

Nyaya: The definition of perception and classification

In logic perception is to be regarded as a form of true cognition. Taking it in this sense, some Naiyāyikas define perception as a definite cognition which is produced by sense-object contact and is true or unerring. The perception of the table before me is due to the contact of my eyes with the table, and I am definite that the object is a table. The perception of a distant figure as either a man or a post is a doubtful and indefinite cognition, and, therefore, not a true perception. The perception of a snake in a piece of rope is definite but false; and so it is different from valid perception.

The definition of perception as a cognition due to the stimulation of our sense organs by the perceived object is generally accepted by us. It is accepted also by many systems of philosophy, Indian and Western. Some Naiyāyikas, the Vedāntins and others, however, reject it on the ground that there may be perception without sense-object contact. God, we are told, perceives all things, but has no senses. When I see a snake in a rope, there is really no snake to come in contact with my eyes. Mental states like the feelings of pleasure and pain are directly cognised or perceived by us without the help of any sense organ.

All this shows that sense-object contact is not common to, and cannot, therefore, be a defining character of, perceptions. What, however, is really common to, and distinctive of, all perceptions is a feeling of 'directness' or 'immediacy' of] the knowledge given by them. We are said to perceive an object, if and when we know it directly, i.e., without taking the help of previous knowledge or any reasoning process (jñānā-karaṇaka). If at midday you turn your eyes overhead, you see the sun directly, and not by means of any process of inference or reasoning. There is neither any necessity nor any time for you to think and reason before the perception of the sun arises in your mind.

So some Indian logicians propose to define perception as immediate cognition (sākṣāt pratīti), although they admit that perception is in almost all cases conditioned by sense. There are different ways of classifying perception. First, we have the distinction between laukika or ordinary and alaukika or extraordinary perceptions. This distinction depends on the way in which the senses come in contact with their objects. We have laukika perception when there is the usual sense-contact with objects present to sense. In alaukika perception, however, the object is such as is not ordinarily present to sense, but is conveyed to sense through an unusual medium. Perception, again is of two kinds, namely, external (bāhya) and internal (mānasa).

The former is due to the external senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. The latter is brought about by the mind's contact with psychical states and processes. Thus we have six kinds of laukika or ordinary perceptions, viz., the visual (cākṣuṣa) auditory (śrautṛa), tactual (spārśana), gustatory (rāsana), olfactory (ghrāṇaja), and the internal or mental (mānasa) perception, Alaukika or extraordinary perception is of three kinds, viz., sāmānyalakṣaṇa, jñānalakṣaṇa and yogaja.

According to the Nyāya (also the Vaiśeṣika Mīmāṃsā, and Jaina), there are six organs of knowledge. Of these, five are external and one is internal. The five external senses are the organs of smell (ghrāṇa) taste (rasanā), sight (cakṣuḥ), touch (tvak), and hearing (śrotra). These perceive respectively the physical qualities of smell, taste, colour, touch and sound. They are physical in nature and each of them is constituted by that very same physical element whose qualities are sensed by it. This seems to be suggested by the fact that in many cases we use the same name for both the sense organ and the physical quality sensed by it. It is probably based on the principle that only like can perceive like. Mind (manas) is the internal organ which perceives such qualities of the soul as desire (icchā), aversion (dveṣa), striving or willing (prayatna), pleasure (sukha), pain (duḥkha) and cognition. It is not made of the material elements (bhūtas) like the external senses. It is not limited to the knowledge of any particular class of things or qualities but functions as a central and common organ in all kinds of knowledge. The Nyāya view of mind as an 'internal sense' (antarindriya) is accepted by the Vaiśeṣikas, the Sāṅkhyas, the Mīmāṃsakas and others. But some Vedāntins criticise and reject the Nyāya view of mind as an 'inner sense'.