A note on *nirvikalpaka* and *savikalpaka* perception

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Some ten years ago an interesting discussion took place in the pages of this journal. It began with an article by Arindam Chakrabarti (2000) whose title betrays its intention: “Against immaculate perception: seven reasons for eliminating *nirvikalpaka* perception from Nyāya”. Followed a response by Stephen H. Phillips (2001), “There’s nothing wrong with raw perception: a response to Chakrabarti’s attack on Nyāya’s *nirvikalpaka pratyakṣa*”, which in its turn was commented upon in Chakrabarti’s “Reply to Stephen Phillips” (2001).

This discussion, as is clear from the titles, concerns the need and even possibility of *nirvikalpaka* perception. What Chakrabarti tries to do is “to show why we can easily do without *nirvikalpaka* perception inside the Nyāya epistemology” (2000, p. 3). Indeed, his project is “of purging Nyāya of indeterminate perception” (ibid.). These and other remarks show that Chakrabarti’s intention is not to destroy Nyāya epistemology by showing its incoherence or impossibility. He is not just playing around with the idea whether there is a need for *nirvikalpaka* perception in a system that he considers otherwise inadequate. No, his reflections, as I understand them,

clearly cover the issue whether there really is such a thing as *nirvikalpaka* perception. And his answer is no: there is no such thing as *nirvikalpaka* perception.

In this article I will not continue the philosophical debate of Chakrabarti and Phillips. I will however consider the question whether there is such a thing as *nirvikalpaka* perception. Subsequently I will take up the question whether *savikalpaka* perception as conceived of in Nyāya is capable of doing its job all on its own, without *nirvikalpaka* perception.

A good point of departure for a discussion of the existence, or possibility, of *nirvikalpaka* perception is an Indian philosophical text different from Nyāya, viz. the Pātañjala Yogaśāstra. This text not merely states that *nirvikalpaka* perception is philosophically possible or even necessary, but goes to the extent of claiming that a state can be reached in which there is only place for such perception. The relevant discussion starts at YS 1.9 *śabdajñānānupātī vastuśūnyo vikalpaḥ* "*Vikalpa* results from knowledge of words and is devoid of objective referent". This definition seems to justify the rendering "conceptual construct" for *vikalpa*, at least provisionally. The same term occurs again in YS 1.42 *tatra śabdārthajñānavikalpaiḥ saṃkīrṇā savitarkā samāpattiḥ* "The meditational attainment with *vitarka* is mixed with conceptual constructs regarding words, things and cognitions".[1] It is understood in the immediately following sūtra YS 1.43: *smṛtipariśuddhau svarūpaśūnyevārthamātranirbhāsā nirvitarkā* "When the memory is purified,

[the meditational attainment] without *vitarka*, which is as it were empty of itself and in which only the object shines forth, [comes about].” Given that YS 1.43 follows YS 1.42, it is clear that the meditational attainment here presented is *not* “mixed with conceptual constructs regarding words, things and cognitions”. This is confirmed by the Bhāṣya, with which we can in this respect agree without hesitation.

Here, then, the Yogaśāstra introduces a meditational state that is without *vikalpa*, that is, without conceptual constructs.[2] We may be tempted to use philosophical arguments to dismiss this claim as no more than the outcome of scholastic speculation about the mental states of yogis. I would however counsel against such hasty dismissal. Philosophy may not be sufficient to deal with this issue. There are psychological reasons to believe that mental states without conceptual constructs can and do exist. They contrast with “normal” states of awareness, in the formation of which language acquisition plays, or has played, an important role. More precisely, human beings have two cognitive styles, which in normal circumstances are simultaneously active. One of these two is due to language acquisition; I call it the symbolic cognitive style. The other cognitive style, the non-symbolic one, does not result from language acquisition. The non-symbolic style can exceptionally be experienced on its own, without the symbolic style (or with a reduced presence of the symbolic style). Such experiences are commonly, and broadly, referred to as mystical, and then tend to be experienced as

giving a more direct access to reality than is available in ordinary mental states. The method that allows certain people to experience the non-symbolic cognitive style with reduced (or even without) admixture of the symbolic cognitive style is mental absorption.[3]

Several elements here enumerated in connection with the non-symbolic cognitive style recur in the sūtras about *nirvikalpaka* cognition. Like the non-symbolic cognitive style, *nirvikalpaka* cognition is “not mixed with conceptual constructs resulting from the knowledge of words”; and like the former, the latter is characterized by a shining forth of only the object. It is also well-known that mental absorption is an important aspect of yogic meditation. It seems fair to assume that the yogic *nirvikalpaka* attainment corresponds to the non-symbolic cognitive style, and is therefore a really existing mental state.

