

## On Advaitic Theory of Perception

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, I propose to argue that Advaitic theory of perception belongs to the realm of Indirect realism, which entails the notion that mind can never enter the external world. Additionally, body-awareness is the basis of Advaitic theory of perception, in both chronological and metaphysical sense. Even though there were some challenges to Advaitic theory of perception, we can resolve them by lowering the standard of knowledge. This approach might not be the best, but it is a reasonable one.

**Keywords:** Advaitic theory of perception, Direct realism, Indirect realism, Body-awareness, Indian philosophy

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# 論不二論的知覺理論

賴文\*

## 摘要：

在本文中，我試圖論證不二論的知覺理論是屬於間接實在論的立場，意即心靈永遠無法進入外在世界。此外，身體覺察是不二論的知覺理論的基礎，時序及形上學意義上都是。雖然此種知覺理論有其需面對的理論挑戰，但我們可以藉由降低對知識的標準來解消它們。這雖然不是最好的進路，但卻是合理的做法。

**關鍵詞：**不二論的知覺理論、直接實在論、間接實在論、身體覺察、印度哲學

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## Introduction

In this article, I intend to argue the following points on the basis of Advaitic theory of perception:

The metaphysical status of perception in Advaitic theory. When it comes to theory of perception, it is essential to clarify its metaphysical status. We must know how the author sets out the position of the perceiver, the object perceived and perception itself. In the case of Advaitic theory, I swing between the interpretation of Direct realism and Indirect realism. However, because of the existence of Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti (transformed mind), Indirect realism will be more appropriate to describe Advaitic theory of perception than Direct realism does.

Since Advaitic theory of perception asserts that Antaḥkarana will finally become non-different to the object, it indicates that at this stage (Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti) our mind is going out and then being a conscious construction of the object. In this context, I intend to argue that our mind (Antaḥkarana) can achieve this stage because mind has already been aware of our body, and at every moment our mind continues to be aware of our body. In other words, body-awareness is the basis of Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti.

Some challenges to Advaitic theory of perception. First, what is the epistemic relation between the object and Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti? Namely, is there a capacity which human has in order to make sure that Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti successfully transform into the similar existence as the object? Second, given the experience of A (vision, I see this pen), B (touch, I hold this pen), C (movement, I play this pen at my hand), D (hearing, I can hear the sound of the pen when the pen touches the table), the knowing of existence of an object relies on only A or unity of A, B, C and D?

The process of perceiving should be briefly stated as follows (according to Perrett and Bilimoria, they only gave the example of vision; in this context, we focus on the visual perception in this article): when the object is illuminated or is affected by the light, we will receive the stimulation.

Therefore, our Antahkarana goes out and transformed into the similar existence of the object (the state of Antahkarana-Vṛtti). In this process, we can know the object because our Antahkarana becomes the similar existence of the object, namely, we know the object because our mind become just like it.

## 1. Metaphysical status of Advaitic theory of perception

In the first place, we must briefly illustrate the difference between Direct realism and Indirect realism:

The metaphysical status of Direct realism holds that our relation to the object perceived is ‘direct’. The directness indicates that there is no mediacy between me and the object perceived. In this sense, our mind can directly grasp the object and then the object can present in our mind. Of greater importance, in this version of realism, it seems that there is no demarcation between the mental world and the external world. Our mental capacity belongs to the external world. Hence, our mind does not have to cross over to another kind of world; mind just reaches that distant object. Simply put, this version of realism just has to deal with the problem of distance rather than that of different ‘kind of world’.

Indirect realism presupposes the mental and external world in a slightly different way. Our relation to the object perceived is ‘indirect’. Thus, we firstly encounter the mental representation of that object and our mind end in here. This metaphysical presupposition tells us two things: First, we can ‘infer’ that there is a table out there because we perceive our mental representation of that table, and our mind can only touch our mental representation instead of the external world (the real table). In this sense, our epistemic relation to the external world is through inference of mental representation; besides, our mind can never enter into the external world. Second, the proponents of this stance maintain that we can separate the external world from mental world, they are two realms. There is an extreme conception of Indirect realism: even though there is no table out there (no real table in the external world), an evil

scientist can still cheat us by introducing the mental representation of that table to us and make us think that there is a table out there. The purpose of this conception is to reveal that there is a possibility that in fact there is no physical reality, but we still perceive the object and then believe that there is an external world out there.

Circle back to Advaitic theory of perception, to which stance it belongs? I intend to interpret this theory is more like Indirect realism based on the following reasons: First, in the case of vision, we can know (or infer) the object exists and has specific qualities such as the extension, color, texture and so on since our mind at the final stage becomes Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti. This quasi-reality can be counted as mental representation. Metaphysically, we construct a mental representation in order to represent that object. Second, although in Advaitic theory of perception, we receive the stimulation of the object and thus construct the mental representation; however, it seems that our mind can grasp the real object and then form the mental copy. In this sense, we do not know this theory falls within the realm of Direct realism or Indirect realism. Nevertheless, because this theory supposes the existence of mental representation (Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti), this can be the reason that we put Advaitic theory of perception into the realm of Indirect realism even in a non-traditional way. That is to say, even though we can grasp the real object, but we know the detail of the object and we can represent this object since we use our mental representation. Third, our relation to Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti is direct. We come to know the detail of that object better because we directly perceive our mental representation of that object, in the meantime, mental representation retains in our mind. In this sense, it seems that our relation to our mental representation is more direct than our relation to the real object.

