



Consciousness and Knowledge in Indian Philosophy

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Source: *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Jan., 1979), pp. 3-10

Published by: [University of Hawai'i Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1398894>

Accessed: 06/08/2013 16:05

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One of the patterns that emerges from the enormously complex and complicated discussions in the epistemologies of the Indian philosophies is the way metaphysical disputes are made to depend on the epistemological, and the latter again on theories about the nature of consciousness. If we take one central metaphysical dispute, namely, that between the idealism of the Vijñānavādin Buddhist and the realism of the Hindu philosophers (Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā, in particular), the enormous disputational literature in Sanskrit that centers around it shows this common pattern. The realism-idealism issue—the question whether there are things external to the knowing mind or, more radically, whether all objects of knowledge exist independently of their knowledge—is made dependent on questions about the nature of knowledge and consciousness. In this article, I want to bring out, and comment upon, the nature of this dependence.

I

Now, with regard to the nature of *jñāna*¹ or consciousness, three main questions may be singled out by virtue of the central position they occupy in the literature:

1. Is *jñāna* formed (*sākāra*) or form-less (*nirākāra*)?
2. Is *jñāna* self-revealing (*svaprakāśa*) or revealed by an other (*paraprakāśa*)?
3. Is *jñāna* of-an-object (*aviśaya*) or object-less (*nirviśaya*)?

There are two other questions which we may as well keep in mind:

4. Is *jñāna* a substance (*dravya*), a quality (*guṇa*) or an action (*karma*)?
5. Is *jñāna* self-validating (*svataḥpramā*) or validated by an other (*parataḥpramā*)?

Each of these questions is enormously complex, and to the discussion of each of these, every school of philosophy and every author of a philosophical work sought to make contributions. Instead of reviewing the discussions in their multifarious details, I will pick out and dwell on some major strands, especially those which appear to me philosophically significant.

What is meant by asking whether *jñāna* is formed (*sākāra*) or form-less (*nirākāra*)? It is asking whether consciousness itself possesses an *ākāra*. The word *ākāra* literally means “form” or “shape.” The *ākāra* of a thing is a function of the structural arrangement of its parts. External objects have *ākāra* in this sense, they are formed or shaped. Now the Vijñānavādin who denies that there are external objects ascribes *ākāra* to consciousness. The Nyāya-Mīmāṃsā realist who believes that there are external objects denies that con-

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consciousness has its own *ākāra*. Let us recall an example that abounds in the literature. The Buddhist holds that the perceptual knowledge “This is blue” itself has the form of “blue,” whereas the Nyāyā-Mīmāṃsā realist holds that the knowledge “This is blue” itself is formless, but *derives its* form from the form of its object. This Buddhist view accords well with Buddhist idealism, for the apparent form of the object is really a form of the knowledge; the Nyāyā-Mīmāṃsā view accords well with Nyāyā-Mīmāṃsā realism, for the form or shape that appears *in* a knowledge cannot belong to that knowledge itself which is formless and therefore must belong to an object outside of knowledge.

The Buddhist writers often use their idealism as a premise for proving that knowledge is *sākāra*, but they also use the latter thesis to establish idealism. One and the same author can do both only at the risk of circularity. Of course, if idealism is already established and it is admitted that there are no external objects, then it would follow that the blue which appears in the knowledge of blue (“This is blue”) would be a form of the knowledge itself. But it seems to me that while a denial of external objects entails that knowledge is *sākāra*, the latter thesis by itself does not entail the former. For it is quite possible while the knowledge of blue (“This is blue”) has its own “blue”-form, there is also something out in the world which “corresponds” to it: this, in fact, is the view of the Buddhist Sautrāntikas who were representationists of a sort. Another premise is needed for arguing to the idealist’s thesis, namely, the proposition that all consciousness is self-intimating or self-revealing (*svapṛakāśa*). To maintain that a state of consciousness is self-intimating is to say that its existence and its manifestation are inseparable, that at the very moment of its coming into being it is given either to itself (on the Buddhist view), or to its owner, the self (on other views); it is to assert its transparency. If a state of consciousness is given to itself *ab initio*—that is, prior to any subsequent act of introspection, retrospection or reflection—then the form that is given in the knowledge “This is blue” should belong to that knowledge itself; since the form of the knowledge should, in any case, be given and since no knowledge presents us with two sets of forms (one of which could belong to the alleged external object), the only form that knowledge ‘shows’ must belong to the knowledge itself. The hypothesis of the realist, in that case, becomes unprovable. Thus, idealism is entailed by a conjunction of the thesis that consciousness has a form of its own and the thesis that consciousness is self-illuminating. The Buddhist idealist therefore takes as much pain to defend the conjunction of these two theses, as some of the Hindu realists do to prove the untenability of both. The realist’s case is strengthened if he denies both; for, if knowledge itself is form-less (*nirākāra*) and nonself-illuminating (*a-svapṛakāśa*), then what is given in a knowledge of the form “This is blue” cannot be that knowledge itself but something other than it—namely, an object that falls outside of it.

