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What is immediate perception? The Buddhist answer

Is the immediacy of our knowledge an epistemological ideal or merely a psychological reassurance that our senses don’t misguide us? If we disregard immediacy in favour of other means to determine all of our knowledge including sensation, how can we discern sensation from knowledge? Conversely, if we regard immediacy as a physiological event (sense stimulation), how can we prove that it’s part of the cognitive process? Immediacy-related problems arise in any epistemological discourse – Western or Eastern, ancient or modern. What is immediacy according to Buddhist epistemological tradition (pramanavada) represented by Dignaga (480-540) and Dharmakirti (600-660)?

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (henceforth, the SEP), immediacy requires two criteria: an immediate object of perception, and immediate perception: something is immediately experienced or is given if the cognitive consciousness of it is not arrived at via any sort of inferential process. The second one appeals to the idea of certainty: something is immediately experienced or given if the awareness of it is certain, incapable of being mistaken (Bonjour: Fall 2001).

In their disputes with Brahmanical thinkers the Buddhists tried to exclude any kind of mental construction (kalpana) from the realm of the immediately given. But, deprived as it is of mental construction, immediate perception becomes automatically incapable of providing any cognitive information about its object. That is why Buddhist thinkers had to prove that immediate perception (pratyaksha), in spite of its non-conceptual character, is still a genuine instrument of knowledge (pramana). How did they manage to reconcile the ‘blindness’ of pure sensation with its being part of the cognitive activity?

Units of becoming
The main goal of knowledge from the Buddhist point of view is to know things the way they are (sahishnuta) or to know reality as such (tathata). What then constitutes reality? For the Buddhist the essence of reality is impermanent (anitya); to exist means to change, because nothing has any endurable essence (anatman). Existence is being reduced to a stream of discrete momentary dharmas.

The term dharmas (in plural form) has no equivalent in Western thought: it has been interpreted in many ways: ‘phenomena’, ‘point-instances’, ‘units of becoming’, ‘properties’, ‘tropes’ etc. To know reality as it is means to know it as a series of dharmas. For the Buddhist this kind of knowledge is obtained in meditation and has a totally immediate character. In this way immediacy is obviously related to the religious soteriological perspective of the Buddhist tradition, but it is the immediacy of the common cognitive experience that was a subject of epistemological discourse and controversy among philosophers of different Indian schools and traditions – Buddhist as well as Brahmanical.

Particulars and universals as subject-matters of pratyaksha and anumana
According to Dignaga’s major epistemological work Pramanasamucaya (‘A Collection of Instruments of Knowledge’, henceforth, PS), only two instruments of valid knowledge (pramana) exist: pratyaksha, or perception, and anumana, or inference, and each of them has its own subject matter. Pratyaksha deals with what Dignaga calls svavalakhana, literally, that which characterises itself, a particular characteristic or pure particular – something absolutely unique, singular and, most important, momentary (kshinas). As svavalakhana are ultimately real (paramartha), and inexpressible, to experience them means to experience reality as it is. The object of the other pramana, inference (anumana), is constituted by conceptualisations, verbalisations, reflections and other products of mental construction (kalpana or vikalpa) that Dignaga calls samanyalakshana – a general characteristic applicable to many objects or distributed over many instances. Samanyalakshanam, generally translated as ‘universal’, are endurable and not subject to change – for this reason they are regarded by Buddhists as only relatively real (samskritam).

The term svavalakshana does not easily lend itself to interpretation. Its understanding is still a highly controversial matter among scholars. The problem is that its ontological status is quite ambiguous in our authors’ writings. The reason for this ambiguity was formulated by George Dreyfus: ‘Dignaga and Dharmakirti are ontologists only inasmuch as their epistemology requires them to be. They even seem to feel free to alternate between several conflicting metaphysical standpoints. For example, in most of their works, Dignaga and Dharmakirti adopt a so-called Sautrantika standpoint, presupposing the existence of external objects. In other parts of their work, however, they shift their ontological frameworks and move to a Yogacara rejection of external objects. Commonsensical levels are introduced for the sake of convenience and withdrawn to be replaced by higher but more counterintuitive schemes’ (Dreyfus 1997: 49). A choice of ontological positions is equally applicable to svavalakshana: it may be either mind-independent or mind-dependent. As far as immediacy is a kind of inner experience of mental actuality, it will be natural to accept that svavalakshana, at least in some of our authors’ texts, is regarded as a sort of sense data.

