

CHAPTER VI

ABERRATION OF PERCEPTION

In a comparative study of philosophical views of East and West regarding perception we should bear in mind that the current technological devices were not available to the ancient Eastern thinkers augmenting their range of perception. They had not at their disposal, e.g., microscope, electron microscope, telescope, radio-telescope, ultra-sound devices, etc. Hence, the characteristics of the objects highlighted by the use of these devices should not be taken into account putting the Eastern philosophers at a disadvantage. Only then we can evaluate their respective contribution to the philosophy of perception in a proper way.

We perceive things veridically. We also perceive things wrongly. How are we to distinguish between veridical and non-veridical perception ? And also how are we to assign

reasons for the non-verdical perceptions ? In both Indian and Western philosophy we find the discussion on perceptual errors. These perceptual errors are due to disorders of the sense-organs. "Excessive use, disuse, inadequate use, and injudicious use of the sense-organs tend to produce disorders of sensation and affect perception. The stimulus, the external medium of transmission, the sense-organ, the bodily constitution, the mental factor, and the moral equipment might operate jointly and severally to produce erroneous perception"¹. Defective perceptions are also due to (a) indistinct nature of the object, (b) physiological disturbance in the sense-organ, and (c) absence of mental equanimity. Thus it is a fact that there is faulty perception. Now let us mention some Indian concepts as to the perceptual errors.

In taking up the perceptual errors after Indian philosophy we are dealing with the Sāṅkhya concept first. Sense-object contact gives rise to particular mode of intellect or *buddhivṛttiviśeṣa* and perceptual cognition is due to this particular mode of intellect which according to Sāṅkhya, is physical in nature. According to the Sāṅkhya view, *pramāna* is *buddhivṛtti*. Perceptual knowledge is a kind of *buddhivṛtti*. *Indriya* is not *pratyakṣa pramāna*. The Sāṅkhya holds the view that what is *prama* will forever remain *pramā*, it can never become a *pramā*. Thus *pramā* is

eternal in nature. Further, they hold the view that indriya is only an instrument for revealing pramā in the context of worldly knowledge. The buddhivṛtti or mode of intellect in the state of Samsara or empirical world comes into existence through sense-contact is transformed into perceptual cognition. Due to sense-object contact citta or mind takes the form of the object. This mode of parināma, according to Sāṅkhya, is called buddhivṛtti.

I propose to deal with the aberrations of perception here with special reference to Sāṅkhya philosophy. A valid perceptual cognition requires careful attention to the object of perception. To be valid, perception depends on the fulfilment of some conditions, otherwise it becomes invalid or fallacious. The validity of the perceptual cognition depends on three conditions, viz., (a) intellectual condition, (b) physical condition, and (c) moral condition. Intellectual condition is the state of equipose of mind, undisturbed by any extraneous factor. Physical condition is the continuation of the physical body in a state of health. Moral condition implies freedom from superstitions, prejudices and emotional imbalances of mind.

Sankhya kārikā 7 speaks of the reasons for defect or doṣa of perception². In the said verse we find that the defect of perception arising from the following : (a) beyond the range of the capacity of the sense (atidurāt), (b) too close proximity (atisāṃipya), (c) defect of sense-organ (indriyabhava), (d) inattention (anyamanaskatā), (e) subtleness (Sūkṣmatva), (f) obstruction (vyavadhāna),

(g) being overwhelmed (abhibhavan), (h) limitation of sensuous distinguishability and (i) non-apprehension of the non-manifest.

In the said verse the causes of non-perceptions have been given. This may be illustrated now. (a) We cannot perceive the leaves and branches which are at distance. But they are existent. (b) If the object is far away, the particular sense-organ is incapable of apprehending it, similarly, if the object is very near, we cannot perceive. For example, contact lenses in the eyes are not seen by the same eyes. (c) We know that the blind cannot perceive colour and the deaf cannot hear. To such persons, therefore, the world of colour and sound simply does not exist and any talk about such a world would, to him, will be unintelligible. Nevertheless we cannot say of the non-existence of colour and sound. (d) Whenever we are engrossed (tanamaya) in an object, we cannot perceive or apprehend the object which is before us. Here, too, we cannot say of the non-existence of the object. For example, whenever I am engrossed in deep thinking, I may not be aware of the person who is standing beside me. (e) The atoms cannot be perceived. Dyaṇuka (dyad) cannot be perceived and trasarenu (triad) without sunlight cannot be perceived. (f) The object cannot be perceived, if it is covered by something, e.g., we cannot perceive an object which is on

the otherside of the wall. (g) Sometimes the objects cannot be perceived due to overpowering or overshadowing of particular objects. The stars remain in the sky always, yet during the daytime these cannot be perceived. This is due to existence of the sunlight. (h) Whenever similar objects are blended, we cannot distinguish particular object, e.g., drop of water in the lake. (i) Non-revealed objects can never be perceived, e.g., curd in milk.

