

A CRITIQUE OF THE VISIṢṬĀDVAITIC THEORY OF PERCEPTION AND PERCEPTIVE ERROR

It is always requisite in correct knowledge to know how we know any object. The consensus of opinion with regard to this is that sensation (samvedanā) is possible only if there are objects, sense-organs and the perceiver who cognizes the object through his sense-organs. These three factors, then are the most important, as without the cognizer and his sense-organs, no object could ever be sensed, and without the sense-organs, it is impossible for any one to sense at all, lacking the instruments, so to speak cognition, and without the objects what one might perceive is certainly not a sensation, whatever else that may be. These, then, are important, and no theory of perception can claim to have solved the problem of perception, if it did not take up the realistic aim of discovering these three factors. A metaphysical theory might, if so minded, claim that the one indubitable certainty about perception is the existence of the perceiver alone, or else might claim that the existence of the self or perceiver is only a reflective act due to the perception of the object experienced as that of subject. An empirical theory may claim to solve this quarrel by pointing out that both these, subject and object, fall within the sphere of consciousness, and as such both of them are but moments of consciousness. All these explanations, however, do not touch the core of the problem of perception at all or its reality and falsity.

In this context it is interesting to note that Professor George Santayana has luminously and with great philosophical insight stated the evolution of the error into its native truth. The hidden truth is revealed as the emotion that gave the seal of error to it passes. "The error came from a wild belief about it: and the possibility of error came from a wild propensity to belief. Relieve now the pressure of that animal haste and that hungry presumption; the error is washed out of the illusion; it is no illusion now, but an idea. If you eliminate your anxiety, deceit itself becomes entertainment, and every illusion but so much added acquaintance with the realm of form..."¹

Truth must be self-consistent, and must be a proof of its own being. That is to say that, if we see truth, it must exhibit at once inner consistency and self-validity. It must fulfill the promises of its own being. In other words, even as the Buddhists, Jains and the pragmatist claim, the nature of truth is dynamic, and every truth exhibits purposiveness, which need not be specially that which pleases us or any one.

The nature of perception as a psychological process must be first understood. Indian thinkers hold generally that perception through senses (*pratyakṣa*) is due to the contact of sense-organs with the object.² The process of this contact is not that the

¹ *Scepticism and Animal Faith* :p.304

² Sākṣātkāri pramā karaṇam pratyakṣam: Yatindramatadipika ed. Ādidevananda p.8

object stimulates the subjects sense-organs but that the subject's consciousness goes over to the object through the senses or rather through the instrumentality of the powers of the senses. For instance, the eye is the instrument of cognition of colours and forms, and it is claimed that the light-rays in the eye move to the object and apprehend the object, This a dynamic way of putting the case and is in consonance with the dynamic nature of psychology that has through out characterized the Indian schools of thought. The importance of this contactual relation in any general explanation of perception and its validity can easily be understood, when we find that many theories have come into existence to explain the causes of error. Error in perception, or illusion, in effect that has to be reckoned with in our ordinary life. An escape from it is necessitated, because without correct knowledge there can possibly be no adequate action, not to speak of life itself. Our life is governed far the most part by the correctness of our perceptions: our inferences grow out of these perceptions; and indeed the discovery of the differences between one experience and another is the mainstay of civilized life.

What is it that the senses grasp when knowing an object in the manner we have stated above? Do the senses or rather the consciousness working through the instruments of sensation (*jñānedriyas and manas*) snatch the objects and bring back the impressions to the self, the substrate of the consciousness? Or does the consciousness in perception apprehend the object as having characteristics which are capable of being apprehended by the sense-organs? Whatever be the nature of the object as such whether it is a constellation of atoms or whirling wavicles the psychological fact of perception shows that these constellations of atoms or whirling wavicles, which are apprehended by us in perception, are found to possess the sensory characters that we receive from them. Therefore, we are forced to affirm, at the risk of being celled naive, that the object's nature in fact has characteristics which are apprehended by us as sensory, and therefore we can grant the same sense or sense-data to these features Of; the objects, provided it is clearly understood that these are not the mental ideas belonging to the subject, but rather belong to the object itself. Cognition or perception involves even in its most rudimentary phase, an act of holding together different views of the object gathered through the several senses. It is a process of separating distinguishing and comparing; and as such, errors are traceable in almost all cases to this discrimination of the several facts belonging to the object that is cognized. This view is accepted by Prof Dawes Hicks³ who finds that cognition does not mechanically piece up the several parts of the perceived content, and thus introduce an order that did not exist in the object, but it discovers the unity in it as belonging to it. It is only when, due to prior experience, we bring irrelevant or invalid comparisons that we commit error. But that error cannot be

Indriyārthasannikarṣa janya jñāna pratyakśam 1. Tarkasamgraha.

