

Falsifiability of Falsifiability: Neti - Neti in Advait Vedant - A Comparative Analysis in Search for Truer Knowledge

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Abstract: *Karl Popper's theory of falsification as a criterion for the demarcation of scientific knowledge has long been a subject of endless debate on the impact it can have on positivism and on the methodology of acquiring as well as refining knowledge. It may interest the reader that a conceptualisation often likened with falsification has been the form and content of an age - old chant repeated endlessly in praise of the divine within the Sanatan philosophical tradition and examined at length by the revered Adi Shankaracharya in his commentaries on Badrayan's Brahmasutra and Bhagavadgita. In this article, we would be looking at an interesting interaction of these two traditions of knowledge peering through the keyhole of a timeless tale chosen meticulously from the vast expanse of narratives pervading the Sanatan darshan.*

Keywords: Falsifiability, Falsification, Neti Neti, Advait Vedant, Knowledge, Traditions

1. Introduction

As I begin deliberating on the aforementioned theme, I am reminded of this delightful tale which is a part of the great ancient Indian lore of Vikram and Vetaal -

As Vikram lodged the dead corpse onto his shoulders and began walking out of the cremation ground, Vetaal wrapped his arms around his neck and hissed into his ears:

“For what good do you toil endlessly like this o king? What is it that you expect to achieve at the end of this ordeal? Could it be that you harbour an ideal which you are hoping will realise itself? What will you do if after having achieved your goal, you realise it was not meant for you since the beginning itself? Your mercilessness and ignorance remind me of a story:

In a certain prosperous kingdom ruled by a just and wise ruler, there lived a troubled crown prince. Since his childhood years, he had been seeing a dream every night wherein a maiden, with unparalleled beauty serenaded him in a myriad of alluring ways. He had become so enchanted by her fantastical charm that when his father, the king expressed the desire of his coronation, he made an excuse of touring the kingdom in order to go look for his *swapna sundari* (dream beauty). His father readily agreed, unaware of his true intentions, and asked him to return within a year. Over the course of the next eleven long months, the prince scoured towns, villages, citadels, forests, mountains and valleys in search of his *swapna sundari*.

With one month remaining to the deadline given by his father, he lost his way into a dense forest. Exhausted and depressed, as he stopped for a drink of water at a spring, lo and behold, he witnessed the reflection of the one he had been searching for - *swapna sundari*! He swiftly turned around and fell on his knees professing his love for her. Contrary to his expectations, instead of breaking into an alluring serenade, the maiden let out a terrified scream and ran away from him. He pursued her all the while reminding

her of the promises she made to him in his dreams till she reached a cottage and shut the door at him. He promptly knocked on the door and an elderly woodcutter stepped out with an axe in his hand. He cast a disdainful look at the young man pestering his daughter. The prince begged to see the girl. The irked woodcutter brandished his axe and asked him a single question: ‘Are you a fool?’ The prince, shook momentarily, began laughing. ‘Yes, yes I am a total fool.’

Vetaal stopped the story then and there and so must we. What is of interest to us from this little tale is what the knowledge of *swapna sundari*, both as a *swapna* (dream or unconscious, ideal non - experience) and as a *sundari* (an actual, living, beautiful person), did to the prince. We would be looking at various aspects of the truth of this knowledge as we venture forth, along with Karl Popper's theorising of falsification and the Indian philosophical invocation of *Neti Neti* as they sought for true knowledge and reliable ways of reaching that knowledge, in their respective searches for their own *swapna sundari*.

Accordingly, in the first section of this paper, we would look at the conceptualisation of knowledge within both renditions followed by the steps taken and processes initiated while identifying problems or questions. Next, having established some theoretical frameworks of how knowledge is related to questioning and problematising, we would be inadvertently led to an examination of the practices of criticism or critical analysis within both the traditions. Moving further, there would be some discussion on the inherent or explicit deliberation on Truth with reference to theory - building and causality. Finally, we would be looking at the prescriptions for attaining/realising/understanding truth before summing up our inference (s) from this endeavour.

1) Knowledge and Ignorance vs Prama and Adhyas

Going back to our little tale, one may wonder as to why did the prince agree that he is indeed a fool. In response, Popper would remind us of his first two theses of the twenty seven he presented as an opening contribution to the Tubingen symposium, namely the knowledge thesis and the ignorance

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thesis. In accordance with the knowledge thesis, there is undoubtedly an abundance of knowledge in natural and social sciences. This knowledge is practically significant. It also aids our understanding of the world by enriching our theoretical insight. However, discovery of new knowledge reveals the flaws, gaps and conflicts within the existing knowledge which is an iteration of the ignorance thesis. Maybe this is a reason why the prince acknowledged or recognised his foolishness when faced with the reality of the existence of the one he deemed *swapna sundari*.

