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Author

Sharf, RH

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KNOWING BLUE: EARLY BUDDHIST ACCOUNTS OF NON-CONCEPTUAL SENSE PERCEPTION

Robert H. Sharf

Group in Buddhist Studies, University of California, Berkeley
rsharf@berkeley.edu

*And I find myself knowing the things that I knew
Which is all that you can know on this side of the blue*

Joanna Newsom

Is there such a thing as direct, non-conceptual experience, or is all experience, by its very nature, conceptually mediated? Is *some* notion of non-conceptual sensory awareness required to account for our ability to represent and negotiate our physical environment, or is it merely an artifact of deep-seated but ultimately misguided Cartesian metaphysical assumptions? Perhaps conscious experience in humans is inextricably tied to the representational or self-reflexive capacities of language; if so, does it necessarily follow that newborn infants and animals are not conscious? Is the very notion of non-conceptual experience logically incoherent or unintelligible? Or perhaps the problem lies in our use of concepts to describe phenomena that lie, by definition, beyond the confines of conceptual thought. Surely, that we can't conceive of something is insufficient ground to conclude that it doesn't exist.

These are, of course, much debated issues in contemporary philosophy of mind. Recently, the debates have been framed in terms of "first-order" (or "same-order") theories of consciousness versus higher-order theories; the latter maintain that subjective awareness consists in a second-order *representation* of a first-order state (consciousness is said to be "transitive"), while the former argue that consciousness is "intransitive" or "self-intimating," and thus the phenomenon of self-awareness need not entail secondary or higher-order cognitive processing. Among the higher-order theories, a further distinction is made between "higher-order perception" (a.k.a. HOP, or "inner sense") theories, which hold that higher-order representations can be non-conceptual, versus "higher-order thought" (HOT) theories, which argue that the secondary representations that give rise to subjective awareness necessarily involve conceptual thought or propositional belief.¹

Other philosophers working in the areas of cognitive science and perception have engaged in parallel debates over "non-conceptual mental content," "non-linguistic thought," and even "non-linguistic conceptual thought"—subjects that bear directly on the relationship between thought, concepts, language, and perception. Here too we find a burgeoning and highly

technical literature, in which cognitivists face off against phenomenologists, conceptualists take on non-conceptualists, “state non-conceptualism” is contrasted with “content non-conceptualism,” and so on.² As in the case of the HOT debates, the growing complexity and sophistication of the literature on non-conceptual mental content has not brought the field closer to consensus on whether “non-conceptual experience” is intelligible in the first place. Some years ago there was hope that the notion of “qualia” might contribute focus and clarity to these issues. More recently, attention has turned to the distinction between “phenomenal consciousness” (p-consciousness) and “access consciousness” (a-consciousness).³ Yet irrespective of whether one talks of qualia, or p-consciousness, or intransitive consciousness, or non-relational consciousness, or first-order consciousness, or same-order consciousness, or pre-reflective awareness, the challenge remains the same: how to make conceptual sense of an experience that is alleged to be non-conceptual?

Despite the difficulties, many philosophers continue to be drawn to these issues. The interest is sustained, in part, by contemporary research in cognitive science and artificial intelligence that promises to revolutionize our understanding of consciousness and perception. (It is no accident that MIT Press is a leading publisher of philosophical books in this area.) But despite the wealth of new empirical data and the profusion of increasingly sophisticated philosophical arguments, the underlying quandaries—quandaries related to the “hard problem” of consciousness and how our percepts relate to the mind-independent world—go back to the dawn of philosophical reflection, and the verdict is still out on whether the spate of new work bespeaks progress (however that might be measured) or is what the Buddhists would call “conceptual proliferation” (Sanskrit: *prapañca*, rendered in Chinese as *xilun* 戲論, “frivolous discourse”).

The notion of unmediated or non-conceptual experience has also emerged as a topic of debate among scholars of religion. One early and somewhat fashionable theory of mysticism, now known as “perennialism,” holds that all the major world religions are historically and spiritually grounded in a single ineffable mystical experience. This extraordinary experience (or “altered state of consciousness”) is, by definition, universal; while attempts to communicate it are mediated by language, culture, and belief, the experience itself is not. Some exponents of perennialism have gone further, arguing that the experience is contentless: it is “pure consciousness” itself.⁴ Starting in the 1970s, however, this popular theory came under sustained attack by “contextualists” (a.k.a. “constructivists”), who argued, on philosophical, historical, and ethnographic grounds, that all experience, including so-called mystical experience, is socially, culturally, and conceptually mediated. The notion of a single perennial experience that lies behind the diversity of religious traditions is, according to the constructivists, a modernist conceit based on a systematic misreading of the historical record.⁵ The intuition that motivated the constructivists in

departments of religion is, I believe, the same as that which animates conceptualists in departments of philosophy, namely, that the very notion of unconstructed experience is akin to Wittgenstein's "wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it."

Determining where the Buddhist tradition stands on these issues is no easy task. In my earlier forays into the mysticism debates, I argued that Buddhist conceptions of the path articulated in early *sūtra* and *abhidharma* literature, as well as in *mārga* ("stages of the path") compilations such as the *Visuddhimagga*, do not emphasize direct or unmediated experience (Sharf 1995, 1998). This is because the early tradition did not imagine the aim of Buddhist practice to be a numinous experience or altered state of consciousness. On the contrary, the goal—final *nirvāṇa*—was understood as the permanent *cessation* of phenomenal experience. It is true that the ascending levels of trance states (*dhyānas* and *samāpattis*) associated with the development of meditative concentration (*śamatha*) are defined in terms of the systematic elimination of certain cognitive factors (*caitasika-dharma*, *saṃskāra*) that attend upon and shape conscious experience. But the elimination of these factors does not result in a more luminous or transparent state of "pure consciousness," so much as in the progressive *attenuation* of consciousness itself. The sequence of trances culminates in *nirodhasamāpatti*—a condition akin to a vegetative coma that is phenomenologically (but not soteriologically) indistinguishable from *nirvāṇa*.⁶

This is not to say that immediate (or non-conceptual or unconstructed) experience was unknown in early Buddhism. The notion of "non-discriminative" or "non-conceptual discernment" (*nirvikalpajñāna*, *wu fenbie zhi* 無分別智) appears sporadically early on as a sort of exotic yogic attainment, the purview of buddhas and advanced practitioners.⁷ But non-discriminative discernment did not play a central role in the analysis of *mundane* cognition until the rise of so-called Pramāṇavāda in the sixth and seventh centuries. Dignāga—the philosopher who laid the groundwork for this sophisticated tradition of logic and epistemology—was among the first to argue that there was a non-conceptual aspect to *all* states of cognition, including workaday discursive states. This aspect, known as "self-awareness" (*svasaṃvedana*, *svasaṃvitti*), would come to play a pivotal role in later Indo-Tibetan Yogācāra epistemology, akin to the role that "pre-reflective consciousness" plays in strands of contemporary phenomenology.⁸

Non-conceptual discernment was also important in certain post-sixth-century traditions of Buddhist meditation, notably the "subitist" traditions of Tantra, Chan, and Dzogchen. However, the cultivation of non-conceptual states of "luminous" or "mirror consciousness" was not without controversy. Detractors argued that such practices contravened orthodox Buddhist teachings and/or fostered antinomian and ethically pernicious behavior. The same controversies now dog the modern mindfulness movement (a.k.a. *satipaṭṭhāna*, *vipassanā*) that emerged in Burma in the early twentieth

century. Some teachers of the new Burmese practices interpret mindfulness (Pali: *sati*, Sanskrit: *smṛti*) as “bare awareness” or “bare attention,” by which they mean attending directly to sensations as they arise in the mind without any discursive reflection, emotional response, or ethical judgment. The goal, it would seem, is some sort of non-conceptual experience. Yet, as critics note, understanding *sati* as bare or non-conceptual awareness seems odd on the face of it, given that the traditional meaning of *sati/smṛti* is to “remember,” “recollect,” or “bear in mind.”⁹

If I am correct in my analysis, while the seeds of “non-conceptual discernment” may have been present early on, it did not come to the fore in Buddhist thought and practice until the rise of Pramāṇavāda, Tantra, Chan, and Dzogchen (Sharf 2014b, 2016). These developments, which date to the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, were likely influenced by non-Buddhist Indian religious traditions, including Tantra. Be that as it may, the early Ābhidharmikas could not help but run into the puzzle of non-conceptual cognition; as we will see, the structure of their theories of perception make the problem unavoidable.

Distributed Cognition

The *Nidānavagga-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya* contains the following succinct account of the arising of mind:

And what, bhikkhus, is the origin of suffering? *In dependence on the eye and forms, eye-cognition arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling [comes to be]; with feeling as condition, craving. This is the origin of suffering. In dependence on the ear and sounds, ear-cognition arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling [comes to be]; with feeling as condition, craving. This is the origin of suffering.*¹⁰

The passage goes on to repeat the same formula for the nose and odors, tongue and tastes, body and tactile objects, and mind and mental phenomena. While the passage is found here embedded in a sermon on suffering, the section italicized above appears repeatedly in the Pali canon, as well as in parallel passages in the Chinese Āgamas, serving as a stock formulation or “pericope” for the Buddha’s teaching on the arising of mind. (I’ll refer to it below as the “arising-of-mind pericope.”) Its appeal lay in the succinct manner in which it touches upon all eighteen elements (*dhātu*) that collectively comprise the phenomenal world, as well as their causal and temporal interrelations. But the terse formulation also raised a number of problems that would preoccupy Buddhist exegetes for centuries to come.

To appreciate the pericope, keep in mind that Buddhist scholiasts sought to produce, using the resources provided in the scriptures, a robust account of mind and perceptual experience that does not invoke an enduring self or subject (*ātman*). Rather than adducing a single overriding cogito or “witness

consciousness,” scriptural accounts distribute cognition among six quasi-independent registers: five of which are associated with the material senses, and one with the mind or mental sense (*manas*), namely, mind-cognition (*manovijñāna*). These six registers are structurally alike insofar as each involves the interactions of three discrete elements: the perceptual object (*viṣaya*), the sense faculty (*indriya*), and cognition (*vijñāna*). This creates a total of eighteen elements that collectively account for the entirety of conscious experience; there is no need for an independent observer that sits astride the process. So far so good. But it is not obvious how this model can account for what modern philosophers call the synthetic unity of apperception or cognitive binding. How is it that these six registers interact to create the semblance of a unified and integrated phenomenal domain?

There is, to my knowledge, only a single *sūtra* that acknowledges and addresses this problem directly.¹¹ The *Mahāvedalla-sutta* (*Majjhima-nikāya* 43) consists of a series of questions that Mahā Koṭṭhita poses to Sāriputta, along with Sāriputta’s responses. One of the questions is as follows:

“Friend, these five faculties each have a separate field, a separate domain, and do not experience each other’s field and domain, that is, the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty, and the body faculty. Now of these five faculties, each having a separate field, a separate domain, not experiencing each other’s field and domain, what is their resort, what experiences their fields and domains?”

This seems to be a fairly straightforward description of the binding problem: given that the cognitive reach of each of the sense faculties is restricted to its own register, what integrates them? To which Sāriputta responds,

“Friend, these five faculties each have a separate field, a separate domain, and do not experience each other’s field and domain, that is, the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty, and the body faculty. Now these five faculties, each having a separate field, a separate domain, not experiencing each other’s field and domain, have mind as their resort, and mind experiences their fields and domains.”¹²

In short, mind is unique among the six faculties in having access to, and serving as foundation or “resort” (*manopaṭisaraṇaṃ*, the Chinese parallel reads *yī* 依, “basis”) for the other five.

The *Mahāvedalla* is notable among the Pali *suttas* for the manner in which it defines, often in a rather technical manner, terms like cognition (*viññāṇa*, *vijñāna*), feeling (*vedanā*), ideation (*saññā*, *saṃjñā*), meditative trance (*jhāna*, *dhyāna*), and so on. Accordingly, some scholars see this text, which likely belongs to a relatively late strata of the *suttapīṭaka*, as precursor to the kind of systematic exposition found in Abhidharma literature. In any case, it may be the earliest extant Buddhist text to posit a structural

asymmetry between (1) the five cognitions associated with the material senses (hereafter: the five sense cognitions), and (2) mind-cognition.

