Seeing Face-to-Face: Nyāya Realism

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Jonardon Ganeri

1. Matilal as Global Philosopher

Matilal, Bimal Krishna. 1986. *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1a. A Borderless or Cosmopolitan Approach to Philosophy:

"I have wilfully mixed separate disciplines in [my] presentation of classical Indian philosophy, the domain of the Sanskritists and the Indianists, and modern Western analytical philosophy. This has been done with the conviction that such an eclectic approach would be eventually profitable, and I believe, even philosophically rewarding. I have translated back and forth the philosophical issues that faced the classical Indian philosophers, in the vocabulary of modern philosophy, and vice-versa […] I believe such translations are both possible and fruitful for *both* kinds of philosophers today. I think it gives better insight into the nature of the philosophical problems as such—problems the classical people were trying to grapple with. And the reverse translation it is hoped, may illuminate some modern issues, some unrecognized aspects of these issues at least, and by doing so, may stimulate creative thinking all the more." (2002a, 109).

1b. The Story of Indian Philosophy:

Matilal: Buddhist Phenomenalism vs Nyāya Realism
Ganeri: Nyāya Realism as a middle way between Infallible Relationalism and the Content View

1c. Perceptual Structure and the Kant-Strawson thesis:

savikalpaka (associated with *vikalpa*, the imagination): "… the time-honoured distinction found in the entire classical literature on the Sanskrit philosophy of perception is made with the help of this word '*vikalpa*': *nir-vikalpa pratyakṣa*, 'perception without imagination' and *sa-vikalpa pratyakṣa* 'perception with imagination' (1986, 313–4); such perceptual experience is "*infused* or *soaked* with imagination in the sense of concept-application and object-identification […and…] necessarily *contaminated* with proliferation of concepts" (1986, 313).

"The actual occurrent perception of an enduring object as an object of a certain kind, or as a particular object of that kind, is […] soaked with or animated by or infused with–the metaphors are *à choix*–[concepts]" (Strawson [1970] 1974, 53).

"No psychologist has yet thought that the imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself. [… However…] the senses do not merely afford us impressions but also put them together, and produce images of objects, for which without doubt something more than the receptivity of impressions is required, namely a function of the synthesis of them" (Kant, *Critique* A120, note a; 1998, 239).

"Perceptual consciousness involves the constructing of sense-image models of external objects" (Sellars [1978] 2007, 459); cf. Dummett's "proto-thought" (1994, 122: "The vehicle of such thoughts is certainly not language: it should be said, I think, to consist in visual imagination superimposed on the visually perceived scene").

The terms *vikalpa* and *kalpanā* are derived from the verb √*klp*—"to produce, make, effect, shape, fashion, intend, imagine": "Particularly in poetic or other literary contexts, *vikalpa* as sheer imaginative production tends to be differentiated from error-ridden mental events such as illusion, hallucination, visualization, and dreams, and also from magical tricks and conjuring; imaginative *vikalpa* or *kalpanā*, to some extent like artistic or theatrical productions, is sometimes strongly correlated to notions of

true perception, and is by no means simply an instantiation of false or distorted cognition" (Shulman 2012, 19).

"The ordinary sense of the word ["imagination'] is an inventive, fanciful or playful application of concepts to things, while the philosophically relevant sense stands for ordinary concept-application in perception. Without further ado I might add that *kalpanā* in ordinary Sanskrit (such as *kavi-kalpanā*) means the same thing as 'imagination' in ordinary English, while the technical sense is not very far from what 'imagination' means in the writings of Hume and Kant." (Matilal 1986, 313).

"I wish to argue that seeing is mostly seeing-as …, i.e. is seeing something as something and it is only with regard to such seeing-as that the possibility of promiscuity, i.e. the possibility of illusion, can arise" (1986, 181).

2. Matilal on Nyāya Realism

2a. Key Principles

- [**Direct Realism**] "What we are directly aware of in our perception is the physical reality that exists independently of our awareness of it."
- [**Empiricism**] "Perceiving is knowing in the most direct sense, and there is no further basis or foundation or ground which is more indubitable or certain, and from which such perceptual knowledge is derived or inferred. This knowledge is not always verbalised, but it is verbalizable."
- [**Argumentation**] "We see as well as touch physical objects, wholes, bodies, and their properties as well. [W]e see and touch wholes and substrata because they have parts and properties, but not necessarily because we see or touch those parts and properties."
- [**Illusion**] "An analysis of perceptual illusion is possible without the assumption of sense data or sense-impressions intervening between the perceiver and the physical world."
- [**Consciousness**] "A cognitive event may occur and pass away unnoticed or unperceived. We can neither recall it nor communicate it to others." (Matilal 1986, 5–6)

"The Nyāya realist, subscribing to naïve or direct realism, says that the best way to make sense of our pre-philosophical intuition about the felt existence of these objects [solid, three- dimensional, opaque objects, such as pots, stones, chairs, and tables] is to regard them as directly grasped by our visual perception" (1986, 371).