³ Cf. Hundred years of British Philosophy : Rudolf Metz. P 513

an error of perception, but only of the synthesizing activity by which we link up this particular experience with similar experience for the sake of our practical action, present or future.

As Prof. Stout states " The underlying principle is that physical facts are not separate and self-contained, but essentially incomplete parts of a whole within which each has its consequences and conditions more or less probable and sometimes practically certain. So far as what seems to be a physical fact in each of the several perceptions is a condition or consequent of what seems to be physical fact in the others, each being founded in its own immediate sense-experience, and so far relatively independent of others support and is supported by them. This is what is meant by saying, they cohere. Such coherence is the warrant for our ordinary confidence in the testimony of our senses:⁴

Rightly does Prof. Stout point out also that 'the sensory continuum of the individual is a partial extract from a world-continuum,□□□ in entire harmony with the seeming discontinuity between the immediate content of sense experience and the world of physical phenomena." Thus it is that we find that the difficulty of explaining the sense-impressions or percepts having sensory character apart from the object, is bridged by affirming that in perception, at any rate, we are aware of partial extracts from a world continuum, but due to its being extracted, so to speak, or delimited by the perceptual field from the world continuum, it does not lose its continuity with the entire world-continuum. Thus in perception we are aware of two things at once, namely, the sensum of the object as well as its "perceptual appearance ", which is its continuity with the world-continuum. The difficulty in this position is, that, it tries to explain the example of the oar in water as bent by pointing out that though the sensum gives bentness to it, our perceptual appearance will dictate the belief that it is straight. Are we indeed aware of the two factors in perception? The belief that it is straight, a matter belonging to the realm of prior cognition that the oar is straight, is a smṛti fact, and it is this that engenders the belief that the oar is straight, and it is this that overrules the sensum □bentness□. Thus the account given by Prof. Stout, though valuable, has finally to explain the origin of the belief in the perceptual continuum, which is the physical aspect of the object, distinct in one sense, from the sensory aspect of it. It is criticising this view that Prof. A E. Taylor writes " My difficulty is that (a) I cannot feel at all sure that, in the case supposed (the oar), there is anything at all which merely looks but is bent, and (b) that if there is something which is bent, when I try to say more precisely what this something can be, it always turns out to be a problematic something e.g. an image on the (retina) which is not sensed at all, since I certainly do not look at images on my retina-and is definitely physical and not mental.

⁴ Mind and Matter Vol I. P 260

Thus it is clear that in perception we have to accept that the perceived objects as a 'characterised that' which belongs definitely to the realm of the physical, and is physical. The perception is an experience of the embodied being belonging indeed to nature, and experiencing it. The sense impressions are indeed parts of the object and all that is being perceived is true. In one sense, we can go to the extent of saying that in perception we are in direct compresence with physical nature (*sākṣātkāra*) and what we sense is true and real. The facts of error or illusion must be discovered in almost all cases, in the nature of the object itself. This is what is meant by saying that it belongs to the physical order or continuum, or in one word Nature, despite what may be apprehended of it by the individuals. This is the central principle also of the *Yathārthakhyāti* of Rāmānuja, of Nāthamuni before him. and of Śrī Vedānta Deśika and other writers of the Viśiṣṭādvaita school of thought.

That all knowledge is of the real is a general tenet of Prābhākaras, and this includes perceptual knowledge too. This is what Rāmānuja points out as the view espoused by the knowers of the Veda -

Yathārtha sarvavijñāna Iti vēda vīda matam. |

śrutismṛtibhyaḥ sarvasya sarvārtha manava pratītiḥ || and following verses.

Yāmunācārya in his *Ātma-siddhi* writes that Nāthamuni, the first amongst the Acaryas of the Sri Vaiṣṇava School, held the Yathārtha-khyāti view:

In the *Nyāya parīśuddhi* Sri Vedānta Deśika affirms that Nāthamuni and others held this view.

