmology and metaphysics to which Vātsyāyana is committed to here is the law of *karma*, namely that actions impelled by desire bind the agent to the consequences of their actions. If an agent, from an ill-founded desire, does an immoral act, he is bound to undesired consequences, which will come to be in this life or the next, and, correspondingly, if an agent, from a well-founded desire, does a moral act, he will experience the positive results. Action without desire, on this view, is not only possible, it also does not bind one to the consequences, negative or positive, of the acts. One does not accrue any *dharma*, or merit, or *adharma*, or demerit from unmotivated action, and thereby is able to free oneself from the transmigration of souls.²⁴

Thus Vātsyāyana reasons that to liberate oneself from *karma* and the worldly cycle of act and consequence, one must somehow achieve a state of being without desire, a state in which one is not attached to or burdened by the going-ons of the world. The perfection of such a state of being and action without desire is twofold. First, without desire, without commitments and bonds to worldly affairs like those that ensnared Yudhiṣṭhira, immoral action no longer becomes inevitable. Free from desire, the knower can achieve a more perfect understanding of what is, and thus what one ought to do. Second, without the bondage of desire, the actor is freed from the web of acts and consequences that would cause the self to be born again in another life along with all its suffering. Thus the path away from desire leads toward moral perfection and the end of suffering.

Earlier what was established (in §1.3) was that Vātsyāyana holds the position that our moral and immoral dispositions are products of true and false cognitions of the world respectively. When we understand things properly, we do the right thing and the opposite when we do not. However, what could not be addressed then was Vātsyāyana's position that once error of mind ceases so does desire, and its partner, hatred. Holding in mind, now, that desire, according to Vātsyāyana, is *the* relation that binds us to this world and entangles us and our cognitions in its imperfections, we can understand why desire is a *source* of mental error.²⁵ Insofar as I conceive of things through my attachments to things in this world, I lack impartiality, as it were, and the truth is obscured for me. We see also how desire is a *product* of mental error: insofar as I do not understand this world and my self properly, I remain attached to it. If I think myself to be my body, I might seek to satisfy its cravings and ignore the solace I might find in my mind.²⁶

Thus the antithesis of attachment, or desire, is the absence of any mental error, including the follies of false cognition, illusion, bias, self-contradiction, and myopia.²⁷ Rather than conceiving of things through

²⁴ See *NSB* 4.1.68 and *NSB* 1.1.2 under *pravṛtīh*

²⁵ See footnote 14

²⁶ *NSB* 4.1.6 (929-930): Conceptions (*samkalpāh*) that determine that things are pleasing are the causes of desire; conceptions (*samkalpāh*) that find things to be repulsive are the causes of hatred. And, because both of these conceptions (*samkalpāh*) are marked by false cognition (*mithyā-pratīpatti-lakṣanatva*), they are nothing other than errors of mind. Thus it is that desire and hatred are born from mental error. And, when understanding of the true nature of things puts an end to mental error, desire and hatred cease to be produced; this is why desire and hatred have one and the same thing for their antithesis. It is with a view to this that it was said in *Sūtra* 1.1.2 that:

First, false knowledge (*mitthyājñānam*) ceases, upon which moral errors (*doṣah*) cease, then action (*pravṛtīh*), birth (*janman*), and pain (*duḥkham*) cease in that order, each because of the cessation of the previous one. After the end of all these things, there is the ultimate good (1.1.2).

विषयेषु रञ्जनीयाः सङ्कल्पा रागहेतवः, कोपनीयाः सङ्कल्पा द्वेषहेतवः, उभये च सङ्कल्पा न मिथ्याप्रतिपत्तिलक्षणत्वान् मोहाद् अन्ये, ताव् इमौ मोहयोनी रागद्वेषाव् इति तत्त्वज्ञानाच्च च मोहनिवृत्तौ रागद्वेषानुत्पत्तिर् इत्य् एकप्रत्यनीकभावोपपत्तिः; एवं च कृत्वा तत्त्वज्ञानाद् दुःखजन्मप्रवृत्तिदोषमिथ्याज्ञानानाम् उत्तरोत्तरापाये तदनन्तराभावाद् अपवर्ग इति व्याख्यातम् इति

