

Pramāṇavāda and the Crisis of Skepticism in the Modern Public Sphere

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There is widespread and warranted skepticism about the usefulness of inclusive and epistemically rigorous public debate in societies that are modeled on the Habermasian public sphere, and this skepticism challenges the democratic form of government worldwide. To address structural weaknesses of Habermasian public spheres, such as susceptibility to mass manipulation through “ready-to-think” messages and tendencies to privilege and subordinate perspectives arbitrarily, interdisciplinary scholars should attend to traditions of knowledge and public debate that are not rooted in western colonial/modern genealogies, such as the Sanskrit traditions of pramāṇavāda and vāda. Attention to vāda, pramāṇavāda, and other traditions like them can inspire new forms of social discussion, media, and digital humanities, which, in turn, can help to place trust in democracy on foundations that are more stable than mere (anxious) optimism.

Key words: *vāda*; *pramāṇa*; Nyāya; *hetvābhāsa*; Habermas; Michael Warner; public sphere; democracy

In the fall of 2021, a student and I debated, or attempted to debate, masking in classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. My home institution did not require masks in classrooms but claimed instead to “strongly encourage” their use. However, beyond posting phrases like “strongly encourage” to websites, this encouragement did not amount to much. In one class I taught, just a third of students wore masks. So, during an office hours session, I brought the issue up with a student to ask if he would like to review masking research with me. He was cordial but said he found the exercise pointless. “You’ll share research that backs your opinion, and I’ll reply with research that backs my opinion, and we’ll end up getting nowhere.” Where I am in the US South, this student’s skeptical sentiment is not unusual. Amid an international public health crisis and other pressing predicaments, open and epistemically rigorous social discussion strikes many as, at best, quixotic.

Yet many cultures historically have rejected such skepticism about critical discussion and have emphasized its importance for navigating crises. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Arjuna and Krishna debate before the start of an epochal battle. During this discussion, divine Krishna identifies himself with *vāda* (10:32), a kind of conversation that he thereby associates with himself as a perfect unity of infinite diverse particulars (11:9–14). Compared with other kinds of speech, *vāda*-talk is supposed to be less torrid and torpid and more pacific; those who wish to do right in the world without distortive attachments practice it. In the *Apology*, Socrates implores his fellow Athenians to discuss virtue every day, to converse and test themselves and others, “for the unexamined life is not worth living” (38a). Without such examination, societies make bad choices, and when societies make bad choices, life can become unbearable—societies need critical social debate to be worth living in. Both philosophies refuse skepticism about critical discussion.

Still, as reflected in scholarship on Jürgen Habermas' political philosophy, there has been some uncertainty in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries about the locus and efficacy of such critical social deliberation. Habermas imagines what he calls "the public sphere" as a heterogeneous and inclusive site, located at the intersection of state political power and private interests, that is engaged in a "permanent process of opinion and consensus formation" (Habermas 1991: 208).¹ This public sphere includes not only formal debates in legislatures, courtrooms, professional journals, and media but also informal debates in places like shop floors, nightclubs, and street corners. Habermasians contend that this public sphere offers an ongoing check on state politics that is a necessary condition of democracy, provided it is accessible to all, and provided that disciplines of reasoning rather than "'ready-to-think' messages" guide its opinion and consensus outputs (Aubert 2021: 452).² But no such open and disciplined public sphere has existed in societies that imagine themselves as democracies.

Seyla Benhabib argues that the Habermasian public sphere is both a "regulative ideal" and "constitutive fiction" of the democratic form of government. As a regulative ideal, the public sphere is a standard that all democracies strive for but cannot reach. The more inclusive the sphere is of all forms of expression, including epistemically corrupt forms such as disinformation and misinformation, the more vulnerable it may be to manipulation in which ready-to-think messages substitute for thought. "'Ready-to-think' messages" are phrases persons and organizations use to evade meaningful analysis or critique. "My home institution strongly encourages masking" is, I would contend, one example. The point of the slogan was to escape critical analysis. Conversely, the more that disciplinary mechanisms constrain the public sphere, the less equipped it may be to check institutional politics. Nonetheless, Benhabib argues, a democratic society should strive to meet these conditions of inclusivity and rigorous reasoning that frequently are in conflict, be distressed when efforts fall short, and try again and again "to reenact its identity in the public sphere" (Benhabib 1997: 19).³ The public sphere is therefore on her view a constitutive fiction of the democratic form of government. Societies that count as democracies are perpetually anxious about unavoidable divergences between their ideal and their present realities (Benhabib 1997: 2). Societies, however, that shrug off such anxieties cease to constitute themselves according to the democratic form of government.

Skepticism, then, about the utility of open and epistemically rigorous social discussion is a crisis for democracy, even while anxieties present in many societies about failures of inclusivity and widespread disinformation and misinformation also affirm democracy's vitality. Viewed optimistically, nostalgia for a "lost" yet imaginary public sphere once marked by civility, trust, and shared commitment to reason and truth regardless of political differences indicates continued social investment in the public sphere as a constitutive fiction. This nostalgia harmonizes with a chorus of anxieties discordantly and often violently expressed and suppressed over the past four centuries about gaps between ideal discourse and historical realities. Viewed less optimistically, general skepticism about the practicality of public debate also portends the death of the ideal—and for Habermasians, the death of the democratic form of government.

