



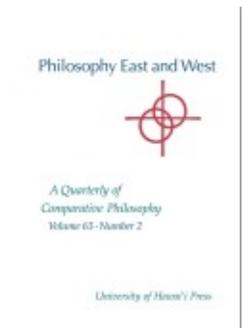
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Philosophy East and West, Volume 54, Number 3, July 2004, pp. 365-367
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2004.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2004.0015)



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COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

Seeing without Recognizing? More on Denuding Perceptual Content

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To be in the presence of something is not necessarily to see it. Everyone knows that. Even if an onlooker looks at me and sees me 'looking at' a particular wall with eyes wide open, she cannot be sure that I am *seeing* that wall. Apart from the possibility that I am distracted or inattentive, I may be focusing on the color of the wall or some particular graffiti on it so attentively that I may not be noticing that it is the color of a *wall* or that the graffiti is on a *wall*. Even if the wall causes my perception, it need not be the object of my perception, just as my retina or sunlight is not.

Thus, I must have some say on what it is that I am seeing. That does not mean that I may not be mistaken about my own current perceptual content. Neither does it mean that to have a say is to be able to 'say' in descriptive words what one is seeing. All it means is that I cannot be clueless about it. I cannot be, to use Sydney Shoemaker's phrase, strongly "self-blind" (which is worse than being self-oblivious). Now, the myth of immaculate perception, in both of its (radically unlike) Nyāya and Buddhist versions, requires us to admit some such perceptual states that are so radically un-self-ascribable, or—to use Phillips' terminology—unapperceivable, that the subject is "never able to say anything" (in Siderits' words) concerning what she is perceiving during these states. This comes dangerously close to self-blindness. To admit, for other systemic reasons, that one is acquainted directly and pre-predicatively with either a bare featureless fleeting particular (the Sautrāntika Buddhist claim) or a pure universal feature as yet cognitively un-pasted to a particular (the Nyāya claim) is to consign a nook of our own minds to such self-blindness, and also to acknowledge that an awareness can take something as its object without recognizing it as anything whatsoever.

Even to see a particular as a *unique uncategoryable* something is to see it as something, even to see a man as 'that man whom I can't recognize' is to bring him under the general concept of an unknown stranger currently in front of me, a negative demonstrative covering concept. That is why I think seeing is not possible without recognizing. (*Seeing cannot even be caused by a bare particular since there aren't any in the world. That is what my realism tells me.*) If it were, then we would have to be partially self-blind. But we are not.

Recently two parallel controversies have erupted on the pages of this journal: one between myself and Stephen Phillips regarding the necessity of Indeterminate Perception within Nyāya epistemology, and the other between Monima Chadha and Mark Siderits on the issue of whether a realist needs perception of particulars without deployment of concepts. The first controversy is muddied with technical Nyāya assumptions—for example, about how many moments a perceptual cognitive state

lasts or what can be called the instrumental cause of a perception with full-fledged qualificative content. The latter controversy is muddied with the turbid understanding one has of what Kant meant by concepts or the use of concepts in the shaping of an experience.

Now, I have for a long time felt that not just Kant's but just about every Western philosopher's concept of a *concept* (except Frege's, which is an odd notion) is regrettably unclear. Notwithstanding his book *A Study of Concepts* (MIT Press, 1992), even Peacocke's notion of a concept (which is different from Fodor's notion of a concept) does not yield obvious answers to such simple queries as: "Can two people possess the same concept?" or "When I use a concept that I possess to process a perceived content, do I make the concept itself an object of my perception?"

Siderits' bringing in Externalism versus Internalism, the hotly debated issue in current philosophy of content, has also complicated matters. Chadha's initial mistaken idea that Nyāya is Kantian on this question of all perceptions having conceptual content has also added confusion.

But once the initial dust settles, I believe that these two controversies together could help clarify a number of absolutely central issues in the philosophy of perception where making use of the resources of contemporary analytic philosophers and cognitive scientists along with the insights and detailed arguments and counterarguments of Classical Indian philosophers would prove to be enormously productive.

In reading Phillips' annotated translations from Gaṅgeśa, one immediately reaps one such philosophical harvest. The section on "Indeterminate Perception" is preceded by a fragment of the section on "Apperception or Awareness of Awareness." So already one can see that we cannot discuss the question of whether we can have seeing without seeing-as, without deciding what our stance would be about our ability to perceive that we have perceived. Siderits defends the Buddhist claim that we can see bare particulars by making the Buddhist out to be an externalist: I need not be aware of the fact that or recognize what exactly it is that I am aware of. Surely, he is not unaware of the simultaneous insistence of the Yogācāra Sautrāntika schools that every awareness is self-aware! So, how does he reconcile externalism with this necessary self-awareness thesis? The self-luminosity of a self-sensing cognition of the Buddhist, Siderits would perhaps say, has little to do with *knowing that one is sensing something*, let alone knowing conceptually exactly what one is sensing. It is an instantaneous non-propositional transparency of consciousness that is perfectly consistent with the non-conceptuality of its content. This is where the drama begins, and a new problem-space is opened up. I can only indicate this problem-space as a grid arising out of the crisscrossing of possible answers to the following three distinct but connected controversies:

1. Do all our perceptions involve the use of concepts, or recognitions of general features, or do some perceptions involve purely concept-free content? (the *nirvikalpaka* debate).

2. Are our perceptions necessarily or possibly self-aware or are there awarenesses that the subject of the awareness is necessarily unaware of (the *Sva-prakāśa* and Internalism debate).

3. Are all predicative or concept-enriched awarenesses linguistic or are there pre-linguistic recognitional capacities? (the controversy regarding the meaning of “avyapadeśyam”).

I have tried to deal with each of these controversies in three different papers,¹ but the intricate argumentation between Siderits, Phillips, and Chadha has convinced me that I need now to deal with them all in one sustained investigation.

Note

1 – See “Against Immaculate Perception: Seven Reasons for Eliminating *Nirvikalpa* Perception from Nyāya,” *Philosophy East and West* 50 (1) (January 2000), for my discussion of the first debate. See “Perception, Apperception and Non-Conceptual Content,” in *Perspectives on Consciousness*, ed. Amita Chatterjee (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003), for my discussion of the second debate. And see “Experience, Concept-Possession and Knowledge of a Language,” in *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson*, ed. L. E. Hahn, Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), for my discussion of the third debate.

Perceiving Particulars: A Buddhist Defense

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In a recent article in this journal, Monima Chadha claimed that the position of certain Buddhist philosophers concerning the perception of particulars is incoherent.¹ Her defense of what she calls a “Nyāya-Kantian” position raises interesting questions concerning how we have knowledge of mind-independent reality. While the view that she subscribes to may well be right, I shall try to show that her arguments against the views of the Yogācāra-Sautrāntika Buddhists fail to undermine their position. But some of the issues involved here intersect with underlying themes in the recent debate between Arindam Chakrabarti and Stephen Phillips over the status of indeterminate perception in Nyāya,² so I shall have something to say about that as well.

The basic position I shall seek to defend has the form of a conditional: if we wish to maintain anything like the broadly metaphysical-realist stance that is fundamental to both Yogācāra-Sautrāntika and Nyāya (as well as to Kant), then we need to hold that in at least some cases of perception it is individuals as such that are the objects of our cognitive states. Chadha’s discussion leads her to the conclusion that we never perceive particulars as such. Instead, she says, what are cognized in perception are always universal features, so that what are ordinarily thought of as the par-