

Indirect Perception of Brahman in the Bhagavad-gītā

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*rāja-vidyā rāja-guhyam pavitram idam uttamam
pratyakṣa-avagamam dharmyam su-sukham kartum avyayam (Bg 9.2)*

Today, I'd like to talk about the role and nature of perception as we find it in the Bhagavad-gītā, particularly regarding religious experience, broadly construed. There are two ways that such perception is described in the Gītā. The first, which we may call “direct”, involves a kind of immediate experience of Brahman¹, *Īvara*, or the self. Take, for example, Arjuna's vision of the *aiśvaram rūpaṁ* of the eleventh chapter. Arjuna wishes to see (*draṣṭum*) such a form (11.3), and is repeatedly commanded to look upon it (*paśya*) by Krishna (11.5-8). His experience is described in perceptual terms (*aneka-adbhuta-darśanam*, etc.) and in his prayer, Arjuna notes that he is seeing (*paśyāmi*) the manifestation which he describes (11.15, etc.). Another example is found in the thirteenth chapter, where yogīs are said to see (*paśyanti*) the indwelling self through various meditative disciplines (13.24). Other descriptions employ non-visual—but arguably perceptual—terms. For example, in the sixth chapter we find the term *brahma-saṁsparśam*, “contact with Brahman” (6.24), which seems an eminently tactile way to describe religious experience.²

We will designate the second kind of religious perception “indirect”. Here, objects or beings encountered in ordinary life and culture are to be seen in relation to a more fundamental reality in such a way that our experience of them radically changes. They are no longer perceived as wholly independent, but as dependent upon and derivative of

¹ I include both the personal and non-personal conceptions of Brahman here.

² Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Brahman and upon the hidden workings of *prakṛti* as governed by Brahman. In chapter four, Krishna tells Arjuna that by the guidance of those who have seen the truth (*tattva-darśinaḥ*), “you will see (*drakṣyasi*) all beings—without exception—within the self, then within me” (4.35). In the fifth chapter, karma-yogīs are described as similarly apprehending diverse beings according to their spiritual equality (*sama-darśinaḥ*) (5.18). Elsewhere in the fourth chapter, a wise person is said to remain fixed in yoga (*yuktaḥ*) by his ability to “see inaction within action and action within inaction” (*karmaṇy akarma yaḥ paśyed akarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ*). Later, the fifteenth chapter tells us that those with the eye of knowledge (*jñāna-cakṣuṣaḥ*) can apprehend the travails of a self enmeshed in transmigration, while others cannot (*na anupaśyanti*) (15.10-11).³

The second, indirect kind of seeing is the topic of this paper. I would like to consider what is required to make such experiences *perceptual*, and not merely inferential or metaphorical. For this purpose, I will employ a contemporary analysis of indirect seeing, Fred Dretske’s notion of displaced perception.⁴ I will try to show how this model of perception illumines elements of the Gītā’s didactic structure, and I will support this analysis with passages from the Gītā and with select commentary from Rāmānuja. Though I will not discuss *karma-yoga* directly, I should note that I find the issue of indirect religious experience compelling because of the Gītā’s endorsement of *karma-yoga*, a discipline of engagement with the world. As such, a primary factor which distinguishes *karma-yoga* from ordinary life is one’s perception of the word in which he or she acts (cf. 3.27-8; 2.69, etc.). To

³ I should add that there are some descriptions of religious perception in the Gītā seem to fit with either reading, for example, 6.29-32.

⁴ Fred Dretske, *Naturalizing the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1994), 41-4.

the degree that we can understand the Gītā's account of perceptual transformation, we can attain more mature grasp of how *karma-yoga* works.

