

# H-Net Reviews

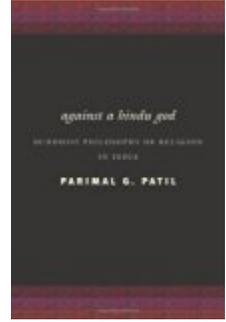
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Parimal G. Patil. *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xi + 406 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14222-9.

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## Whose Omniscience?

Early in the history of classical Indian philosophy, the *Nyāya Sūtra* directs arguments against recognizably Buddhist positions, as does Nāgārjuna against Nyāya and its sister school Vaiśeṣika, without, on either side, identification of the opponent by name. Great thinkers of both camps—from Vātsyāyana (c. 400) through Vācaspati (950) and Udayana (1000) on the Nyāya side, and especially Dignāga (500) and Dharmakīrti (625) among Buddhist reasoners—attack the others’ theses or rebut the others’ objections to positive arguments. By the eleventh century, Udayana is able to fill two large volumes with almost nothing but close combat with the Dignāga school, “Discernment of the Truth about the Self” (*Ātma-tattva-viveka*) and “Handfuls of Flowers of Critical Reasoning [Proving the Existence of God, *īśvara*]” (*Nyāya-kusumāñjali*). Almost contemporaneously, Ratnakīrti (1050), one of the latest Buddhist luminaries to write in Sanskrit, engages Nyāya in tightly reasoned treatises, one of which, “Refutation of Arguments Establishing *īśvara*” (*īśvara-sādhana-dūṣaṇa*), is the main focus of the book under review.

The Buddhist-Nyāya debate is multidimensional, involving epistemological controversy regarding the nature and status of perception, inference, testimony, and other issues, as well as metaphysical disputes concerning, in particular, whether there is an individual self or any other thing (including God) that endures, or whether everything is essentially momentary. And as Parimal Patil shows, much of the general conflict is relevant to Ratnakīrti’s purported refutation of what is historically the

central Nyāya inference for *īśvara*. There are a dozen or so theistic inferences, invented for the most part by Udayana, but the one Ratnakīrti targets was advanced by Vātsyāyana and all the early *Nyāya Sūtra* commentators, and was the only theistic inference defended by Gaṅgeśa in the fourteenth century in his solidifying of New (*navya*) Nyāya.

Patil has brought to bear on his study and interpretation of Ratnakīrti’s refutation most of the interlocking theses of Ratnakīrti’s Buddhist worldview. He is particularly good at showing the soteriological point of the refutation, while at the same time establishing that Ratnakīrti considers his reasoning epistemically rational—i.e., that Ratnakīrti thinks his argument objectively cogent from the Nyāya or any point of view irrespective of purpose (except to that of believing the truth). In this review, I shall emphasize limitations of Patil’s study, showing what it is not but perhaps might have been. What the book is, though, is outstanding scholarship making innovative use of distinctions ironed out in contemporary epistemology to present—without jargon—Ratnakīrti’s philosophy in its full glory, which is glorious indeed. Painstaking examination of the refutation of Nyāya’s theistic inference launches the deepest of probes into Ratnakīrti’s entire system.

Patil reveals an amazing degree of interlock among Ratnakīrti’s positions. The refutation of the theistic argument ties up tightly with Ratnakīrti’s rejection of what he takes to be the Nyāya epistemology of inference, and con-

nects with his alternative theory of the nature and underpinnings of the source of knowledge, which is, according to the Dignāga school, along with perception one of only two *pramāṇas*. (Patil translates *pramāṇa* here, appropriately, as “instrument of warranted awareness,” not giving it a realist rendering such as “generator of knowledge” or “generator of true cognition.”) The value of this book lies as much in the holism of its presentation (matching the coherence of the system portrayed) as in the clarity with which Ratnakīrti’s refutation is displayed. By thinking critically along with Ratnakīrti as he elaborates his complaints against Nyāya, and by careful study of Ratnakīrti’s other works and those of his most important Buddhist predecessors, Patil has given us a “must-read.” By “us” I mean mainly scholars of classical Indian thought, whatever the more specialized interest. But also, to his great credit, Patil has made Ratnakīrti—and Indian Buddhist philosophy in general, which in Ratnakīrti comes arguably to its fullest expression—available to non-specialists. That this scholar can write is an understatement. Ratnakīrti’s views are easily grasped. Without very many explicit comparisons, Patil’s exposition is full of resonances with Plato, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, and much analytic reflection. The footnotes, which are prodigiously extensive, provide pertinent text and translation along with the best philosophic and scholarly references, but can be ignored without losing the train of the argument. Everyone has much to learn from this book.