Here, we are mentioning a quotation from Dr. Gangānāth Jhā :

"Extreme remoteness : Bird soaring high in the sky

Extreme proximity : collyrium in the eye

Destruction of organs : blindness, deafness

Absence of mind : underinfluence of strong desire a man
does not perceive

Minuteness : atom

Intervention : queen behind the wall

Subjugation or suppression : Non-perception of constella-
tion suppressed by bright rays
of the sun

Intermixture : Drops of rain water disappear-
ing in a tank

And so on : non-production, e.g., of curd in the milk"³.

Above illustrations are the cases of non-observation. It is clear that perceptual cognition may be rendered

faulty by mental factors and by physical causes. Faulty perceptual cognition may be divided into two classes :

(a) Fallacy of non-perception (aparyavekṣaṇa), and (b) fallacy of wrong perception (bhrānta paryavekṣaṇa). Non-perception is due to inattention of the mind i.e., it is the defect of internal sense-organ. For example, when Sakuntalā was engrossed in deep thinking of her beloved husband Duṣmanta, she could not know the presence of the great sage Durvāsā. It is to be remembered that Sakuntalā was not inattentive, because she paid attention to her husband. Wrong perception may be due to defects of external sense-organs or for other causes such as insufficiency of light etc. For example, 'perceptions of a snake in the case of a rope'. Non-observation arises when we overlook or neglect something which we should normally observe. But we should always observe the entire contents and then we can have a valid perceptual cognition. The fallacy of wrong observation arises when we observe the object of perception as this or that thing because of sensory defects, whereas it should be perceived in some other mode. For example, we can say that a man suffering from jaundice, perceives a conchshell as yellow, whereas he should perceive it as white. Be it noted here that J.S. Mill also mentioned two kinds of observational fallacies, namely, (a) the fallacy of non-observation and (b) māla-observation.

The Sāṅkhya view of aberration of perceptual cognition has striking resemblance with that of Skinnerian behaviourism. All empirical perceptual cognitions are modification of buddhi which is product of prakṛti and as such is physical. Thus considered empirically perceptual knowledge of ordinary experience is fully explicable in physical terms. All reference to conscious ego are in a sense cut out. This is true of Skinnerian behaviourism in a way. In the said behaviourism the entire world of perceptual knowledge is explicable in terms of stimulus and response whether delayed or non-delayed, modified or non-modified. All reference to any intervening variable such as consciousness or neural traces are cut out. Everything is explained in physical terms.

Deviations in perceptions from specially prevalent norms of perceptual experience are explained by Sāṅkhya in physical terms. For example, objects which are visible normally may become invisible during mist and the invisibility of the objects in this case can be explained in terms of mist which is a physical phenomenon. Likewise in the language of Skinnerian behaviourism our audition of the ringing of the telephone bell becomes inaudible when it is masked by loud noise of crackers. The inaudibility here is explained entirely in physical terms.

In the sequel I will deal with the theories of

erroneous perception as propounded by the Buddhists, Naiyāyikas and Advaitins. According to the Buddhists, all perceptions, being momentary, are indeterminate cognitions incapable of apprehending any Vikalpa or relational determination whatsoever. Therefore, perception which only says that there is something is veridical while perception which asserts what that something is in a determinate way is invalid. In the light of this how are the Buddhists to explain errors of perceptual cognition in the normal sense of the term ? This is the crux of the problem. To the Buddhists all determinate perceptions are equally invalid. However, some of these perceptions are capable of satisfying practical needs and, therefore, are taken to be valid in a practical sense. But there are cases of determinate perception where practical needs are not satisfied and so they are taken to be erroneous. For example, the determinate perception of rope satisfies the practical need of the people and is taken to be valid whereas the determinate perception of rope as snake, although determinate, fails to satisfy the practical need of the people and as such is taken to be invalid.

The Naiyāyikas as opposed to the Buddhists admit determinate perception fulfilling certain conditions as valid, indeterminate perception being neither valid nor invalid but is a pre-supposition in the interest of the logical harmony. The conditions which render a determinate

perception as valid are firstly its conformity with the object as it is, and, secondly, its issuance in satisfying practical needs. Therefore, the Naiyāyikas admit that the truth of perceptual knowledge, like knowledge of other types, lies in its conformity of object as it is. For example, the perception of 'rope as snake' fails to fulfil the condition, that knowledge should conform to the object and as such, is invalid. Secondly, this conformity gives rise to expectancy which is satisfied by indulging in practical activity and this is also frustrated because of the non-conformity.