Is pratyaksha a cognitive event?
To Dignaga, a pratyaksha (etymologically, ‘before eyes’) is above all an immediate experience, and its immediacy proves its veracity and certainty. This immediacy is so important that he defines pratyaksha through the exclusion of mediacy in the form of mental constructions. Thus he calls it kalpapada-apdvaram, ‘free from mental constructions’ (PS: 35). In this

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They might propose an answer: contention is cognitive but not immediate? Contact is not cognitive and conceptualisation of the knowledge itself, which is a flow of existence of Atman, the Self. But for him simple seeing and contact with their objects (they insist on non-contactualness of certain senses – the visual and auditory). Second, pratyaksha is not necessarily a sense perception. Among its manifestations Dignaga lists mental perception (manasa-pratyaksha), yogic perception (during meditation) and self-awareness, which have nothing to do with senses. Thus we could safely say that immediacy of pratyaksha is not reduced to any sort of direct sense stimulation.

Then how is it produced? Dignaga attributes the answer to this question to neither the existence of Atman or Self in a role of a permanent cogniser. For them there is no subject of knowledge apart from the knowledge itself, which is a flow of momentary point-instances (dharmas). So what makes an instance of pratyaksha a piece of knowledge if sense-object contact is not cognitive and conceptualisation is cognitive but not immediate? They might propose an answer connected to their concept of svasamvedana as a variety of pratyaksha. Literally, svasamvedana is a self-awareness, not the awareness of the Self as Atman, but the awareness of the cognitive event itself, or self-reflexive awareness. Dignaga distinguishes between mental perception of the object, such as colour and other sense qualities, and self-awareness of desire, anger, pleasure, pain, etc., which for him constitute mental events not dependent on any sense organ. Svasamvedana is a sort of intuitive experience (asana) that accompanies all kinds of mental activity, being itself free of any conceptualisation. It is sometimes rendered by the term ‘apparition’, introduced by Leibniz in the sense of the reflexive awareness of our personal cognitive experience as desirable or not. But that does not mean either that cognition is cognised by a separate cognitive act (otherwise, there would follow an infinite regress) or that svasamvedana, being a sort of introspection, has other mental states as its objects.

Is pratyaksha a true or an instrumental cognition? When Dignaga defines pratyaksha as exempt from mental construction, does he mean that the pramaṇa of pratyaksha is a true cognition? The confirmation that pramaṇa is not tightly associated with truth lies in the veridical status of anumāṇa (inference). Being a mental operation dealing with mentally constructed objects, it could not grasp the true nature of the object and for this reason is regarded as anhanta – erring or subject to errors. Nevertheless, it is still a pramaṇa. Why? Because, according to Dharmakirti, it may reveal something previously unknown and may lead to a successful action. It is pramaṇa because of its instrumentality with regard to practical tasks, including final emancipation. Thus we may safely add instrumentality to what we suppose may be the Buddhist definition of immediacy.

Sketching a new definition of perceptual immediacy

Dharmakirti argues that when we think of an object, we have only a blurred cognition of it, whereas when we see it we have a vivid apprehension. But for him simple seeing and ‘seeing as’, (perceiving an object as something), for example, a jug, constitutes two different cognitive events that have different contexts. One is perception without mental constructions, the other is perceptual judgment somehow caused by this perception and assisted by memory. For Dharmakirti the perceptual judgment ‘this is a jug’, unlike inference (anumāṇa), is not a pramaṇa because it deals with something already apprehended by perception. But how does he explain our experiencing immediacy with regard to seeing something definite, like a jug? For him it is because of the kalpana (mental construction) that a cognitive image appears for us as a totally external thing (Pramanavartītikā III: 159-162). One more distinguishing feature of kalpaṇa owing to its mediate character is its lack of vividness (svaśāsāṃsvaśāsana). Accordingly, pratyaksha is distinguished by its vividness (śāsāti), which may be construed as our fourth criterion of pratyaksha’s immediacy.

To this set of criteria one may add another: svāyam-pratyakṣa, the congruency of internal image with external object, or the fact that the knowledge takes the form of its object. To exclude the possibility of interpreting svāyam-pratyakṣa in the sense that knowledge may have only the form of the object, but not in its own form (svākāra), we should add to our criteria the self-reflexive character (svasamvedana) as a confirmation of the fact that cognitive event has its own form as well.

Thus, we can single out six criteria of immediacy from the works of our authors: 1) non-inferential character (kalpana-opādāna), corresponding to the first point of the SEP definition; 2) non-errant character (ahharana), corresponding to the second point of SEP definition; 3) instrumentality (pramaṇa) with regard to practical tasks; 4) vividness (śāsāti); 5) congruence (svāyam-pratyakṣa) with its object; and 6) self-reflexive character (svasamvedana). In this way, an acquaintance with Buddhist epistemology may suggest new perspectives for our understanding and interpretation of perceptual immediacy.

For further reading

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