There are a couple of ironies, however, in what Patil tells us about his project at the beginning. I shall bring these out at the end of the review. First, the heart of the book, the inference that Ratnakīrti refutes, which can be reconstructed formally as an “inference for others” (*parārthānumāna*):

- (1) Earth and the like have an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.
- (2) For they are effects.
- (3) (This is) like a pot (which has an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause), and unlike an atom (which is not an effect); where an effect, there an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.
- (4) Earth and the like are similar (fall under the rule).
- (5) Therefore earth and the like have an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.

The supplementary argument that the intelligent maker is *īśvara* (“God”) is that this is the best candidate, no hypothesis being as simple as *īśvara* as creator. Nyāya’s motto in reasoning about entities that are the-

oretic (in the sense that in no instances are they known immediately by perception) is to assume only as much about a posited cause as is necessary to account for an effect in view. Nyāya philosophers formulate causal principles on the basis of correlations without bias about the sorts of things that can be linked, so long as the cause has the character that makes it able to perform the role for which it is proposed in the first place. Thus, the God inferred by Naiyāyikas is not considered omnipotent, since atoms, ether, and individual selves are eternal and uncreated, and laws of karmic justice, etc., are what they are independently of God’s creative action. But God is omniscient, knowing all there is to know about everything; otherwise, God would not be able to play the required causal role, since only an agent thoroughly familiar with the material with which he or she works is capable of producing the intended result, like a weaver with thread to be woven.

Ratnakīrti counters that all that can be known about the property to be proved—the *sādhyā*, rendered by Patil as “target,” which in this case is the property *having an intelligent maker*—is that it is not unconnected with the inferential subject—the *pakṣa* or “site” in Patil’s translation, in this case, “earth and the like.” But according to Ratnakīrti (and others), there are obvious counterexamples to the purported pervasion of the prover property—the *sādhana*, rendered by Patil as the “reason,” which in this case is *being an effect*—by the target. For instance, growing grass is an effect but does not have an intelligent maker.

The Nyāya response is to include all seeming counterexamples in the set of things taken to be the inferential subject. Thus, growing grass is to be included in the “and the like” (“etc.”) part of the phrase “earth and the like” at step (1) above, and no counterexample can be drawn from the *pakṣa*, or “site,” on pain of begging the question. The whole point of inference is to make us know something about an inferential subject that we did not know previously, and so we cannot assume we know, prior to the inference, whether the site is or is not qualified by the target. Patil shows that Ratnakīrti exposes the trick here, which has to do with whether there is significant doubt about grass’s not having an intelligent maker. He argues that *growing grass* cannot legitimately be part of the site if there is no such doubt. With sophisticated epistemological moves, Ratnakīrti succeeds, it seems, in making the case that there is no significant doubt about growing grass’s not having an intelligent maker, at least of the sort familiar to us through the likes of examples such as a pot and a potter.

The issues I have identified (following Patil) are related: extrapolation is limited to instances that are well known, according to the Buddhist—instances where we are acquainted with an effect and the intelligent agent who is an instrumental cause thereof, and indeed, acquainted with an extrapolatable characteristic of the connection such that we may say that the reason or prover property is *due to* the target. Ratnakīrti’s rival theory of pervasion as inference-warranting, which Patil shows to be based on the *apoha* (“exclusion”) theory of concept-formulation, avoids the error of making us know too much, and for this reason does indeed seem to be preferable to the Nyāya theory. Patil is at his best in illuminating the Buddhist “exclusion” theory, which on his reading is the knot at the center holding together the separate strands of Ratnakīrti’s system. The *apoha* theory is in my view abstruse, including, Patil shows, both selective and negational components. However, Ratnakīrti does seem to derive from it the right scope for inference’s capacity to generate knowledge. About a chapter is devoted to *apoha* and Ratnakīrti’s epistemology of inference, which are as central to the book as a whole as the refuted theistic reasoning.

Now to the two ironies. The first has to do with what Patil tells us about the disciplines in which he works, which include, he says, philosophy as well as indology and religious studies. But is it doing philosophy to walk us up to the edge of an evaluative overview without telling us anything about what we should finally think, i.e., about whether Ratnakīrti’s refutation is really successful, or whether his is really the superior epistemology? Ratnakīrti here comes across as *seeming* right because Ratnakīrti himself surely takes his reasoning to be cogent, and Patil channels its force admirably. But we never really hear the voices of the other side, and Patil does not himself take a stance.

