

Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.



**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & REVIEWS**

journal homepage: [www.ijmrr.online/index.php/home](http://www.ijmrr.online/index.php/home)

## **ARTHAKRIYĀ: THE CRITERION FOR REALITY?**

**Dr Reetu Jaiswal**

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, India.

Email: [rjaiswal@philosophy.du.ac.in](mailto:rjaiswal@philosophy.du.ac.in)

**How to Cite the Article:** Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.



<https://doi.org/10.56815/ijmrr.v2021n1.2021.1-8>

<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
<i>Real, Cognition, Buddhism, Nyāya, Arthakriyā, Perception</i>	This paper will be discussing the debate concerning the views of Dignāga, Dharmakīrti and Mokṣākaragupta. The views of Buddhist scholars have been challenged by Naiyāyikās and this paper shows how in the development of epistemological positions of Buddhist scholars, they have tried to answer the questions raised by the realists and yet maintained the fundamental principle of momentariness in their views. In this epistemological development, this paper will deal with the exposition of the nature of perception and reality while explaining what role arthakriyā plays in this discussion.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The main concern of Buddhist logic and epistemology is to establish—‘what is real?’ The whole Buddhist Epistemology is set to make a distinction between ultimate reality (*svalaksana*) and the reality given to us in our every perpetual experience (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*). (Prasad, 2001, p. 143) Dignāga first made this distinction to draw the line between the real and the unreal. He maintained two kinds of real: particular or event (*svalakṣaṇa*) and continuant (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), which are constructed on the perceptual flow of these particulars radiating uniform appearances. (Prasad, 2001, p. 149) He defined perception as “*pratyakṣam kalpanāpodham* (perception is free from mental construction)” (Hattori, 1968, p. 25). But after defining the concept of perception and producing the idea of two kinds of reality, he did not explain how the ultimate real is different from the given real. Is there any criterion for that or not? And how can we differentiate between the perception with a



[The work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution  
Non Commercial 4.0 International License](#)

Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.

defective vision and a perception with a clear vision? These questions make Dharmakīrti redefine the criterion for reality.

The criterion to be real, which lacks a proper place in the philosophy of Dignāga, is defined as being capable of efficient operation (*arthakriyā*) by Dharmakīrti. This idea of *arthakriyā* was further developed by the followers of Dharmakīrti. This paper will focus on the view of Mokṣākaragupta. The aim of this paper is to try to show the main points that were dealt with by Dharmakīrti on the concept of *arthakriyā* and the changes that have been made by Mokṣākaragupta to answer the objections raised against Dharmakīrti's view.

Dharmakīrti defined perception in *Nyāya Binduh* as *pratyakṣama kalpanāpodham abhrāntam* (Shastri, 1924, 1.4) i.e. 'perception is a cognition that is unmistaken and free from conception'. Dharmakīrti asserts his opposition to Nyāya's view of determinate perception. Nyāya school defines perception as "that right knowledge generated by the contact of the senses with the object, devoid of doubt and error not associated with any other simultaneous sound cognition (such as the name of the object as heard from a person uttering it, just at the time when the object is seen) or name association, and determinate" (Dasgupta, 1922, p. 334). In this realist understanding of perception, the uninterrupted contact of objects with the senses is required. Based on the levels of such contact, the school divides perception into two parts: indeterminate (*nirvikalpa*) and determinate (*savikalpa*). When the object is seen for the first time without any name associated with it and without determination of its identity, it is called *nirvikalpak*. After that when one understands the characteristics and qualities of the objects and names them, it becomes *savikalpak*. In this process of perception, contact of the senses with the objects and their qualities and universals is necessary. On the contrary, for Dharmakīrti, perception is *nirvikalpak*, it is free from conceptual constructions and illusions. If perception is free from such construction, how do we test a given cognition to determine whether it is a valid perception or an erroneous one? How to make a distinction between real and unreal? And how do we identify any object as that object? To answer these questions, the concept of *arthakriyā* was presented.