This asymmetry turns out to be crucial for the Buddhist analysis of mind and cognition, and the Ābhidharmikas develop it at length. We learn not only that the five sense cognitions have access only to their proper objects (i.e., the eye to visual objects, the ear to sounds, and so on), but also that these objects must, at least according to the Sarvāstivāda Vaibhāṣikas, coexist with cognition itself. That is to say, eye-cognition can only register a visual form if said form exists in the present. Mind-cognition, on the other hand, has access to mental objects (*dharma*s) as well as to sense percepts that are transduced from the five material senses. Moreover, mind can perceive past and future objects as well as objects in the present. Finally, and most germane to this essay, Vaibhāṣika masters hold that the five sense cognitions apprehend their objects *directly*, without access to concepts or language. As such, it is sometimes said that sense cognition grasps the “inherent characteristic” (*svalakṣaṇa*) of the object but not its “generic characteristic” (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*). Grasping the generic characteristic involves apprehending the object not merely as a one-off particular but as the token of a generic type, and this requires capacities associated with mind-cognition such as ideation (*saṃjñā*), recollection (*smṛti*), and knowledge (*prajñā*).¹³ In an oft-repeated example, visual cognition is said to know “blue” but not “this is blue.” Only mind-cognition can know “this is blue.”¹⁴

Note that the arising-of-mind pericope gives no hint of any structural difference between sense cognition and mind-cognition; the asymmetry seems to have been introduced in later texts such as the *Mahāvedalla* and early commentarial works so as to render the Buddhist model of distributed cognition intelligible. This is merely one of several lacunae and ambiguities in the pericope with which later commentators had to struggle. Another was how to understand the temporal and causal relationships that pertain between the perceptual object, the sense faculty, and cognition. The pericope reads, “In dependence on the eye and forms, eye-cognition arises.” Does this mean that the eye (the visual sense faculty, *cakṣurindriya*) and form (the material object, *rūpa*) *precede* the arising of visual cognition (*cakṣurvijñāna*), or is the dependence logical rather than temporal, such that the three arise simultaneously? This turned out to be a contentious issue on which Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika part ways.¹⁵ As mentioned above, the Vaibhāṣikas hold that all three elements must coexist for perception to occur; it makes little sense, they reason, to talk of sense perception (*pratyakṣa*) with respect to a non-existent sense object.¹⁶ To defend their position, they develop a theory of “simultaneous causation” (*sahabhūhetu*), such that the sense object and sense faculty are the immediate cause of, yet co-arise with, sense cognition.¹⁷ In contrast, Sautrāntikas reject simultaneous causation as incoherent; they insist, on both exegetical and philosophical grounds, that

cognition emerges *after* the arising of the sense object and sense faculty. As a result, in the Sautrāntika model the object of perception is no longer present when cognized.¹⁸

While Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas disagree over whether sense cognition coexists with its object, they concur that the full recognition of the object does not occur until the immediately following moment, when mind-cognition, shaped by ideation, recollection, knowledge, and other mental factors (*caitasika*), apprehends the throughput of the previous cognition. In technical terms, the preceding moment of cognition is said to function as the *mana-indriya* or “mind-faculty” of the subsequent arising of mind (*manas*). Thus in the Vaibhāṣika schema, full recognition of a sense object is a two-step affair: in the first moment, sense cognition arises along with the sense faculty and object, and in the second moment mind-cognition arises. In contrast, the Sautrāntika model involves three steps: sense faculty and object arise in the first moment, sense cognition in the second, and mind-cognition in the third.

One issue on which both the two-step and three-step models concur is that mind-cognition does not apprehend the sense object (*viśaya*) directly, since the object has already passed when mind-cognition arises. Sautrāntikas go one step further in this regard, as they insist that even sense cognition does not apprehend the object directly. In either case the question arises: when the sense object is no longer present, what precisely is apprehended? Ābhidharmika exegetes discuss this “after image” under the rubric of the *ākāra*, a particularly difficult concept that is variously translated “aspect,” “form,” “mental image,” “mode of activity,” and so on. The variety of translations reflects the different and somewhat conflicting accounts of *ākāra* in Ābhidharmika sources. As others have discussed this topic at length, I will touch on it only briefly here.¹⁹

The Sautrāntikas are associated most closely with *ākāra* theory in later doxographic accounts, in which they are described as *sākāravāda*. (*Sākāravāda*—the theory that the mind has access only to inner representations—would appear to be a precursor to full-blown Yogācāra idealism.) Secondary sources, possibly influenced by later Pramāṇavāda thought, often present the *ākāra* as a kind of internal image or mental representation of the object that is grasped by *vijñāna*. But this is misleading: technically, the Sautrāntika position is that there is nothing apart from *vijñāna* for *vijñāna* to grasp, since the other two elements (*dhātu*)—the object element (*viśaya-dhātu*) and faculty element (*indriya-dhātu*)—have passed. It is more accurate to describe the *ākāra* as that aspect or appearance or mode of activity of *vijñāna* that is engendered by, and accordingly “resembles” (*sādṛśya*), the no-longer-extant perceptual object (*viśaya*). As this aspect of cognition is causally determined by the object, Sautrāntikas could insist that, while our sense percepts are always after the fact, they are nonetheless empirically grounded in the external world.

In contrast, Vaibhāṣikas believe that sensory cognition grasps the object in “real time,” and hence there is no need to engage the notion of *ākāra* to mediate a temporal gap. However, Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas agree that mind-cognition arises only after the passing of the perceptual object, so Vaibhāṣika accounts will sometimes aver to the *ākāra* in their discussion of mind-cognition. But despite a penchant for treating the building blocks of cognition as independently existing entities (*dharmas*), Vaibhāṣikas do not regard the *ākāra* as such. Instead they identify the *ākāra* with *prajñā* (knowledge); it is *prajñā* qua *ākāra* that grasps, or assumes the form of, the generic characteristic (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) of the object. Thus for Vaibhāṣikas, in mundane (non-dhyānic) cognition the emergence of the *ākāra* entails conceptual discrimination (which is integral to the activity of *prajñā* for those who are not spiritual adepts), and this in turn entails the possibility of epistemic error. To use, somewhat loosely, the snake/rope analogy, for Vaibhāṣikas, the *ākāra* is the snake apprehended by mind-cognition (i.e., the rope misidentified by *prajñā*), while eye-cognition sees something more “rope-like.” I am reluctant to call the content of eye-cognition a “rope” proper; while Vaibhāṣikas hold that eye-cognition directly perceives an aggregate (*heji* 和集), as opposed to individual atoms or a provisionally existing assemblage (*hehe* 和合) of atoms,²⁰ to label this aggregate a “rope” would entail some degree of conceptual discrimination, and this is precisely what is in question. Note also that it is even more challenging to locate anything resembling a “rope” in the Sautrāntika schema, since in their model not even sense cognition grasps its object directly.²¹

I would reiterate that this is a highly simplified version of *ākāra* theory, and it appears that both Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas struggled in their attempts to make sense of it. To give a single illustration, Vaibhāṣikas hold that the sensory object is immediately available to sense cognition, and thus there is no need to reference an *ākāra*. The *ākāra*, qua *prajñā*, is involved only in the *conceptual* recognition of the generic characteristic of the object by mind-cognition. But here they run into a problem, since according to Vaibhāṣika orthodoxy, *prajñā* is one of the ten omnipresent mental factors (*mahābhūmikadharmā*, *dadīfā* 大地法), and thus it must, by definition, attend the arising of all cognition, both sensory and mental. In fact, the problem pertains not only to *prajñā*, but to ideation (*saṃjñā*) and recollection (*smṛti*) as well. How can these universal mental factors, which are associated with conceptual knowledge, be operative in non-conceptual sensory cognition? The Vaibhāṣika solution, in brief, is to claim that in sensory cognition, *prajñā*, *saṃjñā*, and *smṛti* are present but too “weak” to be active.²² We will return to this theory in more detail below.

Putting aside such complexities, it would appear that the notion of *ākāra* arose to help fill the epistemic gaps between what we perceive, what we *think* we perceive, and what is really there. At times, it seems to occupy a space betwixt and between the various fundamental elements (*dhātu*) that

comprise the building blocks of cognition. Indeed, *ākāra* might be seen as an emergent entity, save that Vaibhāṣika exegetes are mereological reductionists—they hold that only indivisible parts are real—and they thus repudiate the ultimate reality and causal efficacy of aggregate entities. For our immediate purposes, we need simply note that all Ābhidharmika voices agree that the “object” grasped by mind-cognition—the *ākāra*, however it is understood—is the outcome of a multistep process that involves, at some point along the way, conceptual discrimination. They disagree, however, as to precisely when and where conceptuality kicks in.

Before turning to the issue of non-discriminating cognition, we will look briefly at one more controversy that divided Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika theorists. Recall the lines from the arising-of-mind pericope: “In dependence on the eye and forms, eye-cognition arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling [comes to be]” One question raised by Ābhidharmikas is whether “contact” (*sparsā*) is simply a term for the convergence of sense object, sense faculty, and sense cognition, or whether it is a discrete entity in its own right.²³

Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy holds that the determining marker of ultimate (as opposed to nominal) existence is causal efficacy. Vaibhāṣikas could then cite the scriptural passage—“with contact as the condition, feeling [comes to be]”—in support of their claim that contact is a real entity (*dravya*), as it is the cause for the arising of feeling (*vedanā*). Moreover, given the Vaibhāṣika doctrine of simultaneous causation, contact can be deemed the “effect” of the convergence of object, faculty, and cognition, yet still coexist with them in the same instant. The Sautrāntikas disagree; they argue that contact is simply a nominal entity (*prajñapti*) that designates the convergence of object, faculty, and cognition, and it is this convergence that brings about feeling. This is consistent with the Sautrāntika tendency to resist the unnecessary reification of *dharma*s, but it is also mandated by their rejection of simultaneous causation. Were contact a discrete entity occasioned by the convergence, it would have to appear after the passing of object, faculty, and cognition, and it seems odd to claim that “contact” arises when the objects that are in contact are no longer extant.²⁴

The debate over the existential status of contact is tied to a much broader controversy concerning the relationship between mind (*citta*) and its attendant “concomitant mental factors” (*caitasika*, *caitta*). The concomitant factors are the various cognitive functions that arise with, and bear upon, the operations of mind, including contact (*sparsā*), ideation (*saṃjñā*), recollection (*smṛti*), and knowledge (*prajñā*). The question, then, is whether mind and its concomitant factors are ultimately one thing or many. The Vaibhāṣikas treat all the concomitant factors as they do contact, that is, as real, discrete, causally efficacious entities that are “associated” (*saṃprayukta*) with, but not identical to, mind (*citta*). In contrast, Dārṣāntika and Sautrāntika exegetes are less inclined to reify the concomitant factors, and

regard them instead as distinct “aspects” or “modes” of mind (*cittaviśeṣa*, *xin chabie* 心差別). But there is considerable difference of opinion among individual Dārṣṭāntika and Sautrāntika masters on this issue. Some say that all concomitant factors are merely aspects of mind (*citta*) or cognition (*viññāna*), some that they are aspects of volition (*cetanā*), and some propose a truncated list of three real concomitant factors (*vedanā*, *saṃjñā*, and *cetanā*), each of which is accompanied by cognition. (In this last account, which is influenced in part by the canonical list of five *skandhas*, the remaining concomitant factors are subsumed under volition.) But given that mind, cognition, and volition are used somewhat interchangeably by Ābhidharmikas, the variations among the anti-reificationist theories need not concern us here.²⁵

At first glance this larger debate might appear as just more scholastic pedantry, but the underlying issue is of considerable philosophical import. Is mind (*citta*) something that exists over and above its cognitive functions and states, or does the term refer precisely to those functions and states? And where does consciousness fit into the picture? Is it something that properly belongs to a singular if continuously transforming entity (“mind”), or does it emerge through the complex interactions of distributed but interdependent processes? (Framed in this way, the controversy is reminiscent of modern debates surrounding reductionism, eliminativism, epiphenomenalism, and so on.) This issue was pressing and consequential for early commentators, yet the scriptures provided little guidance—they don’t clearly differentiate terms like *viññāna*, *citta*, and *manas*, they say little about the asymmetry between the five sense cognitions and mind-cognition, and they don’t address the problem of simultaneous versus successive causation.²⁶ This was left for the Ābhidharmikas to sort through.