It is significant that Ratnakīrti argues not only negatively, but also puts forth several positive arguments—for momentariness in particular, as well as for the thesis that meditation on momentariness has soteriological value. There are weak positions here on which Patil does not dwell. For example, the hinge thesis that from meditation on momentariness we become capable of yogic perception of *dharma* is mysterious but not illumined by Patil. (Why should such meditation reduce selfishness—which is all that is mentioned in defense of the claim – any more than, say, meditation on *ātman* à la Nyāya? ) And it is surely highly implausible that we have the power to *construct* external, intersubjective objects, the objects of bodily and linguistic acts. Ratnakīrti’s subjectivist the-

sis is, however, glossed over by Patil in my judgment. I am suggesting, then, that a properly *philosophic* study would not be the mere mouthpiece for Ratnakīrti that this book becomes—albeit there is tremendous merit in allowing Ratnakīrti to address us in our own philosophic terminology in a study that is, all told, like a lucid translation but better.

The second irony is that Ratnakīrti argues that *Buddha* is omniscient. In broad perspective, Nyāya’s attribution of omniscience to *īśvara* seems like a species of error common to all the religious philosophies of classical India—including Jainism (which, like Buddhism, is atheistic while yet attributing omniscience to the Jina). Furthermore, as Patil mentions but does not elaborate, Ratnakīrti accepts that earth and the like *do* have an intelligent maker, just not Nyāya’s *īśvara*. Within Nyāya, Vācaspati argues that insofar as one of the causal functions for which *īśvara* is posited is to combine atoms, *īśvara* must be bodiless; for if an embodied being were thought to bring this about, then another combiner would be required, *ad infinitum*, all bodies being made up of atoms. Thus the intelligent maker could not be much like us, it is pretty evident, in both the Nyāya and Buddhist conceptions.

To be sure, Patil tells us repeatedly that Ratnakīrti’s Naiyāyikas are not necessarily the real McCoys, but only the interlocutors of his treatises, saying “Ratnakīrti’s Naiyāyikas” so frequently that when the qualifying possessive is not used (but only the word “Naiyāyikas”), we assume an ellipsis and understand that it is only the Naiyāyikas of Ratnakīrti’s own conception that are meant. This is not entirely true, however, in chapter 2, where the Nyāya epistemology is laid out before the *īśvara* inference is dissected in chapter 3. There Patil does an excellent job overall in presenting Nyāya’s theory of knowledge. Early Naiyāyikas are quoted, and, I repeat, he has mastered the philosophic idiom required to make the views plain, including some terrific innovations. However, there are distortions from the Nyāya point of view, it seems to me, probably due to his slightly confusing *Ratnakīrti*’s Naiyāyikas for Vācaspati and company when these are not the same. The difficulty is perhaps compounded by Ratnakīrti’s being quite a bit more fair-minded towards Naiyāyikas than is, say, Udayana in presenting Buddhist theories. We are talking mostly about subtleties. But the “certification conditions,” for example, that Patil stresses belong alone to Ratnakīrti. Ratnakīrti has a brilliant rhetorical strategy in his “Proof of Momentariness by Positive Correlation” (*Kṣaṇa-bhaṅga-siddhi anvayātmikā*), showing that his inference does not

fall to certain well-known fallacies, to wit, Patil’s “certification conditions,” and he employs the same strategy or, we could say, holds his Naiyāyikas to the same standards with respect to their *īśvara* inference—albeit in the one case the examined inference passes the tests and in the other it fails them. But this is not how Nyāya looks at certification. If a specific fallacy is alleged, the proponent has an epistemic duty to show it to be non-genuine, but not a duty to consider all defeating possibilities.

A related misconstrual: Patil tells us in several places that Ratnakīrti criticizes the Nyāya theory for its view that “a finite, unspecified number of empirical observations and nonobservations can establish the absence of a reason property in all dissimilar cases” (p. 149). This is a straw man. To know *Śābaleya* as a cow is to know something about any particular cow, including future cows. Similarly, one knows about anything smoky that it is something fiery (and about anything non-fiery that it is non-smoky). But negative correlation, like the positive,

delivers a fallible projection, and a judgment of pervasion can be wrong though appearing to be warranted. Unlike Ratnakīrti’s Naiyāyikas, the real ones are not so presumptuous. The deep issue is how sensitive to potential defeaters we have to be in order to act confidently on our inferences. Surely, contra Patil’s Ratnakīrti (304-305), we needn’t be aware of all possible defeaters. Inferences may have to be certified when challenged, but we do not have to be as sensitive to defeaters as Ratnakīrti and Patil make out, at least not according to Nyāya.

Patil has given us a great book on Ratnakīrti, partially through learning and presenting the views of Ratnakīrti’s opponents, which he has done admirably well, although the book lacks an evaluative overview and does not present equally the two sides of the debate about *īśvara*. It is a penetrating study of Ratnakīrti’s entire philosophy for all that, indeed perhaps better for the restrictions.

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