KUMĀRILA’S DEFENCE OF REALISM
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KUMĀRILA ON PERCEPTION

The complex structure of titles and subtitles highlights the twofold nature of this work, including a translation of a Sanskrit text on perception in a theoretical framework. The text is the *Pratyakṣapariccheda* (“chapter on perception”, but also “determination of perception”) of the Ślokavārttika, one of the main philosophical texts of the great Mīmāṁsā thinker Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (possibly 7th century AD). Kumārila’s work, as Professor Taber understands it, represents the Mīmāṁsā’s vigorous reply to the challenges of the Buddhist logician Diṅnāga (c. 480–540 AD). More in detail, Kumārila’s *Pratyakṣapariccheda* aims at defending the Mīmāṁsaka realist view of perception against Diṅnāga’s sharp criticism.

Diṅnāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya* opens with an analysis of the definitions of perception to be found in the root-texts of the so-called orthodox systems of Hindu thought (among which Mīmāṁsā is included), and shows their flaws. Perception, he maintains, is nothing but the immediate grasp of an unrepeatable particular (*svalakṣaṇa*). Every conceptualisation, and hence verbalisation, is necessarily subsequent and therefore unfaithful to the content of immediate perception (whose object has only a momentary existence). The unrepeatable particular stands in no justified relation with one’s succeeding conceptualisations of it (such as the awareness “this is *x*”), which should consequently be regarded as purely hypothetical. Indeed, for
the Buddhist logicians “perception” (pratyakṣa) is tantamount to “immediate awareness of a particular”, including also awareness of pain/pleasure, self-awareness, and the Buddha’s immediate awareness of the Four Noble Truths etc. Even in this latter case, maintain the Buddhists, the requisites of immediateness and non-conceptualisation are satisfied, for the pure mind of the awaken Buddha “sees” the Four Noble Truths, the Law of Karma etc. as they are, without superimposing conceptualisations on them.

Kumārila replies that the common-sense understanding of pratyakṣa is “sense perception”, and this itself excludes the Buddha’s (intellectual) awareness from its sphere. Philosophers—argues Kumārila—have no right to interfere with the common usage of a word unless cogent arguments force them to do so. Obviously enough, according to Kumārila, Diṅnāga’s arguments are not cogent, since they violate common sense on the basis of a theory that contradicts ordinary usages and beliefs and lies beyond any possible demonstration. Unlike Diṅnāga, Kumārila believes that we first perceive a non-conceptual “something” (the perception’s content cannot be verbalised as it is non-conceptual) and immediately after that, say, “a cow”. Although the latter is already conceptualised and can therefore be verbalised, it is still a perception, since it arises without interruption out of a contact of the sense faculty with its object (on the contrary, the judgement “it was a cow” occurring after one turned her eyes to something else, is not to be considered a perception). Later on, the sensorial datum “a cow” may become part of a complex judgement, such as the inference of a herdsman next to it etc.

By now, it should be clear what is at stake in the controversy about perception. Kumārila tries to defend the common sense realism shared by most “orthodox” philosophical schools in India (apart from Advaita Vedānta) against the Buddhists’ illusionism. According to the former, perception, or rather sense perception, is the warranty for all other means of knowledge. If no direct relation between a perceptible content (a particular x, or a succession of x, y, z...) and its conceptualised form (a cow) is justified, then the entire system of knowledge is put in jeopardy. For no indeterminate particular can find place in an inference, nor in an analogy etc. Any “thing” needs to be accessible in a conceptualised form, in order for someone to relate to it as an object of thought. One has to recognise an individual instance of smoke, e.g., as a token of a certain type of things (namely smokes) in order to infer fire from it. Moreover, one may suggest that a verbalised form of the “thing” known is needed in inferences etc., and it is surely necessary in order to communicate to others what we inferred. On the other hand, the immediate form of an x can only be seized
by sense faculties. So, the denial of a *continuum* between its immediate and its conceptualised (and then verbalised) form amounts to crediting all our cognition-tokens with no necessary connection with perceptual reality. This is not a problem to Buddhists, who acknowledge the arbitrariness of our commonly shared beliefs and argue that they have only a certain practical efficacy, but no necessary link to any “reality” *in se*. The criticism raised by Buddhist logicians hits the target in so far as it emphasises the non-uniformity between our sensorial data and the contents of a conceptualised cognition. Such absence of uniformity, they maintain, depends on the gap between the two kinds of cognition. As a bridge between, say, a perceived particular and the universal cowness of an inference, Kumārila offers conceptualised perception, whose existence is instead obviously denied by Buddhists. In fact, Diṅnāga maintains that we can only perceive a “something” (non-verbalizable), whereas all successive steps such as “a cow” are fully conceptual and therefore hypothetical.