According to the Advaitins, in the real sense of the term Brahma Pratyakṣa alone is real, and Brahma Pratyakṣa is devoid of all bhedas or distinctions sa-jātiya, svagata and vijātiya. But Brahma-pratyakṣa is possible only in metaempirical plane and as such is beyond the ken of knowledge of the empirical world in which we live, move and have our being. Therefore, the Advaitins are required to give us a satisfactory explanation of veridical and non-veridical perceptions as they occur in the empirical plane. In the empirical plane we at times perceive 'a rope as an snake', 'a mother of pearl as a piece of silver' or 'a white conch as yellow one'. The Advaitins hold that in the case of erroneous apprehension we perceive an object which is logically indefinable being other than real and unreal (Sadasadvilakṣaṇa) and is capable of being sublated on the rising of valid perception.

All these are different explanations of erroneous perception as propounded by different schools of Indian Philosophy, namely, Bauddha, Nyāya and Advaita Vedānta. Anyway, I like to quote a few lines to have more clear view regarding erroneous perception.

"..." Vatsyayana takes up in this connection three common cases of illusion. These are : Seeing a person in a Pillar, a flock of ducks in a distant flag, a dove in a darkish lump of clay. One peculiarity of illusion can easily elude us if cases like these are considered separately. When the three are examined together, a striking feature common to all illusions leaps before our eyes. You have the illusion of a person only in the pillar, or of flock of ducks only in the flag or of the dove only in the clay. Never is there an illusion of a flock of ducks in the pillar or in the clay, just as there is never the illusion of the dove in the flag or in the pillar. The list of such examples can be indefinitely extended : You have the illusion of a snake only in the rope and never in the shining shell, just as you have the illusion of silver only in the shining shell and never in the rope.

There is thus an obvious selectivity - a rigid regularity — involved even in the cases of common illusions. This has to be counted for. And it can be explained only on the assumption that there is an objective coercion even

in the cases of the common illusions. You do not have the liberty of having any illusion anywhere and at any time. Something outside your own mind or your own consciousness — something that is objective — dictates terms to the nature of the illusion. The Pillar determines that you are to have the illusion of a person and specifically so. The flag obliges you to have the illusion only of the ducks, just as the clay obliges you to have the illusion only of the dove. Not that you are under any obligation to have an illusion. Under normal conditions you can certainly see a pillar in pillar, a flag in a flag. These are cases of right knowledge, and not of illusion. However, in so far as you have an illusion, you are not free from some objective coercion — something outside your consciousness dictating terms to your consciousness. Without understanding this objective coercion, the common cases of illusion remain unexplained"⁴.

Thus there is illusory perception such as perceiving a snake in the locus of rope or rajat or silver in the locus of sukṭi or mother-of-pearl. But here one question arises : why do we not illusorily perceive 'Silver' in the locus of rope or snake in the locus of mother-of-pearl ? The Naiyāyikas' explanation of fastening of consciousness on the deśāntariya, kālāntariya sarpa, (snakes existed elsewhere and elsewhere) is of no avail, for sukṭi or mother-of-pearl is also elsewhere and elsewhere. The Advaitins'

explanation fares no better, for māyā being aindrajalika or magical should not be incapable of projecting or vikṣepa of snake in the locus of mother-of-pearl or sukṭi. Thus, although Advaitins' explanation of the different facets of perception may be to an extent better than that of Naiyāyikas, they are, however, sailing in the same boat in so far as the aforesaid possibilities of illusory perceptions are concerned. This is a surd of perception which no School of Indian Philosophy has been able to explain satisfactorily.

Now, we are mentioning four types of non-veridical perception as admitted by Don Locke. To quote him :

"(1) I sense - something that does not really exist (as with Macbeth's dagger).

(2) I sense something that does really exist, but I take it to be something else, something else that does not really exist (as when I take a vine to be a snake).

(3) I sense something that does really exist but, objectively, it is different from what I sense it as being (as when I see red tomato but, through colour-blindness, sense it as grey).

(4) I sense something that does really exist, and I sense it as it is objectively, but I take it to be what is not (as when, in the Muller-Lyer illusion, I see two lines which are in fact equal, but take one to be longer than the other)"⁵.

The arguments and examples cited by Don Locke seem to have a striking resemblance with those of Mimāṃsakas and Buddhists of ancient India. Perceptual error is taken to arise both by Prof. Don Lock and Indian Philosophers from the fact of taking into account only similarities between that which perceived to exist and that which does not exist factually or from failing to take into account the dissimilarities between that which is perceived to exist and that which does not exist as a matter of fact.

