Title
Knowing blue: Early buddhist accounts of non-conceptual sense perception

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Is there such a thing as direct, non-conceptual experience, or is all experience, by its very nature, conceptually mediated? Is some notion of non-conceptual sensory awareness required to account for our ability to represent and negotiate our physical environment, or is it merely an artifact of deep-seated but ultimately misguided Cartesian metaphysical assumptions? Perhaps conscious experience in humans is inextricably tied to the representational or self-reflexive capacities of language; if so, does it necessarily follow that newborn infants and animals are not conscious? Is the very notion of non-conceptual experience logically incoherent or unintelligible? Or perhaps the problem lies in our use of concepts to describe phenomena that lie, by definition, beyond the confines of conceptual thought. Surely, that we can’t conceive of something is insufficient ground to conclude that it doesn’t exist.

These are, of course, much debated issues in contemporary philosophy of mind. Recently, the debates have been framed in terms of “first-order” (or “same-order”) theories of consciousness versus higher-order theories; the latter maintain that subjective awareness consists in a second-order representation of a first-order state (consciousness is said to be “transitive”), while the former argue that consciousness is “intransitive” or “self-intimating,” and thus the phenomenon of self-awareness need not entail secondary or higher-order cognitive processing. Among the higher-order theories, a further distinction is made between “higher-order perception” (a.k.a. HOP, or “inner sense”) theories, which hold that higher-order representations can be non-conceptual, versus “higher-order thought” (HOT) theories, which argue that the secondary representations that give rise to subjective awareness necessarily involve conceptual thought or propositional belief.1

Other philosophers working in the areas of cognitive science and perception have engaged in parallel debates over “non-conceptual mental content,” “non-linguistic thought,” and even “non-linguistic conceptual thought”—subjects that bear directly on the relationship between thought, concepts, language, and perception. Here too we find a burgeoning and highly
technical literature, in which cognitivists face off against phenomenologists, conceptualists take on non-conceptualists, “state non-conceptualism” is contrasted with “content non-conceptualism,” and so on.\(^2\) As in the case of the HOT debates, the growing complexity and sophistication of the literature on non-conceptual mental content has not brought the field closer to consensus on whether “non-conceptual experience” is intelligible in the first place. Some years ago there was hope that the notion of “qualia” might contribute focus and clarity to these issues. More recently, attention has turned to the distinction between “phenomenal consciousness” (p-consciousness) and “access consciousness” (a-consciousness).\(^3\) Yet irrespective of whether one talks of qualia, or p-consciousness, or intransitive consciousness, or non-relational consciousness, or first-order consciousness, or same-order consciousness, or pre-reflective awareness, the challenge remains the same: how to make conceptual sense of an experience that is alleged to be non-conceptual?

Despite the difficulties, many philosophers continue to be drawn to these issues. The interest is sustained, in part, by contemporary research in cognitive science and artificial intelligence that promises to revolutionize our understanding of consciousness and perception. (It is no accident that MIT Press is a leading publisher of philosophical books in this area.) But despite the wealth of new empirical data and the profusion of increasingly sophisticated philosophical arguments, the underlying quandaries—quandaries related to the “hard problem” of consciousness and how our percepts relate to the mind-independent world—go back to the dawn of philosophical reflection, and the verdict is still out on whether the spate of new work bespeaks progress (however that might be measured) or is what the Buddhists would call “conceptual proliferation” (Sanskrit: prapāñca, rendered in Chinese as xilun 戏论, “frivolous discourse”).

The notion of unmediated or non-conceptual experience has also emerged as a topic of debate among scholars of religion. One early and somewhat fashionable theory of mysticism, now known as “perennialism,” holds that all the major world religions are historically and spiritually grounded in a single ineffable mystical experience. This extraordinary experience (or “altered state of consciousness”) is, by definition, universal; while attempts to communicate it are mediated by language, culture, and belief, the experience itself is not. Some exponents of perennialism have gone further, arguing that the experience is contentless: it is “pure consciousness” itself.\(^4\) Starting in the 1970s, however, this popular theory came under sustained attack by “contextualists” (a.k.a. “constructivists”), who argued, on philosophical, historical, and ethnographic grounds, that all experience, including so-called mystical experience, is socially, culturally, and conceptually mediated. The notion of a single perennial experience that lies behind the diversity of religious traditions is, according to the constructivists, a modernist conceit based on a systematic misreading of the historical record.\(^5\) The intuition that motivated the constructivists in
departments of religion is, I believe, the same as that which animates conceptualists in departments of philosophy, namely, that the very notion of unconstructed experience is akin to Wittgenstein’s “wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it.”

Determining where the Buddhist tradition stands on these issues is no easy task. In my earlier forays into the mysticism debates, I argued that Buddhist conceptions of the path articulated in early sūtra and abhidharma literature, as well as in mārga (“stages of the path”) compilations such as the Visuddhimagga, do not emphasize direct or unmediated experience (Sharf 1995, 1998). This is because the early tradition did not imagine the aim of Buddhist practice to be a numinous experience or altered state of consciousness. On the contrary, the goal—final nirvāṇa—was understood as the permanent cessation of phenomenal experience. It is true that the ascending levels of trance states (dhyānas and samāpattis) associated with the development of meditative concentration (śamatha) are defined in terms of the systematic elimination of certain cognitive factors (caitasika-dharma, saṃskāra) that attend upon and shape conscious experience. But the elimination of these factors does not result in a more luminous or transparent state of “pure consciousness,” so much as in the progressive attenuation of consciousness itself. The sequence of trances culminates in nirodhasamāpatti—a condition akin to a vegetative coma that is phenomenologically (but not soteriologically) indistinguishable from nirvāṇa.6

This is not to say that immediate (or non-conceptual or unconstructed) experience was unknown in early Buddhism. The notion of “non-discriminative” or “non-conceptual discernment” (nirvikalpajñāna, wu fenbie zhi 無分別智) appears sporadically early on as a sort of exotic yogic attainment, the purview of buddhas and advanced practitioners.7 But non-discriminative discernment did not play a central role in the analysis of mundane cognition until the rise of so-called Pramāṇavāda in the sixth and seventh centuries. Dignāga—the philosopher who laid the groundwork for this sophisticated tradition of logic and epistemology—was among the first to argue that there was a non-conceptual aspect to all states of cognition, including workaday discursive states. This aspect, known as “self-awareness” (svasamvedana, svasamvitti), would come to play a pivotal role in later Indo-Tibetan Yogācāra epistemology, akin to the role that “pre-reflective consciousness” plays in strands of contemporary phenomenology.8

Non-conceptual discernment was also important in certain post-sixth-century traditions of Buddhist meditation, notably the “subitist” traditions of Tantra, Chan, and Dzogchen. However, the cultivation of non-conceptual states of “luminous” or “mirror consciousness” was not without controversy. Detractors argued that such practices contravened orthodox Buddhist teachings and/or fostered antinomian and ethically pernicious behavior. The same controversies now dog the modern mindfulness movement (a.k.a. satipaṭṭhāna, vipassanā) that emerged in Burma in the early twentieth

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century. Some teachers of the new Burmese practices interpret mindfulness (Pali: sati, Sanskrit: smṛti) as “bare awareness” or “bare attention,” by which they mean attending directly to sensations as they arise in the mind without any discursive reflection, emotional response, or ethical judgment. The goal, it would seem, is some sort of non-conceptual experience. Yet, as critics note, understanding sati as bare or non-conceptual awareness seems odd on the face of it, given that the traditional meaning of sati/smṛti is to “remember,” “recollect,” or “bear in mind.”

If I am correct in my analysis, while the seeds of “non-conceptual discernment” may have been present early on, it did not come to the fore in Buddhist thought and practice until the rise of Pramāṇavāda, Tantra, Chan, and Dzogchen (Sharf 2014b, 2016). These developments, which date to the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, were likely influenced by non-Buddhist Indian religious traditions, including Tantra. Be that as it may, the early Ābhidharmikas could not help but run into the puzzle of non-conceptual cognition; as we will see, the structure of their theories of perception make the problem unavoidable.

Distributed Cognition

The Nidānavagga-sutta of the Saṃyutta-nikāya contains the following succinct account of the arising of mind:

And what, bhikkhus, is the origin of suffering? In dependence on the eye and forms, eye-cognition arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling [comes to be]; with feeling as condition, craving. This is the origin of suffering. In dependence on the ear and sounds, ear-cognition arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling [comes to be]; with feeling as condition, craving. This is the origin of suffering.

The passage goes on to repeat the same formula for the nose and odors, tongue and tastes, body and tactile objects, and mind and mental phenomena. While the passage is found here embedded in a sermon on suffering, the section italicized above appears repeatedly in the Pali canon, as well as in parallel passages in the Chinese Āgamas, serving as a stock formulation or “pericope” for the Buddha’s teaching on the arising of mind. (I’ll refer to it below as the “arising-of-mind pericope.”) Its appeal lay in the succinct manner in which it touches upon all eighteen elements (dhātu) that collectively comprise the phenomenal world, as well as their causal and temporal interrelations. But the terse formulation also raised a number of problems that would preoccupy Buddhist exegetes for centuries to come.

To appreciate the pericope, keep in mind that Buddhist scholiasts sought to produce, using the resources provided in the scriptures, a robust account of mind and perceptual experience that does not invoke an enduring self or subject (ātman). Rather than adducing a single overriding cogito or “witness
consciousness,” scriptural accounts distribute cognition among six quasi-independent registers: five of which are associated with the material senses, and one with the mind or mental sense (manas), namely, mind-cognition (manovijñāna). These six registers are structurally alike insofar as each involves the interactions of three discrete elements: the perceptual object (viṣayā), the sense faculty (indriya), and cognition (vijñāna). This creates a total of eighteen elements that collectively account for the entirety of conscious experience; there is no need for an independent observer that sits astride the process. So far so good. But it is not obvious how this model can account for what modern philosophers call the synthetic unity of apperception or cognitive binding. How is it that these six registers interact to create the semblance of a unified and integrated phenomenal domain?

There is, to my knowledge, only a single sūtra that acknowledges and addresses this problem directly. The Mahāvedalla-sutta (Majjhima-nikāya 43) consists of a series of questions that Mahā Koṭṭhita poses to Śāriputta, along with Śāriputta’s responses. One of the questions is as follows:

“Friend, these five faculties each have a separate field, a separate domain, and do not experience each other’s field and domain, that is, the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty, and the body faculty. Now of these five faculties, each having a separate field, a separate domain, not experiencing each other’s field and domain, what is their resort, what experiences their fields and domains?”

This seems to be a fairly straightforward description of the binding problem: given that the cognitive reach of each of the sense faculties is restricted to its own register, what integrates them? To which Śāriputta responds,

“Friend, these five faculties each have a separate field, a separate domain, and do not experience each other’s field and domain, that is, the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty, and the body faculty. Now these five faculties, each having a separate field, a separate domain, not experiencing each other’s field and domain, have mind as their resort, and mind experiences their fields and domains.”

In short, mind is unique among the six faculties in having access to, and serving as foundation or “resort” (manopāṭisaranām, the Chinese parallel reads yi 依, “basis”) for the other five.