Habermas wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in part to alert readers to this impending demise of democracy. As Isabelle Aubert points out, Habermas' concept of the public sphere allowed him "to highlight the progressive loss of the principle of critique and the growth of manipulated public opinion" in late capitalist societies (Aubert 2021: 449). Mass circulation of soundbites, jingles,

billboards, memes, and other ready-to-think messages saps the public sphere's capacity for critique and invites political passivity. Public spheres wither unless they resist the mass circulation of such automatic anti-thought. Further, as Michael Warner suggests, there is little cause to expect late capitalist public spheres to offer much resistance. The social subjectivity that the public sphere in late capitalism enacts aims not principally at social epistemological ends, such as opinion and consensus formation, but also at the consumption of icons—images of private desires, no matter how antisocial or uncouth, circulating as public desires (Warner 2002: 170).⁴ Consumption of icons, through which persons seem to see themselves in the public sphere in their particularities rather than as generic subjects or citizens, accords with wants while resistance to ready-to-think messages and fidelity to reason and truth often do not. Deliberation in late capitalist public spheres, in short, does not principally seek Habermasian social epistemological ends.

Scholars point to a second structural cause for skepticism about the efficacy of inclusive and epistemically rigorous debate in the public sphere. Even if the public spheres of late capitalist societies developed techniques to resist mass manipulation through ready-to-think messages and to divert social attention toward epistemically rigorous practices of opinion and consensus formation, they would remain antagonistic to public consideration of minoritarian opinions and values. Indeed, efforts to improve epistemic rigor in the public sphere often only increase such antagonism. In his later work, Habermas argues that commitment to secular, post-metaphysical reasoning makes the public sphere hostile to religious expressions and forms of life (Aubert 2021: 459). Techniques intended to “restore” epistemic rigor to the public sphere may only amplify this hostility.⁵ Similarly, Warner argues that “themes of universality, openness, meritocracy, and access” enact a “minoritizing logic of domination” (Warner 2002: 167). In Habermasian public spheres, some particular identities appear unmarked by particularity—universal, generic, and, therefore, dominant—while other particular identities appear marked as particular—vivid, not universal, and, therefore, parochial. To enact itself as universal, the public subject of reason must appear neutral or objective. Habermasian public spheres accomplish this appearance by marking others as particular and warding off, or treating as problematic, their inclusion in the public sphere. Hence, Warner notes, the modern public sphere faces a paradox: “the very mechanism designed to end domination is a form of domination” (Warner 2002: 168).

Skepticism, then, about the efficacy of open and epistemically rigorous public debate—and therefore skepticism about the viability of democracy—is not unwarranted. A viable public sphere must resist mass manipulation through ready-to-think messages although it has not shown much capacity for or interest in such resistance; it must prioritize the pursuit of social epistemological ends even though it does not want to; and it cannot determine *a priori* at an imaginary time before public discourse starts, which particular perspectives are universal and general, and which are particular and parochial, even as the very notion of the Habermasian public sphere seems to require assumptions of generic commonality.

These difficulties are arguably intrinsic to formations of the public sphere whose histories can be traced, either by experiencing or imposing colonization, to western modernity. Still, they do not by themselves discredit the public sphere as a regulative ideal or constitutive fiction. Gaps between the ideal of the public sphere and the realities of democratic societies should be expected, as Benhabib argues. So long as they continue to stir social anxiety, hope for the democratic form of government persists. But gaps between the regulative ideal of the public sphere and present circumstances do not necessarily stir anxiety, and continuation of the democratic form of government is thus not assured.

Commitment to the public sphere as a constitutive fiction is contingent and can dissipate. Those who remain anxious about the states of public spheres of late capitalist societies must address these structural problems if the ideal of the democratic form of government is to rest on foundations more stable than finger-crossing.

Solutions to structural weaknesses of formulations of the public sphere that are rooted in western modernity may be sought in frameworks of open and epistemically rigorous public debate that do not share this genealogy. Cautions, though, are needed. Habermas' concept of the public sphere is inextricable from western modernity, not just because of the histories he considered when developing the concept but also because of how social subjectivity and social epistemological ends are construed. Warner writes, referencing Habermas, "the bourgeois public sphere consists of private persons [...] who enter into rational-critical debate around matters common to all by bracketing their embodiment and status" (Warner 2002: 57). The imagined social subject of the Habermasian public sphere is a generic "we" of persons without particular characteristics joined by common interests. This social subject accordingly values consensus formation as a principal social epistemological goal. Formations of the public sphere that are not rooted in western modernity should be expected to construe social subjectivity and social epistemological ends differently. Let us say that, minimally, to perform the regulative function of the Habermasian ideal, they must provide for maximally inclusive and epistemically rigorous discussion that aims, if not at consensus, at interactive and responsive exchanges of claims, counterclaims, justifications, and critiques that can challenge or hold power to account.

Further, such alternative frameworks of open and epistemically rigorous public debate need not historically have been either maximally inclusive or resistant to power. For example, the Sanskrit traditions of *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* have strong connotations with "high culture" and Brahminism. Their historical practice was not inclusive. Similarly, the patronage system through which *pramāṇavāda* was developed and formal *vāda* debates were conducted was not particularly conducive to speaking truth to power. To some extent historically, it would not be unreasonable to compare practices of *vāda* to the "aristocratic or monarchal model" of the "representative public sphere" that Habermas contrasted with the bourgeois public sphere. In such a model, power is displayed rather than contested (Warner 2002: 47). Nonetheless, these frameworks of open and epistemically rigorous public debate led to changes of positions and innovations of ideas that cannot be reduced to power dynamics. Such frameworks may still inspire contemporary solutions to weaknesses of the modern public sphere insofar as they are capable structurally of facilitating maximally inclusive and epistemically rigorous public discussion in ways that hold power to account.