Displaced Perception

According to Dretske, displaced perception involves seeing a target fact through the direct apprehension of a more immediate perceptual object. To illustrate this phenomenon, he provides various examples, including seeing how much one weighs by looking at a bathroom scale, seeing that one's gas tank is half full by looking at a dashboard gauge, and hearing that a cake is finished baking when a timing bell sounds. He notes that “in such cases, one comes to know that *k* is *F*—sees that *k* is *F*—by seeing and hearing, not *k* itself, but *h*. The perceptual fact is displaced from the perceptual object” (1994, 41). The crucial factor that turns ordinary perception of immediate objects into displaced perception of a target object or fact is the awareness of an appropriate connection between the properties of the perceived object and the target.⁵ It is crucial to note that in displaced perception, the target fact does not supersede the phenomenal character of the object perceived. The perceptual object remains, but the added conceptual richness through which the object is perceived indelibly transforms the experience of it. Displaced perception thus involves three things:

- i. the apprehension of a perceptual object, leading to
- ii. apprehension of a displaced target fact or object, which depends on
- iii. an awareness of an appropriate connection between the perceptual object and target fact.

⁵ The nature of this awareness varies. It seems clear, though, that for it to effect *perceptual* experience, it must be deeply internalized, and operate on an implicit, fundamental level, not something that must be traced out in steps as in inference.

With this notion in play, I want to consider how the indirect religious perception described in the Gītā may be considered a kind of displaced perception. Let’s therefore consider one of the passages noted above and discuss how metaphysical teachings of the Gītā serve to furnish the “appropriate connections” which allow for indirect religious perception.⁶

Having grasped that (knowledge) you will never again become bewildered,
Arjuna. By it, you will see all beings without exception in the self, then in
me. (4.35)⁷

The content of the knowledge spoken of here is not discussed explicitly in the fourth chapter. Rāmānuja reasonably suggests that it is the teachings conveyed in texts 2.17-39, which focus on the radical distinction between selves and matter.⁸ He glosses the phrase “seeing all beings without exception in the self” as “you will see all beings, separately considered in the forms of gods, men, etc. within yourself, as there is equality among you and all beings when separated from *prakṛti*, owing to having one form as consciousness.”⁹ How would this be an instance of displaced perception? The immediate perceptual data involves various living beings (*devamanuṣyādi*), commonly categorized according to what we may call the details of their psychophysical machinery. But in the transformed perception described

⁶ In the interest of time, I am only going to examine one passage in detail, but please see the chart at the end of this paper for an attempt to illustrate the dynamic I am examining in a number of verses.

⁷ *yaj jñātvā na punar moham evaṃ yāsyasi pāṇḍava
yena bhūtāny aśeṣeṇa draṅṣyasi ātmany atho mayi*

⁸ *Gītābhāṣya* 4.34.

⁹ *devamanuṣyādyākāreṇa ananusmhitāni sarvāṇi bhūtāni svātmaṇi eve draṅṣyati yataḥ tava anyeṣāṃ ca bhūtānāṃ prakṛtivyuktānāṃ jñānaikākāratayā sāmyam. Gītābhāṣya* 4.35. He later says that “those who have the ‘eyes of knowledge’, who possess the knowledge of the difference between the self and the body, can see the self as possessed of a different form (from matter) in all conditions.” *Gītābhāṣya* 15.10.

here, there is a two-fold conceptual connection between the data and the target fact, which allows for the experience Rāmānuja describes: (i) Living beings are fundamentally *ātman*s which are ensheathed by, but essentially separate from *prakṛti*. (ii) Considered apart from differences born of *prakṛti*, each self is essentially a quantum of consciousness, and, as such, equal. When this conceptual connection is strong enough, one sees the target fact—a non-*prakṛtic* *ātman*, qualitatively equal to oneself—through the perception of a local fact—the body of a living being.

The second level of transformed perception indicated here, seeing all things in Krishna (*atho mayi*) is accounted for in a similar way. Though no texts up to 4.35 explicitly discuss the relationship between an *ātman* and Krishna (or the personal Brahman more generally), it is amply discussed in later chapters. Rāmānuja cites the passage “taking refuge in this knowledge, they attain equality with me” (14.2).¹⁰ He could have also noted “the eternal living being, a fragment of myself, in the world of the living” (15.6)¹¹ or “all beings abide in me” (9.4).¹² Texts such as these indicate that individual *ātman*s (i) share qualitative equality with Krishna/the personal Brahman, and (ii) their existence is somehow derivative of Krishna/the personal Brahman. By means of displaced perception, they are also *seen* as such.