Let us recount some of the arguments by which both these theses have been

defended by the Buddhist idealists and attacked by the Hindu realists. First, as to the thesis that knowledge has its own form:

1. The relation of knowledge to its object requires an identity between the two, hence the knowledge of blue (“This is blue”) should itself be “blue.”
2. If knowledge were form-less (*nirākāra*), there would be no difference between knowledge of blue and knowledge of yellow, and in that case the former could manifest yellow and the latter could manifest blue, which is absurd.
3. To say that the seeming form of a knowledge is due to its contiguity with its object will not do, for the object may well not exist at all, as in the case of past or future objects. (*Tattvasaṅgraha*, *Kamalāśīlapañjikā* 566)
4. Truth is ‘*sārupya*’ or agreement of knowledge with object (*Nyāyavindu* 1.19) and ‘*sārupya*’ requires that knowledge has the form of the object. As Digṅāga writes: *viśayākāra eva asya pramānam* (*Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1.10). The object-form (of the knowledge) is the source of cognising the object.
5. Knowledge is always experienced as having a form. The alleged form-less knowledge is never experienced.
6. The Buddhist also appeals to the fact that with regard to the same object we often have different cognitions (“This is long,” “This is short”). The same jar is simultaneously apprehended as a jar, as a substance or as knowable. Contradictory forms cannot belong to the same object, so they must belong to the knowledges concerned.

As against these arguments, the realists want to argue for the thesis that, to use the well-known words of Udayana (*Kusumāñjali* 4.4), a knowledge, form-less by itself, is distinguished only by its object (*arthena eva viśeṣo’hi nirākāratayā dhiyām*). Their chief arguments are as follows:

1. Knowledge is *not* the sort of thing that could have the form of an object, that could be ‘blue’, ‘triangular’, etc., for it is *amurta*. It does not have a figure (*Prameya-kalamārtanda*, 102).
2. Knowledge is not experienced as something like a mirror in which the object is reflected (*na punardarpaṇādivat pratibimbākṛāntam*). It is rather experienced as what is in itself formless and yet apprehends objects with forms (*Prameya-kamala-mārtanda*, 103).
3. If knowledge assumes the form of its object, then it would be inexplicable why objects would seem to be “near” or “distant” (*Prameya-kamala-mārtanda*, 103).
4. Knowledge would be like an object if it had the form of the latter and yet the two are experienced as radically different.
5. How is the supposed form of knowledge itself known? Is its knowledge form-less or not?
6. To require total *sārupya* or agreement is to reduce knowledge to a material object, which is inconsistent with its nature as knowledge.
7. The thesis that knowledge is *sākāra* should consistently lead to denial of the external world (*Tātparyatikā* on *Nyāyasūtra*, 4.2.33).
8. An external object is characterized by extension (*sthoulya*), whereas knowledge could not have this feature. The discontinuity (*viccheda*) amongst various objects apprehended together could not be ‘represented’ in the appropriate knowledge (*Tātparyatikā* on *Nyāyasūtra*, 4.2.33).
9. To the Buddhist argument that contradictory or contrary forms could not possibly belong to the same object and therefore must belong to the knowledges, Kumārila, the great Mīmāṃsā realist, replies that there is no hard

and fast rule laid down by God that “one object must have one, and only one form.” “We must accept everything just as it is perceived.” In other words, Kumarila says, we must accept something to be of one or of many forms according as we perceive them. There can be no other criterion (*Ślokavārttika*, 218–220).