Besides Kumārila’s direct opponent Diṅnāga, the *Pratyākṣapariccheda* also faces mirror-like objections coming from the Grammarians. It is, indeed, to be noted that in India grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) is often acknowledged among philosophical schools, and that its main exponent, Bhartṛhari (possibly 5th century AD) is surely one of the foremost Indian philosophers. In a well-known verse (*Vākyapadiya* I.131), this thinker states that all cognitions, even perceptual ones, are permeated with language. He consequently denies any role of non-conceptual perception and claims that all knowledge is grounded on its all-pervading linguistic aspect. As for the above-mentioned example, Bhartṛhari asserts that even the first perception of a particular is already permeated by language, that is, there is no particular or succession of particulars apart from their being “[a] cow”. Inverted commas here indicate the verbalised form “cow” (*gauḥ* in Sanskrit), and not just the conceptual content corresponding to it. Experience, *qua* experience, is linguistic. On this subject, as we shall see, John Taber widens the Indian classical debate opening it to stimuli and questions coming from contemporary (chiefly Anglo-American) philosophy.

Kumārila’s counter-arguments are stringent and often word-to-word, and offer a good example of how the Indian tradition of debate enhanced Indian philosophy in general. More complex is the issue of the relation between Kumārila and Diṅnāga’s famous commentator Dharmakīrti. Each seems to know the other’s views, as vividly proven, among others, by the text here reviewed. However, a fixed chronology is still a disputed matter. At any rate, both show how philosophically rich was classical India.
Until today, only Gaṅgānātha Jhā’s translation of the Pratyakṣapariccheda was available. All Sanskritists are indebted to this great scholar who translated the whole Ślokavārttika and many other major works, from Vātsyāyana’s Nyāyabhāṣya to Śāntarakṣita’s Tattvasaṁgraha. However, his pioneering effort did not pursue any comparative attempt. Moreover, due to their intricacies and cumbersomeness, his translations are of little use for non-Sanskritists. Hence the relevancy of Taber’s translation and study of this important text, crucial for the understanding of Indian epistemology.

As for the “mission” of this particular translation, the volume is the second of the RoutledgeCurzon Hindu Studies Series, edited by Francis X. Clooney, SJ. The Series laudably aims at “bringing Hindu traditions into dialogue with contemporary trends in scholarship and contemporary society” (p. ii). One may question the role of a Mīmāṁsaka text in contemporary debate, and Taber does not avoid the problem, his attempt being “to make the text at hand accessible to philosophers—for, after all, it is a philosophical text” (p. xiii). This ambitious aim is pursued by means of a commented translation, along with explanatory notes and a useful introductory study.

The translation spares the reader from philological devices, such as the frequent use of brackets. As Taber states, “I have tried to keep the English wording of the verses as close to the original Sanskrit as possible—without, however, using square brackets to set off words and phrases I have had to add myself to complete the syntax or clarify the references of pronouns” (p. xii). A Sanskritist, perhaps, will often miss Sanskrit original words given in brackets after the translation of technical terms. But this non-technical style is meant to enable a direct reading of the English text, independently of the Sanskrit original.

This, however, would not be enough for a non-Sanskritist, as Indian philosophical texts presuppose an Indian philosophical context and cannot be easily understood by outsiders. Therefore, Taber has added his own commentary to every stanza. This choice may puzzle some scholars, as it is a rather unusual practice among Sanskritists, who would resort to classical commentaries to explain a text. Taber justifies his operation by virtually placing his commentary within the stream of teachers who century after century mediated the understanding of philosophical texts to their pupils. As a matter of fact, he explains,

[w]hen learning a Sanskrit philosophical text it is customary in India, even today, not just to pick it up and read it but to study it with a teacher
who will provide an oral commentary. In fact, most Indian philosophical
texts are too difficult to comprehend without some kind of assistance. [...]  
*Perhaps the greatest obstacle to Westeners gaining a picture of what Indian 
philosophy is about is that it is presupposed that its texts will be studied in 
this way*.