Pramāṇavāda and *vāda* have this structural capacity, as we will see, and differ in interesting—even promising—ways from the Habermasian public spheres of western modernity. They are inclusive and epistemically rigorous but do not require interlocutors to pretend to shed particularities as a condition of participation in public discussion. They do not assume a generic social subject. Nor are they structurally inclined toward secular reasoning and away from metaphysical belief. Unlike disciplines such as biology, physics, and chemistry, *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* do not either assume a specific metaphysics or bracket metaphysical questions from their fields of concern. Moreover, they are capable of formalization and therefore of widespread and various use. While significant barriers to entry exist for *pramāṇavāda*, these are modest relative to other formal methodologies; unlike first-order predicate logic, for example, *pramāṇavāda* can be taught to children. Arguably, interdisciplinary scholarly attention to *pramāṇavāda*, *vāda*, and other traditions like them may inspire the creation of new

forms of social discussion, media, and digital humanities, which, in turn, can help to place trust in democracy on foundations more stable than mere (anxious) optimism.

Still, there are considerable barriers to the use of *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* in modern public spheres. As we will see, direct participation requires that one learn the formal protocols of the *pramāṇas* and the specific ways each knowledge source can be challenged. Without widespread training, it is hard to imagine these protocols being mastered and practiced in places like nightclubs and corner shops. Further, classical *vāda* debates were highly formal events and remain so today, with intricate rules governing the process of debate, when theses can be introduced and by whom, and so on. Each such protocol limits the inclusivity of *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda*. Hence, they may also limit their capacities to sustain democracy. However, the same problem faces every elite intellectual discourse. Academic ideas circulate through conferences with high registration fees, mostly paywalled journals, universities with access conditions that favor the elite, and university presses that charge fees most people in the world cannot afford. Elite discourses do not need to be adopted by all to contribute to the social epistemological ends of the public sphere—nor can they be.

Digital humanities projects based on protocols of *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* could code many of the formal rules and restrictions of these knowledge practices into the backend of user interfaces, just as other (problematic) epistemic assumptions are built into platforms such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and WhatsApp. My students and I have, for example, created a prototype of an online debate platform based on *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* that restricts means of supporting claims to three *pramāṇas* and *tarka* and restricts means of challenging claims and justifications to a limited set of “flags” that are associated with theses and the specific mechanism of support. The platform’s coding formalizes the satisfaction conditions and mechanisms of challenge discussed later. Other contemporary technologies and activities can be similarly designed to make *pramāṇavāda*, *vāda*, and other non-western knowledge traditions more accessible to academic and non-academic publics and thereby increase the inclusivity and epistemic rigor of contemporary public spheres. As with other elite intellectual discourses, *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* practices may be translated in ways that would allow for their transmission, in modified forms, through non-academic publics with different material conditions of circulation.⁶

Pramāṇavāda refers to the formal study of the nature and use of basic knowledge instruments (*pramāṇas*) for oneself and in deliberations with others. It has documented textual roots in the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, a roughly second-century medical treatise, and the *Nyāya Sūtra*, a slightly later foundational text of the Nyāya philosophical text-tradition (*darśana*). In both texts, *pramāṇavāda* is closely associated with *vāda*, or faithful, truth-directed debate. For approximately a millennium, *pramāṇavāda* provided a public framework through which the various Indian *darśanas* were able, as Richard King notes, to “interact, ‘fine-tune’ their own theoretical perspectives and develop an in-depth understanding” of others’ positions, justifications, and counterarguments (King 1999: 136).⁷ From the second through, at least, the fourteenth century, *pramāṇavāda* made possible epistemically disciplined *vāda* debates between Carvāka materialists, Vedānta theists, reductionist Buddhists, Nyāya creationists, Mīmāṃsā textualists, and several other philosophical text-traditions, as well as debate within these *darśanas*. Notwithstanding its displacement by the Habermasian public sphere as a principal mode through which ideas were circulated among strangers, the capacities of *pramāṇavāda* to support inclusive and epistemically rigorous debate have not dissipated.

Pramāṇavāda is structurally open and epistemically rigorous. *Nyāya Sūtra* 1.2.1 defines *vāda* as follows: “Employing the five components of a formal demonstration, taking up theses and countertheses, debate for the truth (*vāda*) is a matter of proving and refuting by means of knowledge sources (*pramāṇas*) and suppositional reasoning (*tarka*), without contradicting established positions.”⁸

One cannot participate in *vāda* without engaging opposing theses or presenting a thesis of one’s own. Indeed, critiquing another’s thesis without taking a stand of one’s own is termed *vitandā*, destructive debate (NS 1.2.3). Further, *vāda* structurally requires one to prove theses and refute countertheses principally by relying on *pramāṇas*, which are basic knowledge instruments that favor critical thought over ready-to-think messaging.

