

Rethinking Classical Dialectical Traditions

Daya Krishna on Counterposition and Dialogue

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Abstract

This essay debates the way Daya Krishna reinterpreted some dialectic elements of classical Indian philosophy, with a special focus on “dialogue” and “counterposition.” The essay subsequently analyses the consequence of this reinterpretation on contemporary Indian philosophy.¹

Keywords

Daya Krishna – dialogue – contemporary Indian philosophy – classical Indian philosophy – counterposition – tradition – political

1 This article is the result of research collaboration between its three authors. Sections “The History of Dialogue” and “Daya Krishna’s Dialogue” are attributed to Elisa Freschi; “*Samvāda*,” “The Challenge of a Contemporary and Global World,” and “Unveiling the Historicity of Concepts” to Elise Coquereau; and “Some Possible Criticisms” to Muzaffar Ali. The last paragraph of the concluding section (beginning with “Last, and more generally”) is also attributed to Elisa Freschi.

The History of Dialogue: The Practice of Argumentative Discussion in Classical Indian Philosophy

Vāda and Saṃvāda

The Indian philosopher Daya Krishna (1924-2007) was intentional in his reuse and reappraisal of concepts of classical Indian philosophy, doing this as part of his programmatic openness towards all traditions of thought and in order to escape the monopoly of the terminology and categories of Western thought.² Accordingly, he explicitly chose to use the term *saṃvāda* in order to define his methodology. The term *saṃvāda* is generally used in Classical Sanskrit to indicate a dialogue. Etymologically, the term is the result of adding the pre-verb *sam-* “with” (as in Latin *cum*, found in the English con-versation) to *vāda* “discussion.” The latter term is a technical term in the philosophical school of Nyāya, which focused on logic and dialectic and accordingly discussed and elaborated dialectic and eristic tools. Within this framework, Nyāya scholars distinguish between three types of verbal confrontations, namely *vāda*, *jalpa* and *vitāṇḍā*. *Vāda* is a discussion aiming at the ascertainment of truth; *jalpa* is a verbal confrontation aiming at defeating the opponent with a more powerful thesis; and *vitāṇḍā* is a verbal confrontation aiming only at defeating one’s adversary by finding weak points in his thesis, and without any interest in establishing an independent view, like in sophistry. From the point of view of their historical development, scholars agree on the presence of hostile, agonistic and collaborative, “non-agonistic” forms of dialogue in pre-Classical and Classical Indian Philosophy, with the latter possibly having developed out of the former.³

The Nyāya school is not judgmental in explaining the difference among *vāda*, *jalpa* and *vitāṇḍā* and rather elaborates on the various means to be used in each of them (cavils can be raised, for instance, in *jalpa* and *vitāṇḍā*, but not in *vāda*). The background assumption is at any rate that one is participating to a public debate, with a jury (*pariṣad*) or (probably at a later stage) the king presiding over the debate, and a public. There are several records of this type

2 For Daya Krishna in general, see Daniel Raveh (“Daya Krishna (1924-2007),” in *Mens Sana Monographs* 6.1 (2008), 281-284) and Shail Mayaram, ed., *Philosophy as saṃvāda and svarāj: dialogical meditations on Daya Krishna and Ramchandra Gandhi* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014). For Daya Krishna’s re-reading of classical Indian Philosophy see Elisa Freschi, “Unveiling (Indian) Philosophy,” in *Rivista di Studi Sudasiatici* 2 (2007), 265-270.

3 For further information see: <http://elisafreschi.com/2016/03/21/dialogue-in-indian-philosophy/>.

of debates,⁴ and in all cases the price at stake appears to have been extremely high. At least, debaters hoped to convert the king to their cause or religion, which had been proved to be more philosophically convincing. This meant that the winner could in this way gain political and financial support to his group. In hagiographies, the defeated thinker is often described as being forced to convert to the winner's position.⁵

Daya Krishna's choice of the term (*sam*)-*vāda* clearly points at his positioning himself within those who search for truth and not for a victory in debate. The collegiality of this enterprise is further stressed by the choice of the preverb *sam-*, which in Nyāya is not found in combination with *vāda*, but is nonetheless evocative of a long tradition (see fn. 3 for the use of *sam-bhāṣā*). Although *vāda* is in Nyāya truth-oriented, it also retains a competitive aspect. Daya Krishna removed this in favour of an open-ended and non-competitive discussion. This removal does not amount to an irenic ideal, since the critical engagement with other ideas makes Daya Krishna often ready to dismiss what he deems to be prejudices or closed-ness in other authors.⁶ His *saṃvāda* is not a peaceful encounter of ideas that never clash. On the contrary, it can be harsh at times. Moreover, Daya Krishna even displays a preference for the hostile confrontation modelled after the *viṭaṇḍā* when he writes:

It should be noted that jalpa is defined in terms of chala ['fraud', EF] and jāti ['futile rejoinder', EF] and hence consists of them (see sūtra 1.2.2). Thus, really speaking, there are only vāda, jalpa and viṭaṇḍā as jalpa consists of chala and jāti. This reveals that ultimately the act of reasoning in its psychological aspect consists only of honesty and dishonesty in reasoning. Both vāda and viṭaṇḍā are honest, even though the latter is not generally considered as such. But, the person who engages in viṭaṇḍā is perhaps even more honest than the one who engages in vāda, because he openly declares that he has not yet found the truth or does not have any settled siddhānta ['conclusive opinion', EF] of his own, but that he sees

4 See, e.g., the ones described in Johannes Bronkhorst, "Modes of debate and refutation of adversaries in classical and medieval India: a preliminary investigation," in *Antiquorum Philosophia* 1 (2007), 269-280, and in Michel Angot's Introduction from *Le Nyāya-Sūtra de Gautama Akṣapāda. Le Nyāya-Bhāṣya d'Akṣapāda Pakṣilasvāmin. L'art de conduire la pensée en Inde Ancienne. Édition, traduction et présentation* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2009).

5 See Bronkhorst, "Modes of debate," 274.

6 For a critique of *vāda* as unproductive among people sharing the same worldview, see Daya Krishna, *Discussion and Debate in Indian Philosophy: Issues in Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, and Nyāya* (Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2004), 62.