The Mahāvedalla is notable among the Pali suttas for the manner in which it defines, often in a rather technical manner, terms like cognition (viññāna, vijñāna), feeling (vedanā), ideation (saññā, sāṃjñā), meditative trance (jhāna, dhyāna), and so on. Accordingly, some scholars see this text, which likely belongs to a relatively late strata of the suttapitaka, as precursor to the kind of systematic exposition found in Abhidharma literature. In any case, it may be the earliest extant Buddhist text to posit a structural
asymmetry between (1) the five cognitions associated with the material senses (hereafter: the five sense cognitions), and (2) mind-cognition.

This asymmetry turns out to be crucial for the Buddhist analysis of mind and cognition, and the Ābhidharmikas develop it at length. We learn not only that the five sense cognitions have access only to their proper objects (i.e., the eye to visual objects, the ear to sounds, and so on), but also that these objects must, at least according to the Sarvāstivāda Vaibhāṣikas, coexist with cognition itself. That is to say, eye-cognition can only register a visual form if said form exists in the present. Mind-cognition, on the other hand, has access to mental objects (dharmanas) as well as to sense percepts that are transduced from the five material senses. Moreover, mind can perceive past and future objects as well as objects in the present. Finally, and most germane to this essay, Vaibhāṣika masters hold that the five sense cognitions apprehend their objects directly, without access to concepts or language. As such, it is sometimes said that sense cognition grasps the “inherent characteristic” (svalakṣaṇa) of the object but not its “generic characteristic” (sāmānyalakṣaṇa). Grasping the generic characteristic involves apprehending the object not merely as a one-off particular but as the token of a generic type, and this requires capacities associated with mind-cognition such as ideation (sāmjayā), recollection (smṛti), and knowledge (prajñā).13 In an oft-repeated example, visual cognition is said to know “blue” but not “this is blue.” Only mind-cognition can know “this is blue.”14

Note that the arising-of-mind pericope gives no hint of any structural difference between sense cognition and mind-cognition; the asymmetry seems to have been introduced in later texts such as the Mahāvedalla and early commentarial works so as to render the Buddhist model of distributed cognition intelligible. This is merely one of several lacunae and ambiguities in the pericope with which later commentators had to struggle. Another was how to understand the temporal and causal relationships that pertain between the perceptual object, the sense faculty, and cognition. The pericope reads, “In dependence on the eye and forms, eye-cognition arises.” Does this mean that the eye (the visual sense faculty, cakṣurindriya) and form (the material object, rūpa) precede the arising of visual cognition (cakṣurviñāna), or is the dependence logical rather than temporal, such that the three arise simultaneously? This turned out to be a contentious issue on which Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika part ways.15 As mentioned above, the Vaibhāṣikas hold that all three elements must coexist for perception to occur; it makes little sense, they reason, to talk of sense perception (pratyākṣa) with respect to a non-existent sense object.16 To defend their position, they develop a theory of “simultaneous causation” (sahabhūhetu), such that the sense object and sense faculty are the immediate cause of, yet co-arise with, sense cognition.17 In contrast, Sautrāntikas reject simultaneous causation as incoherent; they insist, on both exegetical and philosophical grounds, that
cognition emerges after the arising of the sense object and sense faculty. As a result, in the Sautrāntika model the object of perception is no longer present when cognized.\footnote{18}

While Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas disagree over whether sense cognition coexists with its object, they concur that the full recognition of the object does not occur until the immediately following moment, when mind-cognition, shaped by ideation, recollection, knowledge, and other mental factors (caitasiska), apprehends the throughput of the previous cognition. In technical terms, the preceding moment of cognition is said to function as the mana-indriya or “mind-faculty” of the subsequent arising of mind (manas). Thus in the Vaibhāṣika schema, full recognition of a sense object is a two-step affair: in the first moment, sense cognition arises along with the sense faculty and object, and in the second moment mind-cognition arises. In contrast, the Sautrāntika model involves three steps: sense faculty and object arise in the first moment, sense cognition in the second, and mind-cognition in the third.

One issue on which both the two-step and three-step models concur is that mind-cognition does not apprehend the sense object (viṣaya) directly, since the object has already passed when mind-cognition arises. Sautrāntikas go one step further in this regard, as they insist that even sense cognition does not apprehend the object directly. In either case the question arises: when the sense object is no longer present, what precisely is apprehended? Ābhidharmika exegetes discuss this “after image” under the rubric of the ākāra, a particularly difficult concept that is variously translated “aspect,” “form,” “mental image,” “mode of activity,” and so on. The variety of translations reflects the different and somewhat conflicting accounts of ākāra in Ābhidharmika sources. As others have discussed this topic at length, I will touch on it only briefly here.\footnote{19}

The Sautrāntikas are associated most closely with ākāra theory in later doxographic accounts, in which they are described as sākāravāda. (Sākāra-vāda—the theory that the mind has access only to inner representations—would appear to be a precursor to full-blown Yogācāra idealism.) Secondary sources, possibly influenced by later Pramāṇavāda thought, often present the ākāra as a kind of internal image or mental representation of the object that is grasped by vijñāna. But this is misleading: technically, the Sautrāntika position is that there is nothing apart from vijñāna for vijñāna to grasp, since the other two elements (dhātu)—the object element (viṣaya-dhātu) and faculty element (indriya-dhātu)—have passed. It is more accurate to describe the ākāra as that aspect or appearance or mode of activity of vijñāna that is engendered by, and accordingly “resembles” (sādṛśya), the no-longer-extant perceptual object (viṣaya). As this aspect of cognition is causally determined by the object, Sautrāntikas could insist that, while our sense percepts are always after the fact, they are nonetheless empirically grounded in the external world.
In contrast, Vaibhāsikas believe that sensory cognition grasps the object in “real time,” and hence there is no need to engage the notion of ākāra to mediate a temporal gap. However, Vaibhāsikas and Sautrāntikas agree that mind-cognition arises only after the passing of the perceptual object, so Vaibhāṣika accounts will sometimes aver to the ākāra in their discussion of mind-cognition. But despite a penchant for treating the building blocks of cognition as independently existing entities (dhammas), Vaibhāsikas do not regard the ākāra as such. Instead they identify the ākāra with prajñā (knowledge); it is prajñā qua ākāra that grasps, or assumes the form of, the generic characteristic (sāmānyalakṣaṇa) of the object. Thus for Vaibhāsikas, in mundane (non-dhyānic) cognition the emergence of the ākāra entails conceptual discrimination (which is integral to the activity of prajñā for those who are not spiritual adepts), and this in turn entails the possibility of epistemic error. To use, somewhat loosely, the snake/rope analogy, for Vaibhāsikas, the ākāra is the snake apprehended by mind-cognition (i.e., the rope misidentified by prajñā), while eye-cognition sees something more “rope-like.” I am reluctant to call the content of eye-cognition a “rope” proper; while Vaibhāsikas hold that eye-cognition directly perceives an aggregate (heji 和集), as opposed to individual atoms or a provisionally existing assemblage (hehe 和合) of atoms, to label this aggregate a “rope” would entail some degree of conceptual discrimination, and this is precisely what is in question. Note also that it is even more challenging to locate anything resembling a “rope” in the Sautrāntika schema, since in their model not even sense cognition grasps its object directly.

I would reiterate that this is a highly simplified version of ākāra theory, and it appears that both Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas struggled in their attempts to make sense of it. To give a single illustration, Vaibhāṣikas hold that the sensory object is immediately available to sense cognition, and thus there is no need to reference an ākāra. The ākāra, qua prajñā, is involved only in the conceptual recognition of the generic characteristic of the object by mind-cognition. But here they run into a problem, since according to Vaibhāṣika orthodoxy, prajñā is one of the ten omnipresent mental factors (mahābhūmikadharma, dadī 大地法), and thus it must, by definition, attend the arising of all cognition, both sensory and mental. In fact, the problem pertains not only to prajñā, but to ideation (saṃjñā) and recollection (smṛti) as well. How can these universal mental factors, which are associated with conceptual knowledge, be operative in non-conceptual sensory cognition? The Vaibhāṣika solution, in brief, is to claim that in sensory cognition, prajñā, saṃjñā, and smṛti are present but too “weak” to be active. We will return to this theory in more detail below.

Putting aside such complexities, it would appear that the notion of ākāra arose to help fill the epistemic gaps between what we perceive, what we think we perceive, and what is really there. At times, it seems to occupy a space betwixt and between the various fundamental elements (dhātu) that

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comprise the building blocks of cognition. Indeed, ākāra might be seen as an emergent entity, save that Vaibhāṣika exegetes are mereological reductionists—they hold that only indivisible parts are real—and they thus repudiate the ultimate reality and causal efficacy of aggregate entities. For our immediate purposes, we need simply note that all Ābhidharmikā voices agree that the “object” grasped by mind-cognition—the ākāra, however it is understood—is the outcome of a multistep process that involves, at some point along the way, conceptual discrimination. They disagree, however, as to precisely when and where conceptuality kicks in.

Before turning to the issue of non-discriminating cognition, we will look briefly at one more controversy that divided Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika theorists. Recall the lines from the arising-of-mind pericope: “In dependence on the eye and forms, eye-cognition arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, feeling [comes to be]...” One question raised by Ābhidharmikas is whether “contact” (sparśa) is simply a term for the convergence of sense object, sense faculty, and sense cognition, or whether it is a discrete entity in its own right.23

Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy holds that the determining marker of ultimate (as opposed to nominal) existence is causal efficacy. Vaibhāṣikas could then cite the scriptural passage—“with contact as the condition, feeling [comes to be]”—in support of their claim that contact is a real entity (dravya), as it is the cause for the arising of feeling (vedanā). Moreover, given the Vaibhāṣika doctrine of simultaneous causation, contact can be deemed the “effect” of the convergence of object, faculty, and cognition, yet still coexist with them in the same instant. The Sautrāntikas disagree; they argue that contact is simply a nominal entity (prajñapti) that designates the convergence of object, faculty, and cognition, and it is this convergence that brings about feeling. This is consistent with the Sautrāntika tendency to resist the unnecessary reification of dharms, but it is also mandated by their rejection of simultaneous causation. Were contact a discrete entity occasioned by the convergence, it would have to appear after the passing of object, faculty, and cognition, and it seems odd to claim that “contact” arises when the objects that are in contact are no longer extant.24

The debate over the existential status of contact is tied to a much broader controversy concerning the relationship between mind (citta) and its attendant “concomitant mental factors” (caitasi, caita). The concomitant factors are the various cognitive functions that arise with, and bear upon, the operations of mind, including contact (sparśa), ideation (sāṃjñā), recollection (smṛti), and knowledge (prajñā). The question, then, is whether mind and its concomitant factors are ultimately one thing or many. The Vaibhāṣikas treat all the concomitant factors as they do contact, that is, as real, discrete, causally efficacious entities that are “associated” (sāmprayuktā) with, but not identical to, mind (citta). In contrast, Dārśṭāntika and Sautrāntika exegetes are less inclined to reify the concomitant factors, and
regard them instead as distinct “aspects” or “modes” of mind (cittaviśeṣa, xin chabie 心差別). But there is considerable difference of opinion among individual Dārṣṭāntika and Sautrāntika masters on this issue. Some say that all concomitant factors are merely aspects of mind (citta) or cognition (vijñāna), some that they are aspects of volition (cetanā), and some propose a truncated list of three real concomitant factors (vedanā, samjñā, and cetanā), each of which is accompanied by cognition. (In this last account, which is influenced in part by the canonical list of five skandhas, the remaining concomitant factors are subsumed under volition.) But given that mind, cognition, and volition are used somewhat interchangeably by Ābhidharmikas, the variations among the anti-reificationist theories need not concern us here.25

At first glance this larger debate might appear as just more scholastic pedantry, but the underlying issue is of considerable philosophical import. Is mind (citta) something that exists over and above its cognitive functions and states, or does the term refer precisely to those functions and states? And where does consciousness fit into the picture? Is it something that properly belongs to a singular if continuously transforming entity (“mind”), or does it emerge through the complex interactions of distributed but interdependent processes? (Framed in this way, the controversy is reminiscent of modern debates surrounding reductionism, eliminativism, epiphenomenalism, and so on.) This issue was pressing and consequential for early commentators, yet the scriptures provided little guidance—they don’t clearly differentiate terms like vijñāna, citta, and manas, they say little about the asymmetry between the five sense cognitions and mind-cognition, and they don’t address the problem of simultaneous versus successive causation.26 This was left for the Ābhidharmikas to sort through.