²⁷ Hedonism is understood as an unsustainable position precisely because of the many contradictions that it occasions. See *NSB* 4.1.58.

my attachments to my body or to my friends or through the parochialism of my education or corner of the planet, in the ideal cognitive state, I would be able to understand perfectly and completely the absolute nature of things (*tattvajñānam*). Here, we can see why, according to Vātsyāyana, such understanding would be a state without desire, but how is it that a being who is entangled in desire and entrenched in this imperfect world could ever achieve this state? Is it not paradoxical for a person to desire to act without desire? Vātsyāyana's resolution of this paradox, and the central role of inquiry, epistemology, and philosophy in this path to the highest good in the *NSB* is the subject of the next section.

1.5 *Desiring to Know*

If we grant that desire, attachment to worldly affairs, is antithetical to perfect cognition, it might seem that perfect cognition is outside the reach of human beings, since such attachments are so deeply ingrained. How a living being, who from birth has desires and whose actions, according to Vātsyāyana, are animated by a drive to achieve his desires, could ever abandon desire itself is a difficult proposition. The puzzle taken to its extreme is the paradox that a person cannot desire to be free from desire, since this desire is of course still a desire. Thus we might conclude a person can never be free from desire. These problems can be resolved, however, if we consider how Vātsyāyana envisions such an agent could disentangle himself from a single desire. The limit condition of perfect understanding and complete freedom from desire will be covered in the discussion of a single desire on the logic that the negation of all desire is merely the negation of individual desires achieved with regard to all knowable objects.

A certain kind of dualism might be able to resolve this issue. That is, one could employ a distinction between, on the one hand, the passions, desires, and all such embodied empirical cognitions, and, on the other hand, pure thought and contemplation. For it might seem possible to be free from desires if one were to, as the oft-used metaphor goes, withdraw into the high castle of pure thought. However, this kind of dualism does not appeal to Vātsyāyana, even though it was likely available to him at the time.²⁸ He rejects this position from the very beginning of the text by putting forth the *Universal Principle of Purpose*. As I showed in §1.1, Vātsyāyana analyzes all activities of knowing, whether it be perception of worldly objects or abstract philosophical inquiry, as subtypes of action—and as action, as he told us, an activity of knowing must have some end in view of which it is done. Thus, he cannot just encourage those wishing to free themselves of worldly imperfection and attachment to withdraw into “pure thought,” since the activity of thinking about things on his model is fueled by the desire to know. Freedom from desire is still possible, however, because, real knowledge satiates, and thus negates, the desire to know.

In fact, the act of knowing negates desire twice over: first, when I cognize properly what an object is, I cognize the fact that this object is not-I, and by the cognition of this fact am no longer attached to it. This follows from the view, discussed in §1.4, that desire, or attachment, is nothing but falsely cognizing something as essential to one's self (*ātman*). Second, when I completely know the thing, my desire to know what the thing is ceases, since any doubt I had about the thing and about what relation it stands in to my self, to my success, to moral ends, or to other things is, at the moment knowledge is attained, completely resolved. Vātsyāyana talks explicitly about the *desire to know* (*jijñāsa*) after *Sūtra* 1.1.32. He defines it thus:

As for the *desire to know*, it is that which imparts the purpose of cognizing a thing not yet cognized. For what reason does a person desire to know what is not yet known? The person does so thinking that when I comprehend the truth of this thing, I will either discard, obtain, or treat this thing with indifference. Thus, to judge what is to be rejected, obtained, and treated with indifference is the purpose of *understanding the true nature of things*, and it is for the sake of this purpose that a person desires to know.²⁹

He gives us a picture of how the desire to know functions with doubt and proof in our reasoning and the conduct of philosophy during his discussion of *tarka*, or philosophy itself, in *Sūtra* 1.1.40:

²⁸ Hajime Nakamura, *A History of Early Vedānta Philosophy*, trans. Trevor Leggett, Sengaku Mayeda, Taitetz Unno et al, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983).