That this view is held and expounded by Śrī Nāthamuni in his Nyāya tattva also is stated by him in his Tattva muktākālāpa ;

The criticism against a theory of this kind such as the yathārthakhyāti, wherein the illusory object, or rather the so-called object of illusory cognition (which is, by the way, a very misleading expression which predicates of the cognition itself falsity) that it has been accepted by all, in some sense, under the generous influence of memories or *samskāras* which unconsciously and instinctively encroach upon its' functions for the sake of practical activity. Further the theory cannot be accepted in the manner in which it has been stated by the Upanisadic theorists. The quintuplication of the primary elements as explaining the actual presence of all elements in all things, though in different proportions, may be or may not, be true. Aver that it is so, yet it is impossible to explain the formal similarities which pertain to the genus characteristics, rather than to substantial characteristics. It is true that it is impossible to divorce the form from the matter in which it inheres, but our essential illusion is precisely when we do commit this divorce, and attribute the qualities that belong to a

thing, to some thing else on the basis of the principle of accepted unity of quality with substrate. That is to say, on seeing a likeness of snake, we attribute to the substrate where it is perceived, the other qualities belonging to the snake over and above the actually perceived form. This is the principle of Anyathākhyāt', where in one thing appears as different from what it is. Critiques of illusion cannot and should not dismiss lightly this problem as a problem purely pertaining to the realm of sensory-illusion, and nothing more. The ultimate question has to be faced, and that is supposing we observe properly and investigate properly and experiment properly, what would be the causes, real and invariable, of the illusion which indeed has occurred? As Sri Vedānta Deśika' pointed out, we find that the Akhyāti theory, which holds that illusion is a matter referable to non-observation or non-discrimination between two perceptions (indeed one of the perceptions is not a perception at all but a recognition of a perception if not pure remembrance) is a very acceptable one, only because of its conforming to the principle of parsimony (*lāghavam*). But the Anyatā-khyāti theory, which indeed cannot but accept in some way the failure to discriminate in its theory of mal-observation or otherwise- cognition, is at once an efficient theory as well as conforming to the principle of parsimony (*laghīyasi*)⁵. Claims could be brought forward to show that one or other of these theories is more acceptable than the other, and we could indeed even accept the theory of indefinability of 'the object of illusory cognition'. It is, however, very clear that most Indian thinkers have not tried to enquire in to the causes which have tended to bring about the illusion. The reference ultimately is to the object's nature, and this is certainly not answered by saying that the cognition of the previous snake is superimposed here, or that there are two cognitions, one of which happens to be only a real re-collection of a previous experience of real silver in a shop, which now interferes with the brilliance or *tejas* of the nacre, or that it is impossible to describe whether the thing, the snake taken as such is a real entity or an unreal entity, real because it has been experienced, unreal because it has been proved to be otherwise in action or thus sublated.

A correct understanding of the nature of the object is what is vouched by even error. Error indeed is the gateway to knowledge, because it draws our attention to certain features of the object which bears similarity to other previously experienced objects, though it is uniquely different. The doctrine of *Yathārthakhyāti* only points out that so far as our perceptual experience goes, it is impossible to explain away the differences or identities as false, for indeed *they are not sublated*. The rope can yet be utilised to frighten others in the twilight: the nacre can yet be palmed off, even as synthetic diamonds can be sold as diamonds. This is the essential point about the reality of the object, and obviously no mere perception can reveal the inner nature of the object.

⁵ Nyāya-parísuddhi: Sarve rūpyanyathakhyātiḥ dustyah

An excellent survey of all the theories of error has been given in the Introduction to his edition of the *Brahmasiddhi* by Prof. Mahāmahopādhyāya S. Kuppaswami Sastriar, and this can be consulted. But whilst it is most excellently presented from the stand-point of Indian Schools, a constructive survey is yet a desideratum from the standpoint of philosophy which does not divorce the epistemological from the physical. Strict relevance in regard to perceptual theory which does not debunk any features of reality, however distressing this might be to settled convictions has always been the mark of progress.