Each *pramāṇa* describes, or is intended to describe, a natural, reflexive, and irreducible instrument of warranted true cognition (*pramā*). Each, therefore, aims to be maximally inclusive and universal. For example, *Nyāya Sūtra* 1.1.4 defines the *pramāṇa* of perception (*pratyakṣa*) as follows: “Perceptual knowledge (*pratyakṣa*) arises from a connection of sense faculty and object, does not depend on language, is inerrant, and is definitive” (Dasti and Phillips 2017: 20). Every being with at least one functioning sense capacity is capable of perceptual knowledge, provided sensory contact with an appropriately perceptible object causes their cognition in the right sort of way. A person whose tongue touches sugar reflexively and vividly knows sweetness, regardless of their linguistic or conceptual background, provided their gustatory system works at the time. Similarly, the Nyāya philosopher Vātsyāyana defines a trustworthy source (*āpta*) of testimonial knowledge (*śabda*) as “someone who knows something directly, an instructor with the desire to communicate it faithfully as it is known” (Dasti and Phillips 2017: 35). When words are from sources who have firsthand knowledge, want to communicate this knowledge, and successfully express this knowledge, others reflexively gain testimonial knowledge from them. For example, when a person knows the time, faithfully wants to tell the time, and tells the time without misspeaking, you naturally and reflexively know what time it is. Because every person with language capacities arguably gains knowledge this way as a matter of course, the *pramāṇa* of *śabda* aims, like *pratyakṣa*, to be maximally inclusive and universal.

Further, no one set of *pramāṇas* is treated structurally by *pramāṇavāda* or *vāda* as more public or universal than others. Different *darśanas* recognized different sets of *pramāṇas*, and standards of public reasoning in debates were adapted to the *pramāṇas* that interlocutors in those debates recognized. While all (or most) *pramāṇavāda* scholars (*pramāṇavādins*) acknowledged some *pramāṇas*, they disagreed about the set of *pramāṇas*. Those who disputed the existence of a *pramāṇa*, such as testimony, analogy, or postulation, would typically try to account for it through other, allegedly more basic *pramāṇas*. In contexts of debate, Buddhist and Vaiśeṣika *pramāṇavādins* recognized only two basic knowledge sources: perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). Most Cārvāka materialists who refrained from wholesale skepticism recognized just perception. *Pramāṇavādins* from the Nyāya, Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Mīmāṃsā *darśanas* recognized testimony (*śabda*) as well as inference and perception but disagreed with each other about the existence of other *pramāṇas*. Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and some Vedānta *pramāṇavādins* recognized just the three, while Nyaya *pramāṇavādins* recognized four, Prabhākara Mīmāṃsā *pramāṇavādins* recognized five, and Advaita Vedānta and Bhaṭṭa Mīmāṃsā *pramāṇavādins* recognized six. Still, members of these *darśanas* constructively debated with one another for centuries and adapted the *pramāṇas* they used to the specific interlocutors they were dialoguing with.

When interlocutors accept a *pramāṇa* that their opponents do not, they may employ this *pramāṇa* to warrant their own cognitions. However, they cannot use it to mandate cognitions onto their opponents. For example, a Nyāya philosopher may appeal to *śabda* and *śruti* to justify their belief that the creator of the universe is Īśvara. But they cannot thereby compel a Buddhist, who does not recognize *śabda* as a *pramāṇa* or the Vedas as authoritative, to also accept this belief as knowledge. Likewise, a Catholic may cite the *Catechism* to warrant the thesis that human personhood begins at conception. However, they cannot thereby compel a non-Catholic who does not recognize *śabda* as a *pramāṇa* to accept the thesis. Nor could they compel an adherent of Reform Judaism, a major Jewish denomination, to agree; while the adherent would accept *śabda*, they would also have cause to doubt Pope John Paul II's firsthand knowledge of the matter.

Pramāṇavāda and *vāda* do not structurally favor secular or post-metaphysical reasoning. The one shared non-syntactic criterion for a legitimate thesis in a public *vāda* debate is that it genuinely be in doubt, or in other words, be well-timed. When a thesis is presented in debate, there should be others who doubt it, and it should not be refuted by common experience, and unless one is presenting new evidence or reasoning, the matter should not have already been resolved through previous open and epistemically rigorous social inquiry. Religious and secular assertions alike meet this criterion for a legitimate thesis. For example, through the protocols of *pramāṇavāda*, Nyāya and Buddhist philosophers vigorously debated the Nyāya thesis that “our world has been created by an intelligent agent” (Patil 2009: 59). So long as a thesis statement genuinely is in doubt and is syntactically well-formed, it is suited for *vāda* debate. Syntactically, it should locate a target property or *sādhyā* (e.g., “has been created by an intelligent agent”) in some subject or *pakṣa* (e.g., “our world”). Consequently, *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* are not structurally averse to religious theses.

Nor, moreover, does *pramāṇavāda* or *vāda* require theses to appear shorn of particularities, biases, or emotion. “My home institution recklessly endangered its community during the COVID-19 pandemic” and other contentious or impolitic claims meet the syntactic and non-syntactic criteria for an appropriate thesis. “My home institution” is a subject or *pakṣa* and “recklessly endangered its community during the COVID-19 pandemic” is a target property or *sādhyā*. Moreover, my home institution contests claims that it recklessly endangered its community during the COVID-19 pandemic while others, including me, assert them. Neither universal experience nor previous open and epistemically rigorous critical social discussion has resolved the issue. Therefore, “My home institution recklessly endangered its community during the COVID-19 pandemic” is an appropriate thesis for a *vāda* debate. Unlike participation in some institutions in the US South, participation in *pramāṇavāda* does not expect one to appear neutral or unmarked by particularity. Uncouth and minoritarian claims are welcome so long as they presently are in doubt and have not already been settled through common experience or previous open and epistemically rigorous public debate.

Pramāṇas are the main means of proving and refuting theses in *vāda* debates, and, like theses, these do not structurally favor secular over religious, politic over impolitic, or majority over minority reasons. The natural, reflexive, and irreducible knowledge instrument that relies directly on reasoning rather than directly on perceptual or verbal evidence is inference (*anumāna*). Members of all *darśanas*, excluding some Cārvāka materialists and Buddhist skeptics, recognized it as a *pramāṇa*. *Anumāna* is the way one gains knowledge about something previously unknown from something presently known.