Knowing Blue

We have seen that, for Vaibhāṣikas, the recognition of the object by mind-cognition is a two-step process, while for Sautrāntikas it involves three steps. Both agree, however, that prior to the conceptual recognition of a sense object by mind-cognition, the object is grasped non-conceptually by sensory cognition. This non-conceptual perceptual moment is described in the *Vijñānakāya-śāstra* (*Apidamo shishen zulun* 阿毘達磨識身足論), one of the earliest Sarvāstivāda compendia, as follows.²⁷

There are six cognition bodies, namely, eye-cognition, ear, nose, taste, touch, and mind-cognition. Eye-cognition is only able to discern blue; it is unable to discern “this is blue.” Mind-cognition is also able to discern blue. As long as [mind-cognition] is unable to discern [the color’s] name, it is unable to discern “this is blue.” But should it be able to discern its name, it discerns, at the same time, both “blue” and “this is blue.” The colors yellow, red, white, and so on are [analyzed] in the same way as the color blue. Ear-cognition is only able to

discern a sound; it is unable to discern “this is a sound.” Mind-cognition is also able to discern the sound. As long as it is unable to discern its name, it is unable to discern “this is a sound.” But should it be able to discern its name, it discerns, at the same time, the sound and “this is a sound.”

有六識身。謂眼識耳鼻舌身意識。眼識唯能了別青色。不能了別此是青色。意識亦能了別青色。乃至未能了別其名。不能了別此是青色。若能了別其名。爾時亦能了別青色。亦能了別此是青色。如青色黃赤白等色亦爾。耳識唯能了別聲。不能了別此是聲。意識亦能了別聲。乃至未能了別其名。不能了別此是聲。若能了別其名。爾時亦能了別聲。亦能了別此是聲。²⁸

The *Vijñānakāya* passage goes on to repeat the same formula for nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and touch, and concludes by saying that “mind-cognition is also able to discern all *dharmas*” 意識亦能了別諸法。

The notion that sense perception is to mental perception what knowing blue is to knowing “this is blue” would prove beguiling—it shows up regularly in later *Ābhidharmika*, *Pramāṇavāda*, and *Yogācāra* treatises. Vasubandhu draws on it, for example, in his discussion of “contact” (*sparsā*) in his *Abhidharmakośa* (*Apidamo jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論). Traditionally, there are said to be six kinds of contact—one associated with each of the six cognitions. But the *Vaibhāṣikas*, drawing on a distinction attested in the *sūtras*, divide them into two types.²⁹ The first is known as “contact of resistance” (*pratigha-saṃsparsā*, *youdui chu* 有對觸), as it is associated with the resistance a sense faculty encounters when confronted with a material object (*rūpa*). The second is “contact of verbal designation” (*adhivacana-saṃsparsā*, *zengyu chu* 增語觸) and is associated exclusively with the mind and its encounter with a name or concept. Vasubandhu explains it as follows.

(30cd) Five [kinds of contact] are associated with resistance, and the sixth is conjoined with a verbal designation.

Commentary: The five kinds of contact of the [senses such as the] eye etc. are called “resistance [contact],” as their bases (*āśraya*) are the faculties that resist [their objects]. The sixth is mental contact, which is called “designation [contact].” The reason is that designation means “name,” and name is the primary object grasped through mental contact. It is for this reason that it is called designation contact. Thus it is said that eye-cognition alone is able to know blue, but it does not know “this is blue.” Mind-cognition knows blue and knows “this is blue.” Therefore the name is primary. Thus the name “resistance contact” is derived from its basis (*āśraya*), while the name “designation contact” is derived from its cognitive object (*ālambana*).

五相應有對。第六俱增語。論曰。眼等五觸說名有對。以有對根為所依故。第六意觸說名增語。所以然者。增語謂名。名是意觸所緣長境。故偏就此名增語觸。如說眼識但能了青不了是青。意識了青亦是了青。故名為長。故有對觸名從所依。增語觸名就所緣立。(T.1558: 29.52c4-10)

The distinction between resistance contact and designation contact is thus predicated on the different ontologies of their perceptual objects, and this is captured epistemically in the distinction between knowing blue and knowing “this is blue.”

Samghabhadra will similarly reference “knowing blue” in his discussion of mind-cognition in his **Nyāyānusāra* (*Apidamo shun zhengli lun* 阿毘達磨順正理論).

When the treatise says “cognition is that which discerns,” it means that it apprehends in a general manner the characteristic of the object field. Each [kind of cognition] apprehends generally this or that object’s characteristic. To say that each [kind of cognition] individually discerns means that although many kinds of objects, including form, [sound, taste, smell] and so on, may be present, eye-cognition will still only apprehend form and will not apprehend sound and so on, and it will only apprehend blue but not the designation “blue” and so on, and not that it is pleasing or not pleasing, not that it is male or female, not that it is a man or a tree stump, not that it is gained or lost, and so on. Just as eye-cognition, with respect to its own objects, only generally apprehends their characteristics, the remaining cognitions should be understood accordingly.

論曰。識謂了別者。是唯總取境界相義。各各總取彼彼境相。名各了別。謂彼眼識雖有色等多境現前。然唯取色不取聲等。唯取青等。非謂青等。亦非可意不可意等。非男女等。非人杌等。非得失等。如彼眼識。於其自境。唯總取相。如是餘識。隨應當知。(T.1562: 29.342a17-22)

These texts all concur that the difference between non-conceptual sensory cognition and conceptual mind-cognition is captured in the claim that the eye knows blue but not “this is blue.” This bare sensation of blue appears, at least on the surface, to be what analytic philosophers call a “quale” or “raw feel.” But just as with qualia, the claim raises a host of thorny questions. What, if anything, might be said about the nature or content of this blue quale, given that it is bereft of any generic “blueness”?

As discussed above, five sense cognitions are sometimes said to apprehend the “inherent characteristic” (*svalakṣaṇa*) of the object—a transient particular—while mind-cognition apprehends the “generic characteristic” (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) which involves the application of concepts and categories. Such a distinction is necessitated, in part, by the Vaibhāṣika doctrine that a sense faculty can only apprehend an object that is immediately present, and thus no two moments of sense cognition apprehend the same object-field (*viśaya*).³⁰ (While the object-field grasped by sense cognition is continually changing, the perceptual object [*ālambana*] of mind-cognition, which is apprehended via a conceptual category, can persist from one moment to the next.) But Vaibhāṣikas are aware that, although the immediate sense perception of a *svalakṣaṇa* does not involve the use of concepts and language, it still entails *some* minimal discriminative capacity—after all, the claim, it would appear, is that eye-cognition can

differentiate blue from yellow or red or white, and that this occurs in the perceptual stream *prior* to the application of concepts such as “blue” and “yellow” and “red” and “white.” The Vaibhāṣikas then devise a specific discriminative mechanism, namely “inherent discrimination” (*svabhāvavikalpa*), to account for this capacity, and they explain it with reference to two mental factors, *vitarka* (*jue* 覺, *xun* 尋) and *vicāra* (*guan* 觀, *si* 伺), which might be rendered “coarse discernment” and “fine discernment.” (For reasons that will become clear below, I will leave these two terms untranslated in this essay.) These complex notions turn out to be key to understanding what it means to know blue but not “this is blue.”

Vitarka, Vicāra, and the Three Kinds of Discrimination

The *vitarka*–*vicāra* pair appears frequently in early *sūtras*, and while their precise meaning is neither clear nor consistent, both terms initially seem to have been associated with thought, rumination, or the inner discursive activity that precedes speech.³¹ In time, *vitarka* came to be understood as the initial and imprecise detection/discernment/recognition of a perceptual object, while *vicāra* is understood as the subsequent mental inspection of said object. Accordingly, many commentators, both medieval and modern, interpret the two terms as two kinds or degrees of conceptual discrimination or discursive thought. This is evident in the various English translations, in which *vitarka* shows up as “conception,” “ideation,” “reasoning,” “examination,” “inquiry,” “directed thought,” and “initial application of thought,” while *vicāra* is rendered “investigation,” “scrutiny,” “judgment,” “sustained application of thought,” and so on.

Extended discussions of the *vitarka*–*vicāra* pair can be found in paracanonical works such as the *Peṭakopadesa* and *Milindapañha*, as well as the **Vimokṣamārga-śāstra* (or **Vimuttimaggā*, *Jietuo dao lun* 解脫道論), and Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimaggā* and *Aṭṭhasālinī*. The following passage from the **Vimokṣamārga*, which draws on the same stock of illustrations found in the *Peṭakopadesa* and *Milindapañha*, is typical of this literature.³²

Question: What is the difference between *vitarka* and *vicāra*?

Answer: It can be compared to striking a bell. The initial sound is *vitarka*, and the reverberations that follow constitute *vicāra*. Again, it can be compared to mind [apprehending an] object. The initial [contact] is *vitarka* and what follows is *vicāra*. Moreover, seeking *dhyāna* is *vitarka*, and maintaining it is *vicāra*. And again, recalling is *vitarka*, and not losing it is *vicāra*. And again, bearing in mind with a coarse mind is *vitarka*, while bearing in mind with a refined mind is *vicāra*. Where there is *vitarka* there is *vicāra*, but where there is *vicāra* there may or may not be *vitarka*. As it says in the Tripiṭaka, “The initial settling of the mind on something is *vitarka*. Having attained *vitarka*, if the mind is not yet stabilized, then it is *vicāra*.”³³

When you see someone coming from afar you are not initially aware if it is a man or woman. Then you become aware that it is a man or woman with a particular color and form—this is *vitarka*. Thereupon you can discern whether the person has virtue or lacks virtue, is rich or is poor, is noble or base—this is *vicāra*.

Vitarka seeks out [the object] and draws it near, while *vicāra* holds to it and follows it. It is like a bird rising into the sky; the [initial] movement of its wings is *vitarka*, and the stabilization of its flight is *vicāra*.

When something is first taught, [the knowledge gained] is *vitarka*; having been instructed over time, it is *vicāra*. By means of *vitarka* one holds [the object in mind], and by means of *vicāra* one investigates it. By means of *vitarka* one deliberates, and by means of *vicāra* one pursues those deliberations.

問覺觀何差別。答猶如打鈴。初聲爲覺後聲爲觀。復次如心所緣。初爲覺後爲觀。復次求禪爲覺守護爲觀。復次憶是覺不捨是觀。復次龜心受持爲覺。細心受持爲觀。若處有覺是處有觀。若處有觀。於處或有覺或無覺。如三藏所說。初安心於事是覺。得覺未定是觀。如遠見來人。不識男女及識男女。如是色如是形爲覺。從此當觀有戒無戒富貧貴賤爲觀。覺者求引將來。觀者守持隨逐。如鳥陵虛奮翅爲覺。遊住爲觀。初教爲覺久教爲觀。以覺守護以觀搜擇。以覺思惟以觀隨思惟。³⁴

Notice that some of the analogies, such as the initial striking of a bell (which, being percussive, lasts for but an instant before the reverberations set in), lend themselves to a more non-conceptual understanding, while others, such as recognizing a distant figure as male or female, might seem more conceptual. In his detailed analysis of the terms, [Lance Cousins \(1992:153\)](#) summarizes the early Pali Abhidhamma understanding as follows: “*vitakka* is ‘thinking of’ something, whereas *vicāra* is ‘thinking about’ that same thing.” This formulation is intriguingly reminiscent of the distinction between knowing blue and knowing “this is blue.”

It appears that early Ābhidharmikas did not initially deploy *vitarka* and *vicāra* in their analyses of sense perception per se. Their exegetical interests lay, rather, in distinguishing different dhyānic states. That *vitarka* is “coarse” and *vicāra* “subtle” helped to differentiate the coarser quality of mind in the first stage of *dhyāna* from the more refined mind in the second stage.³⁵ As for mundane (non-dhyānic) perception, early Sarvāstivāda compendia state that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are both present in sense cognition and mind-cognition. For example, the **Abhidharmahṛdaya* (or **Abhidharmasāra*, *Apitan xinlun* 阿毘曇心論),³⁶ one of the earliest surviving Sarvāstivāda compilations, says, “There are five that possess *vitarka* and *vicāra*; the three [elements] have three possibilities; everything else lacks it” 有覺有觀五。三行三餘無。The auto-commentary explains,

As for “the five that possess *vitarka* and *vicāra*”: the five spheres of [sense] cognition as well as *vitarka* and *vicāra* are coarse, and thus [the sense cognitions] are associated with *vitarka* and *vicāra*. As for “the three [elements]

have three possibilities”: the elements (*dhātu*) of the mind-faculty, *dharmas*, and mind-cognition—these are the three. When they occur in either [1] the desire realm or in the first level of *dhyāna*, then they have *vitarka* and *vicāra*. [2] Should they be in the intermediate level of *dhyāna*, then there is no *vitarka* but some *vicāra*. [3] Everything above that is without *vitarka* and *vicāra*. As for “everything else lacks it”: this means that the remaining elements are neither *vitarka* nor *vicāra*, because they are not associated with them.