Reality is said to be characterised by either eternity or persistency. Any inner contradiction in a thing due to its having parts will make continuity or persistency impossible, and therefore all things that have parts should be declared to be unreal. Under this principle all created things will become unreal. This was made the chief criticism by the Eleatics downwards to Bradley and other idealists, of all reality of change. As to eternity, shorn of all change, it would be just a self-evident and self-valid existence having what is known as internal coherence. But what about the ordinary things of life, which have no self-valid inner coherence? They have therefore to be treated as unreal. But these twin principles do not really explain the reality of change: and the reality of momentary states is the fundamental principle of Buddhism. So far as the problem of perception is concerned, we have to put to ourselves the question whether perception is a way to knowledge or is not? If it is a way to knowledge, then what it presents is real; if not, all that it presents will have to be deemed to be unreal and not merely a real overlain with unreality due to subjective ignorance. If it is objective ignorance that is said to delude, the uncovering of it will mean the more and more clear understanding of the object's unity of characteristics, when in the specific characteristics may be said to have similarities in various degrees with other objects. The nature of the object is unique and it is this uniqueness that grants it the specific power to bring about results, or to cause anything, or to fulfil certain activities due to its relationship in the universe. Thus the practical efficacy or causal efficacy of objects is most important in determining once for all the reality of an object as an object amongst objects. It is this that is recognised in the schools of Cārvāka, Buddhist and Jain, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and Kumārila, and in Rāmānuja's school. Let me briefly refer to these theories.

The materialists (Cārvāka) hold that truth is available only through perception. It is the only source of knowledge for us. They do not admit that it is ever possible to have any other kind of knowledge, through any other medium. Reasoning cannot furnish truth, and inference has no place in the understanding of reality as an independent instrument of knowledge. It is clear from certain writings of the Cārvākas that they do not mean to accept inference at all.⁶ But the truth about the

⁶ cf. *Lokāyata-vāda-bhanga*: Vedānta Desika: Trans, Dr.K.C.V

matter seems to be that they do not accept inference as an independent pramāṇa, source of right knowledge, for what it is dependent upon is the memory or impressions or perceptions of objects. It is true, of course, that since what we receive from sensations or perceptions are the material on which we act, and since these are of a transient nature, the Cārvāka cannot but finally deny the whole of reality. The intention of the Cārvāka thinker, on the other hand, seems to be, that despite himself, he was prepared to be inconsistent enough to say that there was a metaphysical possibility of the world consisting of four elements.⁷ Even here he holds that perception is all and is all-sufficient for our purposes. To go beyond the perceived is to land oneself in speculative fictions. Reasoning should confine itself to interpretation of sensations and nothing more. Once however this standpoint is taken, it is important to know as to whose perception is valid: whether it is one's own perception, or should we arrive at a consensus of opinion in this matter regarding the nature of the object? How can subjectivity of perception be overcome so as to yield the consensus of opinion which is a kind of objectivity? Cārvāka theorists only assert that all that one perceives is true for that individual, under the circumstances.

That which furthers or advances their pleasure is truth, and that which does not is false. Truth is the pleasant, is that which is adequate and easy of performance, and is that which does not cause sorrow or distress. Therefore an affective-criterion of truth and a frustration criterion of truth are given. The frustration-criterion, as I shall call it, really is a veiled pragmatic test of practical success or that which works, artha kriyākāritva. It is what the *Nyāya Vaiśeṣika* system calls the extraneous or extrinsic test (*parataḥ-pramāṇya*). Whether it is necessary to consider this to be a test extraneous to the object's reality, is a matter very much under dispute as some hold that the object's reality includes its effective existence which can only be discovered in and through its reactions; The intention of an object is as much important as its actual state, and is part and parcel of the sensation itself. This theory then already envisages the need to study the purpose or dynamic quality of the object as already being given in the perception, though what is plainly sensed through the senses is just an integral portion, so to speak, of the object. It is not enough to affirm that an object is merely its sensed-content, for it is also a dynamic object in relation to the purposes and promises it enfolds in its being. This fact it is that is discovered in the illusion. Illusion is possible only because there has been non-discrimination of the pure sensation from the 'intention'; or rather, illusion occurs where-ever the intention has been affirmed of a thing which indeed does not possess this 'intent'. Illusions of perceptions, then, need not be purely sensory: and indeed the perception is, provided all things or factors are in a healthy condition, always true. What makes a true sensation false is not the sensation in its intrinsic nature, but the wrong 'intent' that

⁷ The progress of the materialist school in the East, as in the West, has been mainly in the direction of scientific progress, despite all theocratic criticism.

we predicate of it. This wrong 'intent' is affirmed of it because of previous experience having gone along with similar sensations of such objects, and which are recalled through spontaneous memory (*smṛti*).