How does this *nirvikalpaka* attainment relate to *savikalpaka* mental states? It seems reasonable to think about perception in the two-tiered manner indicated above: two cognitive styles (the symbolic one and the non-symbolic one) are superimposed upon each other. The Yogaśāstra calls attention to the fact that the *nirvikalpaka* state can (exceptionally) be experienced in isolation, and this agrees with our understanding of the non-symbolic cognitive style. The yogic *savikalpaka* state, on the other hand, corresponds to the combined cognitive styles that are responsible for “ordinary” perception.

The Yogaśāstra is not alone in claiming that *nirvikalpaka* cognition can be experienced by yogins. Even some Nyāya thinkers accept this. Bhāsarvajña, for example, states this in so many words in his Nyāyasāra.[4] Even for certain Nyāya thinkers, therefore, *nirvikalpaka* cognition is no mere theoretical requirement. It plays a double role: it can be experienced independently, admittedly only by people who engage in certain mental exercises, and it also underlies “normal” cognition. We have seen that much the same can be said about the non-symbolic cognitive style. There is therefore no a priori reason to reject the very possibility of *nirvikalpaka* cognition. It is true that other Nyāya texts claim that *nirvikalpaka* cognition can only be established through inference and that they describe its contents in terms that are completely determined by Nyāya ontological considerations.[5] It is possible that this particular inferred *nirvikalpaka* cognition is open to criticism. It would yet seem one-sided and premature to reject it without taking into consideration that something rather like it may very well exist, and may indeed be experienced by certain people in certain mental states.

These observations have their use in the discussion initiated by Chakrabarti and Phillips, outlined above. Chakrabarti’s claim that there can be no place for *nirvikalpaka* perception may have to be revised. Briefly put, if the position here presented about the two-tiered structure of the human mind is correct, and if the *nirvikalpaka* cognition of Nyāya, too, corresponds to at least

some extent to the non-symbolic cognitive style, we will have to accept that there is after all place for something like *nirvikalpaka* cognition, also in Nyāya.

Let us now have a closer look at the definition of *vikalpa* presented in YS 1.9. This definition reads *śabdajñānānupātī vastuśūnyo vikalpaḥ*, which we translated: "*Vikalpa* (a conceptual construct) results from knowledge of words and is devoid of objective referent". The part "devoid of objective referent" reveals Buddhist influence. This is hardly surprising, because Buddhist elements in the Pātañjala Yogaśāstra have attracted the attention of several scholars.[6] Buddhist ontology had from an early date denied the existence of the world of our common sense experience, and attributed our mistaken belief in its existence to the words of language.[7] The conceptual constructs that we create as a result of knowing words are therefore devoid of objective referents, and this is precisely what the sūtra says. Yogic perception, several Buddhist texts point out, is without *vikalpa*.[8]

Brahmanical thinkers, and most particularly those of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school, did not agree. For them, words do have referents, and indeed, they were convinced that the world we live in corresponds in many respects to the one and only language they recognized, Sanskrit. The ontology of these thinkers, as I have shown elsewhere, was to a considerable extent based on an analysis of the Sanskrit language.[9] They would not therefore agree with the part *vastuśūnyo* in the above definition.

They had less difficulty with the part *śabdajñānānupātī* "results from knowledge of words". Words are often mentioned in descriptions of *savikalpaka* knowledge, also in the Nyāya school. It is for this reason that Chakrabarti suggests that *savikalpaka* perception is propositional. Phillips (p. 108) calls it verbalizable. The expression *śabdajñānānupātī* seems to justify this. Certain Buddhist authors make a point of emphasizing that the cognition concerned *may*, but does not have to be expressed verbally. Dharmakīrti uses in this context the word *yogya* "suitable, able".[10]

However, some Nyāya authors use expressions that suggest that words are actually present in *savikalpaka* cognition. This suggests that *savikalpaka* cognition is not *verbalizable*, but *verbalized*. This, if correct, gives rise to an important question. If words are present in *savikalpaka* cognition, what then is the difference between this cognition and verbal cognition, *śābdabodha*?

Consider the following passage from Keśava Miśra's Tarkabhāṣā (p. 33 l. 10-11):

> *... savikalpakaṃ jñānaṃ nāmajātyādiyojanātmakaṃ ḍittho 'yaṃ brāhmaṇo 'yaṃ śyāmo 'yam iti viśeṣaṇaviśeṣyāvagāhi jñānam ...*
>
> *Savikalpaka* cognition is connected with names, universals, etc., and concerns the relation of qualifier and qualificand as we find it in "this is Ḍittha", "this is a Brahmin", "this [man] is dark".