²⁹ *NSB* 1.1.32 (270): तत्राप्रतीयमानेऽर्थे प्रत्ययार्थस्य प्रवर्तिका जिज्ञासा. अप्रतीयमानमर्थं कस्माज्जिज्ञासते ? तं तत्त्वतो ज्ञातं हास्यामि वोपादास्य उपेक्षिष्ये वेति । ता एता हानोपादानोपेक्षाबुद्धयस्तत्त्वज्ञानस्यार्थः, स्तदर्थमयं जिज्ञासते ।

As a matter of fact, when the truth of a thing is not understood, the desire to know is born— this desire takes the form— *this object is to be known*. Then one doubts as to how to discern the real thing with regard to the question of which of two possible contradictory natures does it belong. This doubt takes the form— *Is this thing thus, or not thus?* When one comes to contemplate these two contradictory natures, if one finds proofs in support of one of them, he assents to it— this assent being in the form— *There are proofs supporting this fact, and as there are proofs, the thing must have this nature, and not the other one.*³⁰

This general picture of how we inquire and become involved in the action of knowing applies to the path of wisdom that leads to freedom from desire. As noted, knowledge frees one from desire, from attachments, because knowledge of the truth of things also gives one firm knowledge that these things are *not-I*. They do not share in my nature, nor are they essential to my being. Just as the kind of cognition an agent had determined what she found to be desirable, this true and firm knowledge of what is *I* and *not-I* severs the attachments one has to the world— it is a state of being of complete indifference. Vātsyāyana sketches this path after *Sūtra* 4.2.2:

When [the objects of sense-perception] are wrongly conceived, they effect attachment, hatred, and error of mind. Thus it is these objects that a person should seek to know and understand the truth of first of all. When a person understands the truth of these, his false cognitions with regard to sense-objects disappear. When these have disappeared then he should seek to know the things related to the self, such as the body, the mind, and so-forth. When knowledge of these has been attained, the cognition of 'I' with regard to those things other than the self ceases forthwith. Thus, the agent, acting with his mind wholly unattached, either to external objects or to objects related to the self, comes to be called 'released.'³¹

Applying what we know now of Vātsyāyana's commitment to desire in our active inquiry, we can now work out the progression toward the highest good through knowledge that Vātsyāyana is envisioning, and how desiring to know indeed can lead to freedom from desire itself. Before philosophy, the agent cognizes the world, and insofar as she gains knowledge by means of the ways of knowing she attains success in those knowledge-guided actions. However, motivated by her desire for further success, to know better what she should seek, she inquires into both objects and the conditions for knowing objects. Through this heightened state of knowledge of things she comes to know what is really desirable for a being like her, and pursues success in moral action. Yet her attachments, however good, and the imperfect state of the world together are such that she inevitably falls into immoral action. Desiring to know what she should do, what aims she should take up: she pursues deeper understanding of the truth of things. Having understood finally the true nature of her self, what is *I*, and the true nature of things, what is *not-I*, her desire, including that for further knowledge, ceases. For what could she want to know now that she knows everything?

So far, what has been discussed are Vātsyāyana's vision of the world of human action and inquiry. We have thus been able to outline and understand the cognitive and moral progression to the highest good that he constructs from these ideas. However, what has not yet been proven is that the steps, the cognitions of the truth, in this progression are steps that follow from a recognizable and systematic epistemological endeavor, and are not, as has been charged in so many words, tenets of a dogmatic doctrine placed on the scaffolding of something close-to, but not quite, epistemology.