Knowing Blue

We have seen that, for Vaibhāṣikas, the recognition of the object by mind-cognition is a two-step process, while for Sautrāntikas it involves three steps. Both agree, however, that prior to the conceptual recognition of a sense object by mind-cognition, the object is grasped non-conceptually by sensory cognition. This non-conceptual perceptual moment is described in the Vijnānakāya-śāstra (Apidamo shishen zulun 阿毘達磨識身足論), one of the earliest Sarvāstivāda compendia, as follows.27

There are six cognition bodies, namely, eye-cognition, ear, nose, taste, touch, and mind-cognition. Eye-cognition is only able to discern blue; it is unable to discern “this is blue.” Mind-cognition is also able to discern blue. As long as [mind-cognition] is unable to discern [the color’s] name, it is unable to discern “this is blue.” But should it be able to discern its name, it discerns, at the same time, both “blue” and “this is blue.” The colors yellow, red, white, and so on are [analyzed] in the same way as the color blue. Ear-cognition is only able to
discern a sound; it is unable to discern “this is a sound.” Mind-cognition is also able to discern the sound. As long as it is unable to discern its name, it is unable to discern “this is a sound.” But should it be able to discern its name, it discerns, at the same time, the sound and “this is a sound.”

The Viṃśikāya passage goes on to repeat the same formula for nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and touch, and concludes by saying that “mind-cognition is also able to discern all dhammas” 意識亦能了別諸法.

The notion that sense perception is to mental perception what knowing blue is to knowing “this is blue” would prove beguiling—it shows up regularly in later Ābhidharmika, Pramāṇavāda, and Yogācāra treatises. Vasubandhu draws on it, for example, in his discussion of “contact” (sparśa) in his Abhidharmakośa (Apidamo jushe lun 阿毘達磨俱舍論). Traditionally, there are said to be six kinds of contact—one associated with each of the six cognitions. But the Vaibhāṣikas, drawing on a distinction attested in the sūtras, divide them into two types. The first is known as “contact of resistance” (pratigha-samāsparśa, youdui chu 有對觸), as it is associated with the resistance a sense faculty encounters when confronted with a material object (rūpa). The second is “contact of verbal designation” (adhi vacana-samāsparśa, zengyu chu 增語觸) and is associated exclusively with the mind and its encounter with a name or concept. Vasubandhu explains it as follows.

(30cd) Five [kinds of contact] are associated with resistance, and the sixth is conjoined with a verbal designation.

Commentary: The five kinds of contact of the [senses such as the] eye etc. are called “resistance [contact],” as their bases (āśraya) are the faculties that resist [their objects]. The sixth is mental contact, which is called “designation [contact].” The reason is that designation means “name,” and name is the primary object grasped through mental contact. It is for this reason that it is called designation contact. Thus it is said that eye-cognition alone is able to know blue, but it does not know “this is blue.” Mind-cognition knows blue and knows “this is blue.” Therefore the name is primary. Thus the name “resistance contact” is derived from its basis (āśraya), while the name “designation contact” is derived from its cognitive object (ālambana).

五相應有對。第六俱增語。論曰。眼等五觸說名有對。以有對根為所依故。第六意觸說名增語。所以然者。增語謂名。名是意觸所緣長境。故偏就此名增語觸。如說眼識但能了青不了是青。意識了青亦是是青。故名為長。故有對觸名從所依。增語觸名就所緣立。 (T.1558: 29.52c4-10)
The distinction between resistance contact and designation contact is thus predicated on the different ontologies of their perceptual objects, and this is captured epistemically in the distinction between knowing blue and knowing “this is blue.”

Sanghabhadra will similarly reference “knowing blue” in his discussion of mind-cognition in his *Nyāyānusāra* (Apidamo shun zhengli lun 阿毘達磨順正理論).

When the treatise says “cognition is that which discerns,” it means that it apprehends in a general manner the characteristic of the object field. Each [kind of cognition] apprehends generally this or that object's characteristic. To say that each [kind of cognition] individually discerns means that although many kinds of objects, including form, [sound, taste, smell] and so on, may be present, eye-cognition will still only apprehend form and will not apprehend sound and so on, and it will only apprehend blue but not the designation “blue” and so on, and not that it is pleasing or not pleasing, not that it is male or female, not that it is a man or a tree stump, not that it is gained or lost, and so on. Just as eye-cognition, with respect to its own objects, only generally apprehends their characteristics, the remaining cognitions should be understood accordingly.

These texts all concur that the difference between non-conceptual sensory cognition and conceptual mind-cognition is captured in the claim that the eye knows blue but not “this is blue.” This bare sensation of blue appears, at least on the surface, to be what analytic philosophers call a “quale” or “raw feel.” But just as with qualia, the claim raises a host of thorny questions. What, if anything, might be said about the nature or content of this blue quale, given that it is bereft of any generic “blueness”?

As discussed above, five sense cognitions are sometimes said to apprehend the “inherent characteristic” (svalaṅkṣaṇa) of the object—a transient particular—while mind-cognition apprehends the “generic characteristic” (sāmānyalakṣaṇa) which involves the application of concepts and categories. Such a distinction is necessitated, in part, by the Vaibhāṣika doctrine that a sense faculty can only apprehend an object that is immediately present, and thus no two moments of sense cognition apprehend the same object-field (viśaya).30 (While the object-field grasped by sense cognition is continually changing, the perceptual object [ālambana] of mind-cognition, which is apprehended via a conceptual category, can persist from one moment to the next.) But Vaibhāṣikas are aware that, although the immediate sense perception of a svalaṅkṣaṇa does not involve the use of concepts and language, it still entails some minimal discriminative capacity—after all, the claim, it would appear, is that eye-cognition can
differentiate blue from yellow or red or white, and that this occurs in the perceptual stream prior to the application of concepts such as “blue” and “yellow” and “red” and “white.” The Vaibhaśikas then devise a specific discriminative mechanism, namely “inherent discrimination” (svabhāvavikalpa), to account for this capacity, and they explain it with reference to two mental factors, vitarka (jue 覚, xun 寻) and vicāra (guan 観, si 伺), which might be rendered “coarse discernment” and “fine discernment.” (For reasons that will become clear below, I will leave these two terms untranslated in this essay.)

These complex notions turn out to be key to understanding what it means to know blue but not “this is blue.”

Vitarka, Vicāra, and the Three Kinds of Discrimination

The vitarka–vicāra pair appears frequently in early sūtras, and while their precise meaning is neither clear nor consistent, both terms initially seem to have been associated with thought, rumination, or the inner discursive activity that precedes speech. In time, vitarka came to be understood as the initial and imprecise detection/discernment/recognition of a perceptual object, while vicāra is understood as the subsequent mental inspection of said object. Accordingly, many commentators, both medieval and modern, interpret the two terms as two kinds or degrees of conceptual discrimination or discursive thought. This is evident in the various English translations, in which vitarka shows up as “conception,” “ideation,” “reasoning,” “examination,” “inquiry,” “directed thought,” and “initial application of thought,” while vicāra is rendered “investigation,” “scrutiny,” “judgment,” “sustained application of thought,” and so on.

Extended discussions of the vitarka–vicāra pair can be found in paracanonical works such as the Peṭakopadesa and Milindapañha, as well as the *Vimokṣaṁārga-śāstra (or *Vimuttimagga, Jietuo dao lun 解脫道論), and Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga and Aṭṭhasālinī. The following passage from the *Vimokṣaṁārga, which draws on the same stock of illustrations found in the Peṭakopadesa and Milindapañha, is typical of this literature.

Question: What is the difference between vitarka and vicāra?
Answer: It can be compared to striking a bell. The initial sound is vitarka, and the reverberations that follow constitute vicāra. Again, it can be compared to mind [apprehending an] object. The initial [contact] is vitarka and what follows is vicāra. Moreover, seeking dhyāna is vitarka, and maintaining it is vicāra. And again, recalling is vitarka, and not losing it is vicāra. And again, bearing in mind with a coarse mind is vitarka, while bearing in mind with a refined mind is vicāra. Where there is vitarka there is vicāra, but where there is vicāra there may or may not be vitarka. As it says in the Tripitaka, “The initial settling of the mind on something is vitarka. Having attained vitarka, if the mind is not yet stabilized, then it is vicāra.”
When you see someone coming from afar you are not initially aware if it is a man or woman. Then you become aware that it is a man or woman with a particular color and form—this is vitarka. Thereupon you can discern whether the person has virtue or lacks virtue, is rich or is poor, is noble or base—this is vicāra.

Vitarka seeks out [the object] and draws it near, while vicāra holds to it and follows it. It is like a bird rising into the sky; the [initial] movement of its wings is vitarka, and the stabilization of its flight is vicāra.

When something is first taught, [the knowledge gained] is vitarka; having been instructed over time, it is vicāra. By means of vitarka one holds [the object in mind], and by means of vicāra one investigates it. By means of vitarka one delerates, and by means of vicāra one pursues those deliberations.

Notice that some of the analogies, such as the initial striking of a bell (which, being percussive, lasts for but an instant before the reverberations set in), lend themselves to a more non-conceptual understanding, while others, such as recognizing a distant figure as male or female, might seem more conceptual. In his detailed analysis of the terms, Lance Cousins (1992:153) summarizes the early Pali Abhidhamma understanding as follows: “vitakka is ‘thinking of’ something, whereas vicāra is ‘thinking about’ that same thing.” This formulation is intriguingly reminiscent of the distinction between knowing blue and knowing “this is blue.”