I think that beyond this example and others like it, large swaths of the Gītā may be understood as providing capsule descriptions of the world as seen through displaced perception of Brahman. One of the most ubiquitous themes in the later chapters of the Gītā

¹⁰ *idaṁ jñānam upāśritya mama sādharmaṃ āgatāḥ*

¹¹ *mamaivāṃśo jīva-loke jīva-bhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ*

¹² *mat-sthāni sarva-bhūtāni*

is *vibhūti-yoga*, a sustained meditation on *Bhagavan*'s expansive power as manifest in the world.¹³ Typical examples of this include:

In water I am the taste, Arjuna. Of the sun and moon, I am the light. In all the Vedas I am the *om̐*. In ether I am the sound; in men, ability. (7.8)

Of things that purify I am the wind. Of weapon-wielders I am Rāma. Of fish I am the shark. Of rivers, I am the Gaṅgā. (10.31)

I am the father of the universe, the mother, the supporter, the grandfather. I am that which is to be known, the purifier, the sacred *om̐*. I am also the *ṛk*, *sāma*, and *yajur* Vedas. (9.16)

I am in the heart of all. Memory, knowledge, and forgetfulness come from me. I am to be known from all the Vedas. (15.15)

These texts fundamentally involve a re-seeing of objects and themes in ordinary experience and culture as Krishna/Brahman. Where previously such things were seen or understood as independent or within a certain cultural framework, Arjuna is now told that they are to convey the experience of Brahman. These verses thus correspond to the second part of displaced perception noted above—a target fact experienced through a perceptible object. What then is the appropriate connection which furnishes the perceptual transformation? It is also given.

By me, in my unseen form, all of this world is pervaded. All beings rest in me. (9.4.)

I am the self of all, Arjuna, situated in the heart of all. I am the beginning, middle and end of all beings. (10.20)

Whatever powerful, beautiful, or vigorous thing there is, understand that it is produced from a small fragment of my splendor. (10.41)

Though it is not from his Bhagavad-gītā commentary, I would like to illustrate the profundity of the transformation described above by citing Rāmānuja's *Vedārthasaṁgraha*

¹³ By my reckoning, it is found in 7.7-12, 9.16-19, 10.19-42, and 15.12-15.

(par. 21). Here, he explains the distinction between those who merely see familiar objects and those who see Brahman by means of the displaced perception discussed above from.

Laymen who have not received the instruction of the Vedānta do not see that all *padārthas* and all individual souls are ensouled by Brahman, and they think that the full meaning of all words is completely exhausted by the various *padārthas* they denote, which, however, form only part of their full significance. Now that they have heard what the Vedānta declares they know that Brahman is the soul of everything because it is His effect and He is its inner Ruler and that every word denotes Brahman as modified by everything. (Trans. van Buitenen)¹⁴

In passing, I'd like to note that the kind of indirect religious perception we see in the Gītā is indeed an old theme in Vedāntic literature. I think that it is safe to say that it is central to the famous sixth book of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. One can analyze the “rule of substitution” (*ādeśa*) given to Śvetaketu as depending upon the appropriate conceptual connections which allow for displayed perception of *SAT/Brahman* within the manifest world. Such connections are introduced with the famous examples of things made of clay, copper and iron, and elaborated by the proto-cosmology which grounds everything in “what-is” (*SAT*). By means of their understanding this rule of substitution, the “greatly learned householders of the past” recognized that all things are merely combinations of the three primal “divinities” heat, water and food, which are in turn transformations of *SAT*. Seeing all things as transformations of *SAT*, the householders therefore claimed “Now, no one can announce something which we haven't heard of, thought of or realized already” (*CU* 6.4.5).

The Need for *Sādhana*

¹⁴ Rāmānuja, *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, edited with translation by J.A.B. van Buitenen (Pune: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1956), 83; 196.