So far as third point of Prof. Don Locke is concerned we are to note that ~~the~~ difference is not a defect, something is seen as grey by some one and the same thing is seen as red by someone else does in no way allow us to reach the conclusion that grey-viewer is perceiving wrongly, while red-viewer is perceiving veridically. As to the merit of the fourth example as given by Don Locke we are to note that it is a failure of estimation of quantity and not a failure of perception. As a matter of fact it is a failure of tacit inference drawn unconsciously on the basis of perceptual data.

Any statement of observation needs to be interpreted by the person observing as well as by the person who is listening to what the observer says. The interpretation of each one of them will take place within his own framework of symbols which in turn will need to be interpreted by

others. Everything that each of us says as report of his observation is open to interpretation, for that is what it means to use symbols, i.e. language. In a sense, therefore, no two persons inhabit the same world of meaning. The language that each uses will need to be interpreted and the interpretation will be within the context and the associations and experience of another person. Each person since childhood lives in his own world of meaning within which he accommodates the cues given by other persons. There will be adjustment, agreement if you like, — but it is logically impossible for anything to transcend essentially personal nature of anyone's understanding of a situation.

From the above discussion, we find that faulty perception is due to disorder of the sense-organ or environmental conditions. Perceptual errors arise on account of abnormal conditions of the senses. Though we find the difference of opinions arising among Indian Philosophers about the source or sources of knowledge, still it is found that all of them accept perception as a distinct source of knowledge. No School of Indian Philosophy, besides the Buddhistic School, raise any question as to the validity of perception, because in perception, they believe, there is direct relation between knower and known.

Now the question is : Can there arise any fallacy in the case of perception ? It is a fact that we at times mistakenly perceive one thing as another. For example, we

mistakenly at times perceive and recognise Mr. X as Mr. Y and when the mistakes are pointed out we apologise and stand corrected. These mistakes are mistakes of perception and they do occur.

Further the question is : Can we say that experience of 'Seeing as' is necessarily invalid perceptual experience ? In our reply to the question we answer in the negative. We admit that there are certain cases of 'seeing as' which are cases of invalid perception. But we do not admit that this admission forces us to the conclusion that all cases of 'seeing as' are cases of invalid perception. There are genuine cases of 'seeing as' experience in which the object is seen sometimes as having one qualifier and at other times as having another qualifier without there being any change in the object. This dawning of one qualifier aspect at one time and another qualifier aspect at some other time qualifying the object does not and cannot entail the proposition that the dawning of one aspect is, while the dawning of another aspect is not, a case of veridical perception. For example, in the case of ambiguous picture of a female we sometimes see the picture as the picture of old mother-in-law and at other times we see picture as the picture of young daughter-in-law. We cannot say that case of seeing the picture as the picture of an old lady is a case of veridical perception and seeing the same picture as the picture of a young lady is the case of nonveridical perception,

and the other way about. Both the cases of 'seeing as' are equally valid or equally invalid.

Now a question may arise : Are perceptual errors due to physical defects only, or due only to mental defects, or due to both of them or due to former at one time or later at other times ? We answer the fourth question in the affirmative. It is evident that perception depends on operation of sense-organs and operation of sense-organs are dependent on prevailing of certain conditions. Let us imagine a situation. Let us take it for granted that like moon outside of earth is always away from the sun and human beings are forced to live in the eternally sunless region. It is clear & evident that in this case human beings will not be endowed with visual experience still less with experience of colour. Likewise if we are in a state of mental agitation we are prone to misperceive the objects. Thus mental conditions are also in a sense responsible for defective perception. For example, when one is suffering from emotional disturbance profoundly, he will be found to search for his spectacles despite the fact that he wears it. Thus he fails to perceive the existence of his spectacles on his nose which under ordinary circumstances he will not fail to note. Again, physiological conditions may cause defective perception. For example, if one has not taken his food at the accustomed hours, he is likely to taste the food as bitter although the same food will not taste bitter

to other persons. This is due to the fact that non-taking of food at the accustomed hours caused non-consumption of digestive juices in the stomach which are circulated through blood throughout the body including the taste buds of his tongue. And this is the cause of the bitter taste in the mouth.

So we may come to the conclusion that everyone of the aforesaid conditions may be the cause of defective perception — severally or jointly. These may give rise to the Mal-observation and Non-observation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Indian Psychology - P.T.Rāju, M.A., Ph.D. - mentioned in The Cultural Heritage of India - Vol.III - edited by Haridās Bhattacharya M.A.B.L., p.595.
2. "Atidurātsamipyādīdriyāghātānmanohanavasthānāt! Sauksmyād vyavadhānādbhibhavāt samānābhihār̥cca|| Sankhya-karikā 7.
3. Sāṅkhyatattvakamudi - edited by Gangānāth Jhā, pp.24-25.
4. What is living and what is Dead in Indian philosophy - Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, pp.338-39.
5. Perception and Knowledge of the external World - Don Locke, p.92.