It appears that early Abhidharmikas did not initially deploy vitarka and vicāra in their analyses of sense perception per se. Their exegetical interests lay, rather, in distinguishing different dhyānic states. That vitarka is “coarse” and vicāra “subtle” helped to differentiate the coarser quality of mind in the first stage of dhyāna from the more refined mind in the second stage.35 As for mundane (non-dhyānic) perception, early Sarvāstivāda compendia state that vitarka and vicāra are both present in sense cognition and mind-cognition. For example, the *Abhidharma/da (or *Abhidharmasāra, Apitan xinlun 阿毘昙心論), 36 one of the earliest surviving Sarvāstivāda compilations, says, “There are five that possess vitarka and vicāra; the three [elements] have three possibilities; everything else lacks it” 有覺有觀五。三行三餘無. The auto-commentary explains,

As for “the five that possess vitarka and vicāra”: the five spheres of [sense] cognition as well as vitarka and vicāra are coarse, and thus [the sense cognitions] are associated with vitarka and vicāra. As for “the three [elements]
have three possibilities": the elements (dhātu) of the mind-faculty, dharmas, and mind-cognition—these are the three. When they occur in either [1] the desire realm or in the first level of dhyāna, then they have vitarka and vicāra. [2] Should they be in the intermediate level of dhyāna, then there is no vitarka but some vicāra. [3] Everything above that is without vitarka and vicāra. As for "everything else lacks it": this means that the remaining elements are neither vitarka nor vicāra, because they are not associated with them.

The Mahāvibhāṣā (Apidamo dapiposha lun 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論) confirms that both vitarka and vicāra are associated with the five sense cognitions: “The five sense cognitions such as the eye and so on arise always in association with vitarka and vicāra” 眼等五識恒與尋伺相應起故 (T.1545: 27.377b6). And kārikā 1.32 of the Abhidharmakośa asserts the same thing: “The five cognitions are [always accompanied] by vitarka and vicāra; of the latter three [elements associated with manas], there are three [possibilities]; everything else lacks it” 五識唯尋伺。後三三餘無.37 Vasubandhu explains this as follows.

The five sensory cognitions of the eye etc. have both vitarka and vicāra. They always arise in association with vitarka and vicāra because their mode of activity (ākāra) is coarse and directed toward external objects. To clarify this, the verse uses the term “limited to.” The “latter three” are the mind-faculty, dharmas, and mind-cognition, because among the faculties, spheres, and cognitions, those [associated with manas] come last. These last three elements can be of three kinds. [1] The mind faculty and mind cognition and its associated dharma element, with the exception of vitarka and vicāra, when in the realm of desire or in the first dhyāna, are with both vitarka and vicāra. [2] In the intermediate dhyāna they lack vitarka and have only vicāra. [3] The second dhyāna and above—all the stages up to and including the highest stage (bhavāgra)—lack both vitarka and vicāra.

These passages, all of which concern the nature of dhyāna, agree that vitarka and vicāra are present in sense cognition as well as in mundane mind-cognition. As such, they would not seem immediately relevant to the asymmetry between sense-cognition and mind-cognition.

However, as Sarvāstivāda writers pondered the conceptually unconstructed character of sense cognition, vitarka and vicāra were brought into play. Exegetes, drawing on earlier materials that associated the pair with the initial moments of perceptual recognition, would expand on the notion
that vitarka denotes the “coarse” functioning of mind (cittaudārikatā, cuxin 麁心), while vicāra is mind operating in a more fine-grained or “subtle” manner (cittasūkṣmatā, xixin 細心). 38 On the basis of this distinction, and in some tension with statements in the *Abhidharmahṛdaya, Mahāvibhāṣā, and the Abhidharmakośa* that both vitarka and vicāra are present in sense cognition, Vaibhāṣika commentators will claim that vitarka alone is active (as opposed to simply present) in sensory perception. 39 Vitarka is that rudimentary or “coarse” mode of recognition that knows blue, while vicāra is a more refined discriminatory capacity involved in knowing “this is blue.”

But this immediately creates a problem, as the orthodox and widely accepted Ābhidharmika position was that the operations of the five sense cognitions were avikalpaka—non-discriminating. Yet the Vaibhāṣikas could not deny that vitarka involved some form of discrimination, even if relatively rudimentary or primitive. Indeed, as we have seen, vitarka was commonly associated with thinking or reflection (saṃkalpa, siwei 思惟, etc.). This apparent contradiction was not lost on the Ābhidharmikas, and the problem is raised directly in the *Abhidharmakośa*.

If the five sensory cognitions are always accompanied by vitarka and vicāra, why are they explained as being free from discrimination?

(1.33ab) They are explained as free from discrimination as they are [free from] examination and recollection (nirūpanā anusmaraṇavikalpaṇā-vikalpāḥ) . . . .

According to the Vaibhāṣikas, there are, in brief, three kinds of discrimination (vikalpa): (1) inherent discrimination (svabhāvavikalpa); (2) discrimination through examination (abhinirūpanāvikalpa); and (3) discrimination through recollection (anusmaraṇavikalpa). The five sensory cognitions are explained as free from discrimination insofar as they have inherent [discrimination] but not the other two kinds. It is like a one-footed horse that is called a horse without feet. Inherent discrimination alone is vitarka.

若五識身有尋有伺。如何得說無分別耶。頌曰。說五無分別由計度隨念 . . . 論曰。傳說。分別略有三種。一自性分別。二計度分別。三隨念分別。由五識身雖有自性而無餘二。說無分別。如一足馬名為無 足。自性分別體唯是尋。40

This is a revealing passage; pace the widespread understanding that sense cognition is “without discrimination,” the Vaibhāṣikas concede that it does in fact have some capacity to discriminate, if only in a rather crude fashion. The Vaibhāṣikas come up with an amusing apologia for this inconsistency, namely, that sense cognition is said to lack discrimination in the same way that a one-footed horse is said to lack feet! It would appear that the Vaibhāṣikas simply couldn’t make sense of “direct” sensory perception without bringing in some sort of discriminative capacity. After all, knowing blue must be to know, at the very least, that it is something other than yellow or red or white.
The Vaibhāṣika doctrine of “three kinds of discrimination” (*trivikalpa, san fenbie 三分別) allows us to distinguish this rudimentary cognitive capacity from more complex and decidedly conceptual forms of discrimination. In what I will propose as a “charitable” reading of this doctrine, svabhāvavikalpa—a term intended to denote the very “essence” or “intrinsic nature” (svabhāva) of discrimination itself—is simply to register difference. Arguably, such a capacity is fundamental to, if not definitive of, sentience itself; all life forms can distinguish, in some manner, food from non-food, mates from non-mates, and so on. Given its ubiquity, this capacity must not be dependent on concepts or language or discursive thought or even, perhaps, conscious awareness. This is why I have been careful to translate vikalpa, when used by the Abhidharmikas, as “discrimination” rather than “conception” or “imagining.” (“Conception” and “imagining” may be more appropriate renderings in later Yogācāra, Madhyamika, and Pramāṇavāda writings.) I have been similarly careful to translate vijñāna as “cognition,” rather than the more common “consciousness.” Whether the cognitive capacity of direct sense cognition—the ability of eye-cognition to discriminate or register “blue”—entails what we could call phenomenal consciousness or whether it might be subliminal or subdoxastic is a fraught topic that we will visit brieﬂy below.

To return then to vitarka and vicāra, we saw that the *Abhidhammaḥdaya, Mahāvibhāṣā, and Abhidharmakośa all contain statements to the effect that both vitarka and vicāra exist in sense cognition. But at the end of the Abhidharmakośa passage on the subject, or at least at the end of Xuanzang’s translation, it says that svabhāvavikalpa—the minimal discriminative capacity associated with sense cognition—“is vitarka alone” (自性分別體唯是尋). Xuanzang’s translation, completed in 654, matches the extant Sanskrit text: tatra svabhāvavikalpo vitarkah. But curiously, our earliest textual witness to the Abhidharmakośa, namely, Paramārtha’s (Zhenzi 真諦, 499–569) translation completed in 567, reads: “among the [three vikalpa], the svabhāvavikalpa is precisely vitarka–vicāra” 此中自性分別即是覺觀 (T.1559: 29.168b3-4).

One might dismiss this inconsistency as an anomaly. Yet we find a similar inconsistency in the Mahāvibhāṣā discussion of the three kinds of discrimination. The Mahāvibhāṣā passage may be the earliest reference to the *trivikalpa doctrine in any extant Sarvāstivāda text, not to mention the source for Vasubandhu’s discussion in the Abhidharmakośa. In Xuanzang’s translation, the passage reads as follows:

There are, in brief, three kinds of discrimination (vikalpa): (1) inherent discrimination, which is to say vitarka and vicāra; (2) discrimination through recollection, which is to say the recollection [that arises] associated with mind-cognition; and (3) discrimination through examination, which is the unsettled (vyagrá) knowledge of the manas.
略为三種分別。一自性分別。謂尋伺。二隨念分別。謂意識相應念。三推度分別。謂意地不定慧。(T.1545: 27.219b7-9)

Xuanzang’s translation of the Mahāvibhāṣā thus associates inherent discrimination with both vitarka and vicāra. But this is not the case in the earlier translation of the same passage by Buddhavarman (Futuobamo 浮陀跋摩, d.u.) and Daotai 道泰 (d.u.), completed in 437:

Discrimination is of three kinds: there is inherent discrimination, discrimination through recall, and discrimination through contemplation. As for inherent discrimination, it is vitarka. Discrimination through recall is recollection. Discrimination through contemplation is knowledge.

分別有三種。有自體分別。有憶念分别。有現觀分別。自體分別者。謂覺是也。憶念分別者。謂念是也。現觀分別者。謂慧是也。(T.1546: 28.169b5-7)

So in the early translation of the Mahāvibhāṣā, which is also our earliest witness to the *trivikalpa doctrine, the inherent discrimination characteristic of sense cognition is said to be vitarka alone, but Xuanzang’s later translation includes both vitarka and vicāra. This is the precise inverse of what we found in the two translations of Abhidharmakośa, in which Paramārtha’s earlier translation associates inherent discrimination with both vitarka and vicāra, while Xuanzang’s later text has only vitarka. Moreover, we have already seen that other sections of these same works, as well as the earlier *Abhidharmahṛdaya, explicitly state that vitarka and vicāra are both present in sense cognition. What is going on?

These texts may provide us with a murky but nonetheless telling glimpse into the struggle that Sarvāstivāda exegetes faced in explaining the discriminative capacities of non-conceptual sense perception. They recruited vitarka and vicāra for this purpose—following scriptural precedent, they used vitarka to reference the initial non-conceptual and somewhat crude impression of the object by the senses (the striking of the bell), and vicāra for the subsequent mental investigation of said object (the ensuing reverberations), but they were stymied by orthodox teachings that associated both vitarka and vicāra with sense cognition. This paralleled the problem posed by mental factors such as recollection (smṛti) and knowledge (prajñā). Recall that recollection and knowledge are both classified as “omnipresent mental factors” (mahābhūmika), and as such must be present in all cognition, including that of the five material senses. How to square the fact that vicāra, smṛti, and prajñā are all stated to be present in non-conceptual sense cognition, yet all three seem to entail conceptuality? This is where the *trivikalpa doctrine came to the rescue.

