



Exploring the Ontology of the Perceptual Object: A Preliminary Conversation Between Dharmakirti and Russell

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Abstract: In the universe of human cognition there is no doubt that the perceiver cognizes perceptual objects. In the discipline of Philosophy there are various views and contrarian positions with regard to the very nature and ontology of such perceptual objects. In this paper my aim is to explore philosophically the ontology of the perceptual object with reference to two great philosophers across traditions: Acharya Dharmakirti, the most celebrated Buddhist philosopher and logician of the Indic philosophical tradition and Bertrand Russell the Nobel Laureate philosopher cum logician of the British Analytic school of Philosophy. Being mindful of the contrarian positions advanced by realism and idealism which serves as background to this query, I pick up two cardinal topics: *svalakshana* from Acharya Dharmakirti and that of neutral monism from Russell. The radical position of Acharya Dharmakirti that in perception the perceiver has the direct cognition of the 'thing-as-such' is compared with the 'neutral monism' view of Russell. And I argue for the thesis that both the philosophers through different but not completely incommensurable ontological prisms salvage the object of perception in a web of complex and nuanced ways. In conclusion I point out some of the significant philosophical implications of this view that have a bearing on the ontological status of objects that are cognized by the humans in everyday life.

Keywords: Ontology, Perceptual Object, Dharmakirti, *Svalakshana*, *Kalpana*, Buddhism, Russell, Neutral Monism, Idealism, Materialism, Analytic Philosophy

'tatra pratyaksham kalpanapodham abhrantam'

Perception [direct knowledge] means here neither conceptual construction nor illusion.

Dharmakirti [1]

'... [I]t becomes evident that the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. The real table if there is one, is not *immediately* known to us at all but must be an inference from what is immediately known. Hence two very difficult questions at once arise: ... Is there a real table at all? ... If so, what sort of object can it be?' Bertrand Russell [2]

Articulating the Problem

In this paper, my aim is to philosophically scrutinize in a preliminary way the ontology of the perceptual object and I do this in the space that is engendered by the philosophical conversation between two philosophers who belong to two contradistinguishable philosophical traditions: Acharya Dharmakirti of the Indic philosophical tradition (c.600-660 CE) and the acclaimed analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970 CE) of the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition within the Western philosophical universe. Here one might justifiably raise an objection: is this not a case of woolly and sloppy thinking so as to simply juxtapose two philosophers of two antagonistic, conceptually rich but historically contra-locatable philosophical oeuvre! Admittedly though there is some merit in this argument, my response is that in the *weltanschauung* of the discipline of Philosophy, the cluster of philosophical arguments embodied in conceptual history, logical texture, archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of power are not exclusively bound by territoriality and chronological history. Otherwise as an inquirer into the world of Philosophy, one will find no philosophical stimulus at all in re-reading Russell's classic work 'The Problems of Philosophy' (first published in 1912) along with the 7th century Acharya Dharmakirti's exceptionally brilliant work in logic and epistemology, *Nyāyabindu*. For a philosopher is always at home in the world because she/he is able to transcend the world. Further I venture to say that philosophical concepts are neither completely incommensurable nor wholly commensurable. For as Bimal Krishna Matilal has rightly remarked, history of philosophy is to be seen as an autonomous discipline and not simply as an intellectual discipline parasitical on what has come to be known as the history of ideas. And more importantly in drawing the trajectories of philosophical concepts as a philosophical activity, philosophy is prior to history in the sense that philosophical concerns prevail over historical concerns.[3]

These prefatory remarks, hopefully, offer a methodological justification for my exploration into the nature of the perceptual object and rooting it in a preliminary conversation between the Buddhist philosopher Acharya Dharmakirti and the Analytic philosopher Russell with the hope that this would enable one to re-visit and philosophically 'see' again with fresh eyes the conceptual logic and the cross-cultural significance of the philosophical nuances of what is called 'the perceptual object'.