有覺有觀五者。五識界與覺觀俱處故覺觀相應。三行三者。意法識界此三行。若欲界及初禪是有覺有觀。若中間禪是無覺少觀。是上無覺無觀。餘無者。謂餘界非覺。俱亦非觀。俱不相應故。(T.1550: 28.810a11-17)

The *Mahāvibhāṣā* (*Apidamo dapiposha lun* 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論) confirms that both *vitarka* and *vicāra* are associated with the five sense cognitions: “The five sense cognitions such as the eye and so on arise always in association with *vitarka* and *vicāra*” 眼等五識恒與尋伺相應起故 (T.1545: 27.377b6). And *kārikā* 1.32 of the *Abhidharmakośa* asserts the same thing: “The five cognitions are [always accompanied] by *vitarka* and *vicāra*; of the latter three [elements associated with *manas*], there are three [possibilities]; everything else lacks it” 五識唯尋伺。後三三餘無。³⁷ Vasubandhu explains this as follows.

The five sensory cognitions of the eye etc. have both *vitarka* and *vicāra*. They always arise in association with *vitarka* and *vicāra* because their mode of activity (*ākāra*) is coarse and directed toward external objects. To clarify this, the verse uses the term “limited to.” The “latter three” are the mind-faculty, *dharmas*, and mind-cognition, because among the faculties, spheres, and cognitions, those [associated with *manas*] come last. These last three elements can be of three kinds. [1] The mind faculty and mind cognition and its associated *dharma* element, with the exception of *vitarka* and *vicāra*, when in the realm of desire or in the first *dhyāna*, are with both *vitarka* and *vicāra*. [2] In the intermediate *dhyāna* they lack *vitarka* and have only *vicāra*. [3] The second *dhyāna* and above—all the stages up to and including the highest stage (*bhavāgra*)—lack both *vitarka* and *vicāra*.

眼等五識有尋有伺。由與尋伺恒共相應。以行相處外門轉故。顯義決定。故說唯言。後三謂是意法意識。根境識中各居後故。此後三界皆通三品。意界意識界及相應法界除尋與伺。若在欲界初靜慮中有尋有伺。靜慮中間無尋唯伺。第二靜慮以上諸地乃至有頂無尋無伺。(T.1558: 29.8a11-18)

These passages, all of which concern the nature of *dhyāna*, agree that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are present in sense cognition as well as in mundane mind-cognition. As such, they would not seem immediately relevant to the asymmetry between sense-cognition and mind-cognition.

However, as Sarvāstivāda writers pondered the conceptually unconstructed character of sense cognition, *vitarka* and *vicāra* were brought into play. Exegetes, drawing on earlier materials that associated the pair with the initial moments of perceptual recognition, would expand on the notion

that *vitarka* denotes the “coarse” functioning of mind (*citta**udārikatā*, *cuxin* 麤心), while *vicāra* is mind operating in a more fine-grained or “subtle” manner (*cittasūkṣmatā*, *xixin* 細心).³⁸ On the basis of this distinction, and in some tension with statements in the **Abhidharmahrdaya*, *Mahāvibhāṣā*, and the *Abhidharmakośa* that both *vitarka* and *vicāra* are present in sense cognition, Vaibhāṣika commentators will claim that *vitarka* alone is *active* (as opposed to simply present) in sensory perception.³⁹ *Vitarka* is that rudimentary or “coarse” mode of recognition that knows blue, while *vicāra* is a more refined discriminatory capacity involved in knowing “this is blue.”

But this immediately creates a problem, as the orthodox and widely accepted Ābhidharmika position was that the operations of the five sense cognitions were *avikalpa*—non-discriminating. Yet the Vaibhāṣikas could not deny that *vitarka* involved *some* form of discrimination, even if relatively rudimentary or primitive. Indeed, as we have seen, *vitarka* was commonly associated with thinking or reflection (*saṃkalpa*, *siwei* 思惟, etc.). This apparent contradiction was not lost on the Ābhidharmikas, and the problem is raised directly in the *Abhidharmakośa*.

If the five sensory cognitions are always accompanied by *vitarka* and *vicāra*, why are they explained as being free from discrimination?

(1.33ab) They are explained as free from discrimination as they are [free from] examination and recollection (*nirūpaṇānusmaraṇavikalpenā-vikalpakāḥ*)

According to the Vaibhāṣikas, there are, in brief, three kinds of discrimination (*vikalpa*): (1) inherent discrimination (*svabhāvavikalpa*); (2) discrimination through examination (*abhinirūpaṇāvikalpa*); and (3) discrimination through recollection (*anusmaraṇavikalpa*). The five sensory cognitions are explained as free from discrimination insofar as they have inherent [discrimination] but not the other two kinds. It is like a one-footed horse that is called a horse without feet. Inherent discrimination alone is *vitarka*.

若五識身有尋有伺。如何得說無分別耶。頌曰。說五無分別由計度隨念 . . . 論曰。傳說。分別略有三種。一自性分別。二計度分別。三隨念分別。由五識身雖有自性而無餘二。說無分別。如一足馬名為無足。自性分別體唯是尋。⁴⁰

This is a revealing passage; pace the widespread understanding that sense cognition is “without discrimination,” the Vaibhāṣikas concede that it does in fact have some capacity to discriminate, if only in a rather crude fashion. The Vaibhāṣikas come up with an amusing apologia for this inconsistency, namely, that sense cognition is said to lack discrimination in the same way that a one-footed horse is said to lack feet! It would appear that the Vaibhāṣikas simply couldn’t make sense of “direct” sensory perception without bringing in some sort of discriminative capacity. After all, knowing blue must be to know, at the very least, that it is something other than yellow or red or white.

The Vaibhāṣika doctrine of “three kinds of discrimination” (**trivikalpa*, *san fenbie* 三分別) allows us to distinguish this rudimentary cognitive capacity from more complex and decidedly conceptual forms of discrimination. In what I will propose as a “charitable” reading of this doctrine, *svabhāvavikalpa*—a term intended to denote the very “essence” or “intrinsic nature” (*svabhāva*) of discrimination itself—is simply to register difference. Arguably, such a capacity is fundamental to, if not definitive of, sentience itself; all life forms can distinguish, in some manner, food from non-food, mates from non-mates, and so on. Given its ubiquity, this capacity must not be dependent on concepts or language or discursive thought or even, perhaps, conscious awareness.⁴¹ This is why I have been careful to translate *vikalpa*, when used by the Ābhidharmikas, as “discrimination” rather than “conception” or “imagining.” (“Conception” and “imagining” may be more appropriate renderings in later Yogācāra, Madhyamika, and Pramāṇavāda writings.) I have been similarly careful to translate *viññāna* as “cognition,” rather than the more common “consciousness.” Whether the cognitive capacity of direct sense cognition—the ability of eye-cognition to discriminate or register “blue”—entails what we could call phenomenal consciousness or whether it might be subliminal or subdoxastic is a fraught topic that we will visit briefly below.

To return then to *vitarka* and *vicāra*, we saw that the **Abhidharmahṛdaya*, *Mahāvibhāṣā*, and *Abhidharmakośa* all contain statements to the effect that both *vitarka* and *vicāra* exist in sense cognition. But at the end of the *Abhidharmakośa* passage on the subject, or at least at the end of Xuanzang’s 玄奘 (602–664) translation, it says that *svabhāvavikalpa*—the minimal discriminative capacity associated with sense cognition—“is *vitarka* alone” (自性分別體唯是尋). Xuanzang’s translation, completed in 654, matches the extant Sanskrit text: *tatra svabhāvavikalpo vitarkaḥ*. But curiously, our earliest textual witness to the *Abhidharmakośa*, namely, Paramārtha’s (Zhendi 真諦, 499–569) translation completed in 567, reads: “among the [three *vikalpa*], the *svabhāvavikalpa* is precisely *vitarka*–*vicāra*” 此中自性分別即是覺觀 (T.1559: 29.168b3-4).

One might dismiss this inconsistency as an anomaly. Yet we find a similar inconsistency in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* discussion of the three kinds of discrimination. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* passage may be the earliest reference to the **trivikalpa* doctrine in any extant Sarvāstivāda text, not to mention the source for Vasubandhu’s discussion in the *Abhidharmakośa*. In Xuanzang’s translation, the passage reads as follows:

There are, in brief, three kinds of discrimination (*vikalpa*): (1) inherent discrimination, which is to say *vitarka* and *vicāra*; (2) discrimination through recollection, which is to say the recollection [that arises] associated with mind-cognition; and (3) discrimination through examination, which is the unsettled (*vyagrā*) knowledge of the *manas*.

略有三種分別。一自性分別。謂尋伺。二隨念分別。謂意識相應念。三推度分別。謂意地不定慧。(T.1545: 27.219b7-9)

Xuanzang's translation of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* thus associates inherent discrimination with both *vitarka* and *vicāra*. But this is not the case in the earlier translation of the same passage by Buddhavarman (Futuobamo 浮陀跋摩, d.u.) and Daotai 道泰 (d.u.), completed in 437:

Discrimination is of three kinds: there is inherent discrimination, discrimination through recall, and discrimination through contemplation. As for inherent discrimination, it is *vitarka*. Discrimination through recall is recollection. Discrimination through contemplation is knowledge.

分別有三種。有自體分別。有憶念分別。有現觀分別。自體分別者。謂覺是也。憶念分別者。謂念是也。現觀分別者。謂慧是也。(T.1546: 28.169b5-7)

So in the early translation of the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, which is also our earliest witness to the **trivikalpa* doctrine, the inherent discrimination characteristic of sense cognition is said to be *vitarka* alone, but Xuanzang's later translation includes both *vitarka* and *vicāra*. This is the precise inverse of what we found in the two translations of *Abhidharmakośa*, in which Paramārtha's earlier translation associates inherent discrimination with both *vitarka* and *vicāra*, while Xuanzang's later text has only *vitarka*. Moreover, we have already seen that other sections of these same works, as well as the earlier **Abhidharmahrdaya*, explicitly state that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are both present in sense cognition. What is going on?

These texts may provide us with a murky but nonetheless telling glimpse into the struggle that Sarvāstivāda exegetes faced in explaining the discriminative capacities of non-conceptual sense perception. They recruited *vitarka* and *vicāra* for this purpose—following scriptural precedent, they used *vitarka* to reference the initial non-conceptual and somewhat crude impression of the object by the senses (the striking of the bell), and *vicāra* for the subsequent mental investigation of said object (the ensuing reverberations), but they were stymied by orthodox teachings that associated *both* *vitarka* and *vicāra* with sense cognition. This paralleled the problem posed by mental factors such as recollection (*smṛti*) and knowledge (*prajñā*). Recall that recollection and knowledge are both classified as “omnipresent mental factors” (*mahābhūmika*), and as such must be present in all cognition, including that of the five material senses. How to square the fact that *vicāra*, *smṛti*, and *prajñā* are all stated to be present in non-conceptual sense cognition, yet all three seem to entail conceptuality? This is where the **trivikalpa* doctrine came to the rescue.

To see how this works, let's turn to the *Mahāvibhāṣā* discussion of the meaning of *vitarka* and *vicāra*, which is the reference point for all later Vaibhāṣika discussions of the issue. The passage begins with a definition of *vitarka*.

What is *vitarka*? Answer: when any of the [six kinds] of cognition seek out, distinguish, reveal, determine, represent, and discriminate [the object's] nature and category, this is *vitarka*. While the terms, such as “seeking out” etc., for this quality of cognition may differ, there is no difference in essence, since all these terms express the essential nature of *vitarka*.

云何尋。答諸心尋求辨了顯示推度構畫分別性分別類是謂尋。諸心尋求等名雖有異而體無差別。皆爲顯了尋自性故。(T.1545: 27.219a2-4)

This passage goes on to critique those (Dārṣṭāntika?) exegetes who hold that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are mere nominal entities, and who further maintain that, since the meanings of *vitarka* and *vicāra* are relational and mutually contradictory, it makes little sense to say that both could coexist in the same instant. The position of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* is that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are in fact real entities (*dharmas*) that can coexist in time, but at any particular moment one or the other will come to the fore. To make its point, the text uses various illustrations, such as putting vinegar and water or salt and grits in one's mouth at the same time—some of the flavors (vinegar, salt) are sharp and others (water, grits) dull; both are present, but at any one time one will dominate over the other.⁴²

After clarifying the relationship between *vitarka* and *vicāra*, the text goes on, as we have seen, to introduce the three kinds of *vikalpa*: “There are three kinds of discrimination: (1) inherent discrimination, which is to say *vitarka-vicāra*; (2) discrimination through recollection, which is the recollection associated with mind-cognition; and (3) discrimination through examination, which is the knowing associated with mind-cognition when not absorbed in meditation.” Notice that the second kind of discrimination is associated with recollection (*smṛti*), and third with knowledge (*prajñā*). The passage continues,

In the realm of desire, the five cognitions have only [the first] kind, namely, inherent discrimination. Although they also have recollection, it is not the discrimination of recollection because they are incapable of recollection. Although they also have knowledge, it is not the discrimination of examination, for they are incapable of examination.

