

Carvaka Theory of Knowledge

Dr. Sajiya Sultana Begum

Carvaka philosophy depends on its epistemology. The Carvaka also known as Lokayata philosophy, is called materialism in Indian philosophy. Carvaka philosophy holds the doctrine that perception is the only source of valid knowledge and does not allow inference, testimony etc. as the source of valid knowledge. They say that knowledge means whatever we can perceive through our sense organs, and that is the only right knowledge.

The Carvakas don't admit the inference as a means of valid knowledge. They argue that if inference is to be regarded as a means of valid knowledge, it must presuppose knowledge about which we can have no doubt and which must be true to reality. But inference cannot fulfill these conditions, because when we infer, for example, the existence of fire on a mountain from the perception of smoke, we take a leap in the dark, from the perceived smoke to the unperceived fire. A logician perhaps will point out that such a leap is justified by our previous knowledge of the invariable relation between smoke and fire, and that the inference stated more clearly would be: all cases of smoke are cases of fire, but the Carvakas refuse it and argue that this contention would be acceptable only if the major premise stating the invariable relation between the middle term "smoke" and the major terms "fire" are beyond doubt. But this invariable relation can be established only if we have a knowledge of all cases of smoke in the presence of fire. However, this is not possible because we can't perceive even all the cases of smoke and fire existing in different places all over the world now, to say nothing of those which existed in the past or will exist in the future." Hence, no invariable universal relation can be established by inference. Neither can it be based on another inference, because it will involve a fallacy, since in the case of this inference we should also require another inference to establish it, and so on, and hence would arise the fallacy of an adindefinitum.

Moreover, invariable relation is also not based on testimony of reliable persons who state that all cases of smoke are case of fire. For the validity of testimony itself requires to be proved by inference. Again, if testimony is to be accepted as the only means of the knowledge of the universal proposition, then in the case of a man to whom the fact of the invariable relation between the middle and major terms had not been pointed out by another person, there could be no inference of one thing as fire on seeing another thing as smoke; hence, on your own showing, the whole topic of inference for oneself would have to end in mere idle words.

The Carvakas don't admit any constant class characters like 'smokeness' and 'fireness' which must be invariably present in all instances of smoke and fire respectively. They insist that even if we grant a perception of a relation between smokeness and fireness, it is not possible to establish any invariable relation between all individual cases of smoke and fire. If it is possible to infer a particular fire, we must know that it is inseparably related to the particular

smoke. In fact, it is not possible even to know by perception what "smokeness" or the class characters universally present in all particular instances of smoke are, because we do not perceive all cases of smoke that are found to be universally present in the perceived cases of smoke, but may not be present in the unperceived ones. There is neither any guarantee that uniformity perceived in the past would continue in future. Our knowledge of the invariable relation between smoke and fire cannot be claimed to be dependent on a causal relation between them. Because, a causal relation being only a kind of invariable relation, cannot be established by perception. They point out that a causal or any other invariable relation cannot be established merely by repeated perception of two things occurring together. If a man perceives a number of times fire accompanied by smoke, and another occasion he infers the existence of fire on the perception of smoke, he would be liable to error, because he failed to notice a condition, namely, the wetness of fuel, in the presence of which alone fire is attended with smoke. It is a fact that sometimes our inference happens to be true and leads to successful results. But it is also a fact that sometimes inference leads to error. Truth is not then an unfailing character of all inference, it is only an accident, and a separable one, we find only in some cases.") Inference etc. cannot be regarded, therefore, as a valid source of knowledge.

Thus, Carvakas demonstrated a new path to Indian philosophers for new thinking and the evaluation of their doctrines. It may be noted that the contribution of the Carvakas epistemology is not insignificant to other Indian philosophers and it has also helped to make them more logical and rational. The Carvakas view that no inference can yield certain knowledge is the view of many contemporary western thinkers such as the empiricists, pragmatists and logical positivists.