The association of *savikalpaka* cognition with language is confirmed by the word *nāman* “name” as well as by the examples given: three short sentences. *Savikalpaka* cognition, according to this passage, takes the form of statements and is concerned with the relation of qualifier and qualificand. Both these features *savikalpaka* cognition has in common with *śābdabodha* “verbal cognition”. Here, too, sentences are involved, and here, too, the relation of qualifier and qualificand is central. The term *śābdabodha*, however, is reserved for cognition derived from verbal communication, from statements a hearer may be presented with. However, the different contexts in which these terms are used constitute no compelling reason to think that the end results are different. In *savikalpaka* cognition, too, a statement is produced, and there is no reason to doubt that that statement is analyzed in accordance with the rules that are valid for *śābdabodha*. This suggests that *savikalpaka* cognition and *śābdabodha* “verbal cognition” are in the end one and the same thing, even though resulting from different situations: both are knowledge associated with a verbal statement. Is this correct?

A statement in Viśvanātha Pañcānana’s (or Kṛṣṇadāsa Sārvabhauma’s?)[11] Siddhāntamuktāvalī appears to confirm this. It emphasizes the role played by “memory of the object produced by the word” in the production of verbal cognition (*śābdabodha*). Without it, it states, “someone who knows the word concerned might, in the presence of the

object, arrive at verbal knowledge by means of perception".[12] I understand this statement to mean that, according to this text, verbal cognition and *savikalpaka* cognition are indeed identical, and that they are only distinguished by reason of the fact that they have been produced differently.

We must conclude that, at least according to certain Nyāya thinkers, there is no intrinsic difference between verbal cognition and *savikalpaka* cognition.

I do not know what effect the above observations may have on the discussion initiated by Chakrabarti and Phillips. I have no idea how they might respond to the conviction of the author of the Siddhāntamuktāvalī and perhaps others that there is in essence no difference between verbal cognition and *savikalpaka* cognition. With regard to *nirvikalpaka* cognition, it seems likely that its existence can be vouchsafed by sticking a bit less closely to the description that certain Nyāya texts give of it.

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[1] This translation follows the Bhāṣya, which is not necessarily correct. On the reliability of the Bhāṣya, see Bronkhorst, 1984.

[2] The fact that YS 1.44 introduces another such state, which is this time called *nirvicāra*, need not detain us.

[3] For details, see Bronkhorst, 2010.

[4] Bhāsarvajña, Nyāyasāra (p. 176): *vastumātrāvabhāsakaṃ nirvikalpakam, yathā prathamākṣasaṃnipātajaṃ jñānaṃ, yuktāvasthāyāṃ yogijñānaṃ ca.*

[5] See, for example, Annambhaṭṭa's Dīpikā on his own Tarkasaṅgraha (p. 30): *nanu nirvikalpake kiṃ pramāṇam iti cen na / gaur iti viśiṣṭajñānaṃ viśeṣaṇajñānajanyaṃ viśiṣṭajñānatvād daṇḍīti jñānavad ity anumānasya pramāṇatvāt / viśeṣaṇajñānasyāpi savikalpakatve 'navasthāprasaṅgān nirvikalpakasiddhiḥ /.* See further Phillips & Tatacharya (2004: 609 ff.) on Gaṅgeśa's position.

[6] See Senart, 1900; La Vallée Poussin, 1937; Bronkhorst, 1993: 71 ff.

[7] Bronkhorst, 2008: 28 ff.

[8] See, e.g., Schmithausen, 2007; but see further Patil, 2007.

[9] Bronkhorst, 1992.

[10] Eltschinger (2009: 192) cites Pramāṇaviniścaya 1.7.7 (*abhilāpasaṃsargayogyapratibhāsā pratītiḥ kalpanā*), which corresponds to Nyāyabindu 1.5.

[11] Mishra (1966: 422) provides arguments to believe that Kṛṣṇadāsa Sārvabhauma rather than Viśvanātha Nyāyapañcānana composed the Bhāṣāpariccheda and its commentary Nyāya- (or Siddānta-)muktāvalī.

[12] Siddhāntamuktāvalī, ed. Nārāyaṇa Rāma p. 46; ed. Harirāma Śukla p. 264: *padajanyapadārthasmaraṇaṃ vyāpāraḥ / anyathā padajñānavataḥ pratyakṣādinā padārthopasthitāv api śābdabodhāpatteḥ /.*