³⁰ NSB 1.1.40 (320-321): अविज्ञायमानतत्त्वेऽर्थे जिज्ञासा तावज् जायते जानीयेमम् अर्थम् इति | अथ जिज्ञासितस्य वस्तुनो व्याहतौ धर्मो विभागेन विमृशति किंस्विद् इत्थम् आहोस्विन् नेत्थम् इति | विमृश्यमानयोर्धर्मयोर् एकं कारणोपपत्त्यानुजानाति, सम्भवत्यस्मिन् कारणं प्रमाणं हेतुर् इति कारणोपपत्त्या स्याद् एवम् एतन् नेतरद् इति

³¹ NSB 4.2.1 (1038): शरीरादिदुःखान्तं प्रमेयं दोषनिमित्तं तद्विषयत्वान् मिथ्याज्ञानस्य. तद् इदं तत्त्वज्ञानं तद्विषयम् उत्पन्नम् अहङ्कारं निवर्तयति समानविषये तयोर् विरोधात्. एवं तत्त्वज्ञानाद् दुःखजन्मप्रवृत्तिदोषमिथ्याज्ञानानाम् उत्तरोत्तरापाये तदनन्तराभावाद् अपवर्गं इति. [स चायं शास्त्रार्थसंग्रहोऽनूद्यते नापूर्वो विधीयते इति.]

2. *Why Knowledge Is Not Enough: The Need for Epistemology*

2.1 *Introduction*

The following general objection to this reading could be raised: even if we grant that we need the right ideas about what is worth pursuing and what is not worth pursuing to do what is right, why do we need have a deep understanding of epistemology to do so? The analytic reading responds to this worry by denying that Vātsyāyana actually thinks we need a deep investigation of epistemology to achieve the highest good. According to these readers, Vātsyāyana's epistemology might be useful and agree with his moral commitments, but he does not promote epistemology as the means of achieving moral success. The subject of this section is to show, contra the analytic reading, that Vātsyāyana thinks anyone pursuing success in moral action needs to engage with epistemological questions. In §2.2 we will look at why pre-reflective knowledge is not enough for moral success in action, and why, rather, we need knowledge that comes from a state of epistemological insight. In §2.3 we will look at the moral and metaphysical stakes of epistemology in the philosophical world in which the *NSB* was composed. By examining a near contemporary opponent of Vātsyāyana, the Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy Nāgārjuna, we will see that, in this dialogue, one cannot accept as valid a particular epistemology without taking on certain commitments in metaphysics and psychology that have serious consequences for how one is to choose to act in the world.

2.2 *Why Unreflective Knowledge is Not Enough*

Now, we can make some preliminary remarks about the analytic reading, which, to recall, reads the sections of the *NSB* on moral progression as essentially separate from the sections on logic, reasoning, and epistemology. Contra the analytic reading, we have seen that for Vātsyāyana knowledge, albeit of varying degrees, is central to every level of success in action a person might seek, success in everyday acts, success in moral action, or the highest success—the attainment of the ultimate good (*nibhśreyas*). In fact, we saw that Vātsyāyana motivates people to take up the Nyāya project by positing knowledge as instrumental to success in action. Thus, it cannot be said that the development of one's state of knowledge into full-blown understanding via the study of logic, reasoning, and epistemology is separate from moral progress, since the two pursuits are precisely the same.

However, there is a weaker form of the analytic reading that could still be sustained. This reading might object that, although philosophy is useful at attaining truths that lead to moral success, philosophy-informed, reflective knowledge of these truths is not necessary. The reasoning behind this objection is as follows: Vātsyāyana comes to conclusions about the things that one needs to know to achieve the highest good, e.g. that the self is eternal. However, personal engagement in this inquiry is not necessary to achieve knowledge of these truths. Would not the agent attain success, maybe even the highest success, if he knows what is true, without him needing to possess reflective theoretical knowledge about them and why they are true? This is a weaker form of the analytic reading because it admits that knowledge and the conditions of knowledge are the object of study in the epistemological sections of the *NSB*, and that knowledge is instrumental to achieving success. However, it upholds the idea that reflection on epistemological questions is not necessary for the achievement of the highest good, thus weakening the tie between the moral and epistemological.

However, this reading is impermissible because the kind of cognition that determines what and whether we desire, and thus how we act is not, according to Vātsyāyana, something that can be gained without engagement with epistemology. What we need is reflective knowledge. He makes this explicit in his discussion of *tarka*, or philosophy itself:

Opponent: *Sūtra 1.1.40* says that philosophy is “for the purpose of understanding the true nature of things.” Why is philosophy said to be *for the purpose of* understanding the true nature of things, and not said to be such understanding itself?