"It is, I think, philosophically significant to ask why a Naiyāyika (an exponent of the Nyāya school) believed that the 'whole' must be distinct from the parts in order to justify his belief in his brand of direct realism, and why the thesis that knowledge is not self-revealing was, for him, a stepping-stone towards proving the objectivity of the external world." (Matilal 1986, 7).

"Nyāya will say that in the case of perceptual illusion we have also an 'inward perception' (an *anuvyavasāya)* that we have had an (external) perception. In other words, we not only reach a judgement of the form 'this is silver' but also in the next moment another inward judgement of the form 'I perceive that this is silver'. This, for Nyāya, seems to supply stronger experiential evidence in favour of the perceptual character of the experience" (1986, 218–9).

2b. A Problem: Direct Realism Does Not Entail Naive Realism

"What direct realism affirms is that perceptual experience of physical reality does not depend on perceiving a mediating mental reality […] An object is perceived directly if and only if perceiving it does not depend on perceiving some other object. If perceiving an object depended on perceiving something else, this would mediate one's awareness of the object in a fairly straightforward way, as the television example makes clear" (Genone 2016, 3).

"The most minimal representationalist commitment is that perceptual experience is a matter of a subject representing her environment as being a certain way'" (Schellenberg 2011, 715).

This, however, is compatible with directness: "The fact that an experience represents the world by having accuracy conditions doesn't imply that the experience involves awareness of a representation,

such as a sense-datum or mental image, which would be a mediating object of awareness for the perceiver" (Genone 2016, 5).

"The veil-of-perception view holds that the primary objects of perception are internal mental items - or other non-environmental items. The primary referents are sense data or phenomenal qualities in the mind. On such a view, experience of the physical world is held to be indirect, both in not being the first object of perceptual reference and in being the product of an epistemically evaluable inference from more fundamental objects of perception. [….However…] Perceptual representation does not produce a "veil of ideas," because the first objects of perceptual reference are physical entities in the environment. This is a sense in which perceptual representations are "directly" about the environment: They are referentially non-derivative. Perception of distal physical entities does not go by way of reference to entities closer in […and] perceptual consciousness is fundamentally of the physical world." (Burge 2005, 30).

• What is distinctive of naïve realism is the stronger claim "that objects in the surrounding environment, as well as their properties, are essential to the underlying metaphysical nature of experiences that are genuinely perceptual" (Genone 2016, 7), i.e. that objects are, in some sense, "constituents" of perceptual experience.

• If the *direct* realist says that subjects see objects, as it were, face-to-face, what the *naïve* realist claims is that this is so only because, contra representationalism, standing in a relation of conscious acquaintance with those very objects is fundamental to the constitution of perceptual experience itself.

"The dispute over *vikalpa* is whether all *vikalpas* are fictional or some of them are true representations of reality" (1986, 314).

"A subject, S, is acquainted with an object, o, iff S is in a position to think about o in virtue of a perceptual link with o and without the use of any conceptual or descriptive intermediary" (Dickie 2010, 213).

Conclusion: Matilal's conceptualism about perceptual structure risks leaving open a representationalist reading of Nyāya realism, rather than clearly identifying it as a variety of naïve realism.

3. Is Nyāya Realism Naïve? *Nyāya-sūtra* 1.1.4

3a. What is Naïve Realism (*aka* Relationalism)?

"The standard view is that a naïve realist takes a perceptual experience to be a kind of episode or event that is fundamentally both **presentational** and **relational** […where…] to claim that perceptual experiences are fundamentally presentational is to claim at least that perceptual experiences are by their very nature constituted, at least in part, by mind-independent objects and their manifest properties […and…] to claim that perceptual experiences are fundamentally relational is to claim that perceptual experiences involve a distinct conscious relation between a conscious subject and some object." (Steenhagen 2019, 1002).

"**presentational**": the mind-independent objects, and their qualities are constitutive of the episode in a manner "such that those objects and qualities determine the phenomenal character of the episode" (Steenhagen, 2019: 1003).

3b. Austere vs. Mitigated Relationalism

Austere: "... the phenomenal character of your experiences, as you look around the room, is constituted by the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as colour and shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you." (Campbell 2002, 116)

Mitigated: "… it's open to the Naïve Realist to claim that phenomenal character is determined by the *obtaining of the perceptual relation* more broadly. That is, Naïve Realism can appeal to *both* relata in accounting for the phenomenal character of veridical experience, as well as to facts about the relation itself." (Logue 2012, 217)

• Naïve realism must "explain not just which objects and properties a perceiver experiences, but also how they are experienced" (Genone 2016, 14)."What you experience stays the same but the way you experience it changes" Pautz (2021, 192). "The way things are in a subject's environment, along with attention and point of view, constitute her perceptual experience." (Genone 2014, 351).