## 2. MEANING OF ARTHAKRIYĀ

In the process of perception, Dignāga explains, the senses are involved only in providing the perceptual understanding of objects. The conceptual understanding is constructed by the intellect. When we perceive any object, initially, we only get the perceptual reference to that object in the form of flux. The identification of the object includes two levels, *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*: "The object of cognition is really double, the *prima facie* apprehended and the definitely realised. The first is called *svalakṣaṇa* as that appears directly in the first moment. The second is the form, which is constructed as perceptive in a judgement. The directly perceived and the distinctly conceived are two different things." (Bhattacharjee, 2016, p. 9)

Perception only includes the former and the latter, and the conception of the object is done with inference. On the contrary, the Nyāya school claims that we can identify any object because it inheres an essence, a universal. In any particular object, the universal of being that thing is inherent. For



Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.

example, a cow is a cow because the universal cow-ness is inherent in it. This universal quality resides in the object, independent of the mind.

If universals reside in particulars, how do we distinguish right knowledge from erroneous ones? Dignāga adopts the *apoha* theory to clarify that illusion is the product of the intellect and arises at the level of determinate perception. When the intellect forms the conception of the object in the form of *apoha* i.e. the exclusion of the other. The universal does not reside in the object but exists merely as a name. A cow is not known because some universal cowness exists in it, but because it excludes non-cowness. It is the game of our intellect and words. It works at the level of *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*.

Once again, the question arises if the cognition of an object comes from our mind, how do we differentiate between real and unreal? Can we say that the object itself doesn't exist as we know about the existence of the object with the constructs of our mind, and this could lead us to an illusion too?

Dharmakīrti adopts and systematizes the concept of *arthakriyā* to define and explicate Dignāga's system, which lacked explicit criteria of reality. Through this concept, he draws the line between the real and the constructed and makes the nature of reality clear, which is lacking in Dignāga's philosophy. The capacity to produce effect determines (*arthakriyā*) what is real. Dharmakīrti describes the fundamental opposition between the real and the constructed and says:

“Those (phenomena) which are able to perform a function are here (said to be) ultimately existent. Others are to be conventionally existent. Any phenomenon that is causally efficient is real and included among specifically characterized phenomenon (*svalakṣaṇa*). Any phenomenon that is not causally active is conceptually constructed and included among generally characterized phenomenon (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*).” (Dreyfus, 1997, p. 67)

The term *arthakriyā*, as used by Dharmakīrti and his followers, has been variously rendered by modern scholars: ‘purposive action’, ‘die Erfüllung eines Zwecks’, ‘causal efficiency’, ‘efficient operation’, etc. While each of these translations appears to be satisfactory in some context, none will serve in all contexts. (Nagatomi, 1967-68: 53).

### 3. DOUBLE MEANING OF ARTHAKRIYĀ

Masashi Nagatomi has explained the double meaning of *arthakriyā* in Dharmakīrti's thought. (Ibid., p. 55-56) The term *arthakriyā* has been used in two ways, i.e. causal efficiency and useful action. According to Dharmakīrti, in its ontological sense, it means causal efficiency, and in its epistemological sense, it means useful action.

To answer the question ‘what is real’, Dharmakīrti speaks of *arthakriyā* as causal efficiency. In this sense, *arthakriyā* is a criterion of reality. Here, the term is used as composed of ‘*artha*’ to be taken as ‘real thing’(vastu) and ‘*kriyā*’ as ‘causal power or activity’; thus, ‘a thing’s causal power’. Dharmakīrti says, ‘that which is able to perform a function exists ultimately’ (*arthakriyāsamartham yat tad atra paramārthasat*). (Dreyfus, 1997, p. 66, note 26) Only objects that can participate causally in the production of other phenomena are real. Dharmakīrti equates reality with momentariness, for only momentary phenomena act as causes of other phenomena and thus make an observable difference. If permanent phenomena were to produce an effect, their production would have to be permanent also.



Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.