At this point of our exposition, it is perhaps necessary to take a closer look at the issue by asking once again, what does the word ‘ākāra’ here mean? The Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā realists do admit that most states of consciousness have *prakāra*. We may bring out the difference between *ākāra* and *prakāra* by saying that ‘ākāra’ of the Buddhist means “a real content,” whereas *prakāra* of Nyāya-Mīmāṃsā means “logical qualifier.” The Nyāya, although it denies that a state of consciousness, has a *real* content of its own and, in fact, insists on its contentless character, nevertheless does undertake elaborate *logical* analysis of the sentence which gives expression to a knowledge. The Nyāya believes that there are two stages in which perceptual knowledge grows: for every perceptual encounter of an object, there is an initial nonlinguistic, non-propositional apprehension followed by a linguistic and propositional knowledge. The propositional knowledge, which is necessarily linguistic, has logical components, and the Nyāya logicians developed much sophistication in this analysis.² But the Nyāya metaphysicians were embarrassed by questions about the ontological status of these logical entities. They are, in any case, knowledge-dependent. Their realism depended upon admitting a nonpropositional and nonlinguistic knowledge, in which the thing itself is apprehended without the intermediary of logical or epistemic entities.³ But, in any case, neither sort of knowledge has any *real* content of its own. It has only *logical* contents. It has no *ākāra*, but only *prakāra*.

II

One reason the Nyāya rejected the Buddhist theories is that knowledge is not a thing, a substance (*dravya*). *Ākāra* is determined by arrangements of component parts. Knowledge is not a substance, and only a substance can have parts. It is either an action (*kriyā*) or an attribute (*guṇa*). This brings us to the other related issue that I wish briefly to recall. The theory of knowledge as an action (*kriyā*) had its supporters amongst Indian realists. In fact, it has been argued that only such a theory may save realism by accounting for the difference between the thing itself and the thing as known, that is, as *viśaya*—a difference which is needed for realism.⁴ The best-known form of this view is to be found in the Mīmāṃsakas of the Bhāṭṭa school, for whom that difference—namely, the difference between the *mere* thing and the same thing *as known*—is a fact to begin with and is precisely what needs to be accounted for in epistemology. An act alone can make a difference and, in fact, brings about that difference in that which is acted upon; an act which makes no difference is an absurdity. The act of knowing is precisely that which *transforms*

the *mere* thing to a *known* thing. Since on that theory this act itself is not known at the same time as the object is, that is, since it is not self-intimating, but is rather inferred from the *experience* of that difference—realism is further strengthened, for what is initially apprehended on this account is neither knowledge itself nor one of its contents but rather what is other than it (even if the latter is colored by a quality that is brought about by the act of knowing). This doctrine of ‘act’ is hopelessly unsatisfactory, however. Leaving aside other technical objections raised against the Mīmāṃsā theory, here it may suffice to note that the purpose of knowledge is to manifest, reveal, or unconceal the thing (that is known) precisely as it is, to make it bodily self-present but not to alter it by producing in it a new property such as “knownness.” To know is not to modify what is known. That “epistemological difference” is simply not an implication of knowing, for such a difference would be inconsistent with what knowing is by its intention. What, however, is an implication of knowing is that what is known does not come into being by virtue of being known, that the object of knowledge had a prior unknown existence (*ajñātasattā*), so that the function of knowing extends only as far as removing this unknown status and bringing the object to its self-givenness. As we shall note later, this gave rise to the problem of ignorance vis-a-vis knowledge, and the ramifications of this new problem no less contributed to the realism-idealism issue as did the ones we are discussing now.

What realism then needed was not a theory of knowledge as an activity, but one of knowledge as intentional. All intentional acts are not activities, although all actions may be regarded as intentional. Knowledge is intentional, i.e. is of an object that falls outside it; over and above this, it need not be an act that alters its object. The Nyāya realism is based on this recognition. Knowledge, according to the Nyāya view, is a quality (*guṇa*) of the knower, for there is no other category within the Nyāya ontology for a particular to fall under if it is neither a substance (*dravya*) nor an action (*kriyā*). Knowledge cannot be a substance, for although partless (it has logical, but not real components), it is noneternal; it cannot be an action for it is devoid of motion. It has to be a quality (*guṇa*). But of all the other qualities, it is distinguished by its *being-of-an-object* (*saviṣayakatva*). Even the logical and purely epistemic entities (which reflective analysis reveals and grasps) are equally well transcendent to *their* cognition; and in no case is knowledge self-intimating—so that what is given is the object itself, but not the knowledge or any of its contents.