"**relational**": "A distinctive kind of conscious, perceptual relation obtains between you, as subject of the experience, and various entities that you are perceptually aware of in having that experience" (Soteriou 2016, 7)."Perceptual experiences have a relational nature such that, in a perceptual experience, a perceiving subject stands in a perceptual relation to mind-independent objects" (French 2018). "In claiming that relations of awareness to objects and properties are part of the fundamental metaphysical nature of perceptual experience, naïve realists hold that such relations are sufficient to account for the main explanatory challenges facing a theory of perception, in particular the phenomenology and epistemic role of experience" (Genone 2016, 7).

3c. *Nyāya-sūtra* 1.1.4

> **"Genuine perceptual experience is independent of language (*avyapadeśya*), inerrant (*avyabhicārī*), of a definite character (*vyvasāyātmaka*), and results from (*utpanna*) a connection (*sannikarṣa*) between sense and object." (*Nyāya-sūtra* 1997, 10.2-3)**

Are we, on the basis of *Nyāya-sūtra* 1.1.4, able to conclude that perceptual experience is considered in Nyāya to be as naïve realism claims it to be?

sannikarṣa: Uddyotakara (Ny.V. 28.19–29.2): the connection is either one of "contact" (*saṃyoga*), when the item perceived is an object, or inherence in what is contacted, when the item perceived is a feature of an object, or a qualified-to-qualifier relation, when what is perceived is an absence (the floor as qualified by the absence of a water-jug, for example).

avyapadeśya: Vātsyāyana: the view being excluded is that "there are names for every object of awareness, and proper awareness of objects is wrapped up in names […] As such perceptual experience is verbal in nature" (*Nyāya-bhāṣya* 10.11-20).

utpanna: Naïve realism is committed to what Adam Pautz calls "the simple causal theory of experiential acquaintance":

"When you perceive the sphere, you experience its blue color and its shape, but not its electric charge. Why? According to the basic causal theory, the answer is that your visual system is causally responsive in the right way to its color and shape, but not to its electric charge. You can think of it this way. Experiential acquaintance is a kind of irreducible mental arrow pointed at the states of objects. But, in the actual world, in order for this arrow to be pointed at those external states, there first must be a causal process going in the opposite "direction", from those states to the right processes in the subject's brain. In more detail, the simple causal theory of experiential acquaintance holds that, in the actual world, you are experientially acquainted with an external state (say, the state of a physical object having a color or shape) just in case you undergo some or other "suitable" internal subpersonal physical state that is caused by that state in the biologically normal way." (Pautz 2021, 190)

Charitably interpret the "*utpanna*' in *Nyāya-sūtra* 1.1.4 as an allusion to the simple causal theory underpinning any version of naïve realism.

4. The Structure of Perceptual Experience (*vyvasāyātmaka*)

4a. Two Sides: Contact and Portrayal

"Visual experience is remarkable for two reasons. It seems to involve conscious portrayal of the world; and it seems to involve perceptual contact with the world. When one sees a cat in the ordinary way, for instance, that bit of consciousness seems to involve the worldly depiction of a cat, somehow; and it also seems to involve perceptual contact with a cat. There is much debate about such depiction and perceptual contact. We needn't commit to any story about them. For our purposes, we shall say merely that visual experience has a portrayal side; and we shall mean by the remark solely that it involves conscious depiction of reality somehow. And for our purposes, we shall say merely that visual experience has a perceptual side; and we shall mean by the remark solely that it can make for perceptual contact with reality somehow." (Sturgeon 2008, 112-3).

Vātsyāyana: "A person looking at something at a distance is unable to determine precisely what it is, whether it is smoke or a cloud of dust. So to exclude from the ranks of genuine perceptions such unclear cognition (*anavadhāraṇa-jñāna*) which does arise from a connection between a sense faculty and an object, the sūtra's author uses the qualifier 'of definite character'" (*Nyāya-bhāṣya* 11.7-9).

4b.The Language of Location

As regards this phenomenology, a feature (a locatee, *dharma*) is presented as being in an object (the location, *ādhāra*).

In philosophical Sanskrit the same idiom turns into a general language of location, to be used for any case of property ascription: a Sanskrit logician will say that one sees mangoness in a mango where in English one would be more likely to say that one sees the mango as a mango (Matilal 1986, 343–51; 1998, 26–30; 2002).