As for the choice of classical commentaries, these were devised for their 
particular listeners; Pārthasārathī Miśra’s, for instance, was meant for the 
12th century students. It cannot serve the purpose of providing a bridge to 
Kumārila for today’s Sanskritists; let alone today’s philosophers. On the other hand, the commentary of a Western scholar trained in both Indian 
and Western philosophy such as John Taber may possibly mediate between 
the two. Such mediation is eminently formal, as Taber acknowledges the 
help of two eminent Mīmāṃsakas (Prof. J. Venkaṭarāma Śāstri and Prof. 
K. Śrinivasan) together with the classical commentaries of Umbeka Bhaṭṭa, 
Pārtaśārathī Miśra and Sucarita Miśra. His is the “smooth-flowing dis-
course” (p. xiv) which tries to synthesise both contemporary and ancient 
Mīmāṃsakas, without undergoing the pains of distinguishing between 
them. In this regard, however, there is an important distinction between 
Taber’s commentary and the classical Mīmāṃsaka ones, since the latter are 
in Sanskrit, and therefore provide an interpretation which, no matter how 
forced, still allows the reader parallel reading-options (such as the ones 
offered by Kumārila himself whilst commenting on MS 1.1.4). On the other 
hand, the English translation somehow blocks the text, fixing it in one of 
its possible understandings.

As for the useful tools furnished along with the translation, it is worth 
remembering that, in order to enable a selective reading of Kumārila’s 
text, the Introduction also provides a summary of the subjects treated in 
it and may facilitate partial readings by Western philosophy scholars. In 
the endnotes to the translation, on the other hand, the “expert” reader can 
get acquainted with the background that motivated the translator’s choices, 
thus coming to know more details about the philosophical issues at stake in 
the Indian epistemological debate. Taber deliberately avoids to burden notes 
with technical details about the translation in order to make them accessible 
to non-Sanskritist readers.

Finally, an appendix to the translation contains the Sanskrit text, of 
which Taber furnishes a semi-critical edition elaborated by him through 
the comparison of five existing printed editions (but no manuscripts). As it 
is not a critical edition, it is not meant for “pure” philologists (although it 
may pave the way for further work on the Pratyakṣapariccheda), but rather
for philosophically engaged Sanskritists and Sanskrit-engaged philosophers who might use it along with the English translation.

KUMĀRILA ON PERCEPTION
WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The Introduction sketches the philosophical background of the discussion, highlighting the different positions of Kumārila’s opponents, and culminates with an insightful discussion on conceptualised perception in contemporary philosophy. Regarding pre-contemporary philosophy, Taber’s leading thesis is that until F.H. Bradley and Henri Bergson no Western thinker “seriously considered that the concepts we use to think and talk about our experiences might actually distort it, and that we must somehow dispense with concepts altogether in order to know things as they really are” (p. 32). As with any non-nuanced statement, exceptions and counter-examples might be possibly found within the long history of Western philosophy. Nevertheless, Taber’s point is surely thought-provoking and offers an interesting stimulus for a new reading of that history. From this point of view, interesting questions arise, and a subtle inquiry is likely to throw more light upon the ever elusive différences between the so-called Indian and Western philosophical traditions. Moreover, the history of the Indian debate on a certain theme may also cast light upon parallel Western debates (e.g., yogipratyakṣa and intellectual intuition, see below).

At first sight, Indian epistemology alone acknowledges within sense perception a non-conceptual stage, which precedes any structured apprehension of reality. Appealing as usual to common experience, Kumārila likens it to the first, confused visual experience one has when entering a dark room after having been in bright sunlight. After a short time, things become distinct and are apprehended according to their structured aspect, so one can recognise chairs, desks etc. This example stresses two further peculiarities of Kumārila’s understanding of this non-conceptual stage: it belongs to sense perception alone and chronologically precedes the conceptual one. As a matter of fact, according to Mīmāṃsā directness belongs only to sense experience, and intuition of abstract realities is not possible. Although intellectual intuition is admitted by some schools, it is always

1. For the sake of simplicity, in the following pages I will deal only with knowledge related to the secular world. Such a distinction can be easily done as Mīmāṃsā neatly distinguishes between secular and transcendent realities.
considered as a special case of sensorial perception (with the mind working as a sense faculty), and it is confined to extraordinary individuals (such as God, yogins or the Buddha). Thus, it is by no means the paradigm of certainty, as far as human knowledge is concerned. In sum, against Western prejudices, which often look at Indian philosophy as if it were concerned only with absolute monism, Indian orthodox systems are strongly rooted in a sort of “naive” realism strongly resembling the common-sense understanding of the world.