As the effect would be changeless, it would either never be produced or endlessly repeat its production. The conclusion is that permanent phenomena cannot have any effect. Hence, they make no difference and are fictional, despite our notion that they exist. (Ibid: 66)

Now, the question arises how can we know whether an object is causally efficient or not? The answer is through ‘useful action’ or ‘the fulfillment of human purpose’. In this sense, the term is used as composed of ‘artha’ in the sense of ‘human purpose’ and ‘kriya’ ‘action’ understood broadly as the process through which a thing (vastu) fulfills human desires; thus, ‘activity (of a thing) regarding (the fulfillment of) a human purpose’. This sense of *arthakriyā* is derived from the first sense of it, for only on the basis of their causal efficiency can objects fulfill such a purpose. This meaning of *arthakriyā* appears in Dharmakīrti’s investigation of the nature of *pramāna* (a means of valid knowledge), a subject that was his foremost epistemological concern. Thus, he opens his *Nyāyabindu* with the sutra: “The fulfillment of every human purpose is preceded by a right knowledge. That knowledge, therefore, will be investigated. (*samayagajnanapurvika sarvapurusarthaśiddhir, iti tad vyutpadyate*).” What, then, is a right knowledge (*samagajñāna*)? The opening verse of *Pramāṇavārttika*, II, defines it: “A valid means of knowledge is a non-contradictory knowledge. Non-contradictoriness means the steadiness of *arthakriyā*, useful action (to which the knowledge may lead) –‘*pramānam avisamvādi jnānam, arthakriyāsthithiḥ avisamvādanam*’.” (Nagatomi, 1967-68, p. 55) So, the validity of knowledge according to Dharmakīrti, consists in its conduciveness to *puruṣārthaśiddhi* (the fulfillment of a human purpose). For example, the cognition of fire will be true when it is useful for cooking, heating, burning, etc. If it fails to fulfill the purpose of cooking, etc, the cognition of fire will be erroneous.

These two meanings of *arthakriyā* do not conflict but refer to the functionality of objects in two ways: ontologically and epistemologically. Dharmakīrti emphasizes the epistemological meaning of *arthakriyā* more. Dreyfus explains, “It underlines the importance of practical concerns in Buddhist philosophy. Reality is not an abstract domain of possibilities but one of practical importance to sentient things. Things are real inasmuch as they potentially affect beings.” (Dreyfus, 1997, pp. 66-67)

These two meanings of *arthakriyā* lead us to the double function of the objects i.e. common function and particular function. The common function is the function of colour etc. shaped in the form of a jar, which yields these results, such as containing water and so on. A particular function is the function of those things which yield results, such as causing visual cognition. (Mikogami, 1979, p. 80) Dharmakīrti has mentioned these two functions of objects in his *Pramāṇavārttika-kārika*. It runs as follows (Ibid., 81):

“The word ‘jar’ is used (by people), when causes which cannot yield common results (such as containing water) are excluded, without referring to the distinctions of (particular) functions which color etc. (shaped in the form of a jar) possess//100//

Therefore, the word ‘color’ and the word ‘jar’ do not refer to the same object. This is similar to the distinction between a word which denotes the concept of class and a word which denotes the concept of a composite entity (literally a collection of atoms) //101//



Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.

The distinctions of its particular functions which are subordinate to its common (functions) are referred to by the phrase ‘color etc. of the jar’. And also, by this example other phrases are implied//102//”  
But, against this theory of Dharmakīrti, many objections were raised by the realists:

“(t)he capacity of anything cannot be known until the effect produced is known, and if capacity to produce effects be regarded as existence or being, then the being or existence of the effect cannot be known, until that has produced another effect and that another ad infinitum. Since there can be no being that has not capacity of producing effects, and as this capacity can demonstrate itself only in an infinite chain, it will be impossible to know any being or to affirm the capacity of producing effects as the definition of existence. Moreover if all things were momentary there would be no permanent perceiver to observe the change, and there being nothing fixed there could hardly be any means even of taking to any kind of inference.” (Dasgupta, 1922, p. 160)

These objections led post-Dharmakīrti philosophers to lay more emphasis on the ontological aspect of *arthakriyā*, namely ‘causal power’. Thus, Ratnakīrti and, later on, Mokṣākaragupta used the ontological aspect of *arthakriyā* more significantly. The shift in emphasis of the main referent from the nature and function of valid knowledge to that of what is real or existent led these writers to place more emphasis on ‘causal power’. (Nagatomi, 1967-68, p. 72).