Russell: The Singular Category of Neutral Monism

Russell in his classic work *The Problems of Philosophy* pointedly asks how to determine the very ontological nature of the perceptual object. In his own words: "... the real table, if there is one, is not immediately known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known. Hence two very difficult questions at once arise; namely, ... Is there a real table at all? ... If so, what sort of object can it be?" [4] Making a distinction between 'sense-data' which refers to the things that are immediately known to us in sensation; and 'sensation' that refers to the whole realm of the experience of being immediately aware of things, Russell moves on to a related problematic: (1) Is there anything called matter? (by 'matter' Russell understands the collection of all physical objects) and (2) If so, what is its nature? [5] For Russell, the solutions provided by the autonomous as well as incommensurable philosophical doctrines such as Idealism and Materialism do not hold good. For according to idealists what appears as matter is really something other than matter, that is, mental – e.g., the rudimentary minds of Leibnitz or Berkeley's notion of ideas in the minds. That means the autonomous existence of matter is denied, for, matter is seen not as something intrinsically different from mind. Here Russell makes an axiomatic and philosophically primitive claim that "all knowledge ... must be built up on our instinctive beliefs, and if these are rejected, nothing is left. But among our instinctive beliefs some are much stronger than others, while many have, by habit and association, become entangled with other beliefs, not really instinctive but falsely supposed to be part of what is believed instinctively." [6] Further, Russell thinks that the task of philosophical inquiry is to show the hierarchy of instinctual beliefs and sifting them from any extrapolations and additions and finally show how they cohere together. It is this process of articulating the nature of the perceptual object that I would like to call the architecture of 'Neutral Monism'. [7]

Russellian scholars are divided on the reach and significance of the category of neutral monism. I tend to go with the view expressed by Robert E. Tully, an outstanding Russellian scholar, that neutral monism is a complex doctrine which Russell developed over a period of years. In short it can be seen as 'a synoptic metaphysics that sought to reconcile the contrary tendencies of materialism and idealism, not so much through painstaking argumentation but by identifying what Russell called the wisdom of the cluster of strong instinctual beliefs.' [8] Analyzing further this complex category, Robert Tully identifies the mature doctrine of neutral monism in Russell's own words: "... the things commonly regarded as mental and the things commonly regarded as physical do not differ in respect of any intrinsic property possessed by the one set and not by the other, but differ only in respect of arrangement and context ... [Further] ... the affinities of a thing are quite different ... and its causes and effects obey different scientific laws." [9] Further from the standpoint of neutral monism Russell makes the claim in this way: "... the whole duality of mind and matter ... is a mistake; there is only one kind of *stuff* out of which the world is made, and this stuff is called mental in one arrangement, physical in the other." [10]

A closer look at the conception of 'neutral monism' in Russell gives rise to some underlying fundamental problems. In his analysis of 'neutral monism', Russell seems to emphasize the ontological side of the neutral monism of this conception. This, as Robert Tully has argued, lends itself a sense of depth and mystery and the philosophical urge is to demand a viable explanation of the neutral stuff itself. Another related question is whether this theory does justice to the first-person account of the perceptual object. Robert Tully while closely studying the works of Russell persuasively suggests that Russell himself seems to pre-empt these questions as cases of misinterpretation in one way or other. For Russell says: "So long as [my] views ... are supposed to be either materialistic or idealistic, they will seem to involve inconsistencies, since some seem to tend in the one direction, some in the other. For example, when I say that my percepts are in my head, I shall be thought materialistic; when I say that my head consists of my percepts and other similar events, I shall be thought idealistic. Yet the former statement is the logical consequence of the latter." [11]

Dharmakirti: The Twin Categories of the Given (*svalakshana*) and the Constructed (*samanya lakshana*)