To see how this works, let’s turn to the Mahāvibhāṣā discussion of the meaning of vitarka and vicāra, which is the reference point for all later Vaibhāṣika discussions of the issue. The passage begins with a definition of vitarka.
What is vitarka? Answer: when any of the [six kinds] of cognition seek out, distinguish, reveal, determine, represent, and discriminate [the object’s] nature and category, this is vitarka. While the terms, such as “seeking out” etc., for this quality of cognition may differ, there is no difference in essence, since all these terms express the essential nature of vitarka.

This passage goes on to critique those (Dārśṭāntika?) exegetes who hold that vitarka and vicāra are mere nominal entities, and who further maintain that, since the meanings of vitarka and vicāra are relational and mutually contradictory, it makes little sense to say that both could coexist in the same instant. The position of the Mahāvibhāṣa is that vitarka and vicāra are in fact real entities (dharma) that can coexist in time, but at any particular moment one or the other will come to the fore. To make its point, the text uses various illustrations, such as putting vinegar and water or salt and grits in one’s mouth at the same time—some of the flavors (vinegar, salt) are sharp and others (water, grits) dull; both are present, but at any one time one will dominate over the other.42

After clarifying the relationship between vitarka and vicāra, the text goes on, as we have seen, to introduce the three kinds of vikalpa: “There are three kinds of discrimination: (1) inherent discrimination, which is to say vitarka–vicāra; (2) discrimination through recollection, which is the recollection associated with mind-cognition; and (3) discrimination through examination, which is the knowing associated with mind-cognition when not absorbed in meditation.” Notice that the second kind of discrimination is associated with recollection (smṛti), and third with knowledge (prajñā). The passage continues,

In the realm of desire, the five cognitions have only [the first] kind, namely, inherent discrimination. Although they also have recollection, it is not the discrimination of recollection because they are incapable of recollection. Although they also have knowledge, it is not the discrimination of examination, for they are incapable of examination.

The *trivikalpa doctrine thus allows the Mahāvibhāṣa to distinguish recollection (smṛti) per se, from the discriminatory capacity of recollection (anusmaraṇa-vikalpa); and to distinguish knowledge (prajñā) per se, from the discriminatory capacity of knowledge (abhinirūpaṇāvikalpa). The Vaibhāṣikas can then claim that recollection and knowledge, which are counted among the omnipresent (mahābhūmika) mental factors, are indeed present in sense cognition, but not so their discriminatory capacities. The forms of discrimination associated with recollection and knowledge, which entail reflection and conceptual thought, are
only available to mind-cognition. And while our sources, as we have seen, are not always consistent, they now can handle vicāra similarly. In other words, they can concede that while vicāra may be present along with vitarka in sense cognition (as scripturally mandated), only vitarka is operative. So to return to the inconsistencies we found in the translations of the Mahāvibhāṣā and the Abhidharmakośa: both texts, following Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy, confirm that vitarka and vicāra are present in sense cognition, as are smṛti and prajñā, but they then aver to the *trivikalpa doctrine to show how such conceptualizing capacities are not operative. “Inherent discrimination” is associated with vitarka but not smṛti and prajñā. But the question remained: what about vicāra? Recall that authoritative texts invariably associate vicāra with vitarka when it comes to sense cognition. Does this mean that vicāra is active in inherent discrimination or not? That different Chinese translations provide conflicting responses to this question may reflect the fact that it took time to sort out the details of the new *trivikalpa theory. In other words, rather than being simple errors on the part of the Chinese translators or later copyists, the variant renderings may reflect real inconsistencies among early recensions of the source texts.

In any case, the *trivikalpa doctrine might seem like a gerrymandered solution to a non-problem. That is to say, the question as to how conceptual dharmas can be present in a non-conceptual state might appear artificial insofar as it is occasioned by an inordinately rigid system of classifying dharmas. Had the Vaibhāṣikas simply built in more flexibility, as did the Sautrāntikas, the problem would never have arisen. Why not just reclassify vicāra, smṛti, prajñā, sanātana and other eminently conceptual caitasika such that they don’t end up associated with non-conceptual sense cognition?43 But this response fails to appreciate the philosophical conundrum with which they were wrestling. The Ābhidharmikas recognized that cognition of any kind must involve some minimal discriminatory capacity. That is to say, to discern or detect blue, even at its most primitive, is to distinguish it from yellow and red, and it is difficult to make sense of this unless the cognitive system has some “retention” (i.e., smṛti) and “cognizance” (i.e., prajñā) of yellow and red—the residuum of past experience—even when the percepts of yellow and red are not present. (Were we to live in a world where everything were blue, there would be no “blue.”) In short, the Ābhidharmikas had good reason to assume that any cognitive event must entail a modicum of discrimination, recollection, and knowledge. At the same time, the Ābhidharmikas were committed to a number of not-unreasonable metaphysical postulates, including, (1) the constituent elements of reality are in continual flux; (2) conceptual recognition of a percept involves applying a generic name to a transient particular that emerges from the flux; and (3) there must be a temporal gap between the moment when the transient particular is first apprehended and the subsequent moment when it is identified with a generic name. In short, in this “empiricist” model, a sense datum must first be

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cognitively available as a raw feel for it to serve as the object of mental reflection. The Ābhidharmikas were thus forced to confront a problem familiar to contemporary philosophy of mind, namely, how to characterize the nature and status of this raw feel.

So the Ābhidharmikas punted: they proffered the theory of three kinds of discrimination (*trivikalpa) that would explain, at one and the same time, (1) that there is indeed a modicum of coarse discriminatory activity in what was previously supposed to be a non-discriminative (avikalpaka) state, and (2) that certain mental factors (smṛti, prajñā, saṃjñā), normally deemed conceptual, are present but not yet (fully?) active, in non-conceptual sense cognition. The other two kinds of discrimination—those associated with active knowledge and recollection—are the preserve of mind-cognition, which has both vitarka and vicāra. The Abhidharmakośa explains,

The essence of the diffuse knowledge belonging to mental [reflection] is recollection. “Diffuse” means not concentrated. The diffuse knowledge associated with mind-cognition is called discrimination through examination. Whether [mind] is concentrated or not, the recollection associated with mind-cognition is called discrimination through recollection.

意地散慧諸念為體。散謂非定。意識相應散慧名為計度分別。若定若散意識相應諸念名為隨念分別。(T.1558: 29.8b6-8)

Later texts will reaffirm the claim that smṛti, prajñā, and even saṃjñā are present in sense cognition, but that they are inactive or weak. In the *Nyāyānusāra discussion of the three kinds of discrimination, for example, after Sanghabhadra notes that “the essence of inherent discrimination is vitarka alone” 自性分別體唯是尋 (T.1562: 29.350b11), he goes on to clarify, “although the five sense faculties are associated with knowledge and memory, their capacity to discern and register [therein] is minuscule, and thus [knowledge and memory] are only grasped by mind” 五識雖與慧念相應。擇記用微。故唯取意 (T.1562: 29.350b17-18).

Accordingly, the mature Vaibhāṣika position is that the capacity of eye-cognition to register blue but not know “this is blue” does involve a minimal kind of discrimination (svabhāvavikalpa), and that this is associated with a rudimentary or coarse form of recognition (vitarka) as well as a weak or minuscule form of memory and recognition. In my “charitable” interpretation of the Vaibhāṣika accounts of direct sense perception, I have been careful to disaggregate these rudimentary forms of discrimination from conceptuality per se. This is mandated by the fact that we normally associate conceptuality with language, and, for the Vaibhāṣikas, the use of nominal designations is simply not available to sense cognition. But while I believe this charitable account may well capture the intent of our Vaibhāṣika authors, they have trouble making it stick.
One problem is the claim that the omnipresent factors are present but operate only weakly. This is difficult to swallow when it comes to factors like knowing (prajñā) and ideation (saṃjñā), since it is unclear what functionality they retain, however minimal, once they are stripped of access to names and concepts. Take ideation for example: Abhidharmikas agree that the nature of ideation is to recognize the inherent characteristic (nimitta, xiang 相) of the object.\(^{44}\) The Abhidharmakośa, for example, defines ideation as follows:

The essence of the aggregate of ideation is that it apprehends appearances, which is to say it grasps characteristics such as blue, yellow, long, short, man, woman, enemy, friend, pain, pleasure, and so on. This is further divided into six kinds of ideation [associated with each of the cognitions] as was explained above in reference to feeling (vedanā).

Commentators explain that the capacity to grasp the characteristic is tied to the application of names—associating a transient particular with a generic category or class. The *Abhidharmāvatāra (Ru apidamo lun 入阿毘達磨論) expands on the definition above.

Moreover, in the Abhidharmakośa, ideation is related to “view” (drṣṭi), and we learn that ideation can be in error: “It is the force of mistaken ideation that leads to attachment to various views” 倒想力故貪著諸見 (T.1558: 29.5b14). Given such definitions, it is difficult to imagine what a minimal “non-conceptual” form of ideation might look like.

Similarly, post-Mahāvibhāṣā compilations, including the Abhidharmakośa, *Samyuktābhidharmahṛdaya (Za apitan xin lun 雜阿毘昙心論), *Nyāyānusāra, and Abhidharmāvatāra, associate vitarka with the primitive and non-conceptualizing discriminative capacity of sense cognition, and vicāra with the more conceptual and discursive discriminative operations of mind-cognition.\(^{46}\) Yet they stumble over themselves in their attempts to define non-conceptualizing yet discriminative vitarka. Take, as one final example, the definition of vitarka in the Abhidharmāvatāra:

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Vitarka has the characteristic of causing mind to be coarse with regard to an object. It is also named “discriminative reflection.” Struck by the wind of ideation, it operates in a coarse manner. It is this dharma that serves as the cause of the transformations of the five cognitions.

Try as they might, the Ābhidharmikas couldn’t seem to give a robust account of immediate non-conceptual sense perception—of what it means to just know blue—without bringing conceptuality—the “wind of ideation”—into the picture.

What (if Anything) Sees?

The Abhidharmakośa (kārikā 1.16ab) defines cognition (vijñāna) as “discerning [the sense object corresponding] to each [sense sphere]; it is [also] what is called the sphere of the mental” 識謂各了別。此即名意處 (vijñānam prati-vijñaptir manaḥyatanaḥ ca tat). The auto-commentary elaborates, “each [consciousness] discerns its own object domain; it grasps in general the object’s characteristic, and thus is called cognition” 各各了別彼彼界。總取境相故名識蘊.48 But the definition, which is typical of the literature, seems too circular to be of much help, and it leaves unclear whether vijñāna is a something that does the discerning, or if it is the discerning itself.