## **2. Body-awareness as the basis of perception**

I intend to develop an argument which can support the thesis of body-awareness as the basis of our perception, meanwhile, this argument can also

involve the Advaitic theory of perception. Most importantly, this argument will lead us to the direction that body-awareness is chronologically and metaphysically basic in Advaitic theory of perception.

How does perception occur? I intend to answer this question by introducing the concept of body-awareness and Advaitic theory of perception. Since we were born, the first thing that our mind could perceive is the fact that 'I have this body' and 'I use this body to move and explore the world'. Namely, our mind is aware of our body and its movement. In every moment, our mind uses this body as starting point and the measurement of outward object. For example, I see the table is in front of me; I can perceive the table as three-dimension, and it will deform when I move around it. In this case, when I perceive a table, my mind flows out and 'can' become the similar existence of that table since my mind use my body to be the measurement and 'incarnation' of that table. It means that when I am perceiving the table (at this stage, my mind is at the state of Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti), I am also aware of my body and my body-awareness projects out to be the basis of Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti.

In this argument, I intend to claim that in order to have perceptual experience (in terms of Advaitic theory, the state of Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti), body-awareness is essentially basic and primary. Without the body-awareness, it will be impossible to have perceptual experience of outward object and world. We can put things in a different way so as to imagine that body-awareness is the necessary condition for perceptual experience: if I only have a brain, the brain is connected to independent eyes, ears, mouth, tongue, hands and limbs by electric wire (in this case, I cannot move), I will not have the image or awareness of a 'united' body experience. Every object that presents in front of me will be a facet instead of 'a facet which belongs to an object'. Under this circumstance, because I cannot move my body to form the knowledge of 'If I move this way, then the object in front of me will deform in a certain way'. Lack of this knowledge, all I can 'sense' is chaotic since we cannot have the perceptual experience of 'this facet I perceive is a part of this object with

extension'. In this sense, perceptual experience is impossible to occur.

Put it in another way, Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti is possible because we have body-awareness. In order to make Advaitic theory of perception more complete, the concept of body-awareness must be introduced. However, we have to consider another issue: is body-awareness itself a kind of Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti? I would reply this question positively. We can treat body-awareness as a primary exercise of Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti, when we master this Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti, it will become the basis of other Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti. Therefore, the Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti towards the outward object is always based on Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti towards our body.

### **3. Challenges to Advaitic theory of perception**

What is the epistemic relation between the object and Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti? This question is raised by Bilimoria (Bilimoria 1980, 41), one of the central points of this question is that how do we make sure the object perceived and Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti is non-different? Another point is that when we set out an epistemic relation between the object perceived and Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti, how do we know this relation by another relation? The latter question will lead us to infinite regress.

Bilimoria intended to deal with these problems by introducing the 'I-notion'. I as an agent who can know the epistemic relation between the object perceived and Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti. However, this answer seems to be a bit unclear to me. Bilimoria tried to use I-notion to create a self-evident (basic, without further justification) notion in order to avoid the problem of infinite regress. In this section, I want to make the things more clear. I-notion introduced by Bilimoria can have further implication: I as a active explore who can move to explore the world and the object in a more detailed way. In this context, I can always move to explore more details of the object and simultaneously make sure that the object is non-different to Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti. Hence, the epistemic relation between the object perceived and

Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti can be created because I ‘can’ move and explore more in order to make sure that the object and Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti is in a non-different state. In this sense, I as a movable and explorable agent, who can create the epistemic relation between the jar and the jar-like Antaḥkarana-Vṛtti.

Another problem I intend to solve is that our knowing of the existence of certain object relies on a specific sense-organ experience or unity of these sense-organ experiences? Bilimoria’s answer is that the experience from specific sense-modality is enough to ensure that the object exists, experiences from other sense-modality play the role of making my knowing more certain (Bilimoria 1980, 43-4). More specifically, we only have to rely on a sense modality to ensure that the object really exist. Furthermore, I intend to support Bilimoria’s point because some properties such as color or sound can only be experienced by certain sense-organ; that is to say, in these cases we do not have the unity of different sense-modalities experiences to rely on.

Take the example of pen, I have the experience of A (vision, I see this pen), B (touch, I hold this pen), C (movement, I play this pen at my hand), D (hearing, I can hear the sound of the pen when the pen touches the table). In order to know the existence of this pen, I only have to rely on A, BCD are to make my knowing more certain.

We can consider color and sound. For normal people, we can only perceive color and sound through eyes and ears. In other words, some of our sense-organs have their proper objects: these properties can only be perceived by specific sense-organ. This is the reason to support the point of Bilimoria. Since in some cases such as color or sound, we can only rely on specific sense-organ to know these qualities really exist. If someone insists that we must perceive the unity of different sense-organ experiences to make sure that one thing exists, they will also indicate that we can never make sure the existence of color and sound. This is completely unreasonable.



## **Conclusion**

In this article, we can see that Advaitic theory of perception is more like the perception which Indirect realism claimed. Additionally, this kind of theory of perception must presuppose the existence of body-awareness, otherwise this theory is very unlikely to function. Finally, 'I as a movable and explorable agent' is important because this notion clarifies the epistemic relation between the object perceived and Antahkarana-Vṛtti. Moreover, in order to make sure that one thing exists, single sense-organ experience is enough.

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