Before we go into the epistemic thought-world of Acharya Dharmakirti on the nature of the perceptual object, it is imperative that we locate this problematic in the Buddhist epistemological tradition. Buddhist scholars dwelling deeply on the epistemological tradition cultivated by the Buddhist Achāryas over a period of approximately 2000 years justifiably point to a spectrum of variegated epistemological views advanced in a spirit of enquiry and dialogical rationality. [12] Unlike the tradition of Nyāya logic and epistemology, the Buddhist Achāryas contend that the knowledge episode is a singular cognition event and does not warrant the distinction between the cognized, the cognizer and the cognition. Achārya Dignāga, the father of Buddhist logic and epistemology, echoes this when he claims that there is no distinction between *pramana* and its resultant cognition. That means *pramana* refers not merely to the means or instrument of knowledge, but to the whole cognitive episode called knowledge itself. In fact the Buddhist Achāryas qualify the term *pramana* with the expression *samyak-jnana* or *avi-samvadi-jnana*. Further in their *pramana-vichara*, unlike the *Nyaya* tradition where instrumentality is emphasized, the Buddhist Achāryas would give emphasis to the totality of the episode called 'valid cognition'. As Stoltz, an eminent Buddhist scholar, has rightly put it: "... on the Buddhist model, the notions of 'cognitive agent' and 'cognitive event' collapse into each other. ... For [Acharya] Dignāga and his followers, there is neither an agent of knowledge nor instrument of knowledge, there is just (i) the mental episode of knowing, which is the *pramāna*, and (ii) the object known." [13] Of course in the Buddhist philosophical tradition there is a running debate between two Acharyas on this contentious epistemic assessment. Embodying the Buddhist phenomenism-cum-idealism, one can profitably access the oft quoted axiom of Acharya Dharmakīrti: *sahopalamba-niyanad-abheda-nila-taddhiyoha* [14] and contrast it from the synoptic saying of Acharya Udayana: *na-grahya-bhedam-avadhuya-dhiyo-asti-vrittih*. [15]

Further Acharya Dharmakīrti, walking in the footsteps of his predecessor Dignāga, gives us a clue to the nature of the perceptual object in his definition of perception as direct knowledge. In his own words: *tatra-pratyaksham-kalpana-potham-abhrantam* which means: “perception [direct knowledge] means here neither conceptual construction nor illusion.” [16] Here what is important to note is that for Acharya Dharmakīrti perceptual knowledge is identified as the direct and immediate cognition of the object. That means apprehending the object as-it-is or the thing-in-itself. This can happen only when one cancels out completely the process of categorial ideation called conceptual construction, that is, *kalpana*. Following Acharya Dignaga, Acharya Dharmakīrti states that pure sensation or what might be called the pre-reflective experience is the only source of knowledge where we come into apprehend the absolute reality, the *paramartha-sat* or the thing-in-itself, *svalakshana*. Here one needs to make a commentarial note that in the domain of the Buddhist phenomenism cum idealism we can find a two-pronged characterization of perceptual knowledge. Its essential function is that the cognizer feels the presence of the object within the range of his senses: *sakshat-karitva-vyapara*. The corollary function is the process of conceptual construction and judgment: *vikalpena-anugamayate*. [17] Here it will not be redundant to say a word or two regarding the central notion of conceptual construction, that is, *kalpana*. Acharya Dharmakīrti defines conceptual construction as *abhilap-samsarga-yogya-pratibhasa-pratitih-kalpana*. [18] It means *kalpana* is the categorial ideating thought process which is a distinct cognition of a mental reflex which in turn coalesces itself with a verbal cognition. An important hint here is that the categorial framework employed by the cognizer has to fit in with his pre-reflective sensual experience where the perceptual object is given as such to the perceiver. *Kalpana* thus denotes the judgement in which the cognizer converts the indefinite pure sensation into something definite by predicating it within the categorial framework of *nama-jati-guna-kriya-dravya-kalpana*. [19]