Knowledge is referred to as *prama* within the Sanatan philosophical tradition. *Prama* can be gained through *Pramana* which is a justified means for attaining knowledge. There are four types of *pramana*: *pratyaksha* (perception), *anumana* (inference), *sabda* (verbal testimony) and *upamana* (comparison). What interests us here with reference to the *neti neti* tradition is the conceptualisation of *pratyaksha*. Various schools of thought within the Indian tradition recognise different types of *pratyaksha* including *anubhava*, *smriti*, *nirvikalpa* and *savikalpa*. *Nirvikalpa* perception is intrinsic to understanding of *Brahma* within the Advait philosophy. *Vikalpa* can roughly be referred to as a conceptual construct. To have a *nirvikalpa* perception is to see without conceptual construction or to see something devoid of its distinguishing features which may place it into a conceptual category.

The first step of attaining a *nirvikalpa* perception is to free oneself from *adhyas* or superimposition. Brahmasutra by Badrayan talks about an everlasting, cyclical continuum of superimposition wherein the Self, which is the witness, is superimposed by internal organs and potentialities such as ignorance, will, perseverance etc. Simultaneously, these internal organs are superimposed upon by a Self which is opposed to (*sapeksh*) a nonSelf which then again functions as witness to continuing superimpositions. This is the process which creates agency and enjoyership. Herein, ignorance is neither the lack of knowledge nor contradictions in knowledge. Instead, knowledge in itself is analogous to reality which has multiple levels and has to be unfolded like a wrapped cloth.

Looking at *swapna sundari* from this perspective, the prince would be considered a fool for imposing his own version of reality, marred by his agency and enjoyership upon the purported reality of the maiden and not as an ignorant fool who lacked any kind of knowledge or questioned the internal contradictions of his knowledge. While ignorance leads to linear and evolutionary progression of knowledge in Popper's idea, *adhyas* conveys a more webbed as well as networked understanding of flawed knowledge.

Therefore, instead of seeing knowledge as causing external, uncontrollable and inevitable ignorance, Advait Vedantin sees it as being the source of *adhyas* or superimposition. Notably, it is important to remind ourselves that knowledge is a multifaceted and multidimensional concept within the Sanatan tradition. So, while there exists knowledge which superimposes, there also exists knowledge which liberates and emancipates. In order to understand these diverse formulations of knowledge, we would be looking at the problem of postulating problems in the next section.

2) Producing Problems vs Vidya and Avidya

Vedant philosophy is said to have three keystones which are referred to as *prasthanas*. These include: *shraut prasthana* (those which were heard or Upanishads), *smriti prasthana* (those which have been remembered or Gita which is a part of the memory of Mahabharata) and *nyaya prasthana* (that with logical organisation or Brahmasutra of Badrayan). Vedas are also said to have a logical categorisation of their content into three *kandas* namely *karma kand*, *upasana kand* and *gyan kand*. Avidya and Vidya represent *karma* and *upasana kand* respectively. Ishavasya Upanishad, the first and the shortest of all Upanishads tells us about the consequences of pursuing both. It says:

They who worship Avidya alone fall into blind darkness; and they who worship Vidya alone fall into even greater darkness. (Verse 9, Ishavasya Upanishad)

The conceptualisations of Avidya and Vidya are directed at reformulating the idea of 'problem' as well as the process which should be followed to solve a purported problem. Instead of focusing on the dualism of problems - solutions, the Avidya - Vidya continuum introduces the aspect of action. When we are talking about problems - solutions, we are referring to embodied beings. Shankar reiterates in his *bhashya* (commentary) on the Brahmasutra that embodied beings are capable of action - of doing virtuous as well as immoral deeds, thereby making the experience of happiness or sorrow inevitable. This aspect of action and agency is what Popper slightly overlooks in his theorisation of scientists or knowledge - seekers as problem - solvers.

