

Theories about erroneous cognition

ख्यातिवादाः

(S.N.Sastri)

Sri Sankaracharya points out at the beginning of his commentary on the Brahmasutras, under the heading 'Adhyasa Bhashya', that all activities, whether religious or secular, are based on a person's identification with the body, mind and senses. This identification, which is due to the mutual superimposition (Adhyasa) of the Self or Atma and the non-Self, namely, the body, mind and senses, is due to beginningless ignorance (Avidya). He defines superimposition as 'the apprehension of something as something else'. Examples of such superimposition (or illusion) in actual life are—a rope being mistaken for a snake, nacre for silver, a stump of a tree for a man and so on. The various systems of Indian philosophy have examined this problem of superimposition and each system has propounded its own theory about it, in consonance with its epistemological and metaphysical views. The main points of controversy among the various systems are—What is the nature of the illusory object? How is the illusion caused? Sri Sankara has made a reference to three of these theories in his Adhyasa Bhashya. A verse in which are enumerated five main theories, each of which has the general appellation of 'Khyati', meaning 'apprehension' is reproduced below:--

आत्मख्यातिरसत्ख्यातिरख्यातिः ख्यातिरन्यथा।

तथानिर्वचनीयख्यातिरेतत् ख्यातिपंचकम्।।

1. Atmakhyati- आत्मख्यातिः -- Self-apprehension

This is the theory of the Yogachara school of Buddhism, otherwise known as the Vijnanavada school.

(It may be mentioned here that there are four principal schools of Buddhism as described below.

Vaibhashikas—This school accepts the existence of external objects that can be cognized through perception (pratyaksha).

Sautrantikas --- They also accept the existence of external objects, but hold that their existence can be known only by inference from cognition.

Yogacharas--- They deny the existence of external objects and hold that it is only internal cognitions that are externalized as objects.

Madhyamikas or Nihilists---- According to this school there are neither external objects nor internal cognitions, but only Void or Sunya.

All these four schools consider consciousness to be momentary.

The views of all these schools have been rejected by Sri Sankara in his commentary on Brahmasutras 2.2.18 onwards. One common feature of all these schools is that they do not accept the existence of a permanent Self and hold that everything, including the ego-consciousness, is momentary. Sri Sankara points out in his commentary on Brahmasutra

2.2.31 that unless there is a permanent principle connecting the past, present and future there cannot be recollection or recognition of past experiences).

Now, to revert to the theory of Atmakhyati; according to this the illusory object, say, silver, as well as the substratum, nacre, are both non-existent and are only internal ideas. The error consists in their being perceived as external objects. Just as the nacre is only a form of inner consciousness, so is the illusory silver. In the term Atmakhyati the word 'Atma' stands for consciousness which is momentary and which appears as the external objects. Vedanta rejects this theory. One of the grounds for rejection is that if the substratum, nacre, and the illusory silver are only forms of inner consciousness, then there cannot be any distinction between valid and erroneous perception. Moreover, this is contrary to experience. Sri Sankara points out in his commentary on Br. su. 2.2.28 – “Nobody perceives cognition itself as a pillar, as a wall and so on, but everyone perceives them as objects of cognition”. This sutra says that the theory of non-existence of external objects is not acceptable, because the objects are actually experienced. In his commentary on Br.su. 2.2.29 Sri Sankara rejects the contention of this school that, just as non-existent objects are experienced in dream, non-existent objects may be experienced in the waking state also. He points out that there is a difference between the dream state and the waking state. The difference consists in the fact that the perceptions in dream are sublated immediately afterwards, while those in the waking state are not. To a man who has woken up from sleep the objects perceived in dream never had any existence at all, for he says “I falsely imagined that I was in the company of great men. In fact, I never came into contact with great men; this delusion arose because my mind was overpowered by sleep”. But an object seen in the waking state, such as a pillar, is not thus sublated under any condition. Moreover, dream vision is a kind of remembrance, whereas the visions of the waking state are forms of perception. The difference between remembrance and perception, consisting in the absence and presence of objects, is well known.