As for the chronological precedence, Indian schools generally consider a non-conceptual stage to be the only access to this-worldly reality. It is noteworthy that such a non-structured aspect is considered to actually occur in every sensory experience, and to chronologically precede the subsequent structured apprehension of sense data as “things”. Thus, the dualism that some Western thinkers adopt to analyse a non-separated sense experience is described as the actual succession of two distinct moments. Sense perceptible reality is actually apprehended according to a twofold proceeding. Since the subsequent, structured aspect belongs to the same external reality, human beings just seize it, without having to add anything to it. That the subsequent, structured, stage of perception is not conditioned by other causes than those of the non-conceptual stage, is proved by its arising immediately after it, and out of the same contact between sense organ and object. Thus, one could argue that the first non-conceptual apprehension of reality vouches for the validity of its subsequent conceptual apprehension. But, according to Kumārila, any cognition qua cognition is intrinsically valid and, as such, it does not stand in need of external validation. So, concludes Taber, Kumārila avoids the most dangerous risk of foundationalism:

Although he [Kumārila] insists that we have nonlinguistic cognitions of objects, he does not consider those cognitions to serve as evidence for perceptual judgements, so that the latter may be considered “noninferentially justified”. […] He does not appear to hold the paradoxical view that a nonpropositional mental state can give support to a belief. Rather, as we have seen, all cognitions that apprehend things in a determinate way, which would seem to include perceptual judgements such as “This is a tree”, are intrinsically valid for Kumārila (p. 42).

If this interpretation of Kumārila’s thought is correct, the non-conceptual stage can only play a dialectic role in justifying the conceptual one. Against Buddhists, Kumārila may point to this commonly acknowledged notion of non-conceptual perception and try to demonstrate that its content does
not differ from that of conceptual perception. Hence, if non-conceptual perception is admitted as yielding (valid) knowledge, the epistemic value of conceptual perception cannot be denied. Against Bhartṛhari, on the other hand, Kumārila can use non-conceptual perception as an evidence against the view that all cognition is permeated by language.

Going back to Taber’s main comparative focus, i.e., classical Indian philosophy vs. Western contemporary philosophy, the author compares the way classical Indian and today’s Western philosophers deal with the sense data-intellect discontinuity. On the one hand, Buddhist logicians maintain that the gap is unbridgeable and that all cognition after the first sense-object contact is sheer conceptualisation (\textit{vikalpa}), devoid of any direct connection with reality as such.\footnote{Such a position, I think, leaves the door open to both agnosticism (such as the one displayed in regard of the unknowable \textit{noumenon} in the first edition of Kant’s \textit{Kritik der reinen Vernunft}) and illusionism (such as Schopenhauer’s). Indeed, both positions (together with many other nuances) have been held by some Buddhist school.} On the other hand, Bhartṛhari asserts that there is no conceptualisation-free perception. This rather ancient position within Indian philosophy has been recently embraced (among others) by some analytical philosophers who saw it as the only way out of the sense-intellect discontinuity conundrum:

[This] position has come to dominate modern analytic philosophy; it has been developed in the works of such leading figures as [Wilfrid] Sellars, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman, and Richard Rorty. According to it, we never directly confront objects in nonconceptualized, nonpropositional experience. The raw “given”, which previous epistemologists believed ultimately grounds all our beliefs, is a myth. Thoughts can relate only to other thoughts, beliefs to other beliefs. That which is conceptual or propositional, that which makes a definite assertion about or offers an interpretation of how things are, cannot be based on that which contains no such assertion or interpretation (p. 39).

This view, argues Taber, can be challenged by Kumārila’s arguments against Grammarians. The first and foremost among them is an appeal to common-sense. According to Kumārila, we \textit{do} perceive objects independently of the words expressing them. Moreover, we even recognise types of objects in a non-conceptual way. A baby, in the example evoked by Kumārila’s school, repeatedly recognises the breast, and this means that he recognises it as a
token of the type “breasts”, albeit he cannot be said to know it in a conceptual way (p. 41). Furthermore, insists Taber through Kumārila’s words, the process of apprehending a language presupposes that one’s apprehension of objects pre-exists that of the words expressing them. (In India, Grammarians would reply to this objection by appealing to previous lives and previous linguistic experiences, thus claiming that there is no language-free experience.)