Uddyotakara distinguishes three relations of location: contact (*saṃyoga*), inherence (*samavāya*) and qualification (*viśeṣaṇatā*); these are exploited in our rich perceptual experience: the first for seeing dents *in* surfaces or feeling a pain *in* the knees; the second for seeing wholes *in* parts and qualities *in* objects; and the third, peculiarly, for seeing absences of things *in* the places wherefrom those things are absent.

4c. Selection and Access

"In visually attending to a scene, one dimension of your experience has to do with the characteristics of objects that you would report them to have, act with respect to, or report yourself as experiencing. But another, more fundamental dimension of visual experience has to do with how you grab the object visually in the first place; how, in vision, you snatch it out from the rest of the visual array as something on which you are going to focus. This is not a matter of you representing the object in experience; it is not a matter of experiential representation at all. It has to do with the relation between you and the object. It makes a constitutive difference to your visual experience. And it reflects the mind-independence of the thing." (Campbell 2014b, 51)

Again,

"Huang and Pashler (2007) draw a fundamental distinction between selection and access in visual attention. This is a distinction between two ways a perceived property can function in relation to an object or region. Grabbing the thing out from its background (selection) is one thing, and characterizing it (access) is another. So a property may be used to select the object or region. Or the property may be accessed as a property of that object or region. Selection is what makes the object or region visible in the first place; selection is what makes it possible for the subject to focus on that object or region in order to ascertain its various properties. Access is a matter of the subject making it explicit, in one way or another, just which manifold properties the object or region has. The key point is that whether a property is being used to select an object in experience is one thing, and whether the subject is accessing that property of the object is another. You can use a property of the object to snatch it out. It is a further step to make it explicit that the object has that property." (Campbell, ibid, 54)

- *vicāra* and *vitakka*: A Theravāda text, *Questions of Milinda*, makes the distinction in terms of what is there called *vicāra* and *vitakka*, the first having to do with the initial taking up of a topic, the second consisting in the subsequent mulling over: "As a carpenter fixes a well-turned piece of wood in a socket, so is fixing the mind the distinguishing mark of *vitakka*. […] As a bronze gong that has been struck reverberates afterwards and the sound lingers on, so *vitakka* is to be understood as a *striking*, and *vicāra* as *reverberating*" (*Milinda-pañha* PTS edn., 62–3). Buddhaghosa provides several other similes to explicate the distinction: the first is like a potter pressing down on the clay on the wheel and the second like the clay being turned, or like the thorn which holds a string in the middle of a circle and the tracing of the circle itself (*Atthasālini* PTS edn., 115).

Matilal: the phrases "led to a vortex of controversy, eventually suggesting a radical distinction between conception-free (*nirvikalpaka*) perception and conception-loaded (*savikalpaka*) perception" (2002b, 186; cf. 1986, 10.2).

Here, though, is what we can now say:

- By the phrase "of definite character" (*vyvasāyātmaka*), what is meant is that in perceptual experience a feature of the perceived object is accessed. It is made explicit, can be the basis of verbal report and action, and the perceiver can report themselves as experiencing it.
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- The phrase, "independent of language" (*avyapadeśya*) only superficially contradicts this, because what that phrase refers to is the role of a feature in the selection of an object.

4d. *prakāra* vs. *dharmitāvacchedaka*

"We may draw a distinction between two different aspects of attention and between two different roles a perceived property can play in attention. Attention is selecting an object or region, and [it is also] finding out something about its properties. So, there is accessing a property of an already selected object or region, and there is using a property as the basis on which an object or region is selected in the first place." (Campbell 2011, 324).

The notion of a *dharmitāvacchedaka*, a delimitor of the property of being the object, is to be distinguished from the *prakāra*, the property *accessed* in perception.

"The mode of presentation of a perceptually demonstrated object has to be characterized not in terms of any internal 'qualia' or any description that the subject accesses, but rather in terms of an external property of an external thing that the subject uses to select that object perceptually. Sameness of mode of presentation is the same thing as sameness of the external property on the basis of which the object is selected; difference of mode of presentation is the same thing as difference of the property on the basis of which the object is selected. This gives us an externalist mode of presentation for the perceptual case" (Campbell 2014b, 67).

5. Conclusion

- Genuine perceptual experience is constituted by a relation with an object (the phenomenological "nucleus" or "anchor" of the experience, in Matilal's nice expression), a direct relation of experiential acquaintance that is irreducible to satisfaction-conditions, and that it locates a perceptual feature in that nucleus, where this act of perceptual location is not a matter of seeing the object as falling under a concept.
- The early Nyāya theory about the relationship between what Sturgeon aptly calls the "portrayal" and "perceptual" sides of a given perceptual experience is not happily captured by an appeal to the Kant-Strawson thesis, but is much more felicitously understood in terms of the idea that perceptual attention is Boolean, that is to say that it consists in the two dimensions of selection and access.

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