Thus the doctrine which affirms that all that is perceived is true or true existence or really existing, is correct. But it may be asked whether this 'intent ~ or dynamical possibility of the object sensed is not something that is perceived along with the object? Obviously not, since the sense organs relate themselves not to the inner dynamics of the object but only to the outer form and colour, and perhaps even location. The object, unless it is related to some interest on the part of the individual, will remain opaque, so to speak, to the individual. But if it be an object related to some inner demand of the individual, for example, an instinct, then we find that the 'intention' of the object gets revealed in the reactions of the individual to it. But this 'intention' need not always be awaiting the need of the individual, and is certainly not dependent on it. For it is found that though it is exhibited to the individual only when it is presented to him, it is sought for and attained by the individual, and as such remains extrinsic to the individual, though more surely intrinsic to the object sensed. The materialist's claim, then, that satisfaction or fulfillment of a demand is truth, is true not in respect of himself as he would like to have it but in respect of the object.⁸

The difficulty in respect of the pure Yathārtha-khyāti theory is, that it holds that whatever is perceived is true not merely in the sense of actually existing as perceived as the *sat-khyāti* view that Jainism holds, but also in respect of substantial existence, that is to say, in the case of nacre and silver, the □silver-ness□ is said to be actually present in the nacre, but only in lesser quantity so as to be almost useless for the purpose of transaction in the monetary sense. The presence of snake in the rope is real in a substantial sense. This view is not likely to be accepted except to those who bank on the metaphysical theory of the Upaniṣads of Pañcīkaraṇa quintuplication of primary elements, wherein the gross elements are, each one of them, said to have all the other elements in them, but only in lesser degrees. Thus the *Yathārtha-khyāti* explains the illusion by saying that there is no illusion at all, but only wrong desire or some such mental factor which makes the percept □intend□, something it cannot fulfill. Thus the criterion in the *Yathārtha khyāti vāda* is the efficacy in actual experience - *vyāvahara*. Yathāvastita vyāvahārānuguṇa- jñānam pramā. " All knowledge is true in a sense that it has an object always corresponding to it', or what has been precisely described by Vedāntācārya that all cognitive characters (illusory or otherwise) universally refer to real objective entities as object of knowledge□⁹. The

⁸ Cf. Criticism of Pragmatist Theory of Perception: *Guide of Philosophy*. C.E.M. Joad, p. 448 ff.

⁹ History of Indian Philosophy; S.N.Dasgupta, Vol III.p.246

general maxim is that the idea which corresponds to any particular kind of behaviour is to be regarded as a true representation of the object experience in behavior-

Yatarthavya āṅuṅa ya dho sa Naya-Dyu-Maṅi¹⁰

Thus the correspondence between the object [intended] and the actual realization of that intention or causal efficacy, which, by the way, is to be recognized always as the Buddhists will put it, as *ekārtha-kriyā-kāritva*, cannot but be accepted as clear. This correspondence is not in any sense equivalent to the representationalistic theory which is impossible to sustain in the Sautrāntika system of the Buddhists and in the theories of Locke and Des Cartes.

Whether pragmatism of this kind is something to be refuted is an important point. It is, in the excellent words of Prof. A. N. Whitehead. "an appeal to the wide self-evidence". "Pragmatism is simply an appeal to that self-evidence which sustains itself in civilized experience"¹¹. It is not an extraneous test except that it is extraneous to the senses or rather this relevance or correspondence is of the practical order arising from the theoretical impression. In experience such a divorce between the practical and the theoretical cannot be sustained, for all knowledge is purposive; and action in turn, as even erroneous perception and erroneous action reveal, makes knowledge rich and effective. Such action is subordinate to knowledge, and therefore enriches it and becomes effective in conduct.

Truth is dynamic, because reality is dynamic, and the *Yathārtha-khyāti* only reveals the inner necessity to accept the reality of all experience, so that we could disentangle the mis-relationships that happen due to a variety of cause, mainly pertaining to wrong intentions.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.244

¹¹ Modes of Thought; pp 144-5