According to the sixth century Buddhist Dharmakīrti's systematization of his predecessor Dignāga's threefold criterion of a genuine reason property (*hetu*), inference establishes a well-timed and unrivaled thesis as knowledge when three reason satisfaction conditions (SC) are met:

- (SC1) the reason property (*hetu*) is known to be present in the subject (*pakṣa*),
- (SC2) the reason property is known to be present with the target property (*sādhya*) in a similar case (*sapakṣa*), and
- (SC3) the *hetu* is known to not be present without the *sādhya* in any instance.

To justify the thesis that “the primordial conditions of the world were created by an intelligent agent,” Nyāya philosophers argued that our world has the characteristic of being an effect (*kāryatva*) and cited “a pot” as a *sapakṣa*, or a case that is similar to, but different from, the *pakṣa* (Patil 2009: 59).⁹ For the thesis to be established as knowledge through inference, the three reason satisfaction conditions for a *hetu* must be satisfied. The primordial conditions of the world, the *pakṣa*, must be known to have the characteristic of being an effect (to have the *hetu*). A pot, the *sapakṣa*, must be known to have the characteristic of being an effect (the *hetu*) and to have been created by an intelligent agent (to have the *sādhya*), and the pot must not be part of the subject, the primordial conditions of the world. Finally, it must be known that nothing exists with the characteristic of being an effect that has not been created by an intelligent agent.

Similarly, to justify the thesis that “my home institution recklessly endangered its community during the COVID-19 pandemic,” I might argue that my home institution willfully flouted evidence-based public health guidelines and mandated unsafe practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and cite Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro as a similar case. Assuming the counterthesis was not warranted on equally strong grounds, the same three conditions for a *hetu* would need to be satisfied for my thesis to be established as knowledge through inference. It would need to be known that my home institution willfully flouted evidence-based public health guidelines and mandated unsafe practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who is not a part of my home institution, would need to be known to have done the same and to have recklessly endangered his community during the COVID-19 pandemic. And it would need to be known that no cases of willfully flouting evidence-based public health guidelines and mandating unsafe practices during the COVID-19 pandemic occur without recklessly endangering one's community.

The satisfaction conditions for theses and *pramāṇas* in *pramāṇavāda* public spheres provide shared mechanisms that interlocutors can use to critique opposing theses and arguments and assess their own. Because an appropriate thesis must be well-timed, or in doubt, one can critique another's counterthesis by arguing that it is mistimed, either because it is “Too Early,” and either no one asserts the thesis it supposedly counters or universal experience refutes it, or because it is “Too Late,” and the question has already been settled through open and epistemically rigorous public debate.¹⁰ Likewise, to critique another's inference, one can argue that at least one of the three reason satisfaction conditions is not met or, in other words, that the reason statement relies on a pseudo-reason (*hetvābhāsa*) rather than a genuine one. For example, one can challenge the satisfaction of the first satisfaction condition (SC1) by arguing either that the subject is unestablished—nonexistent, ambiguous, or otherwise in doubt—or that the reason property (*hetu*) is not known to be present in the subject (*pakṣa*). In the first case, one would argue that the interlocutor's reason commits the fallacy of “Unestablished Subject” (*āśrayāsiddha*), while in the second, one would argue that the interlocutor's

reason commits the fallacy, “Itself Unestablished” (*svarūpāsiddha*). Following Dharmakīrti’s systematization of the threefold conditions for a *hetu*, categories of reason fallacies, or *hetvābhāsas*, were correlated with the specific ways that the satisfaction conditions for legitimate reasons might not be met (Gokhale 1992: 87–112).¹¹ While the complete list and nature of these reason fallacies remained hotly debated, they provided interlocutors with formal mechanisms to critique others’ arguments and refine their own in inclusive and epistemically rigorous public discussion.

In addition to the *hetvābhāsas* associated with SC1, one system of accounting for the various ways of challenging an inference can be broadly outlined as follows. To contest the satisfaction of SC2—the requirement that a similar case be known to have the reason property and the target property—an interlocutor could argue that the similar case a) is not known because it is either ambiguous, in doubt, or nonexistent, b) is synonymous with or is a part of the subject, or c) lacks either the reason property or the target property. Each such argument alleges that the reason commits the fallacy “Too Narrow” (*asādhāraṇa*). To contest the satisfaction of SC3—the requirement that it be known that there are no instances of the reason property without the target property—one could either specify one such instance or argue that such instances may exist. In the first case, one would argue that the reason commits the fallacy “Too Broad—Counterexample” (*sādhāraṇa*) by identifying an instance of something with the reason property but without the target property. For example, to challenge my inference in this way, one might cite a particular case of something or someone willfully flouting evidence-based public health guidelines and mandating unsafe practices during the COVID-19 pandemic but not recklessly endangering their community.