Indeed, the question of what exactly sees became the subject of a protracted debate within the Sarvāstivāda world. The Mahāvibhāṣā records a range of early opinions on the issue. The orthodox Vaibhāṣika position is that it is the eye faculty in conjunction with eye-cognition that sees, but at least two Vaibhāṣika masters disagreed: Dharmatrātra argued that it is eye-cognition, while Ghoṣaka said it is knowledge (prajñā) in conjunction with eye-cognition. The Mahāvibhāṣā reports two additional responses as well: Dārśāntika masters claim that it is the collocation (hehe 合, sāmagrī) of object, faculty, and cognition that sees, while the Vātsiputriya claimed that seeing is done by only one eye at a time.49 Later Sarvāstivāda compendia will return repeatedly to this debate, and extended discussions are found in the Pañcavastuka-vibhāṣa (Wushi piposha lun 五事毘婆沙論, T.1555: 28.991b20 ff.), *Samyuktābhidharma-hṛdaya (T.1552: 28.876b12 ff.), Abhidharmakośa (T.1558: 29.10c21 ff.), and *Nyāyānusāra (T.1562: 29.364a23 ff.), among other works.50 A variety of arguments are presented both in defense of, and in opposition to, the various alternatives first articulated in the Mahāvibhāṣā. For example, if it is the eye-faculty that sees, the seeing should be uninterrupted, even when other senses are operative, but we know that only one sense modality is operative at a time. If it is eye-cognition, then it should see even when the eyes are closed, or when the object is obstructed by a screen. A “collocation” of elements cannot see, as the collocation is merely a
provisional concept that refers to the individual entities of which it is comprised. And so on.

At the end of his discussion of “seeing” in the Abhidharmakośa, Vasubandhu presents the Sautrāntika position, which holds that the entire debate is misguided since there is nothing that sees in the first place.

The Sautrāntika masters have this to say: You are all just chewing (khādyate) away at empty space! [According to the sūtras,] “eye-cognition arises in dependence on the eye, forms, etc.” Given such [statements], with respect to seeing, where is a subject and where an object? It is only the cause and effect of [individual] dharmaśs, which don’t actually do anything (nirvyāpāra). In accord with worldly attitudes, we provisionally speak of the eye as that which “sees,” and cognition as that which “knows.” But the wise are not attached to such talk. As the World Honored One taught, one should not obstinately cling to colloquial expressions or stubbornly chase after conventional ideas.

According to this account, as there is nothing that sees or grasps an object, there is also nothing that is seen or grasped. Thus the whole notion of direct sense perception is wrongheaded from the get-go, as it conjures a cogito or subject of experience that apprehends an object. For the Sautrāntikas, such a cogito—something that sees or knows—can only be the ersatz self (ātman) that the Buddhists disavow as a fiction. (Recall that, according to the Sautrāntika analysis, the object of perception is gone before cognition of any kind occurs; hence there is no direct sense perception and no grasper-grasped relationship.) In Chapter 9 of the Abhidharmakośa, in the context of a long refutation of the Vatsiputriya notion of the person (pudgala), Vasubandhu returns to the argument that the cogito is an illusion.

The scriptures state that cognition knows the object. What is cognition doing with respect to this object? It does nothing at all, but merely arises with the object. Just as the effect corresponds to its cause, although it doesn’t do anything, it nevertheless arises resembling the cause, and thus we say that it corresponds to the cause. In the same way, cognition arises without doing anything, yet it resembles the object and thus we speak of it as “knowing” the object. What does it mean to resemble the object? It means that it bears its characteristic. Therefore, although each cognition arises dependent upon a sense faculty, one doesn’t speak of it as “knowing” the faculty but rather as “knowing” the object.

Or [one could say that] cognition continually arises in conjunction with its object, such that a prior cognition is the cause that leads to the arising of a later cognition. To say that cognition “knows” is therefore without fault, since it is common to refer colloquially to a cause as an “agent,” just as it is common to refer colloquially to bells and drums as “calling out.”

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O r we can compare the knowing of cognition to the movements of a flame. Why do we say that a flame is capable of movement? The continuous flickering of the blaze is provisionally called a “flame” [as if it were a single thing]. Since this “flame” continually arises from moment to moment in different places, we say the flame is “moving.” But there is no separate movement. Similarly, the successive instances of mind are provisionally called cognition, and when it arises in conjunction with different objects we speak of it as “knowing.”

The Sautrāntika position, at least as articulated by Vasubandhu, is that there is nothing at all that knows the object—not the eye, or cognition, or the discernment of prajñā. Vasubandhu even rejects the Dārśāntika “emergence” theory that it is the collocation of multiple interdependent entities that sees.

Needless to say, Vasubandhu does not have the last word in this debate. Saṃghabhadra would go on to compose his *Nyāyānusāra to clarify the Vaibhāṣika position and respond to Sautrāntika critiques, notably those presented by Vasubandhu. Among the issues on the table is the Sautrāntika claim that there is no direct perception, since the sense object has passed prior to the arising of sense cognition. Recall that in the Vaibhāṣika two-step analysis, there is direct perception in sensory cognition, but not in mind-cognition—mind only knows an object via conceptual reflection on the throughput of a sense cognition. But in the Sautrāntika three-step model, sense cognition works akin to the Vaibhāṣika understanding of mind-cognition, which is to say that it knows the external object through a mode of re-presentation, that is, the ākāra. Saṃghabhadra disagrees, and while his reasons are many, I suspect that chief among them is a deep and not unwarranted suspicion that the Sautrāntika position will lead to an unorthodox idealism. Such an idealism is counter to the entire Sarvāstivāda project, which involves the determination of the real (causally efficacious) dharmas from which the world is created.

To make his case against the Sautrāntikas, Saṃghabhadra distinguishes between three different kinds of perception (xiăngliăng 現量, pratyakṣa), namely, (1) perception based on the sense faculties (yīgen xianliăng 依根現量, *indiṃyāśītā-pratyakṣa), (2) perception of [inner] feelings (lingna xianliăng 領納現量, *anubhāva-pratyakṣa), and (3) perception of awareness or comprehension (juéliào xianliăng 覺了現量, juehui xianliăng 覺慧現量, *buddhi-pratyakṣa).53 (For the sake of simplicity, following others I’ll refer to them as “sensory perception,” “perceptual experience,” and “perceptual awareness.”) Saṃghabhadra explains,
Sensory perception is based on the five [sense] faculties, and apprehends the five outer sense fields of form etc. Perceptual experience is the immediate manifestation of the dhamas of mind and associated mental factors such as feeling, ideation, etc. Perceptual awareness is the appropriate recognition of both the nature and characteristics of dhamas.

The first and third kinds of perception are already familiar to us: the first is the immediate sensory impression of the raw datum, and the third is associated with mind-cognition as it grasps the particular and generic characteristics (svalakṣaṇa and sāmānyalakṣaṇa) of dhamas. Saṃghabhadra’s innovation lies in proffering the second kind of perception, “perceptual experience” (or perhaps “inner experience”), which is closely associated with the feeling (vedanā) that arises in response to contact with an external perceptual object (wai jingjie 外界). It can be thought of as the visceral sensation that registers the advantageous or deleterious valence (sunyi 損益), or more simply the pain or pleasure (kule 苦樂), of the sense percept (T.1562: 29.374c).

So in this schema, cognition still consists of two steps, but the first step is now divided into two components: (1) the immediate or bare impression of a sense object, and (2) the feeling or sensation or experience (lingna 領納, anubhāva) that arises in conjunction with this sense impression. These perceptions are functionally distinct but occur in the same instant. The third kind of perception is associated with the awareness or comprehension that attends the subsequent arising of mind-cognition, a perceptual awareness that is predicated on the representational and reflective capacities afforded by names and language.

With this model in hand, Saṃghabhadra can acknowledge that the perceptual awareness associated with mind-cognition does not know the object directly, but nevertheless this awareness would not be possible without a prior direct perceptual encounter with an object.

Only when [a feeling] has vanished into the past can it function as an object that appears in memory. This stage of recollection is called the moment of awareness. From this it follows that perceptual awareness only exists with respect to the perception of things that have been experienced in the past. Therefore it is established that perceptual awareness emerges with respect to what has been personally experienced.

He is now ready to refute the Sautrāntika position that sense cognition arises only after the perceptual object has passed. “Since you [Sautrāntika] claim that past [objects of sense perception such as] forms etc. have never been
experienced perceptually, how can you say that you are perceptually aware with respect to your own experience?" 过去色等。既许未曾现量所受。云何可言如自身受有现量觉。Saṃghabhadra continues:

The feelings of another person are not felt as one’s own perceptual experience, and thus there is no perceptual awareness that knows “I have previously felt that very pain or pleasure.” Hence the knowledge of another person’s feelings is not [acquired through] perceptual awareness. In the same way, if forms etc. are not personally felt by sensory perception, then there could be no perceptual awareness of them that knows “I have previously felt this or that form etc.” The knowledge of that object could not be [acquired through] perceptual awareness.

Moreover, if the five object spheres of forms etc. that presently exist were not grasped perceptually, then the cognitive object (ālambana) would be known only via the arising of a subsequent feeling. As the cognitive object is not something grasped directly through perceptual experience, then one could not claim that “I have previously experienced this pain or pleasure.” It is the same with the knowledge that arises dependent on a past [sense object such as] form etc. Were it the case that its cognitive object was not grasped through a past sense impression, then one could not claim “I have previously experienced this form etc.”

Saṃghabhadra is here insistent that there must be a direct perceptual encounter with an object for there to be conceptual awareness of that object, even though those two moments are not simultaneous. Otherwise there would be no difference in kind between the access we have to our own inner experience, and the access we have to the experiences of others; they would both be after-the-fact conceptual construals. Thus conceptually mediated perceptual awareness must be grounded in an individual’s sensory contact with the world. But to make this argument, Saṃghabhadra is compelled to divide the initial moment of immediate sense perception into two components: the sense impression itself (*indriyāśrita-pratyakṣa), and the feeling (vedanā) or perceptual experience (*anubhāva-pratyakṣa) of said impression. This is tacit acknowledgment of the conundrum at the heart of this paper—how can a sense percept be immediate, non-conceptual, and even non-discriminative on the one hand, and still function as the “content” of conscious experience on the other? So in his innovative three-part division of perception, the pure sensory percept is not, in itself, consciously experienced. The sense perception is experienced only via the feeling that arises in tandem with it. In this way, Saṃghabhadra can have his cake and eat it too.
Final Thoughts

Dhammajoti, drawing on Saṃghabhadra’s presentation of the Sautrāntika position in the *Nyāyānusāra, suggests that Sautrāntikas must hold to something akin to the “self-awareness” or “self-illumination” position later associated with svasaṃvedana.\(^56\) Without it, he believes, Sautrāntikas would be unable to explain the “sense of vividness” associated with sense perception prior to the arising of mind-cognition (2009:255). If I understand him correctly, Dhammajoti is saying that for Sautrāntikas the “subject” and “object” of cognition do not coexist—there is no intentionality, no relationship between grasper and grasped—and thus cognition can only be known if it is self-illuminating or self-intimating. But this may simply reflect Saṃghabhadra’s mischaracterization of the Sautrāntika reductionist (if not eliminativist) position. The sense that conscious awareness is a something that stands in need of explanation—that we need to explain it via a theory of self-illumination or other-illumination or what have you—is an illusion or unwarranted reification precipitated by the tremendous speed at which the causally interconnected cognitive processes that undergird the illusion transpire. In the Sautrāntika analysis, at least as presented by Vasubandhu, just as there is no actual “flame” that moves, there is no “knower” that knows, and hence no “knowing” either.