欲界五識身唯有一種自性分別。雖亦有念而非隨念分別。不能憶念故。雖亦有慧而非推度分別。不能推度故。(T.1545: 27.219b9-11)

The **trivikalpa* doctrine thus allows the *Mahāvibhāṣā* to distinguish recollection (*smṛti*) per se, from the *discriminatory capacity* of recollection (*anusmaraṇa-vikalpa*); and to distinguish knowledge (*prajñā*) per se, from the *discriminatory capacity* of knowledge (*abhinirūpaṇāvikalpa*). The *Vaibhāṣikas* can then claim that recollection and knowledge, which are counted among the omnipresent (*mahābhūmika*) mental factors, are indeed present in sense cognition, but not so their discriminatory capacities. The forms of discrimination associated with recollection and knowledge, which entail reflection and conceptual thought, are

only available to mind-cognition. And while our sources, as we have seen, are not always consistent, they now can handle *vicāra* similarly. In other words, they can concede that while *vicāra* may be present along with *vitarka* in sense cognition (as scripturally mandated), only *vitarka* is operative. So to return to the inconsistencies we found in the translations of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* and the *Abhidharmakośa*: both texts, following Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy, confirm that *vitarka* and *vicāra* are present in sense cognition, as are *smṛti* and *prajñā*, but they then aver to the **trivikalpa* doctrine to show how such conceptualizing capacities are not operative. “Inherent discrimination” is associated with *vitarka* but not *smṛti* and *prajñā*. But the question remained: what about *vicāra*? Recall that authoritative texts invariably associate *vicāra* with *vitarka* when it comes to sense cognition. Does this mean that *vicāra* is active in inherent discrimination or not? That different Chinese translations provide conflicting responses to this question may reflect the fact that it took time to sort out the details of the new **trivikalpa* theory. In other words, rather than being simple errors on the part of the Chinese translators or later copyists, the variant renderings may reflect real inconsistencies among early recensions of the source texts.

In any case, the **trivikalpa* doctrine might seem like a gerrymandered solution to a non-problem. That is to say, the question as to how conceptual *dharma*s can be present in a non-conceptual state might appear artificial insofar as it is occasioned by an inordinately rigid system of classifying *dharma*s. Had the *Vaibhāṣikas* simply built in more flexibility, as did the *Sautrāntikas*, the problem would never have arisen. Why not just reclassify *vicāra*, *smṛti*, *prajñā*, *saṃjñā* and other eminently conceptual *caitasika* such that they don’t end up associated with non-conceptual sense cognition?⁴³ But this response fails to appreciate the philosophical conundrum with which they were wrestling. The *Ābhidharmikas* recognized that cognition of any kind must involve some minimal discriminatory capacity. That is to say, to discern or detect *blue*, even at its most primitive, is to distinguish it from *yellow* and *red*, and it is difficult to make sense of this unless the cognitive system has some “retention” (i.e., *smṛti*) and “cognizance” (i.e., *prajñā*) of *yellow* and *red*—the residuum of past experience—even when the percepts of *yellow* and *red* are not present. (Were we to live in a world where everything were *blue*, there would be no “blue.”) In short, the *Ābhidharmikas* had good reason to assume that any cognitive event must entail a modicum of discrimination, recollection, and knowledge. At the same time, the *Ābhidharmikas* were committed to a number of not-unreasonable metaphysical postulates, including, (1) the constituent elements of reality are in continual flux; (2) conceptual recognition of a percept involves applying a generic name to a transient particular that emerges from the flux; and (3) there must be a temporal gap between the moment when the transient particular is first apprehended and the subsequent moment when it is identified with a generic name. In short, in this “empiricist” model, a sense datum must first be

cognitively available as a raw feel for it to serve as the object of mental reflection. The Ābhidharmikas were thus forced to confront a problem familiar to contemporary philosophy of mind, namely, how to characterize the nature and status of this raw feel.

So the Ābhidharmikas punted: they proffered the theory of three kinds of discrimination (**trivikalpa*) that would explain, at one and the same time, (1) that there is indeed a modicum of coarse discriminatory activity in what was previously supposed to be a non-discriminative (*avikalpaka*) state, and (2) that certain mental factors (*smṛti*, *prajñā*, *saṃjñā*), normally deemed conceptual, are present but not yet (fully?) active, in non-conceptual sense cognition. The other two kinds of discrimination—those associated with *active* knowledge and recollection—are the preserve of mind-cognition, which has both *vitarka* and *vicāra*. The *Abhidharmakośa* explains,

The essence of the diffuse knowledge belonging to mental [reflection] is recollection. “Diffuse” means not concentrated. The diffuse knowledge associated with mind-cognition is called discrimination through examination. Whether [mind] is concentrated or not, the recollection associated with mind-cognition is called discrimination through recollection.

意地散慧諸念爲體。散謂非定。意識相應散慧名爲計度分別。若定若散意識相應諸念名爲隨念分別。 (T.1558: 29.8b6-8)

Later texts will reaffirm the claim that *smṛti*, *prajñā*, and even *saṃjñā* are present in sense cognition, but that they are inactive or weak. In the **Nyāyānusāra* discussion of the three kinds of discrimination, for example, after Saṃghabhadra notes that “the essence of inherent discrimination is *vitarka* alone” 自性分別體唯是尋 (T.1562: 29.350b11), he goes on to clarify, “although the five sense faculties are associated with knowledge and memory, their capacity to discern and register [therein] is minuscule, and thus [knowledge and memory] are only grasped by mind” 五識雖與慧念相應。擇記用微。故唯取意 (T.1562: 29.350b17-18).

Accordingly, the mature Vaibhāṣika position is that the capacity of eye-cognition to register blue but not know “this is blue” does involve a minimal kind of discrimination (*svabhāvavikalpa*), and that this is associated with a rudimentary or coarse form of recognition (*vitarka*) as well as a weak or minuscule form of memory and recognition. In my “charitable” interpretation of the Vaibhāṣika accounts of direct sense perception, I have been careful to disaggregate these rudimentary forms of discrimination from conceptuality per se. This is mandated by the fact that we normally associate conceptuality with language, and, for the Vaibhāṣikas, the use of nominal designations is simply not available to sense cognition. But while I believe this charitable account may well capture the *intent* of our Vaibhāṣika authors, they have trouble making it stick.

One problem is the claim that the omnipresent factors are present but operate only weakly. This is difficult to swallow when it comes to factors like knowing (*prajñā*) and ideation (*saṃjñā*), since it is unclear what functionality they retain, however minimal, once they are stripped of access to names and concepts. Take ideation for example: Ābhidharmikas agree that the nature of ideation is to recognize the inherent characteristic (*nimitta*, *xiang* 相) of the object.⁴⁴ The *Abhidharmakośa*, for example, defines ideation as follows:

The essence of the aggregate of ideation is that it apprehends appearances, which is to say it grasps characteristics such as blue, yellow, long, short, man, woman, enemy, friend, pain, pleasure, and so on. This is further divided into six kinds of ideation [associated with each of the cognitions] as was explained above in reference to feeling (*vedanā*).

想蘊謂能取像為體。即能執取青黃長短男女怨親苦樂等相。此復分別成六想身。應如受說。(T.1558: 29.4a4-6)

Commentators explain that the capacity to grasp the characteristic is tied to the application of names—associating a transient particular with a generic category or class. The **Abhidharmāvatāra* (*Ru apidamo lun* 入阿毘達磨論) expands on the definition above.

The meaning of the word “ideation” is that which comprehends by provisionally linking a characteristic to a name and meaning. With regard to visible forms such as blue, yellow, long, short, etc., or sounds such as those from a conch or a drum, etc., or scents like that of agarwood or musk, etc., or tastes like saltiness or bitterness, etc., or tactile sensations like hardness or softness, etc., or *dharma*s like male and female, etc., it comprehends them by provisionally linking their characteristic, name, and meaning. It is the causal basis for *vitarka* and *vicāra*, and thus it is called “ideation.”

想句義者。謂能假合相名義解。即於青黃長短等色。螺鼓等聲。沈麝等香。鹹苦等味。堅軟等觸。男女等法相名義中假合而解。為尋伺因故名為想。⁴⁵

Moreover, in the *Abhidharmakośa*, ideation is related to “view” (*dṛṣṭi*), and we learn that ideation can be in error: “It is the force of mistaken ideation that leads to attachment to various views” 倒想力故貪著諸見 (T.1558: 29.5b14). Given such definitions, it is difficult to imagine what a minimal “non-conceptual” form of ideation might look like.

Similarly, post-*Mahāvibhāṣā* compilations, including the *Abhidharmakośa*, **Samyuktābhidharmahr̥daya* (*Za apitan xin lun* 雜阿毘曇心論), **Nyāyānusāra*, and *Abhidharmāvatāra*, associate *vitarka* with the primitive and non-conceptualizing discriminative capacity of sense cognition, and *vicāra* with the more conceptual and discursive discriminative operations of mind-cognition.⁴⁶ Yet they stumble over themselves in their attempts to define non-conceptualizing yet discriminative *vitarka*. Take, as one final example, the definition of *vitarka* in the *Abhidharmāvatāra*:

Vitarka has the characteristic of causing mind to be coarse with regard to an object. It is also named “discriminative reflection.” Struck by the wind of ideation, it operates in a coarse manner. It is this *dharma* that serves as the cause of the transformations of the five cognitions.

尋謂於境令心麤爲相。亦名分別思惟。想風所繫麤動而轉。此法即是五識轉因。⁴⁷

Try as they might, the *Ābhidharmikas* couldn’t seem to give a robust account of immediate *non-conceptual* sense perception—of what it means to just know *blue*—without bringing conceptuality—the “wind of ideation”—into the picture.

What (if Anything) Sees?

The *Abhidharmakośa* (*kārikā* 1.16ab) defines cognition (*vijñāna*) as “discerning [the sense object corresponding] to each [sense sphere]; it is [also] what is called the sphere of the mental” 識謂各了別。此即名意處 (*vijñānaṃ prati-vijñaptir manaāyatanam ca tat*). The auto-commentary elaborates, “each [consciousness] discerns its own object domain; it grasps in general the object’s characteristic, and thus is called cognition” 各了別彼彼境界。總取境相故名識蘊。⁴⁸ But the definition, which is typical of the literature, seems too circular to be of much help, and it leaves unclear whether *vijñāna* is a something that does the discerning, or if it is the discerning itself.

Indeed, the question of what exactly sees became the subject of a protracted debate within the Sarvāstivāda world. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* records a range of early opinions on the issue. The orthodox Vaibhāṣika position is that it is the eye faculty in conjunction with eye-cognition that sees, but at least two Vaibhāṣika masters disagreed: Dharmatrātra argued that it is eye-cognition, while Ghoṣaka said it is knowledge (*prajñā*) in conjunction with eye-cognition. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* reports two additional responses as well: Dārṣṭāntika masters claim that it is the collocation (*hehe* 和合, *sāmagrī*) of object, faculty, and cognition that sees, while the Vātsīputrīya claimed that seeing is done by only one eye at a time.⁴⁹

Later Sarvāstivāda compendia will return repeatedly to this debate, and extended discussions are found in the *Pañcavastuka-vibhāṣa* (*Wushipiposha lun* 五事毘婆沙論, T.1555: 28.991b20 ff.), **Samyuktābhidharma-hṛdaya* (T.1552: 28.876b12 ff.), *Abhidharmakośa* (T.1558: 29.10c21 ff.), and **Nyāyānusāra* (T.1562: 29.364a23 ff.), among other works.⁵⁰ A variety of arguments are presented both in defense of, and in opposition to, the various alternatives first articulated in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*. For example, if it is the eye-faculty that sees, the seeing should be uninterrupted, even when other senses are operative, but we know that only one sense modality is operative at a time. If it is eye-cognition, then it should see even when the eyes are closed, or when the object is obstructed by a screen. A “collocation” of elements cannot see, as the collocation is merely a

provisional concept that refers to the individual entities of which it is comprised. And so on.

At the end of his discussion of “seeing” in the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu presents the Sautrāntika position, which holds that the entire debate is misguided since there is nothing that sees in the first place.