2. Asatkhyati—असत्ख्यातिः Apprehension of a non-existent.

This is the theory of the Nihilist school of Buddhism, known as the Madhyamika school. It says that in illusory perception something non-existent is apprehended as existent. Both the substratum, nacre and the illusory silver are non-existent. This view is rejected by all the Vedic schools, because there cannot be any cognition of what does not exist. The son of a barren woman cannot be seen either in reality or in illusion. Sri Sankara refers to this theory in his Adhyasabhashya thus (acc.

toRatnaprabha):--

अन्ये तु यत्र यदध्यासः तस्यैव विपरीतधर्मत्वकल्पनामाचक्षते इति।

3. Akhyati—अख्याति: Non-apprehension

This is the theory of the Prabhakara school of Mimamsa. The view held by this school is that there is no positive error in illusory perception; instead, there is only lack of discrimination between the object perceived (nacre) and the object remembered (silver). The nacre is perceived in a general way as 'this' and not as possessing the distinctive feature of nacreness. Silver, which was seen elsewhere, is recollected, but without its association with the past time when, and the particular place where, it was seen. Such recollection is described as "recollection of an object robbed of its 'thatness'" -- प्रमुष्टतत्ताकस्मरणं, In certain other cases, such as 'the conch is yellow', this school explains that two imperfect perceptions arise, one being the visual perception of a conch as such, its real colour (white) being missed, and the other being the visual perception of the yellow colour of the bilious matter which causes jaundice (पित्तद्रव्यपीतिमा), the relation of the yellow colour to the bilious substance being missed. Thus in all cases of erroneous cognition two distinct cognitions—either a perception and a recollection or two perceptions—arise, but their distinction is missed. Thus according to the Prabhakaras, all experiences are valid (अनुभूतिः प्रमा). So, to experience is to experience validly and to err in experience is to experience imperfectly, though validly, the imperfection consisting merely in non-discrimination and not in misapprehension.

The Naiyayikas as well as the Advaitins refute this theory on the ground that sheer lack of discrimination between the cognition of the nacre and the memory of silver cannot turn into the positive experience of silver as something present 'here and now', nor can it impel a person to brisk action to procure the silver. This theory is referred to by Sri Sankara in his Adhyasabhashya thus:-- (Ratnaprabha)

केचित्तु यत्र यदध्यासः तद्विवेकाग्रहनिबन्धनो भ्रम इति।

4. Anyathakhyati-- अन्यथाख्याति: — Misapprehension.

This is the theory of the Naiyayikas. When nacre is wrongly perceived as silver, the erroneous cognition that arises takes the form 'this is silver'. Here 'this' stands for nacre lying in front of the perceiver, and it is first seen as a white piece and not as nacre, the distinctive feature of nacreness being missed either through some defect in sight or because of the particular situation in which the visual perception arises. The visual perception of nacre as 'this' arises in the ordinary way, by contact of the visual organ with the object in front (लौकिकसन्निकर्षः). The real silver-ness that belongs to the real silver existing elsewhere is presented in this

visual perception as the attribute of the nacre seen as ‘this’ in a general form; neither the real silver nor the real silver-ness could be said to be connected with the sense of sight through normal sense-relation (लौकिकसन्निकर्षः); and without such sense-relation being established between the sense-organ concerned and the object to be perceived, perception cannot arise. So the Naiyayikas hold that the real silver and silver-ness come to be connected with the sense of sight through an extra-normal type of sense-relation (अलौकिकसन्निकर्षः), which is called - - ज्ञानलक्षणप्रत्यासत्तिः , or ‘sense-relation represented by cognition’.

Thus according to the Naiyayikas, the visual misapprehension of nacre as silver is an extra-normal variety of visual perception (अलौकिकचाक्षुष). This proposition is interpreted in two ways in Nyaya literature. The earlier interpreters like Vachaspati Misra take it to mean “One reality is mistaken for another” (सदन्तरं सदन्तरात्मना गृह्यते।). But later Naiyayikas like Gangesopadhyaya take it to mean “A real object which does not have a certain attribute is mistaken in an extra-normal perception as having that attribute, which exists elsewhere (तदभाववत् वस्तु तद्वत् ज्ञायते।). (अन्यत् अन्यथा गृह्यते इति अन्यथाख्यातिः।)

This theory is rejected by the Advaitins on the ground that there cannot be perception of real silver as ‘this is silver’ unless it is actually present ‘here and now’ to the organ of vision.

(Re- supernormal perception, see Bhashapariccheda, verses 63 to 65).