Concerning the general approach to Western-Indian comparison, Taber does not “use” Indian philosophy only to find new answers to old Western questions (an approach often criticised by J.N. Mohanty). He rather emphasises the need for a philosophical (and not merely philological) approach towards Indian classics. More in detail, in the Introduction he highlights the need for a study of the Mīmāṃsā system as a whole, like with any other philosophical system:

It would be odd however, to suggest that the philosophical significance of the Pratyakṣapariccheda lies solely in its relevance to contemporary philosophy. The Pratyakṣapariccheda is part of a vast philosophical system, a system that presents one of the most compelling, sustained defenses of metaphysical realism that we know, as well as one of the most powerful defenses of scriptural authority. In the end, this system must be placed as a whole over against other ways of conceiving reality and human existence. It is not an argument here or there, which could be perhaps dressed up for an article in a contemporary philosophical journal, that makes it interesting.

As for the purpose of cross-cultural comparison, although Taber does not explicitly deal with the question, his answer seems to be that Indian philosophy must be given a place within the global enterprise of philosophy:

Even when it comes to particular theories that intrigue us, the most important matter to consider is whether they are part of an overall approach promising more ready solutions to problems, including the great questions of philosophy, that continue to puzzle us (p. 43).

**SOME POSSIBLE “EUROPEAN” OBJECTIONS**

Here I shall devote some space to some of the possible “European” objections to this project. First of all, as Taber himself honestly acknowledges, his work is incomplete, as far as its philological basis is concerned. Howev-
er, Taber believes that a proper critical edition is not a necessary pre-requisite for a correct understanding of the Pratyakṣapariccheda, as the variant readings reported in the five editions considered do not constitute interpretation alternatives. Whatever the case, how much improvement to the text may derive from a proper critical edition will only be known after this has been accomplished.

Secondly, although Taber announces his proposal to deal with both the philosophical and historical background of the Pratyakṣapariccheda, the latter is rather underdeveloped. This is not necessarily a flaw, as the philosophical argumentation of the introduction is possibly even enhanced by the lack of historical “burden”. Nevertheless, a European scholar cannot help missing a detailed account of Kumārila’s and Dharmakīrti’s chronology, together with some hints on the date of Śabara etc. The lack of historicity is even more deeply felt when one comes to Taber’s own commentary and its relationship to the classic ones, since Taber does not deal with the issue of the historical stratification of these works. Although among the edition criteria he allows Umbeka Bhaṭṭa a privileged rank because of his status as Kumārila’s oldest commentator, he also admits that Kumārila’s text might have been altered even before Umbeka, thus setting Kumārila’s text in a historically unapproachable Urtext-condition. Moreover, both Taber’s commentary and his translation are indebted to the classic commentaries as well as to the Indian teachers he mentions in the Preface, but no hint is given as to the relationship of these different layers of interpretation. Therefore, one misses the chance to get acquainted with a centuries long evolution in Mīmāṁsā teachings on perception. From this point of view, Taber writes from within Mīmāṁsā and shares the typical Indian trans-historical approach. One might expect, however, greater “transparency” from a Western scholar in regard to the sources he used and the criteria he adopted whenever confronted with an option.

Lastly, as Taber himself senses, his work runs the risk of dissatisfying both philologists (as he does not accurately motivate his textual choices, etc.) and philosophers (as a single volume is not enough to make Indian philosophy accessible). Nonetheless, it is exactly the absence of texts such as the present one, which enables European academies to neglect Indian philosophy and to persist in old stereotypes about it. From this point of view, this long expected book is most welcome and I hope it will encourage many other Sanskrit scholars to address a larger audience.
This volume constitutes a further exception, among Sanskrit studies, as it provides a really enjoyable translation. Thanks to Taber’s commentary, the logical links among Kumārila’s verses are made explicit and the text can thus be appreciated as a coherent whole. In this way, the translator grants also to non-Sanskritists the pleasure of reading one of the masterpieces of Indian philosophy, without being hampered by the difficulties of Sanskrit language and Indian background. Taber also honestly acknowledges his doubts in the endnotes whenever the interpretation of a passage is problematic. Due to my European background, I wonder whether some of these difficulties might have been solved through the comparison of some manuscripts. However, this is much less a critic against Taber and much more a kind solicitation to European scholars.