#### 4. ANSWERING THE CHALLENGES: MOKṢĀKARAGUPTA’S DEFENCE OF BUDDHIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Various points were developed by Mokṣākaragupta (though propounded by Ratnakīrti and other philosophers) in defence of Dharmakīrti’s theory of momentariness and the theory of *svalakṣana*. The realists raised the objections that “the validity of cognition is (according to you) terrified by its agreeing with experience (*avisamvādakatva*), and the agreement with experience is proved by the attainment of the object seen. We cannot, however, attain the same object which we have seen, because of its momentariness (*kṣaṇikatva*) (i.e. the thing seen is different from the thing reached). Furthermore, what is seen is the color-form (*rūpa*) (of an object). Thus, one thing is seen and another is reached. Accordingly, what we reach is not the thing that you have seen. How then does this cognition become valid?” (Kajiyama, 1966, p. 25)

To solve this problem, Mokṣākaragupta admits two kinds of valid cognition: “the directly apprehended (*grāhya*) and the indirectly determined (*adhyavasāya*). Of these, the directly apprehended object of indeterminate knowledge (*pratyakṣa*) is the single moment of the individual characteristic that is seen. The indirectly determined (or envisaged) object is the universal which is manifested when the determining factor (*vikalpa*) occurs following indeterminate cognition.” (Ibid., p. 58) So, he asserts that even if we reach what is in reality different (from the thing we have seen), we still get, the logical imagination (*adhyavasāya*) of identity, “I reach the very same object which I have seen”; and this is meant by the expression ‘attainment of what has been apprehended (*pratītaprāpaṇa*).” (Ibid., p. 25)

To clarify the above-mentioned ideas, he makes the difference between the dull cognition of an object and the sharp cognition of an object. Kajiyama explains, “For instance, one who gets a dull cognition may be unable to determine the validity of knowledge at the moment of its origination, but he



Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.

determines (the validity of his knowledge of fire or water) through perceiving efficient operations such as burning, cooking, immersion in water...One who gets a sharp cognition, on the other hand, determines it not through the attainment of efficient operation, but only by the sharpened perception (*paṭutarapratyakṣa*).” (Ibid, p. 26) So, the attainment of efficient operation need not always to ascertain the validity of knowledge. He says, “The apprehension of the essential quality of an object is here admitted as the existence of (efficient) operation.” (Ibid, pp. 26-27)

The Jains raise the following question against the theory that things possess two functions (common function and particular function): “Why the cognition of the single (the Whole) such as a jar arises from seeing many constituents (parts) like color etc? And, also, a (useful action) common function can not be an object of perception.” (Mikogami, 1979, p. 86) This objection has been the weak point of Buddhist logic. To solve this problem, the Buddhist thinker Prajñākaragupta asserted that where the particular function (of an object in the sense of causal efficiency) is an object of perception; the common function, in the sense of useful action, is a concept related to objects of purposive action, and is not directly related to our knowledge. However, from the perspective of daily life, our understanding must be confirmed by our experiences.