Vātsyāyana: Philosophy is not understanding itself because it does not, like understanding, achieve determinate cognition. In philosophy, the person simply assents to the assertion that the thing in question has one of the two possible natures on the strength of the argument that puts forth some particular reason in favor of one over the other. By philosophy, however, the person does not determine accurately, nor discriminate, nor resolve that the thing is certainly *thus*.

Opponent: How does philosophy serve the purpose of bringing about understanding of the true nature of things?

Vātsyāyana: It is from the force of the way of gaining knowledge, which arises by way of the “favor” conferred by philosophy, namely, philosophy’s verification of the object of absolute understanding, and whose force is perfected thereupon, that understanding of the true nature of things arises. It is in this way that philosophy serves the purpose of understanding. Philosophy thus affirms the truth of things that are in doubt, i.e. of a thing that exists— it affirms that the true nature of the thing is the particular state of the thing *just as it really exists*. That is, philosophy verifies that the truth of the thing is such that in it there is no doubt or contradiction.³²

Here, we see that although Vātsyāyana admits that only the ways of gaining knowledge, which are available to us pre-theoretically, really get us determinate, positive cognition of things, he tells us that the purpose of philosophy, or reflection on knowledge, is to remove all doubt with regard to the thing in question; philosophy is the activity in which we are motivated to use the ways of gaining knowledge to cognize deeper truths about things. The suggestion is as follows: Sure, the ways of gaining knowledge are very effective at getting you knowledge about things. However, until you start to reflect on what knowledge is and how you get it, which only reasoning can get you to do, you are not really going to discover the underlying nature of your self and the world. Without this deeper, more fine-grained, and complete knowledge you are not going to understand what is really desirable for a being such as yourself nor what you really ought to do.

Having thrown light on what Vātsyāyana sees the purpose of epistemological reflection to be, we are able to set aside this weaker analytic reading. If, on Vātsyāyana’s view, pre-reflective knowledge does not suffice for higher success in action, then our present reading that knowledge and its pursuit is instrumental to achieving the highest good can be sustained. In fact, insofar as it is accepted that epistemological reflection is what gets us to the most successful action, diving into philosophy is the first step towards the highest good, thereby re-uniting the epistemological and the moral.

2.3 *The Stakes of Epistemology: Vīgrahavyavartāni and Eristic Debate*

Further evidence in support of the reading which connects the epistemological and moral projects of the *NSB* can be found if we look outside of the boundaries of the *NSB*. The intimate relation of these domains is recognized by some of Vātsyāyana’s fiercest opponents. What distinguishes Vātsyāyana’s project from that of his opponents is not, it turns out, that he thinks inquiry into knowledge is essential to figuring out practical guidance. Rather, disagreements are had at the level of the particular. Is knowledge possible? How it is attained? What does this mean about the nature of the self? Moreover, what does this mean about how we are to act? By looking at one of Vātsyāyana’s skeptical opponents, the Madhyamaka Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 200 A.D.), we will see how both Vātsyāyana and Nāgārjuna debate morally-loaded positions on the terrain of epistemology and vice versa, thereby confirming the inextricability of epistemology on this view from the pursuit of the highest good.

The existence of the self as an intelligent and morally responsible being, a particular kind of eternal substance, is essential to Vātsyāyana’s moral philosophy. Vātsyāyana establishes the existence of such a self through his epistemology and thereby corroborates its existence in defending his epistemology. His argument goes: how can it be possible to cognize enduring objects, to desire and to attain them, if there was no enduring self behind it all?³³ Nāgārjuna recognizes that Vātsyāyana’s epistemology is inextricable from his

³² *NSB* 1.1.32 (269-270): कथं पुनर् अयं तत्त्वज्ञानार्थो न तत्त्वज्ञानम् एवेति? अनवधारणात् । अनुजानात्ययम् एकतरं धर्मं

कारणोपपत्त्या, न त्ववधारयति न व्यवस्यति न निश्चिनोति एवम् एवेदम् इति । कथं तत्त्वज्ञानार्थं इति ?