III

It is important to be clear as to how the question about the self-intimating nature of knowledge is of relevance here. The issue is: is a state of consciousness (for example, a perception, a thought) known to its owner at the very moment of its coming into existence, that is, by virtue of its merely being a state of consciousness; or is it the case that being intentional it is other-directed and

cannot be also “of,” or “about,” itself? In the latter case, a state of consciousness, while manifesting its object, remains itself unmanifested; in other words, the knower knows the object but not his own knowledge. There would then be a parity between knowledge and its object, both are capable of being manifested by being “objectified” by a knowledge. If the object is manifested by its knowledge, the knowledge is manifested by another knowledge, of which the former becomes the object.

Opposed to this extreme position, held by the Nyāya, is that of the Buddhist, the Advaita Vedānta and the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā (leaving out of consideration, for the present, the enormous differences between them on other matters): they all advocate what is called the self-intimating theory of knowledge, according to which a knowledge does both things at once, it reveals both its object and itself. To know an object is also *eo ipso* to know that one knows it. Madhusudan Saraswati defines this self-intimating character of knowledge as “*avedyatve sati aparokṣavyavahā-raviṣāyatva*” (the property of being the subject matter of perceptual judgment without being an object of knowledge).

Whereas, according to the former theory, the judgment “S is p” (expressing a primary, prereflective knowledge) is different from the judgment “I know that S is p,” on the latter theory, the “I know that” adds nothing to the original judgment and only elaborates what was all along there. One recalls the Kantian statement that the “I think” must necessarily be able to accompany all our judgments.

While the self-intimation theory is common to various philosophical schools, there is a great deal of difference between them in the precise formulation of the theory:

- a. For the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā, a knowledge, by its very being, reveals its object as object, its subject (that is, knower) as subject, and itself as the knowledge. This threefold manifestation takes place simultaneously with the occurrence of a knowledge, so that every knowledge has the form “I know such and such object.”
- b. For the Buddhist Vijnānavādin, who rejects the idea of an agent of knowing, every occurrence of knowledge just reveals itself (and what appears as its object but in fact is its form) to itself.
- c. For Rāmānuja, a knowledge while it is manifesting its object (*viśayaparakāśanavelāyām*), but not when it is past, reveals itself to its own subject, the knower (*svāśrayam prati*), but not to another subject—so that saying without qualification that knowledge as such is self-intimating is misleading, even false.
- d. The Advaita Vedānta, as usual, operates with two formulations of the concept—one of which applies to pure consciousness, and the other to empirical knowledge. Empirical knowledge, for Advaita Vedānta, is pure consciousness as limited by the appropriate mental modification (*vṛttyavacchinnacaitanya*). Whereas objects are manifested by pure consciousness through the mediation of appropriate mental modifications (or *vṛttis*), the *vṛtti* itself is directly revealed by pure consciousness, without needing another mental modification. Therefore, an empirical cognition is self-intimating in the sense that it is manifested by pure consciousness alone (*kevala-sākṣi-vedya*). But of pure consciousness, one may say that it is

self-intimating in the strict and literal sense, it manifests itself, it is self-shining and translucent.

Now consider the Buddhist version of the thesis and contrast it with the Nyāya thesis: their ontological consequences would be clear. Earlier, it was pointed out that for the Buddhist, since knowledge in any case manifests itself and since it also has a form of its own, the form—the form “blue” which appears when I judge “This is blue”—must have to be the form of my knowledge. On the other hand, since for Nyāya, knowledge never manifests itself and does not have a form of its own, the form “blue” appearing in the judgment “This is blue” could only be the form of an object out there. The argument may now be reformulated thus:

To be able to say that two, or allegedly two, things are in fact two, there must be some conceivable situation in which one of them, but not the other, is given, experienced, presented. If there is no such situation then the allegedly two things are in fact one—or, possibly, two inseparable aspects of one and the same thing. (This *sahopalambhaniyama* was, to my knowledge, first used by the so-called grammarians (Vaiyākaranikas) in support of their thesis that ‘name’ and the ‘named’ are identical or at least nondifferent.) Now, if it be the case—as the self-intimation theory asserts—that whenever blue is given, the apprehension of blue is also given, then blue and the apprehension of blue cannot be two different things but should be two aspects of one and the same thing. The Nyāya realism needs therefore the possibility that blue be given, without the apprehension of blue being given; this is not merely possible but, according to the Nyāya, invariably the case. When the object is given, its knowledge is not; when the knowledge is, the object is given, not by itself, but only as ancillary to that knowledge, that is, as *pucchalagna*. The Nyāya has a similar response to the Vaiyākaranika’s thesis of the nondifference between “name” and “the named”.

IV

The last of the three questions with which we began our survey is: Is consciousness of an object (*saviṣaya*) or objectless (*nirviṣaya*)? In contemporary philosophical jargon: Is it intentional or not?

The logical connections between answers to this question and answers to the first two questions are not easy to see. I will only make some brief observations on this matter:

1. The Nyāya which, as I have emphasized, stresses, perhaps most consistently, the non-self-intimating character, is also the school which most clearly recognizes its intrinsic intentionality (*svābhāvika viṣayapraṇatvam*). So also do Rāmānuja and the two Mīmāṃsa schools, even if they otherwise differ amongst themselves on the other issues. Thus Rāmānuja writes: “*na ca nirviṣayā kācit samvit asti*” (Commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.1).
2. The Vijnānavādin Buddhist for whom consciousness may have form, and be self-intimating, the intentionality of consciousness, I would suggest, is

only apparent. The knowledge *of* blue is really a knowledge having “blue” for its form; the ‘of’ does not indicate a self-transcending reference. That an *ākāra* which is immanent to a cognition should be regarded as external, is due to *avidyā*, which then should be the principle, or rather the source, of intentionality.

3. The Advaita Vedānta, for which pure consciousness is both formless and self-intimating and empirical consciousness is formed and yet self-intimating (in a weaker sense), the issue is, as Śankara’s opening sentences in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* indicate, how can consciousness which is, like light, self-revealing, and its object which is, like darkness, its opposite—how can two such things be together, that is, how can pure self-revealing consciousness, whose essence is exhausted by this self-revealing character (*prakāśa-ekarasa*) be also the intentional empirical consciousness, which is of an object (*saviśaya*) and belongs to a subject (*sāśraya*)? Intrinsically, consciousness is objectless and subjectless; owing to *avidyā*, it appears to be *of* an object and as belonging to a subject. Again, *avidyā* is the source of intentionality.
4. Rāmānuja is so impressed by the intentionality of consciousness, that—as said before—he ties its self-intimating character to its intentionality—so that consciousness intimates its own presence to its owner *only* when it is manifesting an object.

v

The purpose of this review has been to establish logical connections between answers to the three questions listed at the beginning, and to bring out the way they determine the realism-idealism issue.

The best case for realism in the strong sense is made by a combination of both the formlessness and non-self-intimating character of consciousness.

The best case for idealism in a strong sense, that is, for the thesis of *viññap-timātratā*, is made by a combination of the two positions: (a) that consciousness has forms of its own, and (b) that consciousness is self-intimating.

There are many intermediate possibilities. The Advaita Vedānta is one such. With its distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, its position with regard to the realism-idealism issue is ambiguous. Pure consciousness is formless and self-intimating, contains no forms within itself, and refers to no other. The apparent other, that is, the world, is neither its form (*ākāra*) nor its real object, but phenomenally superimposed upon it by *avidyā*. Empirical consciousness, both formed and self-intimating, is the result; it manifests an intentionality that is, in the long run, not ontologically self-sustaining.

NOTES

1. On the use of ‘*jñana*’, see my *Gangeśa’s Theory of Truth* (Center of Advanced Study in Philosophy, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan: 1966), esp. 27–28; also B. K. Matilal, *The Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 6–7.

2. For more about this, see *Gangeśa’s Theory of Truth*, pp. 32–37 and *The Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation*, Part I.

3. B. K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 83–91.

4. A forceful recent statement of this argument is to be found in P. K. Mukhopadhyaya, “Cognitive Act,” in *Indian Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1973).