In his study of Buddhist theories of self-cognition, Yao Zhihua, like Dhammajoti, traces the svasaṃvedana idea back to earlier Mahāsāṃghika and Sautrāntika materials. But curiously, Yao believes that, in positing his doctrine of three perceptions, even Saṃghabhadra—arch-critic of Sautrāntika—comes to embrace something along the lines of self-awareness. Among other things, Yao notes that the new category of “perceptual awareness” is essentially reflective in nature.\(^57\) But it is not clear to me that Saṃghabhadra is interested in the nature of awareness per se any more than is Vasubandhu. His concern, rather, is to render intelligible the orthodox Vaibhāṣika understanding of cognition, in which (1) the full sensorial awareness associated with mind-cognition necessarily involves memory and conceptual construction, and (2) this awareness is nevertheless predicated on a prior moment in which there is a direct, unmediated perceptual encounter with an “external” object. Saṃghabhadra wants to prove that, prior to knowing “this is blue,” there must be a moment in which the eye knows “blue” directly.

Gareth Evans (1982) may have been the first to introduce the notion of “non-conceptual content” or “non-conceptual information” into contemporary analytical philosophy.\(^58\) But in working through the issues, Evans concludes that the content of perceptual informational states need not be “perceptual experiences” or “states of a conscious subject” (1982:157). He explains: “we arrive at conscious perceptual experience when sensory input is not only connected to behavioural dispositions in the way I have been describing—perhaps in some phylogenetically more ancient part of the
brain—but also serves as the input to a thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system; so that the subject’s thoughts, plans, and deliberations are also systematically dependent on the informational properties of the input.”

His account is similar, in some respects, to the Vaibhāṣika “two-step” scheme. And like the Vaibhāṣikas, Evans struggles to explain the relationship between the contents of our subliminal non-conceptual informational states and our conscious conceptual representations of them.

While Evans argues that the conscious representations of sensory data involve a conceptual component, many who joined the discussion do not agree. The so-called non-conceptualists (or anti-conceptualists) aver to the intuition that infants and non-human animals, despite their lack of linguistic and conceptual faculties, are nevertheless conscious of their environment. (In Nagel’s terms, it is like something to be them.) They also find it intuitively obvious that our immediate experience of color or music, to pick two popular examples, is too fine-grained to be captured fully in words and concepts. Some speak of the content of sense perception as “analog” in contrast to the “digital” content of propositional belief. As our capacity to discriminate perceptually far outstrips our capacity to discriminate conceptually, this analog perceptual capacity must be given a certain phenomenological priority. To quote Joseph Levine, “When you see a color and think ‘that color,’ the seeing is prior to the demonstrating, or else you really don’t know what you’re demonstrating . . . . But if the seeing, the perceptual experience, is prior to the demonstrating, then the demonstrating can’t be what captures, or brings into existence, the content of that experience.”

The non-conceptualist critique of the conceptualists can sound like Saṃghabhadra’s critique of Saṃkhyā, insofar as they believe it impossible to make sense of our world without recourse to a notion of non-conceptual perceptual content. Levine writes, “It seems clear to me that somewhere within our representational system of thought there have to be links with the world that do not themselves employ the contents of other representations” (2010:174). But the conceptualists refuse to give ground. They argue that it is impossible to connect percept with concept and belief unless sense-experiential states are conceptually structured to begin with, since rational relations can only pertain among conceptual states. That is to say, what they call “sense experiential states” can underwrite empirical beliefs only insofar as they have conceptual content. As for the “richness” argument (i.e., the supposedly fine-grained nature of color or music perception), conceptualists argue that we go astray in considering sense perception to be the cause of an ensuing perceptual experience. We should, rather, be looking for a constitutive account, in which case there is no necessary conflict between the fine-grained analogue nature of sense data and our conceptual capacities. “On the conceptualist view, experience of a colour sample, R, just is a matter of entertaining a content in which the demonstrative concept ‘that shade’ figures as a constituent” (Brewer 2005:221). To be clear, the
conceptualists are not denying that we see, in all its high-resolution detail, “blue,” but this seeing is necessarily constituted, in part, by the conceptual apparatus through which “we” “know” that “we” are “seeing” “blue.” John McDowell sums up the conceptualist position by saying that perceptual experience is “an actualization, in sensory consciousness, of conceptual capacities” (2009:127).

It should now be clear that the contemporary debates over the existence and nature of non-conceptual experience parallel the disputes that took place some two millennia ago among the Ābhidharmikas. The modern debates are no more and no less sophisticated, technical, scholastic, and interminable, and one wonders if any headway has been made. Indeed, I find it difficult to find a contemporary argument that is not at least anticipated in the ancient literature. If there is a lesson here, it may be that once the rupture is made between knower and known, subject and object, first-person and third-person, nurture and nature, mind and world, it is impossible to bring them together again. Of course, human social life, not to mention philosophical reflection, is possible only within the space opened up by this rupture.

My suspicion is that the problems encountered by both ancients and moderns in making conceptual sense of non-conceptual sense perception are due, in part, to our misunderstanding of the logical structure of the mind-world antinomy. Mind and world—knower and known—do not denote autonomous domains or frames of reference, or even interdependent perspectives. Rather, mind and world logically enfold one other; mind is only possible within the world, and the world only possible within the mind. Which is to say that the logical relationship among these antinomies is bound in paradox, and this, I believe, is key to understanding why the problem of non-conceptual experience seems so intractable. But the exploration of this topic will have to await another occasion.

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Notes

1 – The literature on this subject is vast; on the higher-order-thought side, see, for example, Rosenthal 1986, 1993, 2005; Carruthers 2011; Lau and Rosenthal 2011. On the same-order side, see esp. Strawson 2015. Needless to say, there are many different accounts of what precisely higher-order thought entails.

2 – Here too the literature is quite large. I provide references when I return to the topic in my concluding remarks.


4 – Of course, attempts to describe or impart this experience will, of necessity, be culturally mediated. For a philosophical defense of the perennialist position, see Stace 1960. For a defense of the “pure consciousness” hypothesis, see Forman 1993 and Forman ed. 1990.

5 – Leading the contextualists were Steven Katz, who edited a series of influential volumes on the controversy (1978, 1983, and 1992), and Wayne Proudfoot (1985).


7 – I will not deal with those rare references in the Pali suttas, such as the Aṅguttara-nikāya i.49-52, to the effect that mind (citta) is originally pure or luminous (pabhassara), but that this purity is obscured by adventitious defilement. (See also the notion of viññanam anidassanam or “featureless consciousness” found in the Brahma-nimantaṭṭika-sutta, Majjhima-nikāya 49, and the Kevaddha-sutta, Dīgha-nikāya 11.) Early exegeses identified the pure citta mentioned in the Aṅguttara-nikāya as the bhavaṅga-citta, which is mind in its latent or “non-arising” state, and this suggests that they didn’t quite know what to do with it. This has become a topic of some debate among contemporary Theravāda scholars; see Analayo 2017; Collins 1982, pp. 246–247; Gombrich 2006, pp. 43–45; Harvey 1989; Harvey 1995, pp. 166–174; and Thanissaro Bhikkhu on accesstoinsight.org.

8 – The literature on svasaṃvedana/svasaṃvitti is large and growing; see, for example, Arnold 2010, 2012; Coseru 2012; Dreyfus 1996, 1997; Garfield 2006; Hattori 1968; Kellner 2010; Matilal 1986; Moriyama 2010; Sharf 2016; Watson 2006, 2010; Williams 1998; and Yao 2005.
For traditionalist critiques, see the overview and bibliography in Sharf 1995, pp. 262–265. The appropriateness of “bare attention” as a way to understand sati emerged as the subject of considerable controversy a few years back (Bodhi 2011, Dreyfus 2011, Gethin 2011, Wallace and Bodhi 2006), in part as the scriptural sources can be read in multiple ways. Take, for example, the Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta, the single most important scriptural authority on the cultivation of mindfulness in the Pali canon. This text describes the beginning steps as follows:

Breathing in long, he discerns, “I am breathing in long”; or breathing out long, he discerns, “I am breathing out long.” Or breathing in short, he discerns, “I am breathing in short”; or breathing out short, he discerns, “I am breathing out short.” (Majjhima-nikāya 10, i.55; trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Access to Insight: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html)

What exactly is meant here by “discerning” (pajānāti, also translated “knowing,” “understanding”)? When the meditator silently notes his or her breath as “long” or “short,” is this a mere expedient intended to focus the mind on the “bare sensation” of the breath, as some modern exponents have it? Or, alternatively, is the cultivation of sati intended to realign and focus the meditator’s conceptual categories such that the internal narrative better reflects reality as it is described in scriptural sources? In the latter case, rather than bringing an end to conceptualization, mindfulness practice is aimed at replacing erroneous and harmful conceptualizations with true and liberating ones.

Katamo ca bhikkhave dukkhasa samudayo? Cakkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇam. Tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso. Phassapaccayā vedanā. Vedanāpaccayā taṇhā. Ayam kho bhikkhave dukkha samudayo (Nidānavagga, Saṃyutta-nikāya 12.43, ii.72; trans. Bodhi 2000, p. 580, with changes). See also Saṃyutta-nikāya iv.33; Madhupindika-sutta, MN 18, i.108; Chachakka-sutta, MN 148, iii.280; Milindapañha 56; etc. Lin (2015, p. 104) identifies a total of twelve parallel passages in the Saṃyuktāgama (Za ahan jing 雜阿含經); see note below.

While the Mahāvedalla is the only sutta of which I am aware that addresses the asymmetry directly, it is recognized obliquely in a distinction between two kinds of “contact” mentioned in the Mahānidāna-sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya. See note below.

MN 43, i.295; trans. Ñānamoli and Bodhi 2009, p. 391. The Chinese parallel reads: 有五根異行異境界。各各受自境界。眼根耳鼻舌身根。此五根異行異境界。各各受自境界。誰 为彼受境界。誰为彼依耶。尊者大拘絓羅答曰。五根異行異境界各各自受境界。眼根耳鼻舌身根。
此五根異行異境界。各各受自境界。意為彼盡受境界。意為彼依 (T.26: 1.791b11-17). Note that in the Chinese, it is Mahākauśṭhila (Juchiluo 拘絺羅) who is responding to Śāriputra, rather than the other way around. On the Mahāvedalla-sutta see Anālayo 2011, pp. 268–276.

13 – This is, however, a simplification of the svalakṣaṇa-sāmānyalakṣaṇa distinction. The Vaibhāṣika analysis of the topic is complex, somewhat opaque, and inconsistent across sources. To render their analysis of perception coherent and filial to scripture, for example, the Vaibhāṣikas distinguished two different kinds of svalakṣaṇa: the inherent characteristic belonging to the cognitive object proper, and the inherent characteristic pertaining to the sense sphere. The Mahāvibhāṣā contains the following exchange:

Question: How is it that tactile bodily cognition takes the generic characteristic (sāmānyalakṣaṇa) as its object, given that [according to scripture] the five sense cognitions apprehend [only] the inherent characteristic (svalakṣaṇa)?