तत्त्वज्ञानविषयाभ्यनुज्ञालक्षणानुग्रहभावितात् प्रसन्नाद् अननतरप्रमाणसामर्थ्यात् तत्त्वज्ञानम् उत्पद्यत इत्येवं तत्त्वज्ञानार्थं इति । सोऽयं तर्कः प्रमाणानि प्रतिसन्दधानः प्रमाणाभ्यनुज्ञानात् प्रमाणसहितो वादे ऽपदिष्ट इत्य् अविज्ञाततत्त्वम् अनुजानाति । यथा सोऽहो भवति तस्य तथाभावः तत्त्वम्, अविपर्ययो याथातथ्यम्. I am following the emendation provided by Prof. Sheldon Pollock in which तत्त्वज्ञानविषयाभ्यनुज्ञालक्षणानुग्रहभावितात् should be read तत्त्वज्ञानविषयाभ्यनुज्ञालक्षणानुग्रहभावितात् and अननतरप्रमाणसामर्थ्यात् should be read as अनन्तरम् प्रमाणसामर्थ्यात्

³³ See *NSB* 3.2.34 (867)

belief in the existence of the self and the moral philosophy that he does not believe is tenable. Thus, Nāgārjuna realizes that he cannot assent to Vātsyāyana's epistemology, if he does not endorse Vātsyāyana's metaphysics and metaphysics of mind, on which his opposing moral philosophy is based. In Nāgārjuna's work *Vīgrahavyavartāni*, an ostensibly Nyāya interlocutor objects to Nāgārjuna's denial of any independent existing substance with the following charge:

If, having apprehended all things by perception, one then negates the things by saying "all things are empty," that fails to be accomplished. Why? Because it is included among all things, perception, the epistemic instrument [*pramāṇa*], is also empty. Who conceives of objects is empty as well. To this extent there is no thing apprehended by perception, the epistemic instrument. The negation of something unperceived fails to be established. In that context, the statement "all things are empty" fails to be accomplished.³⁴

The Nyāya opponent here, which accords with the positions propounded in the *NSB*, finds Nāgārjuna's denial of substance or any enduring object of that sort troubling as it would entail the non-endurance of the object, the means of knowledge, and the cognizer on which early Nyāya epistemology is based. Nāgārjuna is not troubled, however, since he is happy to dissent from the endurance of objects and of cognizing subjects:

If I apprehended any object by the causes of knowledge, by perception, inference, likeness, or authority, or by any particular one of the four epistemic instruments, I would indeed affirm or deny. But because I do not propound any object I do not affirm or deny. In this context, your criticism [...] does not apply to me.³⁵

Neither Nāgārjuna nor Vātsyāyana operate on the belief that it would be possible to disentangle the epistemologies available from the moral psychologies and metaphysics on which they are based. We see a parallel interaction with a skeptical, ostensibly Madhyamaka Buddhist interlocutor, in the *NSB*.

The kind of skeptical dialectical method advanced by Nāgārjuna is doubly frustrating for Vātsyāyana insofar as it does not accord with his picture of human motivation. Insofar as Nāgārjuna's eristic style of debate and reasoning threatens this picture, we can see how positions in epistemology are consequential in the field of morality. Eristic debate, in which the debater does not purport to have any thesis nor any positive purpose for doing the action of debating, and, rather, only seeks to show the untenability of the opponent's doctrine, challenges Vātsyāyana's principle of *prayojanam* discussed in §1.1. According to this principle, all debate is pervaded by purpose. If Vātsyāyana wants to maintain this principle on which his project is based, the onus is on him to show that this purportedly purpose-less endeavor does actually have a purpose. He takes this up directly after discussing the universal principle of purpose:

Among the forms of philosophical debate, it is accepted that proper and improper debate are undertaken with purpose (*prayojanam*). Now it will be examined whether or not eristic debate [whose proponents purport not to have a purpose (*prayojanam*) in the debate] is undertaken with a purpose or not. Someone who engages in eristic debate is called a eristic debater. If, when pressed to state what his purpose is, the debater states his purpose, declaring that such is position, that such is his thesis, then he is no longer an eristic debater. If, on the other hand, the debater does not state his purpose, then he is open to the charge of being neither an ordinary man nor [by contrast] a serious philosopher. If, as is often the case, the debater says that his purpose is only to make known the contradictions in the other side, then he is no different from these [i.e. the other two cases above]. [The debater] who is making known the contradiction, the person to whom this is made known, that [reasoning] by which he makes this known, and that [contradiction] which is made known, if the debater accepts these, then he is no longer an eristic debater. If, on the other hand, he does not admit

³⁴ Nāgārjuna, *The Dispeller of Disputes*, trans. Jan Westerhoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21-22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

these, i.e. that his purpose consists in showing the untenability of his opponent's philosophy, then his statements have no object (*anarthakam*). [Therefore, all effective debate has a purpose.]³⁶

His conclusion is that a truly eristic debater would make statements that have no object, and as such is not a form of argumentation that is going to get you any closer to the truth. Vātsyāyana's moral psychology permeates every level of the pursuit of knowledge. It is evident both to Vātsyāyana and Nāgārjuna in their respective works that a commitment, or lack thereof, to objective truth has serious moral consequences. If I accept, like Vātsyāyana, that there is an objective truth, then I can make moves to establish the reality of an object, the existence of a cognizing self, and objective truths about what we are and what is most desirable for us. If I deny objective truth, like Nāgārjuna, then I build my moral philosophy on the very realization of this fact—which dispels the corrupting illusion of the self and establishes the ontological equality of all beings. Thus the stakes of the epistemology one is able to establish or to disprove are distinctly, if not exclusively, moral.

3. *How to Know Everything: The Form and Method of the Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya*

3.1 *The Form and Method of the Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya*

A proponent of the analytic reading might have the following final rejoinder: if the big project of the *NSB* is to help people achieve the highest good, why is the text focused and structured around questions of epistemology and knowledge primarily and not practical concerns? To this, we can reply by pointing to the dialectical structure of the *NSB*. It is precisely by inquiring into how we get knowledge that we achieve higher states of success. Only by reflecting on questions and puzzles of epistemology do we receive the deep knowledge of our selves and the world that can lead us to the highest good. The structure and method of the *NSB* bears this out. Take for example the progression from moral action, knowing what is and what is not desirable, to the state of acting without desire, which is achieved by attaining a state without desire. Vātsyāyana initial discussion of desire in *Adhyāya 1* (Book 1) only points out there can be false cognition of what is desirable. It is only after working through the nature of the ways of gaining knowledge, and the epistemological problems related to each, perception, analogy, inference, and verbal cognition, that Vātsyāyana is makes explicit in *Adhyāya 4* (Book 4) that desire itself must be one of the main human errors. This pattern of dialectic in which we begin with inquiry into knowledge, and with every epistemological discovery arrive at states of knowledge which lead us to higher states of success in action, dispels the analytic reading's worry insofar as it cannot be said that the *NSB* is structured around either epistemological or practical concerns since the path it charts sees the two as one and the same.

Having answered the questions posed by the analytic reading, we have also addressed the soteriological reading's worries. The dogmatism with which the soteriological reading charges Vātsyāyana is not one to which he is vulnerable. Although, according to Vātsyāyana, inquiry into knowledge leads to the highest good, Vātsyāyana's concern with using reasoning and conducting proper dialectic reveals that he believes himself to be undertaking a serious inquiry into knowledge, under the conditions conducive to achieving rational results, whatever the moral conclusions may be. He does not, as would be the charge, presuppose his conclusions as he receives them unthinkingly as doctrine. However, the charge of another kind of dogmatism, advanced by the Madhyamaka Buddhists like Nāgārjuna, can still be sustained. It is true that Vātsyāyana proposes a moral psychology and a dialectic from which a skeptic can surely dissent, and, moreover, that plants the seeds of many of Vātsyāyana's conclusions. However, the philosophical complexity admitted by the skeptical Buddhists' charge of dogmatism against the realist Naiyāyikas accounts better for