Mikogami explains:

“Thus, the useful action is related to a criterion for deciding whether a certain piece of knowledge is valid or not. *Arthakriyā*, in the sense of useful action as a criterion for determining the validity of knowledge, is connected with the problem of knowledge. But it is not connected with knowledge on the level of perception. The particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) is only the object of perception, so as a problem arises when a description of useful action comes into the definition of the particular.” (Ibid., p. 88)

On this point Mokṣākaragupta makes following remarks: “The kind of indeterminate cognition is regarded as means of valid knowledge only as to the object of which it produces (a moment later) the determinate knowledge corresponding to the sensation.” (Kajiyama, 1966, pp. 44-45) The validity in the sense of the empirical truth (*saṃvyaahārikapramāṇa*) is here referred to. Only when sense-perception performs a function—which is nothing more than the creation of conceptual knowledge itself—can it be considered an efficient source of knowledge. The very validity of sense-perception is dependent upon its generative efficiency. (Mookherjee, 1935, pp. 314-15) This idea of Mokṣākaragupta can be explained in this way:

“At the level of a momentary object, there is only one and the same causal power, i.e. the capacity to produce its result in its natural flow. This causal power of the momentary object is regarded as particular when we are dealing with sensations or moments, while the same causal power is regarded as a universal causal power to fulfill a human purpose when we are dealing with judgements, which follow the sensations. Thus, one and the same momentary object produces both sensation and judgement. Only when judgement is made about an object, an activity towards the object become possible. At this point, Mikogami has made the conclusion, “when the common function is related to the theory of knowledge, whether knowledge agrees with the experience or not, the problems we face is that of having to admit the universal (*sāmānya*) as an indirect object of sense perception. This



Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.

problem is rooted in the distinction between our area of a common experience and our area of individual experience." (Mikogami, 1979, p. 92).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Though arthakriyā has filled the gap between the real and the unreal, it has generated a new problem for the Buddhists. It has forced them to admit the reality of external objects in the sense that they should become the object of perception so that we can know whether they are useful or not or whether they have 'causal efficiency' in them or not. These questions have led Buddhist philosophers towards the recognition of the reality of external objects. Mokṣākaragupta has tried to solve this problem, by admitting that we can get the knowledge of 'causal efficiency' in the objects only by apprehension. The way Mokṣākaragupta has tried to solve these problems is admirable. And in this sense, he has made a great contribution to Buddhist logic.

## **6. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION**

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

## **7. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **8. PLAGIARISM POLICY**

All authors declare that any kind of violation of plagiarism, copyright and ethical matters will take care by all authors. Journal and editors are not liable for aforesaid matters.

## **9. SOURCES OF FUNDING**

The authors received no financial aid to support for the research.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1] Bhattacharjee, A. (2016). *Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti on the theories of perception*. e-PG Pathshala. [https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp\\_content/S000027PH/P000613/M013464/ET/14555105226.7.1.pdf](https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/S000027PH/P000613/M013464/ET/14555105226.7.1.pdf)
- [2] Dasgupta, S. N. (1922). *A history of Indian philosophy* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Dreyfus, G. B. J. (1997). *Recognizing reality: Dharmakīrti's philosophy and its Tibetan interpretations*. Sri Satguru Publications.
- [4] Hattori, M. (1968). *Dignāga on perception*. Harvard University Press.



The work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial 4.0 International License

Jaiswal Reetu (2021). *Arthakriyā: The Criterion for Reality? International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 2021(1), 1-8.

- [5] Kajiyama, Y. (1966). *An introduction to Buddhist philosophy: An annotated translation of the Tarkabhāṣā of Mokṣākaragupta*. Kyoto University Research Information Repository. <http://hdl.handle.net/2433/72933>
- [6] Mikogami, E. (1979). Some remarks on the concept of *arthakriyā*. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 7(1), 79–94.
- [7] Mookherjee, S. (Ed.). (1935). *The Buddhist philosophy of universal flux*. Motilal Banarsi das.
- [8] Nagatomi, M. (1967–1968). Arthakriyā. *The Adyar Library Bulletin*, 31–32, 52–72.
- [9] Prasad, H. S. (2001). The phenomenology of meaning: Dignāga to Ratnakīrti. *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 18(1).
- [10] Shastri, C. S. (Ed.). (1924). *Nyāyabinduḥ of Dharmakīrti with the commentary of Śrī Dharmottarācārya* (1st ed.). Chaukhamba Sanskrit Sansthan.



The work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial 4.0 International License