Sri Sankara refers to this theory in his Adhyasabhashya thus:- (Ratnaprabha)

तं केचित् अन्यत्र अन्यधर्माध्यास इति वदन्ति।

5. Anirvachaniyakhyati—अनिर्वचनीयख्यातिः Apprehension of the indescribable.

This is the theory of the Advaitins. It is pointed out that illusory cognition being direct and immediate, its object must be present ‘here and now’. It is the positive experience of the object as ‘this is silver’ that incites the experiencer to immediate effort to pick up silver right on the spot. The cognition of silver does not vanish of itself. It is sublated only by the cognition of the nacre. The silver perceived ‘here and now’ must be present where it appears. Yet it cannot be considered as real, because it is sublated by the knowledge of the nacre. Nor can it be called unreal, because it is perceived. What is unreal like the son of a barren woman cannot be an object of experience, even in dream or illusion (see Mandukya Karika, III.28). The silver must therefore belong to a category

of objects different from those of normal experience. It has an apparent existence (प्रातिभासिकसत्त्वम्) distinct from the empirical (व्यावहारिकसत्त्वम्). An empirical object exists prior to its being perceived and afterwards, but the illusory object lasts only as long as its perception lasts. An illusory object serves no practical purpose. It is not real like the objects of common experience, nor is it unreal like the son of a barren woman. It is indefinable (अनिर्वचनीयं) either as existent (सत्) or as non-existent (असत्). Nor can it be described as both existent and non-existent, because these are contradictory attributes and cannot apply to one and the same thing at the same time.

Apart from the above five main theories, there are certain other theories as described below.

6. Viparitakhyati- -विपरीतख्याति:- Contrary apprehension.

This is the theory of the Bhatta Mimamsakas. This is practically the same as the Anyathakhyati of the Naiyayikas. Though the Bhattas do not admit that in the case of shell-silver cognition the silver that is elsewhere is seen through extra-normal sense relation, they maintain that both the shell that is in front and the silver that is elsewhere are existent. According to them, erroneous cognition reveals an existent object in the form of a different object which also exists. Every object has qualities with which it is internally related. It is also related to other objects externally. Thus, silver with which the shell in front is externally related appears to be internally related through the relation of identity. Both the subject and the predicate of the erroneous cognition 'this is silver' are existent (सत्). What is false (असत्) is the relation between the 'this' and the silver, the subject and the predicate of the erroneous judgment. The false identity between the 'this' which is in front and the silver which is elsewhere is due to certain defects such as imperfect conditions of visual perception, defective contact between the visual sense and the object in front, etc. In the absence of defect, silver which is elsewhere cannot be seen in unity with the object with which the visual sense is in contact. (From 'Advaita Vedanta' by R. Balasubramanian).

7. Sad-asat khyati- - सदसत्ख्याति: Apprehension of real and unreal.

This is the theory of the Sankhya school of Kapila. It propounds the theory of 'the apprehension of a real and unreal object'. One and the same thing can be regarded as real and also as unreal under different conditions; so the theory is not self-contradictory. In the illusory perception 'this is silver', silver is real as existent in the silversmith's

shop, but it is unreal as superimposed on nacre. So it is the cognition of a real and unreal object. This is Vijnanabhikshu's explanation of Kapila's theory

Aniruddha's interpretation is different. According to him, in the illusory perception, 'this is silver', the cognition of 'this' is real, because its object nacre is present to the organ of vision; but the cognition of 'silver' is unreal, because its object is not present to the organ of vision and is sublated by the cognition of the nacre. Thus in Aniruddha's view an illusion is the united cognition of a real and an unreal object. While the Nyaya school explains illusion as the mixed perception of two real objects, the Sankhya school explains it as the conjoint perception of a real and an unreal object. (From Methods of Knowledge by Swami Satprakashananda- Advaita Ashrama- Chapter V, para 8).

Satkhyati-- Apprehension of the real.

This is the theory of the Visishtadvaita school. This theory is also known as 'Yatharthakhyati'. This holds that the silver in the nacre is real. It is composed of the ingredients of silver that exist in the nacre. By the process of quintuplication (pancheekaranam), all the subtle elements are present in all the gross elements like earth, etc. Therefore due to the presence of a small portion of silver in the nacre, the object of that consciousness (silver) is real. But, as the silver content is infinitesimal, it cannot have any practical utility; therefore that cognition is erroneous (bhrama). Thus error consists in lack of practical utility. This school holds that all cognition has for its object what is real. Hence the cognition of silver in nacre is true. When one cognition is sublated by another, the disillusionment is explained on the basis of the preponderant element in its constitution. The subsequent cognition becomes more true, the earlier fragmentary perception becomes less true. There is no illusion in the literal sense. (From Yatindramatadipika, Avatara I.25).