The logic of relationship between knowledge and ignorance, according to Popper, implies that there is a directly proportional relationship between knowledge and ignorance: the more knowledge we attain, the more we realise the lack of knowledge we have. Accordingly, the lack of knowledge creates problems. Further, the relevance of a science or a system of knowledge is defined by its efficiency in identifying problems and constructing or seeking solutions appropriate to them. This is a very mechanical perspective which superimposes upon the 'scientist' as well as upon the 'scientific knowledge system' an *a priori* duty characterised by regulated and piecemeal possibility of action and ontologically limited outcomes. While Popper does recognise the role played by subjective factors such as wishes, interests etc. in the construction and formulation of problems, the linearity of criticism characterised by evolutionary causality imposes limitations on the extent and kind of influence which can be wielded by subjective factors alone and in conjunction with objective reality.

Avidya and Vidya are enumerated as a part of Maya within the Advait philosophy. Shankar tells us that Maya is *anivarchaneeya* (not capable of being interpreted). It is neither *sat* (unchanging, eternal) nor *asat* (temporal, transient, constantly changing). The material reality as well as the physicality of the ontological discourse constituting knowledge systems, which juxtaposes as well as superimposes problems and solutions against and upon each other, also encompasses and is shaped internally and externally by agency consisting of action and choice. While this action could be perceived as a result of the concept of

dharma as duty envisioned by the injunctions which are included in scriptures, they are undertaken by the Self which, under the influence of Maya is engaged with *adhyas*. This networking of problems, solutions and agencies (multiple kinds as enumerated through various types of knowledge and the non - interpretability of Maya) simultaneously denies as well as enables linear relationships of causality among problems, solutions and scientific progress and among knowledge, ignorance and evolution. Problems are not causal or linear, in fact, they are entry points into a porous and multi - layered reality which not only entails various kinds of subjectivities but also multiple ways of perceiving within and beyond plural spatio - temporal dimensions.

This may lead us to question the Vedantin about the potential of critical analysis in his understanding.

3) Critical Analysis and Relativism vs Purva Paksha Tradition and Tat Tvam ASI

Popper emphasises that the objectivity of science lies in the objectivity of the critical method. Investigation or enquiry into science can begin with problems as well as encounter problems during the course of the investigation. Since the very idea of knowledge implies that it can turn out to be completely wrong, criticism is an inherent and continuous process. No theory, which can be deemed scientific, is free from criticism. However, the sciences are not objective in themselves since that would imply the attainment of a singular, perfect truth which is in the nature of a justification of the meaning of attained knowledge. What Popper seeks is a falsifiability criterion which can distinguish scientific knowledge from the non - scientific and not a justifiability criterion of meaning pertaining to a specific knowledge system. Criticism thus, has the function of ensuring scientific progress.

It is also important to note that Popper does not see observation statements as objectively 'real' facts. Instead, he sees them as theory - laden and as functions of subjective factors (wishes, interests etc.) as well as objective reality. He recognises the existence of a psychological *a priori* in human understanding which motivates us to look for regularities in the world. However, Popper does not consider this a valid *a priori* since it gives rise to a dogmatic attitude which takes the existence of regularities for granted and seeks to construct omniscient theories which can be instantiated at any point in time. Dogmatic attitude is the reason why Popper is critical of relativism. In contrast, he seeks the creation of a critical attitude which seeks to falsify theories and existing knowledge.

The Purva Paksha tradition is an age - old tradition of argument used particularly fondly by the Nyaya school of philosophy as well as by Adi Shankar. It entails understanding one's opponent entirely as the first step of initiating an argument against them. It is followed by pointing out the flaws therein and then culminating with presentation of one's own view. The Purva Paksha tradition emphasises on the existence of prior knowledge while simultaneously rejecting the perception of any kind of priori knowledge being an *a priori*. Within this tradition, criticism is not based on experiential facts. It is not piecemeal with

focus on specific characteristics/flaws of the theory in question with reference to a particular juncture in space and time. Instead, it is empathetic and embodying. While it is true that it makes reference to the purported 'authority' of an ancient corpus of knowledge (the Vedic tradition), it does not consider the text of Vedas as commandments. Instead, the text is interpreted at multiple levels of spatio - temporal realities, in plural and diverse consequential forms such as *shruti*, *smriti*, *anubhav* etc.

What may interest us here is the conceptualisation of '*swaroop gyan*'. As opposed to *anubhavi* *gyan* or experiential knowledge and *vritti gyan* or instinctual knowledge, *swaroop gyan* or knowledge which is in nature of the Self. Experiential knowledge is acquired through the senses while instinctual knowledge is a product of various kinds of mental processes. By positing the self as its own witness and as its own illumination, the othering of the object of critique is transcended. Resulting criticism and following new argument or Uttar Paksha are then sequentially and logically balanced chains of potentialities and not evolutionary dualisms which restrict some forms of agency as dogmatic while hailing others as critical. Thus, the Purva Paksha tradition counters hegemonic *a priori* attitudes by placing itself within and around a porous self, devoid of any posteriori or priori, which is eternal, all - pervasive and unchanging while being witness to all transience there is, has been or will be. What then is the relevance of such a Self for action?