In this context one might raise a justifiable query: why does Acharya Dharmakīrti add the word *abhrantam* to the axiom given by Acharya Dignaga? There is an ensuing debate concerning this problem. Some scholars think that this addition is redundant because non-illusory nature of perception is identical to non-constructive pure sensation. Because what permits illusion is the process of conceptual construction leading to predicative judgement. But some others echoing the views propounded by Acharya Dharmottara in his *Nyāyabindu-Tika* justify this addition. Both Acharya Dignaga and Acharya Dharmakīrti seem to suggest that erroneous, illusory understanding of the cognized object is produced when sensibility influences the action of the understanding itself resulting into a judgement causing an error or illusion. Thus one can say that a wrong construction is not a sensation and may be metaphorically called a wrong sense-perception, that is, *prayaksha-abhasa* in which the sensation can be called its *asadharana-karana*. [20] This explains the possibility of illusory sense-perception, that is, *indriya-bhranti*.

Concluding Remarks: Re-discovery of the Ontology of the Perceptual Object

Thus far, we have considered the ontology of the perceptual object in Russell and in Acharya Dharmakīrti. I see our philosophical reflections as an exercise, albeit a prefatory one, in the field of dialogical cross-cultural and comparative philosophy. Russell by advancing the category of what he calls ‘neutral monism’, to my mind, re-discovers the nature of the perceptual object as a paradigmatic case of instinctual belief beyond the pitfalls of materialism as well as idealism. Acharya Dharmakīrti in advancing the categorial frame work of *svalakshana-samanya lakshana* moves from ‘the given’ to ‘the constructed’ and thus re-discovers the nature and significance of the perceptual object. Thus this preliminary conversation has shown that both Russell and Acharya Dharmakīrti salvage the ontological nature of the perceptual object albeit through different ontological and epistemological paradigms. And this brings, to my mind, the much needed philosophically pragmatic certainty in the life of the perceiver in everyday life. [21]

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Notes and References

- [1] Dharmakīrti, *Nyāyabindu*, verse 4, in TH. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*, Vol 2, Indian Edition, Motilal Banarsi Dass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 1930, p. 14.
- [2] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 1st edition, Henry Holt & Company / William & Norgate, New York / London, 1912, pp. 16-17.
- [3] Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, p.2.
- [4] Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p.17. In this paper I shall focus mainly on this classic work of Russell in analyzing his ontology of the perceptual object.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p.18.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p.39.
- [7] The concept of ‘neutral monism’ is a contested notion among the Russellian scholars. For a thorough debate on this see Robert E. Tully, “Russell’s Neutral Monism” in Andrew D. Irvine (ed), *Bertrand Russell: Critical Assessments*, Routledge, London & New York, 1999, pp. 257-276. Also see R.E. Tully, “Russell’s Neutral Monism” in Nicholas Griffin (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Russell*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 332-370.
- [8] Robert E. Tully, “Russell’s Neutral Monism”, p. 258.
- [9] *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol.7, *Theory of Knowledge*. Ed E.R. Barnes with K. Blackwell. Allen & Unwin, London & Boston, 1984, p.15.
- [10] *Ibid.*
- [11] Russell, *The Analysis of Matter*, Kegan & Paul, London, 1927, p. 382.
- [12] For example, see Jonathan Stoltz, “Buddhist Epistemology: The Study of *Pramana*” *Religion Compass*, Vol. 3, No.4, 2009, pp. 537-548.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 539.
- [14] Dharmakīrti, *Pramana-vinischaya*
- [15] Udayana, *Atmatattva-viveka*, p. 230.

[16] Dharmakirti, *Nyayabindu*, verse 4.

[17] *Ibid.*, Footnote no. 2, p. 15.

[18] Dharmakirti, *Nyayabindu, Pratyaksha-pariccheda*, verse 5.

[19] Dignaga, *Pramana-samuccaya*, 13.

[20] *Ibid.*, 1.4.

[21] As this Journal IJCRT is multidisciplinary in nature and not particularly Philosophy centric, I have avoided the standard use of diacritical marks for transliterated Sanskrit words (but have italicized them) in view of the intended readership.