The Sautrāntika masters have this to say: You are all just chewing (*khādyate*) away at empty space! [According to the *sūtras*,] “eye-cognition arises in dependence on the eye, forms, etc.” Given such [statements], with respect to seeing, where is a subject and where an object? It is only the cause and effect of [individual] *dharmas*, which don’t actually do anything (*nirvyāpāra*). In accord with worldly attitudes, we provisionally speak of the eye as that which “sees,” and cognition as that which “knows.” But the wise are not attached to such talk. As the World Honored One taught, one should not obstinately cling to colloquial expressions or stubbornly chase after conventional ideas.

經部諸師有作是說。如何共聚楂掣虛空。眼色等緣生於眼識。此等於見孰爲能所。唯法因果實無作用。爲順世情假興言說。眼名能見。識名能了。智者於中不應封著。如世尊說。方域言詞不應堅執。世俗名想不應固求。⁵¹

According to this account, as there is nothing that sees or grasps an object, there is also nothing that is seen or grasped. Thus the whole notion of direct sense perception is wrongheaded from the get-go, as it conjures a cogito or subject of experience that apprehends an object. For the Sautrāntikas, such a cogito—something that sees or knows—can only be the ersatz self (*ātman*) that the Buddhists disavow as a fiction. (Recall that, according to the Sautrāntika analysis, the object of perception is gone before cognition of any kind occurs; hence there is no direct sense perception and no grasper-grasped relationship.) In Chapter 9 of the *Abhidharmakośa*, in the context of a long refutation of the Vātsīputrīya notion of the person (*pudgala*), Vasubandhu returns to the argument that the cogito is an illusion.

The scriptures state that cognition knows the object. What is cognition doing with respect to this object? It does nothing at all, but merely arises with the object. Just as the effect corresponds to its cause, although it doesn’t do anything, it nevertheless arises resembling the cause, and thus we say that it corresponds to the cause. In the same way, cognition arises without doing anything, yet it resembles the object and thus we speak of it as “knowing” the object. What does it mean to resemble the object? It means that it bears its characteristic. Therefore, although each cognition arises dependent upon a sense faculty, one doesn’t speak of it as “knowing” the faculty but rather as “knowing” the object.

Or [one could say that] cognition continually arises in conjunction with its object, such that a prior cognition is the cause that leads to the arising of a later cognition. To say that cognition “knows” is therefore without fault, since it is common to refer colloquially to a cause as an “agent,” just as it is common to refer colloquially to bells and drums as “calling out.”

Or we can compare the knowing of cognition to the movements of a flame. Why do we say that a flame is capable of movement? The continuous flickering of the blaze is provisionally called a “flame” [as if it were a single thing]. Since this “flame” continually arises from moment to moment in different places, we say the flame is “moving.” But there is no separate movement. Similarly, the successive [instances] of mind are provisionally called cognition, and when it arises in conjunction with different objects we speak of it as “knowing.”

經說諸識能了所緣。識於所緣爲何所作。都無所作但以境生。如果酬因。雖無所作而似因起說名酬因。如是識生雖無所作而似境故說名了境。如何似境。謂帶彼相。是故諸識雖亦託根生不名了根。但名爲了境。或識於境相續生時。前識爲因引後識起。說識能了亦無有失。世間於因說作者故。如世間說鍾鼓能鳴。或如燈能行識能了亦爾。爲依何理說燈能行。焰相續中假立燈號。燈於異處相續生時。說爲燈行。無別行者。如是心相續假立識名。於異境生時說名能了。⁵²

The Sautrāntika position, at least as articulated by Vasubandhu, is that there is nothing at all that knows the object—not the eye, or cognition, or the discernment of *prajñā*. Vasubandhu even rejects the Dārṣṭāntika “emergence” theory that it is the collocation of multiple interdependent entities that sees.

Needless to say, Vasubandhu does not have the last word in this debate. Saṃghabhadra would go on to compose his **Nyāyānusāra* to clarify the Vaibhāṣika position and respond to Sautrāntika critiques, notably those presented by Vasubandhu. Among the issues on the table is the Sautrāntika claim that there is no direct perception, since the sense object has passed prior to the arising of sense cognition. Recall that in the Vaibhāṣika two-step analysis, there is direct perception in sensory cognition, but not in mind-cognition—mind only knows an object via conceptual reflection on the throughput of a sense cognition. But in the Sautrāntika three-step model, sense cognition works akin to the Vaibhāṣika understanding of mind-cognition, which is to say that it knows the external object through a mode of re-presentation, that is, the *ākāra*. Saṃghabhadra disagrees, and while his reasons are many, I suspect that chief among them is a deep and not unwarranted suspicion that the Sautrāntika position will lead to an unorthodox idealism. Such an idealism is counter to the entire Sarvāstivāda project, which involves the determination of the real (causally efficacious) *dharma*s from which the world is created.

To make his case against the Sautrāntikas, Saṃghabhadra distinguishes between three different kinds of perception (*xianliang* 現量, *pratyakṣa*), namely, (1) perception based on the sense faculties (*yigen xianliang* 依根現量, **indriyāsrita-pratyakṣa*), (2) perception of [inner] feelings (*lingna xianliang* 領納現量, **anubhāva-pratyakṣa*), and (3) perception of awareness or comprehension (*jueliao xianliang* 覺了現量, *juehui xianliang* 覺慧現量, **buddhi-pratyakṣa*).⁵³ (For the sake of simplicity, following others I’ll refer to them as “sensory perception,” “perceptual experience,” and “perceptual awareness.”) Saṃghabhadra explains,

Sensory perception is based on the five [sense] faculties, and apprehends the five outer sense fields of form etc. Perceptual experience is the immediate manifestation of the *dharma*s of mind and associated mental factors such as feeling, ideation, etc. Perceptual awareness is the appropriate recognition of both the nature and characteristics of *dharma*s.

依根現量。謂依五根現取色等五外境界。領納現量。謂受想等心心所法正現在前。
覺慧現量。謂於諸法隨其所應證自共相。(T.1562: 29.736a9-13)

The first and third kinds of perception are already familiar to us: the first is the immediate sensory impression of the raw datum, and the third is associated with mind-cognition as it grasps the particular and generic characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) of *dharma*s. Saṃghabhadra's innovation lies in proffering the second kind of perception, "perceptual experience" (or perhaps "inner experience"), which is closely associated with the feeling (*vedanā*) that arises in response to contact with an external perceptual object (*wai jingjie* 外境界). It can be thought of as the visceral sensation that registers the advantageous or deleterious valence (*sunyi* 損益), or more simply the pain or pleasure (*kule* 苦樂), of the sense percept (T.1562: 29.374c).

So in this schema, cognition still consists of two steps, but the first step is now divided into two components: (1) the immediate or bare impression of a sense object, and (2) the feeling or sensation or experience (*lingna* 領納, *anubhāva*) that arises in conjunction with this sense impression. These perceptions are functionally distinct but occur in the same instant. The third kind of perception is associated with the awareness or comprehension that attends the subsequent arising of mind-cognition, a perceptual awareness that is predicated on the representational and reflective capacities afforded by names and language.

With this model in hand, Saṃghabhadra can acknowledge that the perceptual awareness associated with mind-cognition does not know the object directly, but nevertheless this awareness would not be possible without a prior direct perceptual encounter with an object.

Only when [a feeling] has vanished into the past can it function as an object that appears in memory. This stage of recollection is called the moment of awareness. From this it follows that perceptual awareness only exists with respect to the perception of things that have been experienced in the past. Therefore it is established that perceptual awareness emerges with respect to what has been personally experienced.

此滅過去。方能爲境。生現憶念。此憶念位。名覺了時。由斯理趣。唯於現量。
曾所受事。有現量覺。故現量覺。於自身受有義得成。⁵⁴

He is now ready to refute the Sautrāntika position that sense cognition arises only after the perceptual object has passed. "Since you [Sautrāntika] claim that past [objects of sense perception such as] forms etc. have never been

experienced perceptually, how can you say that you are perceptually aware with respect to your own experience?" 過去色等。既許未曾現量所受。云何可言如自身受有現量覺。Saṃghabhadra continues:

The feelings of another person are not felt as one's own perceptual experience, and thus there is no perceptual awareness that knows "I have previously felt that very pain or pleasure." Hence the knowledge of another person's feelings is not [acquired through] perceptual awareness. In the same way, if forms etc. are not personally felt by sensory perception, then there could be no perceptual awareness of them that knows "I have previously felt this or that form etc." The knowledge of that object could not be [acquired through] perceptual awareness.

Moreover, if the five object spheres of forms etc. that presently exist were not grasped perceptually, then the cognitive object (*ālambana*) would be known only via the arising of a *subsequent* feeling. As the cognitive object is not something grasped directly through perceptual experience, then one could not claim that "I have previously experienced this pain or pleasure." It is the same with the knowledge that arises dependent on a past [sense object such as] form etc. Were it the case that its cognitive object was not grasped through a past sense impression, then one could not claim "I have previously experienced this form etc."

如於他身受非自領納現量所受。則無現量覺。言我曾受如是苦樂。緣彼受智。既非現量覺。如是現色等。非自依根現量所受。應無現量覺。謂我曾受如是色等。緣彼境智。應非現量覺。又若現在色等五境。非現量得。如緣未來受所起智。緣非曾領納現量所得故。必無自謂我曾領受如是苦樂。例緣過去色等起智。緣非曾依根現量所得故。應無自謂我曾領受如是色等。⁵⁵

Saṃghabhadra is here insistent that there must be a direct perceptual encounter with an object for there to be conceptual awareness of that object, even though those two moments are not simultaneous. Otherwise there would be no difference in kind between the access we have to our own inner experience, and the access we have to the experiences of others; they would both be after-the-fact conceptual construals. Thus conceptually mediated perceptual awareness must be grounded in an individual's sensory contact with the world. But to make this argument, Saṃghabhadra is compelled to divide the initial moment of immediate sense perception into two components: the sense impression itself (**indriyāśrita-pratyakṣa*), and the feeling (*vedanā*) or perceptual experience (**anubhāva-pratyakṣa*) of said impression. This is tacit acknowledgment of the conundrum at the heart of this paper—how can a sense percept be immediate, non-conceptual, and even non-discriminative on the one hand, and still function as the "content" of conscious experience on the other? So in his innovative three-part division of perception, the pure sensory percept is not, *in itself*, consciously experienced. The sense perception is experienced only via the feeling that arises in tandem with it. In this way, Saṃghabhadra can have his cake and eat it too.

Final Thoughts

Dhammajoti, drawing on Saṃghabhadra's presentation of the Sautrāntika position in the **Nyāyānusāra*, suggests that Sautrāntikas must hold to something akin to the "self-awareness" or "self-illumination" position later associated with *svasaṃvedana*.⁵⁶ Without it, he believes, Sautrāntikas would be unable to explain the "sense of vividness" associated with sense perception prior to the arising of mind-cognition (2009:255). If I understand him correctly, Dhammajoti is saying that for Sautrāntikas the "subject" and "object" of cognition do not coexist—there is no intentionality, no relationship between grasper and grasped—and thus cognition can only be known if it is self-illuminating or self-intimating. But this may simply reflect Saṃghabhadra's mischaracterization of the Sautrāntika reductionist (if not eliminativist) position. The sense that conscious awareness is a *something* that stands in need of explanation—that we need to explain it via a theory of self-illumination or other-illumination or what have you—is an illusion or unwarranted reification precipitated by the tremendous speed at which the causally interconnected cognitive processes that undergird the illusion transpire. In the Sautrāntika analysis, at least as presented by Vasubandhu, just as there is no actual "flame" that moves, there is no "knower" that knows, and hence no "knowing" either.

In his study of Buddhist theories of self-cognition, Yao Zhihua, like Dhammajoti, traces the *svasaṃvedana* idea back to earlier Mahāsāṃghika and Sautrāntika materials. But curiously, Yao believes that, in positing his doctrine of three perceptions, even Saṃghabhadra—arch-critic of Sautrāntika—comes to embrace something along the lines of self-awareness. Among other things, Yao notes that the new category of "perceptual awareness" is essentially reflective in nature.⁵⁷ But it is not clear to me that Saṃghabhadra is interested in the nature of awareness per se any more than is Vasubandhu. His concern, rather, is to render intelligible the orthodox Vaibhāṣika understanding of cognition, in which (1) the full sensorial awareness associated with mind-cognition necessarily involves memory and conceptual construction, and (2) this awareness is nevertheless predicated on a prior moment in which there is a direct, unmediated perceptual encounter with an "external" object. Saṃghabhadra wants to prove that, prior to knowing "this is blue," there must be a moment in which the eye knows "blue" directly.