One of the most well - known narratives of the Chhandogya Upanishad is the dialogue between Aruni Uddalak and his son Shwetketu after the latter's return from Gurukul. Shwetketu, beaming with the arrogance of his new - found knowledge, is called by his father who asks him to bring a single fruit of the Banyan tree. He splits up the fruit in half, revealing tiny seeds therein. He tells the vain youth how a single, miniscule seed harbours within it an enormous tree with countless leaves, shoots, fruits, branches etc. and conversely, how such endlessness is embedded within the tiny seed. Having said that, Aruni states one of the greatest and most well - known Upanishadic statements: *Tat tvam asi* (That art thou). A Self which could manifest infinite objective and subjective potential and which can envelop and express such potentials as well. Such a self can neither be this or that which would bring us to using *Neti Neti* to describe such a Self.

4) Verisimilitude and Falsification vs Brahma And Neti Neti

Initially, Popper did not want to make any references to truth in his theorisation. However, in his later works, specifically in *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963), he uses the concept of Verisimilitude or truthlikeness. As a part of this formulation, Popper emphasises upon continuation of criticism of theories till they represent some sort of an approximation of truth. He explains that in terms of all possible logical consequences of a theory, it can have a *truth content* (true propositions that can be derived from a theory) and a *falsity content* (false consequences of a theory). If the consequences of a theory are false, then the premises on which they were based would also be false. A 'good' scientific theory, argues Popper, has a higher level of

verisimilitude. Falsification is the ideal method of attaining higher levels of verisimilitude. The more 'risky' a theory is, the better. The scientificity of a theory is characterised and constituted by the fact that even a single adverse instance or consequence can render the entire theory as false.

Advait philosophy perceives anything which is *sapeksh* (depends upon another for definition) as false (*mithya*). The observation of empirical instances opposing the existing knowledge is a part of the domain of *pramana*. *Pramana*, as we have seen earlier, is a means of attaining knowledge. It implies the existence of a *pramata* (subject who knows) and a *prameya* (object of knowledge). Brahma, however, is *nirapeksh*, i. e., independent of subjection or objectivity and cannot be therefore understood through *pramana*. How then, does one know what is Brahma if one does not know what is not Brahma? The Vedantin chants *neti - neti* when talking about Brahma. *Neti - Neti* could be translated in multiple forms: Not this, not this; Neither this, nor that; No end to it, no end to it. It implies transcending *vritti gyan* until only one *vritti* remains, one which is indivisible and unchanging. Instead of likening the path to truth as an evolutionary linear trajectory, *Neti Neti* envisions moving beyond the boundaries of the knower and the known to realise the trueness of one's own Self as the trueness and eternal permanence of the Brahma which is emancipating and liberating.

"That Brahman is without prior or posterior, without interior or exterior i. e. homogeneous and without a second. This Self, the perceiver of everything, is Brahman". (pg 46, Badrayan, *Brahmasutra*)

Falsifiability demarcates and discriminates science from non - science. *Neti - Neti* defies the hegemonic authority of positivistic understanding embedded in the falsifiability criterion to showcase how falsifiability itself may be falsifiable as a dogma of the subjective mind which is restricted by agentship (*kartavya*) in a causal fashion superimposing upon it various confounding and mutually restricting objectivities of space and time.

5) Deductive Method and Situational Logic vs Vivart and Swaroop Gyan

Since the psychological *a priori* is not a valid *a priori*, Popper says that instead of seeking regularities in the world, we must impose regularities upon the world ourselves. Rather than starting with individual inventions and experiments in order to establish universally relevant conceptualisations, we must start with attempting to falsify primitive magic and myths by seeking instances where they bore false logical consequences. To support this methodology, Popper presents a 'Three world ontology' wherein he describes three kinds of worlds. World 1 is constitutive of the physical environment, world 2 is the world of mental processes and world 3 is the world of human cultural artifacts. It is in world 3 that rational criticism takes place. World 3 objects are abstract objects while their concrete embodiments are physical objects. Popper takes the example of Michelangelo's *Dying slave* sculpture. The sculpture is a world 3 object reflected and embodied concretely in a world 1 object: marble. It transcends both its physical embodiment as well as its origin

as a mental process. Therefore, falsification and criticism only takes place in world 3.