In the second case, one would argue that such instances may exist even if they are not now specified. Nyāya philosophers preferred to formulate such arguments by contending that the supposed universal concomitance (*vyāpti*) of the reason property and the target property relies on an additional property. This method of challenging an inference would allege that the reason commits the fallacy “Contrived Universal” (*upādhi*).¹² For example, a contemporary Nyāya *pramāṇavādin* might contest an inference alleging that identifying as LGBTQ+ should be discouraged because identifying as LGBTQ+ is associated with higher morbidity and mortality, as in the case of cigarette smoking, by noting that the universal connection between something leading to higher morbidity and mortality and needing to be discouraged assumes an additional property—namely, an absence of systematic discrimination. When systematic discrimination is present, something can be associated with higher morbidity and mortality without needing to be discouraged. In contrast, Buddhist *pramāṇavādins* such as Dharmakīrti preferred to formulate such counterarguments by contending that the universal connection (*vyāpti*) between the inference’s reason property and target property is neither causally nor conceptually necessary. Being LGBTQ+ does not cause one to become ill or die, and being LGBTQ+ and thriving is not inconceivable. Consequently, counterexamples may exist or later come to exist (Gokhale 1992: 90–4). An inference with this defect would be said to commit the reason fallacy “Unestablished Universal” (*vyāpyatvasiddha*).

Each *pramāṇa* is associated with specific satisfaction conditions and, therefore, with formal mechanisms of critique. For example, as indicated earlier, Nyāya philosophers contend that when words are from a source that has firsthand knowledge, that wants to communicate this knowledge, and that successfully expresses this knowledge, others reflexively gain testimonial knowledge. Three satisfaction conditions are therefore associated with the *pramāṇa* of *śabda*, or testimony. From these satisfaction conditions, formal mechanisms of critique follow. To contest a source’s firsthand

knowledge of the subject at hand, one can contend that a source does not have direct acquaintance with what they are speaking or writing about or argue that the information from the source is wrong. In the first case, one would flag the testimony with the defect “No Familiarity,” while in the second, one would flag it with the defect “Errant Information.” Alternatively, one could argue that the source is motivated on this occasion by some aim other than communicating knowledge and therefore flag the testimony with the defect “Faithless.” Finally, one could challenge the satisfaction of the third condition by either flagging it with the defect “Misstatement” and arguing that the source on this occasion has misspoken, or by flagging it with the defect “Ambiguous” and arguing that the source’s words do not support the intended claim. Hence, at least five formal mechanisms of critique follow from the three general satisfaction conditions for *śabda*.

Critiques in *vāda* debates must themselves be supported by a *pramāṇa* or by supplemental philosophical argument (*tarka*). It is not enough merely to allege that a person’s testimony is motivated by ends other than communicating knowledge; one must have some basis, typically through a *pramāṇa*, to allege that the testimony is faithless, and this support must itself be capable of withstanding critical scrutiny. So long as support for an allegation is flagged, the allegation lacks critical force.

The formal protocols of *pramāṇavāda* can be used to create adaptable, inclusive, and epistemically rigorous archives of contemporaneous public debates, which can help to educate members of the public sphere without silencing minoritarian opinions and values, and to distinguish on systematic and neutral grounds between interlocutors who are committed to social epistemological ends and interlocutors who are not. For any one thesis, all justifications for it extant in the public sphere can be stated through the protocols of *pramāṇavāda*. Extant justifications for the counterthesis can similarly be stated. For example, the following reason properties (*hetus*) might be among those supporting the thesis, “Eating meat just for enjoyment is unethical”:

- ...willfully causes needless suffering.
- ...significantly and unnecessarily contributes to global climate change.
- ...needlessly increases global food scarcity.

To reject the thesis’ status as public knowledge, opponents who are committed to social epistemological ends would need either to construct at least one equally sound argument to the contrary or identify flaws in, or “flag,” each reason for the thesis using an appropriate category of *hetvābhāsa*. These counterarguments could themselves be critiqued. By following the protocols of *pramāṇavāda*, interlocutors can track arguments against their own positions and identify specific points of continued disagreement or doubt as the discussion proceeds from general reasons to specific factual questions. In the process, they will typically refine their perspectives. Participants, however, who fail to attend to arguments against their favored positions or who continue to restate claims, present arguments, or cite evidence that have already been flagged or discredited will reveal themselves as not being committed to social epistemological ends.

As early as the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, the second-century medical treatise, Sanskrit texts identified three general types of discussion: *vāda*, *jalpa*, and *vitandā*. *Vāda*, as already mentioned, is faithful, truth-directed debate structured through *pramāṇavāda*, while *vitandā* is faithless, undisciplined debate that eschews *pramāṇavāda* constraints. However, the third form, *jalpa*, is both constrained by the formal

structures of *pramāṇavāda* and faithless. Interlocutors who are engaged in *jalpa* adhere performatively to *pramāṇavāda* but employ tricks (equivocation, raising disingenuous objections, etc.) to secure ends other than truth (e.g., winning the debate, “owning” their opponents, protecting an institution, etc.). They are not committed to the interactive and responsive exchange of claims, counterclaims, justifications, and critiques that can challenge or hold power to account. Dharmakīrti’s systematization of the *hetvābhāsas* introduced neutral and robust mechanisms to counter *jalpa* in *pramāṇavāda* discussions. Claims and justifications of both the faithless and faithful are subject to standard mechanisms of critique. Therefore, a faithless interlocutor eventually will either adhere to these mechanisms and be pulled against their wishes toward truth, or openly flout them and be revealed on impartial grounds as a bad faith actor who is not committed to social epistemological ends. Such participants can then be identified and excluded from further public discussion on this topic (e.g., “deplatformed” or “canceled”¹³) on neutral and systematic grounds.