Gareth Evans (1982) may have been the first to introduce the notion of "non-conceptual content" or "non-conceptual information" into contemporary analytical philosophy.⁵⁸ But in working through the issues, Evans concludes that the content of perceptual informational states need not be "perceptual experiences" or "states of a conscious subject" (1982:157). He explains: "we arrive at conscious perceptual experience when sensory input is not only connected to behavioural dispositions in the way I have been describing—perhaps in some phylogenetically more ancient part of the

brain—but also serves as the input to a *thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system*; so that the subject's thoughts, plans, and deliberations are also systematically dependent on the informational properties of the input."⁵⁹ His account is similar, in some respects, to the Vaibhāṣika "two-step" scheme. And like the Vaibhāṣikas, Evans struggles to explain the relationship between the contents of our subliminal non-conceptual informational states and our conscious conceptual representations of them.

While Evans argues that the conscious representations of sensory data involve a conceptual component, many who joined the discussion do not agree. The so-called non-conceptualists (or anti-conceptualists) aver to the intuition that infants and non-human animals, despite their lack of linguistic and conceptual faculties, are nevertheless conscious of their environment. (In Nagel's terms, it is *like something* to be them.) They also find it intuitively obvious that our immediate experience of color or music, to pick two popular examples, is too fine-grained to be captured fully in words and concepts. Some speak of the content of sense perception as "analog" in contrast to the "digital" content of propositional belief. As our capacity to discriminate perceptually far outstrips our capacity to discriminate conceptually, this analog perceptual capacity must be given a certain phenomenological priority. To quote Joseph Levine, "When you see a color and think 'that color,' the seeing is prior to the demonstrating, or else you really don't know what you're demonstrating But if the seeing, the perceptual experience, is prior to the demonstrating, then the demonstrating can't be what captures, or brings into existence, the content of that experience."⁶⁰

The non-conceptualist critique of the conceptualists can sound like Saṃghabhadra's critique of Sautrāntika, insofar as they believe it impossible to make sense of our world without recourse to a notion of non-conceptual perceptual content. Levine writes, "It seems clear to me that somewhere within our representational system of thought there have to be links with the world that do not themselves employ the contents of other representations" (2010:174). But the conceptualists refuse to give ground. They argue that it is impossible to connect percept with concept and belief unless sense-experiential states are conceptually structured to begin with, since rational relations can only pertain among conceptual states. That is to say, what they call "sense experiential states" can underwrite empirical beliefs only insofar as they have conceptual content. As for the "richness" argument (i.e., the supposedly fine-grained nature of color or music perception), conceptualists argue that we go astray in considering sense perception to be the *cause* of an ensuing perceptual experience. We should, rather, be looking for a constitutive account, in which case there is no necessary conflict between the fine-grained analogue nature of sense data and our conceptual capacities. "On the conceptualist view, experience of a colour sample, R, just is a matter of entertaining a content in which the demonstrative concept 'that_R shade' figures as a constituent" (Brewer 2005:221). To be clear, the

conceptualists are not denying that we see, in all its high-resolution detail, “blue,” but this seeing is necessarily constituted, in part, by the conceptual apparatus through which “we” “know” that “we” are “seeing” “blue.” John McDowell sums up the conceptualist position by saying that perceptual experience is “an actualization, in sensory consciousness, of conceptual capacities” (2009:127).

It should now be clear that the contemporary debates over the existence and nature of non-conceptual experience parallel the disputes that took place some two millennia ago among the Ābhidharmikas. The modern debates are no more and no less sophisticated, technical, scholastic, and interminable, and one wonders if any headway has been made. Indeed, I find it difficult to find a contemporary argument that is not at least anticipated in the ancient literature. If there is a lesson here, it may be that once the rupture is made between knower and known, subject and object, first-person and third-person, nurture and nature, mind and world, it is impossible to bring them together again. Of course, human social life, not to mention philosophical reflection, is possible only within the space opened up by this rupture.

My suspicion is that the problems encountered by both ancients and moderns in making conceptual sense of non-conceptual sense perception are due, in part, to our misunderstanding of the logical structure of the mind-world antinomy. Mind and world—knower and known—do not denote autonomous domains or frames of reference, or even interdependent perspectives. Rather, mind and world logically enfold one other; mind is only possible *within* the world, and the world only possible *within* the mind. Which is to say that the logical relationship among these antinomies is bound in paradox, and this, I believe, is key to understanding why the problem of non-conceptual experience seems so intractable. But the exploration of this topic will have to await another occasion.

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Notes

- 1 – The literature on this subject is vast; on the higher-order-thought side, see, for example, [Rosenthal 1986, 1993, 2005](#); [Carruthers 2011](#); [Lau and Rosenthal 2011](#). On the same-order side, see esp. [Strawson 2015](#). Needless to say, there are many different accounts of what precisely higher-order thought entails.
- 2 – Here too the literature is quite large. I provide references when I return to the topic in my concluding remarks.
- 3 – See [Block 1995](#), as well as the responses to Block’s nomenclature and Block’s rejoinder (1997) in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 1995 (18):247–269, and 1997 (20):144–166.
- 4 – Of course, attempts to describe or impart this experience will, of necessity, be culturally mediated. For a philosophical defense of the perennialist position, see [Stace 1960](#). For a defense of the “pure consciousness” hypothesis, see [Forman 1993](#) and [Forman ed. 1990](#).
- 5 – Leading the contextualists were Steven Katz, who edited a series of influential volumes on the controversy (1978, 1983, and 1992), and Wayne [Proudfoot \(1985\)](#).
- 6 – On *nirodha*, see [Griffiths 1986, 1990](#); and [Sharf 2014a](#). Note that Dārṣṭāntika teachers hold that a modicum of *citta* remains in *nirodha*; see the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, T.1545: 27.775a22-24; **Nyāyānusāra*, T.1562: 29.420b17-20; [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), p. 26; and [Fukuda 2003](#), pp. 272–274.
- 7 – I will not deal with those rare references in the Pali *suttas*, such as the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* i.49-52, to the effect that mind (*citta*) is originally pure or luminous (*pabhassara*), but that this purity is obscured by adventitious defilement. (See also the notion of *viññanam anidassanam* or “featureless consciousness” found in the *Brahma-nimantaṇṇika-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikāya* 49, and the *Kevaddha-sutta*, *Dīgha-nikāya* 11.) Early exegetes identified the pure *citta* mentioned in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* as the *bhavaṅga-citta*, which is mind in its latent or “non-arising” state, and this suggests that they didn’t quite know what to do with it. This has become a topic of some debate among contemporary Theravāda scholars; see [Anālayo 2017](#); [Collins 1982](#), pp. 246–247; [Gombrich 2006](#), pp. 43–45; [Harvey 1989](#); [Harvey 1995](#), pp. 166–174; and Thanissaro Bhikkhu on accesstoinsight.org.
- 8 – The literature on *svasaṃvedana*/*svasaṃvitti* is large and growing; see, for example, [Arnold 2010, 2012](#); [Coseru 2012](#); [Dreyfus 1996, 1997](#); [Garfield 2006](#); [Hattori 1968](#); [Kellner 2010](#); [Matilal 1986](#); [Moriyama 2010](#); [Sharf 2016](#); [Watson 2006, 2010](#); [Williams 1998](#); and [Yao 2005](#).

- 9 – For traditionalist critiques, see the overview and bibliography in Sharf 1995, pp. 262–265. The appropriateness of “bare attention” as a way to understand *sati* emerged as the subject of considerable controversy a few years back (Bodhi 2011, Dreyfus 2011, Gethin 2011, Wallace and Bodhi 2006), in part as the scriptural sources can be read in multiple ways. Take, for example, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the single most important scriptural authority on the cultivation of mindfulness in the Pali canon. This text describes the beginning steps as follows:

Breathing in long, he discerns, “I am breathing in long”; or breathing out long, he discerns, “I am breathing out long.” Or breathing in short, he discerns, “I am breathing in short”; or breathing out short, he discerns, “I am breathing out short.” (*Majjhima-nikāya* 10, i.55; trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight*: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html>)

What exactly is meant here by “discerning” (*pajānāti*, also translated “knowing,” “understanding”)? When the meditator silently notes his or her breath as “long” or “short,” is this a mere expedient intended to focus the mind on the “bare sensation” of the breath, as some modern exponents have it? Or, alternatively, is the cultivation of *sati* intended to realign and focus the meditator’s conceptual categories such that the internal narrative better reflects reality as it is described in scriptural sources? In the latter case, rather than bringing an end to conceptualization, mindfulness practice is aimed at replacing erroneous and harmful conceptualizations with true and liberating ones.

- 10 – *Katamo ca bhikkhave dukkhassa samudayo? Cakkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ. Tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso. Phassapaccayā vedanā. Vedanāpaccayā taṇhā. Ayaṃ kho bhikkhave dukkhassa samudayo* (Nidānavagga, *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 12.43, ii.72; trans. Bodhi 2000, p. 580, with changes). See also *Saṃyutta-nikāya* iv.33; *Madhupindika-sutta*, MN 18, i.108; *Chachakka-sutta*, MN 148, iii.280; *Milindapañha* 56; etc. Lin (2015, p. 104) identifies a total of twelve parallel passages in the *Saṃyuktāgama* (*Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經); see note below.
- 11 – While the *Mahāvedalla* is the only *sutta* of which I am aware that addresses the asymmetry directly, it is recognized obliquely in a distinction between two kinds of “contact” mentioned in the *Mahānidāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. See note below.
- 12 – MN 43, i.295; trans. Ñānamoli and Bodhi 2009, p. 391. The Chinese parallel reads: 有五根異行異境界。各各受自境界。眼根耳鼻舌身根。此五根異行異境界。各各受自境界。誰 爲彼盡受境界。誰爲彼依耶。尊者大拘絺羅答曰。五根異行異境界各各自受境界。眼根耳鼻舌身根。

此五根異行異境界。各各受自境界。意爲彼盡受境界。意爲彼依 (T.26: 1.791b11-17). Note that in the Chinese, it is Mahākauṣṭhila (Juchiluo 拘絺羅) who is responding to Śāriputra, rather than the other way around. On the *Mahāvedalla-sutta* see [Anālayo 2011](#), pp. 268–276.

- 13 – This is, however, a simplification of the *svalakṣaṇa-sāmānyalakṣaṇa* distinction. The Vaibhāṣika analysis of the topic is complex, somewhat opaque, and inconsistent across sources. To render their analysis of perception coherent and filial to scripture, for example, the Vaibhāṣikas distinguished two different kinds of *svalakṣaṇa*: the inherent characteristic belonging to the cognitive object proper, and the inherent characteristic pertaining to the sense sphere. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* contains the following exchange:

Question: How is it that tactile bodily cognition takes the generic characteristic (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) as its object, given that [according to scripture] the five sense cognitions apprehend [only] the inherent characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*)?

Answer: The inherent characteristic is of two types: (1) the inherent characteristic of the entity (*dravya-svalakṣaṇa*), and (2) the inherent characteristic of the sense spheres (*āyatana-svalakṣaṇa*). If we speak of the inherent characteristic from the perspective of the entity, then [in addition to the inherent characteristic] the five sense cognitions also take the generic characteristic [of the entity] as their object. But if we speak of the inherent characteristic from the perspective of the sense spheres, then the five sense cognitions only take the inherent characteristic as the object. Hence there is no contradiction.

問云何身識緣共相境。以五識身緣自相故。答自相有二種。一事自相。二處自相。若依事自相說者。五識身亦緣共相。若依處自相說。則五識唯緣自相。故不相違。 (T.1545: 27.65a12-16)

The argument seems to be that any single sense cognition grasps only the inherent characteristic pertaining to its own sense field—the eye sees only colors and forms, the ears sound, etc.—and hence it does not grasp the entity as it exists in itself. But from the point of view of the entity, it is perceived as a whole (by all the senses?), and this entails grasping both inherent and generic characteristics. See also the discussions of *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* in Chapter 6.2 of the “Miscellaneous Aggregate” (*Zayun* 雜蘊) section of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (T.1545: 27.200b16 ff.); *Abhidharmakośa* (T.1558: 29.3a4-11); [Cox 1988](#), pp. 34–35; and [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 101–103, 2009, pp. 19–22.

- 14 – Note that I am using the English word “know” as a generic rendering for the Chinese *liaobie* 了別 (discern, distinguish), *liao* 了 (discern), and *qu* 取 (grasp, apprehend), all of which are used in translations of

nīlaṃ vijānāti, “to know/understand/apprehend blue.” That is to say, I am not using “know” in its more technical philosophical sense, which entails propositional thought and belief. Whether propositional content is entailed in “knowing blue” is precisely what is at issue.