³⁶ *NSB* 1.1.1 (44): तत्र वादजल्पौ सप्रयोजनौ | वितण्डा तु परीक्ष्यते | वितण्डया प्रवर्तमानो वैतण्डिकः | स प्रयोजनम् अनुयुक्तो यदि प्रतिपद्यते सोऽस्य पक्षः सोऽस्य सिद्धान्त इति, वैतण्डिकत्वं जहाति | अथ न प्रतिपद्यते नायं लौकिको न परीक्षक इत्य् आपद्यते | अथापि परपक्षप्रतिषेधज्ञापनं प्रयोजनं ब्रवीति, एतद् अपि तादृग् एव | यो ज्ञापयति यो जानाति येन ज्ञाप्यते यच् च ज्ञाप्यते एतच् च प्रतिपद्यते यदि, तदा वैतण्डिकत्वं जहाति | अथ न प्रतिपद्यते, परपक्षप्रतिषेधज्ञापनं प्रयोजनम् इत्येतद् अस्य वाक्यम् अनर्थकं भवति.

the diversity and rigor of thought born from these disputes than the reductive critique of the soteriological reading.

3.2 Conclusion

I will make my conclusion in four points: two that I would call historical and two that I would call philosophical. First, if the interpretation given here is right, the structure and method of the early Nyāya project is far richer than has previously been appreciated. Having brought to light the moral psychology and theory of action underlying early Nyāya philosophy, I have shown that there is a epistemological-moral dialectic at work in the *NSB*, which follows and is captured by the development from the first line of the text — *the ways of gaining knowledge must have an object* — to Sūtra 1.1.1 — *understanding of the true nature of things* leads to the *highest good*. Understanding the project of this work of the earliest Nyāya philosophy is critical to determining what revolutions were occasioned by later thinkers in this tradition.³⁷

Second, I have specified the philosophical context in which the concept *pramāṇa* was likely born. While the concept later came to be used as the rubric from epistemological debate, it is accepted that the concept was originated in the Nyāya tradition. That the concept of “means” of knowledge developed in Nyāya should not be surprising now that I have brought forward Vātsyāyana’s commitment to knowing as an end-driven action and revealed how the relationship of means to end is present at every level of this system.³⁸ Grasping that the concept ‘*pramāṇa*’ was first embedded in the theory of action and psychology explained above, we are in a better place to understand its use and evolution in the history of classical Sanskrit philosophy.

Third, there are several provocative philosophical questions that arise if we read Vātsyāyana’s *NSB* in accordance with the project he had in mind. One of Vātsyāyana and Nāgārjuna’s fundamental intuitions is that there is a deep interdependence between metaphysics of self and mind and epistemology. Thus, with them, we can ask ourselves what kinds of metaphysical commitments are entailed by the kinds of epistemological pictures that we propose. Another of Vātsyāyana’s structuring ideas is that reflecting on knowledge and questions of knowledge provokes a kind of introspection necessary for achieving substantial and transformative knowledge of what we are. Using Vātsyāyana’s particular views on introspection, we can reconsider what kind of introspection is required for epistemological discoveries, and whether they incite personal transformation, moral or epistemic.

Fourth, having vindicated the *NSB* from the soteriological reading and addressed the concerns of the analytic reading, it is now possible, if not imperative, for anyone who engages philosophically with Vātsyāyana’s epistemology to consider, at the same time, the moral concerns of this ancient thinker.

³⁷ Bearing in mind how deep Vātsyāyana’s practical orientation is, we can see, for example, that the shift inaugurated by Gaṅgeśa, a Nyāya philosopher of the twelfth century, who choose to write exclusively on the ways of gaining knowledge themselves, is radical in ways that we might have otherwise not recognized.

³⁸ See *NSB* 1.1.1 (33): The *pramāṇas* (ways of gaining knowledge) are the means for attaining the end that is knowledge. And, knowledge itself is the means for achieving success in action. At the highest level, ultimate knowledge, or *understanding of the true nature of things*, is the means to the final end, i.e. the highest good.

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