Archives constructed through the protocols of *pramāṇavāda* could be an especially useful means of improving the inclusivity and epistemic rigor of public discussions around cultural topics, such as systematic racism, casteism, abortion, and LGBTQ+ civil rights, in which certain perspectives are unwarrantedly privileged as general and representative while others are unwarrantedly subordinated as unrepresentative. As indicated earlier, *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* do not preemptively exclude uncouth, impolitic, or minoritarian claims from public discussion. Initially, all theses are welcome so long as they are in doubt and syntactically well-formed. One might worry that such permissiveness would impede open and epistemically rigorous discussion in the public sphere by allowing exclusionary and anti-democratic perspectives freely to circulate. Ready-to-think messages in favor of, for example, white supremacy, Brahminism, male supremacy, and the death of LGBTQ+ persons would initially be welcome. However, rather than being a weakness of *pramāṇavāda*, the framework’s radical inclusivity allows it to temper ready-to-think messaging and anti-democratic and exclusionary impulses. Of course, no meaningful example can escape—or, I would say, should aspire to escape—the particularity of the person who offers the example. *Pramāṇavāda* and *vāda*, unlike Habermasian public spheres, do not require perspectives to play-act as universal.

Exclusionary and anti-democratic theses already circulate in late capitalist public spheres. They are asserted in nightclubs and on shop floors and street corners, as well as in legislatures, professional media, courthouses, and other sites of formal institutional power. However, Habermasian public spheres lack structural capacities to distinguish ready-to-think messaging, which should be restrained in the public sphere, from merely unpopular minoritarian expressions, which should be welcome. They consequently preemptively exclude some unpopular positions that, though contentious and challenging, could warrant open and epistemically rigorous inquiry (e.g., “The United States is systematically racist,” “Narendra Modi is an authoritarian,” “Trans athletes have an undue advantage in competitive girls’ and women’s sports”),¹⁴ while allowing already discredited claims to circulate without restraint (e.g., “Donald Trump won the 2020 US Presidential election,” “India is a Hindu nation,” “Gender affirmative care for trans youth is child abuse”).¹⁵ Habermasian public spheres lack capacities to track claims, counterclaims, supposed justifications, and the specific challenges each faces in ways that circulate across multiple publics. As a result, each attempt to dismiss an exclusionary and anti-democratic claim from the public sphere can be cast as an act of censorship—an instance of “cancel culture”—and every unpopular, impolitic, or uncouth expression can be portrayed as a threat to democracy.

Public spheres in late capitalist societies are characterized by regular bouts of intense debate about controversial cultural matters depending on the news of the day and the priorities of those who fund mass ready-to-think messaging. During each such bout in Habermasian public spheres, discussion begins anew. Disproportionate burdens then fall on those with expertise on the subject—including those most harmed by wrong opinions on the topic—to again educate their fellow members of the public sphere. These experts must marshal arguments, counterarguments, and evidence; meanwhile, uneducated fellow members of the public sphere are burdened with no assumption of prior understanding and need only to find themselves persuaded. No matter the outcome, discussion again begins from scratch during the next naturally or artificially arising cultural crisis. In contrast, practices of *vāda* can archive and track the progress of cultural debates.¹⁶ Consequently, those who are harmed by wrong opinions on cultural topics do not face disproportionate burdens. Instead of rehashing arguments, counterarguments, and evidence during each cultural crisis, they can direct uneducated fellow members of the public sphere to an existing archive on the subject. Conversely, rather than burdening others to educate them, members of the public sphere without expertise are burdened, like everyone else, with an obligation to acquaint themselves with the subject and not reassert already discredited claims. Hence, rather than impeding open and epistemically rigorous public discussion, the radical inclusivity of the *pramāṇavāda* framework allows it to counter ready-to-think messaging and exclusionary and anti-democratic tendencies in the public sphere in ways that speak truth to power.

Historically, *vāda*, undergirded by *pramāṇavāda*, obliged participants to refine their various opinions through open and epistemically rigorous discussions with others without tilting the scales toward or against any interlocutor. While the tradition did not typically generate consensus about particular theses—or illusions of consensus that obscure fundamental differences in the public sphere—it did yield consensus about positions that either could not responsibly be held or could not responsibly be mandated onto others. The social epistemological tradition also encouraged all interlocutors to engage others' claims and arguments, and through such engagement, examine their own perspectives. Those today who seek to resuscitate democracy would accordingly do well to attend to *vāda* and *pramāṇavāda* and other frameworks for open and rigorous public deliberation with histories that are not rooted in western modernity.¹⁷

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- ¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991). (Originally published in 1962.)
- ² Isabelle Aubert, "Social Inclusion, a Challenge for Deliberative Democracy? Some Reflections on Habermas's Political Theory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 24, no. 4, (2021): 448–66.
- ³ Seyla Benhabib, "The Embattled Public Sphere: Hannah Arendt, Juergen Habermas and Beyond," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 90, "The Scope and Limits of Public Reason," (1997): 1–24.
- ⁴ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).
- ⁵ See, for example, Michael P Lynch, *In Praise of Reason: Why Rationality Matters for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014).