- 15 – There is a large literature on the identities of, and relationships between, the Vaibhāṣikas, Dārṣāntikas, Sautrāntikas, Yogācāras, and so on in Ābhidharma compendia. For recent work on the topic, see esp. [Dessein 2003](#); [Fukuda 2003](#); [Harada 1996](#); [Honjō 2003](#); [Kritzer 2003, 2005](#); [Park 2007](#); [Yamabe 2003](#).
- 16 – This is one reason for the Vaibhāṣika insistence on the existence of all past and future *dharma*s. In mental perception, even in cases where the object of perception is something from the past or the future, it must currently exist for it to serve as the “cognitive-object-as-cause” (*ālambana-pratyaya*) for the arising of mind-cognition.
- 17 – [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 94–96, 2009, pp. 154–164.
- 18 – [Cox 1988](#), pp. 42–43; [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 44–48.
- 19 – On Abhidharma theories of *ākāra*, see esp. [Dhammajoti 2007b, 2009](#), pp. 269–275; [Kellner 2014](#); and [Kellner and McClintock 2014](#).
- 20 – This is Saṃghabhadra’s position in his **Nyāyānusāra*, see [Cox 1988](#), p. 74, n. 23; [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 142–144.
- 21 – This is, in part, why the *sākāravāda* of the Sautrāntikas is thought to be historically related to Yogācāra idealism; see the references in note 15 above.
- 22 – [Cox 1988](#), pp. 37, 85, n. 138; [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), p. 177.
- 23 – On this debate, see esp. [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 92–132; and [Lin 2015](#).
- 24 – Lin notes that there is an important variant in the various *Samyuktāgama* versions of the pericope, a variant that does not show up in the Pali. These variant readings are noted by Harivarman (Helibamo 訶梨跋摩) in his detailed discussion of this controversy in the **Tattvasiddhi* (*Cheng-shilun* 成實論, T.1646: 32.286c13–287a8). Lin has located a total of twelve passages in the *Samyuktāgama*, eight of which present it in a form matching the Pali, to wit: “In dependence on the eye and form there arises eye-cognition; the coming together of the three things is contact” 緣眼色生眼識。三事和合觸 (T.99: 2.54a, 55a, 55c, 72c, 87c, 88b). The other four contain a small but telling difference: “In dependence on the eye and form there arises eye-cognition; the coming together of the three things *gives birth* to contact” 緣眼及色生眼識。三事和合生觸 (T.99: 2.18a, 74b, 117c, 144b). This second version, which seems to parallel that of the *Abhidharmakośa* (132.10) and other Abhidharma texts, lends support to the Vaibhāṣika position that contact

exists over and above the conjunction of object, faculty, and cognition; see the detailed analysis in [Lin 2015](#), pp. 43–44, 103–107.

- 25 – See the analyses in [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 114–132; [Lin 2015](#), pp. 76–81; and [Yao 2005](#), pp. 99–101.
- 26 – Ābhidharmikas generally agree that *vijñāna*, *citta*, and *manas* reference different aspects or functions of one and the same phenomenon. For the use of these terms in Pali materials, see [Hamilton 1996](#), pp. 105–114; and [Johansson 1965](#). For Sarvāstivāda, see *Mahāvibhāṣā* T.1545: 27.371a19-b29; **Nyāyānusāra* T.1646: 32.274c19-275a10; and the discussions in [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 92–94; [Hall 1986](#), pp. 10–13; and [Lin 2015](#), pp. 7–10.
- 27 – On the *Vijñānakāya-śāstra*, which is attributed to *Devaśarman or *Devakṣema (Tiposhemo 提婆設摩), see [Frauwallner 1995](#), pp. 28–31.
- 28 – T.1539: 26.559b27-c6; cf. the discussion of the six cognitions earlier in the same text, T.1539: 26.582c20-583a13.
- 29 – The distinction between these two kinds of contact is mentioned briefly in the *Mahānidāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* (DN 15, ii.62; trans. [Walshe 1995](#), pp. 225); see the discussion in [Hamilton 1996](#), pp. 49–50.
- 30 – On the differences between Vaibhāṣika and early Yogācāra accounts of the succession of moments of cognition, see [Takatsukasa 2014, 2016](#); and [Yamabe 1990](#).
- 31 – On the early meanings of the pair, and their appearances in early commentaries, see esp. [Cousins 1992](#); and [Jaini 1977](#), pp. 84–85. The Pali *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta* (*Majjhima-nikāya* 20, i.118) contains five different techniques for removing distracting “thought” (*vitakka*).
- 32 – The **Vimokṣamārga-śāstra*, traditionally attributed to Upatiṣya, was translated into Chinese by Sengqiepoluo 僧伽婆羅 (Saṃghapāla?, Saṃghavarman?, Saṃghabhara?) in 515. On this work, see esp. [Anālayo 2009](#). For a translation, see Ehara, Thera, and Thera 1977.
- 33 – Ehara, Thera, and Thera (1977) identify this quote as coming from the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* 10.7-8; 20.84-85.
- 34 – T.1648: 32.415c4-15, cf. Ehara, Thera, and Thera 1977, pp. 87–88. Note that this early Chinese translation uses *jue* 覺 and *guan* 觀 for *vitarka* and *vicāra*, rather than *xun* 尋 and *si* 伺, which became standard later on.
- 35 – The association of *vitarka* and *vicāra* with the *dhyānas* was likely influenced by non-Buddhist traditions, notably the *Yoga-sūtra*; see [Cousins 1992](#), pp. 148–151; and [Bronkhorst 1986](#), pp. 29–64.

- 36 – This text, attributed to *Dharmaśreṣṭhin 法勝 (also rendered *Dharmaśrī), was translated by Saṃghadeva (Jutan Sengqietipo 瞿曇僧伽提婆) and Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠 in 391. It appears to have been composed either immediately before, or contemporaneous with, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (Frauwallner 1995, pp. 128–130; Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998, pp. 174–175). A translation of the text can be found in Willemen 2006.
- 37 – *Savitarkavicārā hi pañca vijñānadhātavaḥ*. The Ming canon has 有唯, a variant that appears in later works as well including the **Nyāyānusāra*, T.1562: 29.350a5. In Paramārtha’s translation of the *Abhidharmakośa*, the *kārikā* is rendered 有覺亦有觀定是五識界 (T.1559: 29.168a12-13).
- 38 – For the articulation of this distinction in later Vaibhāṣika texts, see the **Nyāyānusāra*, T.1562: 29.394a2-c3; *Abhidharmāvatāra*, T.1554: 28.982a24-27; and the discussion in Dhammajoti 2008, pp. 144–146, n. 107.
- 39 – The Sautrāntikas have a rather different analysis, as they don’t reify *vitarka* and *vicāra* into independently existing *dharma*s to begin with, and while they agree that the difference is between coarse and fine discriminative activities of mind, they see these in relative, rather than absolute terms, and hence they believe that they cannot coexist. See the extended refutation of this position in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, T.1545: 27.219a.
- 40 – T.1558: 29.8a27-b5; cf. **Nyāyānusāra* T.1562: 29.350b9-10.
- 41 – That is to say, my association of “sentience” with some minimal discriminative capacity is *stipulative*, and as such does not in itself entail phenomenal consciousness.
- 42 – Somewhat confusingly, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* also cites the example, which it attributes to the *Prajñapti-śāstra* (*Shishe lun* 施設論), of striking a bell or metal vessel, in which the initial sound is “coarse” and the later reverberations are “subtle.” It also mentions the example of the bird beginning to flap its wings to fly, where the initial movements are coarse and the later movements subtle. (The bird example is attributed to the *Dharmaskandhapāda-śāstra*, *Fayun lun* 法蘊論.) It is not clear how such examples strengthen the case for *coexistence*. On the debate over the coexistence of *vitarka* and *vicāra*, see Dhammajoti 2008, pp. 9–10, 144–146, n. 107; and Jaini 1977, pp. 83–88.
- 43 – This is precisely the “Dārṣāntika” position taken by Harivarman in his **Tattvasiddhi*. Harivarman insists that mental factors such as *vitarka*, *vicāra*, and *saṃjñā* are not present when a sense cognition first apprehends an object, and he quotes scripture in support of this

position. Thus for Harivarman, sense cognition is entirely free of *vikalpa*; see [Lin 2015](#), pp. 176–187.

- 44 – On *saṃjñā*, see esp. [Kramer 2012](#).
- 45 – T.1554: 28.981c20-23; cf. [Dhammajoti 2008](#), p. 80. The *Abhidharmāvatāra*, attributed to Skandhila 塞建陀羅, was translated by Xuanzang in 658.
- 46 – *Abhidharmakośa*: T.1558: 29.8a12-27; **Samyuktābhidharmahṛdaya*: T.1552: 28.880b2 (自性思惟者謂覺也), **Nyāyānusāra*: T.1562: 29.349a23-24.
- 47 – T.1554: 28.982a24-27; trans. [Dhammajoti 2008](#), p. 83, with changes.
- 48 – T.1558: 29.4a19-22. For the **Nyāyānusāra* commentary on this passage see T.1562: 29.342a17 ff.
- 49 – T.1545: 27.61c7 ff. On this debate, see [Cox 1988](#), p. 73, n. 19; [Dessein 2003](#), pp. 305–308; [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 51–91; [Harada 1997](#); [Jaini, 1977](#), pp. 74–83; [Kellner 2014](#), p. 283; [Kritzer 2003](#), pp. 333–335, and 2005, pp. 32–33. On *Ghoṣaka*, see [Sastri 1953](#), pp. iii–iv.
- 50 – The debate is picked up in the *Dazhidulun* 大智度論 as well (T.1509: 25.64b19-c11), although here the question is what hears rather than what sees.
- 51 – T.1558: 29.11b1-9. Scholars have traced this Sautrāntika argument back to the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*. See, for example, T.1579: 30.610a19-27, where, in response to the question as to what sees, a distinction is made between ultimate and worldly ways of understanding. The ultimate understanding is that nothing sees, “since all dharmas, by their natures, arise from conditions and vanish in an instant, without doing anything 諸法自性衆緣生故。剎那滅故。無作用故。” See also [Kritzer 2005](#), pp. 32–33; [Harada 1997](#); and [Miyashita 1986](#).
- 52 – T.1558: 29.157b20-c2; cf. [Cox 1988](#), p. 39.
- 53 – In the **Nyāyānusāra* the three perceptions are introduced twice: T.1562: 29.374c13 ff., where the third category of perception is called *jueliao xianliang* 覺了現量, and T.1562: 29.736a9 ff., where the third category is called *juehui xianliang* 覺慧現量. On the three kinds of perception, see [Cox 1988](#), p. 75, n. 27; [Dhammajoti 2007](#), pp. 137–139; 2009, pp. 276–277; and [Yao 2005](#), pp. 86–89. My Sanskrit reconstructions are pulled from [Dhammajoti 2007](#); [Hirakawa et al. 1973, 1977, 1978](#); and [Yao 2005](#).
- 54 – T.1562: 29.374c10-13; see the discussion in [Yao 2005](#), p. 87.
- 55 – T.1562: 29.374c14-24; cf. [Yao 2005](#), p. 87, n. 181.
- 56 – [Dhammajoti 2007a](#), pp. 110, 141, 159; 2009, pp. 252–255.

- 57 – Yao also notes that, in his exposition of the three perceptions, Saṃghabhadra anticipates Dignāga's memory argument and invokes the gap between first-person and third-person experience, all of which play a central role in later arguments for *svasaṃvedana* (Yao 2005, pp. 87–88).
- 58 – The issues can be traced back to Kant, whom some identify as the first "conceptualist," but Robert Hanna (2005, 2008) argues that Kant laid the groundwork for both conceptualism *and* non-conceptualism.
- 59 – Evans 1982, p. 158, emphasis in original. Evans goes on argue that it is not necessary that conscious experience be tied to events for which a concept is ready at hand: "All I am requiring for conscious experience is that the subject exercise some concepts—have some thoughts—and that the content of those thoughts should depend systematically upon the informational properties of the input" (p. 159). See also his discussion of mental self-ascription (pp. 224–235).
- 60 – Levine 2010, p. 191. For an overview of the literature on the conceptualist/non-conceptualist debate, see Bermúdez and Cahen 2015; Crowther 2006; and the "McDowell-Dreyfus debate" in Schear ed. 2013. On the non-conceptualist side, see esp. Bermúdez 1995, 2003, 2007; Collins 1998; Coliva 2003; Peacocke 1992. On the conceptualist side see Brewer 2005; McDowell 1994, 1996, 2009.

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- Note: texts in the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932) are indicated by the text number ("T.") followed by the volume, page, register (a, b, or c), and line number(s).
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