Answer: The inherent characteristic is of two types: (1) the inherent characteristic of the entity (dravya-svalakṣaṇa), and (2) the inherent characteristic of the sense spheres (āyatana-svalakṣaṇa). If we speak of the inherent characteristic from the perspective of the entity, then [in addition to the inherent characteristic] the five sense cognitions also take the generic characteristic [of the entity] as their object. But if we speak of the inherent characteristic from the perspective of the sense spheres, then the five sense cognitions only take the inherent characteristic as the object. Hence there is no contradiction.

問云何身識緣共相境。以五識身緣自相故。答自相有二種。一事自相。二處自相。若依事自相說者。五識身亦緣共相。若依處自相說。則五識唯緣自相。故不相違。(T.1545: 27.65a12-16)

The argument seems to be that any single sense cognition grasps only the inherent characteristic pertaining to its own sense field—the eye sees only colors and forms, the ears sound, etc.—and hence it does not grasp the entity as it exists in itself. But from the point of view of the entity, it is perceived as a whole (by all the senses?), and this entails grasping both inherent and generic characteristics. See also the discussions of svalakṣaṇa and sāmānyalakṣaṇa in Chapter 6.2 of the “Miscellaneous Aggregate” (Zayun 雜薈) section of the Mahāvibhāṣā (T.1545: 27.200b16 ff.); Abhidharmakośa (T.1558: 29.3a4-11); Cox 1988, pp. 34–35; and Dhammajoti 2007a, pp. 101–103, 2009, pp. 19–22.

14 – Note that I am using the English word “know” as a generic rendering for the Chinese liaobie 了別 (discern, distinguish), liao 了 (discern), and qu 取 (grasp, apprehend), all of which are used in translations of
nīlāṃ vijānāti, “to know/understand/apprehend blue.” That is to say, I am not using “know” in its more technical philosophical sense, which entails propositional thought and belief. Whether propositional content is entailed in “knowing blue” is precisely what is at issue.

15 – There is a large literature on the identities of, and relationships between, the Vaibhāsikas, Dārṣṭāntikas, Sautrāntikas, Yogācāras, and so on in Abhidharma compendia. For recent work on the topic, see esp. Dessein 2003; Fukuda 2003; Harada 1996; Honjō 2003; Kritzer 2003, 2005; Park 2007; Yamabe 2003.

16 – This is one reason for the Vaibhāsika insistence on the existence of all past and future dharmas. In mental perception, even in cases where the object of perception is something from the past or the future, it must currently exist for it to serve as the “cognitive-object-as-cause” (ālambana-pratyaya) for the arising of mind-cognition.


20 – This is Saṃghabhadra’s position in his *Nyāyānusāra, see Cox 1988, p. 74, n. 23; Dhammajoti 2007a, pp. 142–144.

21 – This is, in part, why the sākāravāda of the Sautrāntikas is thought to be historically related to Yogācāra idealism; see the references in note 15 above.

22 – Cox 1988, pp. 37, 85, n. 138; Dhammajoti 2007a, p. 177.


24 – Lin notes that there is an important variant in the various Samyuktāgama versions of the pericope, a variant that does not show up in the Pali. These variant readings are noted by Harivaman (Helibamo 訝梨跋摩) in his detailed discussion of this controversy in the *Tattvasiddhi (Cheng-shilun 成實論, T.1646: 32.286c13-287a8). Lin has located a total of twelve passages in the Samyuktāgama, eight of which present it in a form matching the Pali, to wit: “In dependence on the eye and form there arises eye-cognition; the coming together of the three things is contact” 綠眼色生眼識。三事和合觸 (T.99: 2.54a, 55a, 55c, 72c, 87c, 88b). The other four contain a small but telling difference: “In dependence on the eye and form there arises eye-cognition; the coming together of the three things gives birth to contact” 綠眼及色生眼識。三事和合生觸 (T.99: 2.18a, 74b, 117c, 144b). This second version, which seems to parallel that of the Abhidharmakosā (132.10) and other Abhidharma texts, lends support to the Vaibhāṣika position that contact
exists over and above the conjunction of object, faculty, and cognition; see the detailed analysis in Lin 2015, pp. 43–44, 103–107.


26 – Ābhidhammikas generally agree that viññāna, citta, and manas reference different aspects or functions of one and the same phenomenon. For the use of these terms in Pali materials, see Hamilton 1996, pp. 105–114; and Johansson 1965. For Sarvāstivāda, see Mahāvibhāṣā T.1545: 27.371a19-b29; *Nyāyānusāra T.1646: 32.274c19-275a10; and the discussions in Dhammajoti 2007a, pp. 92–94; Hall 1986, pp. 10–13; and Lin 2015, pp. 7–10.

27 – On the Viññānakāya-śāstra, which is attributed to *Devaśarman or *Devaksema (Tiposhemo 提婆設摩), see Frauwallner 1995, pp. 28–31.


29 – The distinction between these two kinds of contact is mentioned briefly in the Mahānidāna-sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya (DN 15, ii.62; trans. Walshe 1995, pp. 225); see the discussion in Hamilton 1996, pp. 49–50.

30 – On the differences between Vaibhāṣika and early Yogācāra accounts of the succession of moments of cognition, see Takatsukasa 2014, 2016; and Yamabe 1990.

31 – On the early meanings of the pair, and their appearances in early commentaries, see esp. Cousins 1992; and Jaini 1977, pp. 84–85. The Pali Vitakkaśaṇṭhāna-sutta (Majjhima-nikāya 20, i.118) contains five different techniques for removing distracting “thought” (vitakka).

32 – The *Vimokṣamārga-śāstra, traditionally attributed to Upatiṣya, was translated into Chinese by Sengqiepoluo 僧伽婆羅 (Saṃghapāla?, Saṃghavarman?, Saṃghabharar?) in 515. On this work, see esp. Anālayo 2009. For a translation, see Eghara, Thera, and Thera 1977.

33 – Eghara, Thera, and Thera (1977) identify this quote as coming from the Dhammasaraṇa 10.7-8; 20.84-85.


35 – The association of vitarka and vicāra with the dhyānas was likely influenced by non-Buddhist traditions, notably the Yoga-sūtra; see Cousins 1992, pp. 148–151; and Bronkhorst 1986, pp. 29–64.
36 – This text, attributed to *Dharmaśreṣṭhin (also rendered *Dharmaśrī), was translated by Saṃghadeva (Jutan Sengqietipo 瞿昙僧伽 提婆) and Lushan Huıyuan 厭山慧遠 in 391. It appears to have been composed either immediately before, or contemporaneous with, the Mahāvibhāṣā (Frauwallner 1995, pp. 128–130; Willemen, Dessein, and Cox 1998, pp. 174–175). A translation of the text can be found in Willemen 2006.

37 – Savitarkavicārā hi pañca vijnānadhātavah. The Ming canon has 唯 for 唯, a variant that appears in later works as well including the *Nyāyānusāra, T.1562: 29.350a5. In Paramārtha’s translation of the Abhidharmakośa, the kārikā is rendered 有覺亦有観定是五識界 (T.1559: 29.168a12-13).

38 – For the articulation of this distinction in later Vaibhāṣika texts, see the *Nyāyānusāra, T.1562: 29.394a2-c3; Abhidharmāvatāra, T.1554: 28.982a24-27; and the discussion in Dhammajoti 2008, pp. 144–146, n. 107.

39 – The Sautrāntikas have a rather different analysis, as they don’t reify vitarka and vicāra into independently existing dharmas to begin with, and while they agree that the difference is between coarse and fine discriminative activities of mind, they see these in relative, rather than absolute terms, and hence they believe that they cannot coexist. See the extended refutation of this position in the Mahāvibhāṣā, T.1545: 27.219a.


41 – That is to say, my association of “sentience” with some minimal discriminative capacity is stipulative, and as such does not in itself entail phenomenal consciousness.

42 – Somewhat confusingly, the Mahāvibhāṣā also cites the example, which it attributes to the Prajñāpati-śāstra (Shishe lun 施設論), of striking a bell or metal vessel, in which the initial sound is “coarse” and the later reverberations are “subtle.” It also mentions the example of the bird beginning to flap its wings to fly, where the initial movements are coarse and the later movements subtle. (The bird example is attributed to the Dharmaskandhapāda-śāstra, Fayun lun 法蘊論.) It is not clear how such examples strengthen the case for coexistence. On the debate over the coexistence of vitarka and vicāra, see Dhammajoti 2008, pp. 9–10, 144–146, n. 107; and Jaini 1977, pp. 83–88.

43 – This is precisely the “Dārṣṭāntika” position taken by Harivarman in his *Tattvasiddhi. Harivarman insists that mental factors such as vitarka, vicāra, and saṃjñā are not present when a sense cognition first apprehends an object, and he quotes scripture in support of this
position. Thus for Harivarman, sense cognition is entirely free of vikalpa; see Lin 2015, pp. 176–187.

44. On saṃjñā, see esp. Kramer 2012.


48. T.1558: 29.4a19-22. For the *Nyāyānusāra commentary on this passage see T.1562: 29.342a17 ff.


50. The debate is picked up in the Dazhidulun 大智度論 as well (T.1509: 25.64b19-c11), although here the question is what hears rather than what sees.

51. T.1558: 29.11b1-9. Scholars have traced this Sautrāntika argument back to the Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra. See, for example, T.1579: 30.610a19-27, where, in response to the question as to what sees, a distinction is made between ultimate and worldly ways of understanding. The ultimate understanding is that nothing sees, “since all dharmas, by their natures, arise from conditions and vanish in an instant, without doing anything” 諸法自性衆緣生故。剎那滅故。無作用故.” See also Kritzer 2005, pp. 32–33; Harada 1997; and Miyashita 1986.


53. In the *Nyāyānusāra the three perceptions are introduced twice: T.1562: 29.374c13 ff., where the third category of perception is called jueliao xianliang 覺了現量, and T.1562: 29.736a9 ff., where the third category is called juehui xianliang 覺慧現量. On the three kinds of perception, see Cox 1988, p. 75, n. 27; Dhammajoti 2007, pp. 137–139; 2009, pp. 276–277; and Yao 2005, pp. 86–89. My Sanskrit reconstructions are pulled from Dhammajoti 2007; Hirakawa et al. 1973, 1977, 1978; and Yao 2005.

54. T.1562: 29.374c10-13; see the discussion in Yao 2005, p. 87.


57 – Yao also notes that, in his exposition of the three perceptions, Saṃghabhadra anticipates Dignāga’s memory argument and invokes the gap between first-person and third-person experience, all of which play a central role in later arguments for svāsmvedana (Yao 2005, pp. 87–88).

58 – The issues can be traced back to Kant, whom some identify as the first “conceptualist,” but Robert Hanna (2005, 2008) argues that Kant laid the groundwork for both conceptualism and non-conceptualism.

59 – Evans 1982, p. 158, emphasis in original. Evans goes on argue that it is not necessary that conscious experience be tied to events for which a concept is ready at hand: “All I am requiring for conscious experience is that the subject exercise some concepts—have some thoughts—and that the content of those thoughts should depend systematically upon the informational properties of the input” (p. 159). See also his discussion of mental self-ascription (pp. 224–235).


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