- ⁶ As I hope the following will demonstrate, the epistemological protocols of *pramāṇavāda* are well-suited for circulation among a broad range of publics. While one should not expect *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda* to be mastered and practiced in most union halls and board rooms, their outputs—especially the adaptable and responsive archives they can create on contemporary social and political topics—could be circulated through these material contexts in ways that hold power to account. The *pramāṇas* that serve as their basis are maximally inclusive and epistemically rigorous; they can therefore be broadly understood and interacted with even by those who do not formally practice *vāda*.
- ⁷ Richard King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999).
- ⁸ Matthew Dasti, and Stephen Phillips, *The Nyāya-sūtra: Selections with Early Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2017), 176–77.
- ⁹ Parimal G. Patil, *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- ¹⁰ The phrase “Too Late” is Parimal Patil’s shorthand translation of *kalātyāpadiṣṭa*. The term, he notes, “literally means ‘that which was pointed out long after its time’” (Patil 2009: 69n101). Keśavamiśra, the Nyāya author of the thirteenth-century logic primer *Tarkabhāṣā*, explains the “Too Late” defect as follows: “That for which it has been determined, through perception, etc. [i.e., through a *pramāṇa*], that the target property is absent in the site of the inference is ‘too late’. It is also said to be ‘that whose object is defeated’ [...]” (*Tarkabhāṣā* 117.01–118.11, quoted in Patil 2009: 69n101). The “Too Early” flag means to capture the Nyāya conviction that debate should proceed only from doubt (*saṃśaya*). When doubt is absent, inquiry should not proceed. However, in terms of content and function, it most directly correlates with a “contrary to experience” (*anubhavadhī*) objection that Nyāya philosophers frequently raised against Buddhist theses. For illustration, consider Jñānaśrīmitra’s eleventh-century *Apohaprakaraṇam* (Lawrence J. McCrea, and Parimal G., Patil *Buddhist Philosophy of Language in India: Jñānaśrīmitra on Exclusion*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Jñānaśrīmitra begins the manuscript by asserting that “exclusion is what is revealed by words and inferential reasons.” His imagined Nyāya interlocutor immediately objects that this Buddhist thesis is “contrary to experience” (*anubhavadhī*). “When something has been proven or disproven by experience,” this Nyāya interlocutor contends, “no other means of valid awareness [i.e., *pramāṇa*] finds an opening” (McCrea and Patil 2010: 49). Therefore, before inquiry proceeds, this alleged defect of the monograph’s thesis must be addressed. The “Too Early” defect accommodates this form of counterargument.
- ¹¹ Pradeep P Gokhale, *Inference and Fallacies Discussed in Ancient Indian Logic: With Special Reference to Nyāya and Buddhism*, Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series No. 107 (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992).
- ¹² This classification of “*upādhi*” as a category of *hetvābhāsa* is my contemporary contrivance. Both Nyāya and Buddhist *pramāṇavādins* regarded the possibility of unspecified counterexamples as grounds for alleging *vyāpyatvasiddha*, or the reason-defect, “unestablished universal.” Because the argumentative strategies differ, I have distinguished them here. The term *upādhi* means “additional property.”
- ¹³ Institutions and venues that are committed to epistemological ends, such as (ideally) universities, media, and the like, are socially obliged to promote faithful, inclusive, and epistemically rigorous discourse. When persons reveal themselves on the basis of objective and systematic criteria as faithless interlocutors, their speech can appropriately be removed from these institutions and venues, at least temporarily, until they return to the social epistemological project. I do not intend “deplatforming” and “cancellation” in the broad sense of day-to-day social ostracism or persecution, but I do contend that it is appropriate and non-discriminatory for institutions that are committed to social epistemological ends to exclude the speech of persons who are shown objectively to be working against

this commitment. Protocols of *pramāṇavāda* provide transparent and corrigible mechanisms for such objective determinations.

¹⁴ Again, no meaningful example can escape the particularity of the person who offers it. Nonetheless, the protocols of *pramāṇavāda* and *vāda*, and not my or anyone else's private preferences, should determine which claims remain in the public sphere and which are evicted. For the record, it is my own opinion that none of these claims should, at this point in public discussion, be jettisoned from the public sphere. However, this opinion does not mean that I agree with them. In the case of the third, I personally would expect that honest, inclusive, and rigorous debate about the topic would lead to divisions of sports based on skill and physical capacities rather than gender (whether assigned at birth or currently identified).

¹⁵ Open and epistemically rigorous inquiry would prove each of these claims false.

¹⁶ This capacity is reflected in layers of commentary that characterize texts that use *pramāṇavāda*. The thirteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist philosopher Sa-Skya Paṇḍita also directly prescribes this sort of archiving and tracking of debates as a way of countering judgments of those who are ignorant or committed to non-social epistemological ends. See David Paul Jackson, *The Entrance Gate for the Wise (Section III): Sa-Skya Paṇḍita on Indian and Tibetan Traditions of Pramāṇa and Philosophical Debate* (Vol. 1), Wiener Studien Zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, Heft 17,1 (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische and Buddhistische Studien, 1987). In his auto-commentary on III.71 of the *Mkhas Jug* (*The Entrance Gate for the Wise*), Sa-Skya Paṇḍita writes: "If the witness is an ignorant person who is unlearned in the procedures of debate, or if even though he understands he does not pay attention on account of desire or anger, or if he falsely detracts [something] from one's honestly stated words, or falsely imputes something by slightly changing the wording—where such witnesses are found, the debating of [true] scholars will not be praised, just as in a place where there is a poisonous snake, a lamp will not be bright. Therefore, in that place with the witness present, one should set down in writing the words [of both opponents], and by sending [this record] to the gathering of another assembly of upright scholars, the learned virtues [of the two debaters] will be exactly understood. This procedure is the liberated conduct [followed by] the great scholars of the past" (Jackson 1987: 364–5). One could imagine a contemporary Ambedkar adopting this tactic of compiling archives of claims, counterclaims, justifications, and critiques to hold power to account in today's discussions of Indianness and Hindutva, for example.

¹⁷ Sincere thanks to Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, Rohan Sikri, Paul Dover, and three anonymous reviewers who provided helpful and extensive critical feedback on previous drafts of this paper.