Instead of classifying reality and abstraction on the basis of ontology, Advait Vedanta enumerates the functioning of what may be deemed reality as *adhyas* or superimposition. *Adhyas* is a logical function of *vritti gyan* (fluctuations of the mind which includes observational reality, misconception, imagination, deep sleep and memory) which superimposes realities upon realities. While *jagat* (physical world) is perceived by and through *adhyas*, we assume it to be real, despite experiencing its transience. We also assume our own subjectivity and agentship to be coherently aware of and in tune with the understanding of our particular experiential knowledge as we superimpose our own reality upon what we perceive and experience. The *atman* or the Self which is *sat* (eternal, unchanging) and the same as Brahma. Avidya which is neither permanent nor temporal and is beyond interpretation (*anivarchaneeya*) constitutes and is constituted by *adhyas*. It is dependent on Brahma for its manifestation and is a part of Brahma itself.

Brahma, reiterates the Advait Vedantin, is the *nimitt* (efficient/causative) *kaaran* (reason) as well as the *upadan kaaran* (that which remains itself while simultaneously manifesting as something else) of *jagat*. It creates and it is of/by/with which it is created. This is not a model of linear causality since it does not advocate a distinction or an evolutionary trajectory among the cause, the catalyst and the consequence. Accordingly, *jagat* is perceived as a *vivart* by the Vedantin - it appears to be true and real but is actually a manifestation dependent upon an eternal, unchanging Brahma. This conceptualisation has been explained through the analogy of the rope and the snake in Shankar's commentary on *Brahmasutra*. While to an egoistical observer influenced by Avidya, the rope may appear to be a snake initially and then may again be interpreted as a rope with further understanding, the rope remains a rope throughout regardless of its changing perception since its reality is neither dependent upon the act of observation and nor on the observer.

Consequently, knowledge of the Brahma, as we have emphasised earlier, is in the form of *swaroop gyan* or knowledge in the nature of the Self. To transcend the superimpositions of reality, one must realise the Self which is not dualistically different from the Brahma. Since such a self is eternal and unchanging, it does experience the physical world and its physicalities but such physical experiences by the virtue of their dependence on Avidya, *adhyas* and *vritti* are regarded as *mithya* or false by the Vedantin. Consequently, *swaroop gyan* which is fluid, porous, networked, eternal and unchanging is Brahmagyan as well. While falsifiability functions as rational criticism in a realm of abstractions, *Neti Neti* is a continuum of removing the veils of superimpositions and plural rationalities which harbour their own particular sense of value and agency in order to realise what one sought was oneself all along. The Ishavasya Upanishad sums this up quite beautifully:

īśāvāsyamidam sarvaṃ yatkiñca jagatyāṃ jagat |

tena tyaktena bhūñjīthā mā grdhaḥ kasya sviddhanam || 1 ||
(Verse 1, Ishavasya Upanishad)

All this - whatsoever moves in this universe (and those that move not) is covered (indwelt or pervaded or enveloped or clothed) by the Ishwar. That renounced, enjoy. Do not covet anybody's wealth (Or - Do not covet, for whose is wealth?).

2. Conclusion

Harking back to our little tale of *swapna sundari*, we would now bear witness to Popper's Rationally Critical Prince who problematises and critically examines the magical and primitive myth plaguing his dreams and ventures out courageously to seek its instantiation. Once he is confronted with the falsification of his knowledge by the situationally - specific and objective reality of the maiden, he acknowledges his foolishness in order to ensure further progression of his knowledge of what true knowledge may or may not be. However, is that all there is to *swapna sundari*? The Vedantin may disagree.

To the Vedantin, the *swapna sundari* and the Prince are both superimpositions of reality. When the Prince ventures out in search of the *swapna sundari*, he gradually unveils his knowledge of her layer by layer - knowledge which is in the form of dependence and dualism, informed by Avidya and transient. He repeats to himself neither this, nor that and when finally confronted by the maiden, instead of blaming the embodied reality of the maiden, he realises the frugality of his own knowledge and acknowledges his foolishness. In doing so, he becomes knowledge in himself: the light and witness to his own pervasiveness. Maybe he returned to be an even wiser king, one with his purported subjects like Brahma. Perhaps this is what the Vetaal would have said, cackling with delight after hearing Vikram's response, as he flew away with the corpse of the falsifiability of *swapna sundari* back to the banyan tree.

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