Though the indirect religious perception discussed above seems to fit under the broad category of displaced perception, there is an important disanalogy from the cases of which Dreske speaks. Seeing that a gas tank is half-full, or that one weighs 170 lbs by means of perceptual objects like a gas-gauge or scale tends to become automatic quite easily. At some point, someone we know and trust told us what the gauge represents, and before long, we attained to displaced perception through it. But the *Gītā* indicates that, for example, seeing living beings as *ātmans*, derivative of Brahman, is not easy, even for those who theoretically accept it as true. Texts 2.62-3 indicate that internalizing the *Gītā*'s basic metaphysical picture requires hard work and concentration, which can be undermined by falling into former habitual patterns of thinking. The reason for this seems clear enough—the picture of the world which the *Gītā* professes is at such variance with common ways of seeing and thinking that it requires deep work on one's core attitudes to develop the conceptual connections which would facilitate displaced perception. Where ordinary examples of displaced perception involve tinkering with small pieces of one's *weltanschauung*, the *Gītā* advocates a radical altering of it, from its very foundations. The *Gītā* recognizes this, and I think that much of yogic *sādhana* of the *Gītā* may be seen as practice to facilitate the internalization of the conceptual connections given provided by its metaphysics. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere¹⁵ I think that the *buddhi-yoga* of the *Gītā* is meant to serve this role. Though its functioning is not elaborated in detail, *buddhi-yoga* seems to involve the internalization of Brahman-centered metaphysics. This understanding resonates well with the close connection between *buddhi-yoga* and *bhakti-yoga* as well.¹⁶ *Bhakti* involves a

¹⁵ Matthew Dasti, "Buddhi-yoga and the Bhagavad-gītā", *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Fall 2005), 139-154.

¹⁶ Cf. 10.8-11 and 18.57.

fundamental shift of attitude toward the world, a shift with a major emotional component.

One *wants* to see God in the world and commune with him.

Final Thoughts and Conclusion

I hope that this paper has indicated a useful way to understand the indirect religious perception of the Gītā in a way that does not forsake its status as genuinely perceptual. I also hope that we have gained some insight into the cognitive aspects which undergird the Gītā's notion of *karma-yoga*. Before closing, I'd like to consider an issue which may have been in some of your minds from the beginning. Displaced perception clearly has some resemblance to classical accounts of *anumāna*, insofar as *anumāna* moves from the apprehension of a commonly perceptual sign to an unseen signified by means of an invariable relationship between the two.¹⁷ Is it more fitting, therefore, to categorize Dretske's notion as *anumāna*? If so, does this damage my argument, given that traditional accounts of *pramāṇa* theory commonly makes a distinction between *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*?¹⁸

There are many things I would say in response to this charge. First, the thrust of my paper has been an account of experiences in the Gītā which are expressly described as perceptual. As such, I'd rather avoid accounts which deny this. Second, the Vedāntic model of displaced perception does not involve seeing a target fact through a connected, but wholly other, perceptual object. In a deep sense, the perceptual object is *identical* with the target fact, and recognizing this identity is key to the perceptual transformation. The indirect

¹⁷ Cf. Vātsyāna's Bhāṣya on Nyāya-sūtra 1.1.5, Praśastapāda's *Padārthadharmasamgraha* 100, etc.

¹⁸ Vātsyāyana remarks in his comments on Nyāya-sūtra 2.1.32 that the basic difference (*lakṣana-bheda*) between inference and perception is that "inference is never due to the contact of the sense with the object to be inferred" while the converse holds for perception.

perception of the Gītā does not, therefore violate the Nyāya claim (for instance) that in perception, the thing cognized must be the same thing with which one's sense-faculties come into contact. Third, while some instances of *anumāna*, including the paradigmatic case of inferring fire on a hill from the perception of smoke, do seem like displaced perception, others, involving chains of reasoning or deliberation are clearly not perceptual at all. Displaced perception requires a tight conceptual link such that the target fact is almost instantaneously apprehended upon perception of the perceptible object.

Verses which indicate displaced perception of Brahman¹⁹

Third-person descriptions

Verse(s)	Content	Connector verse(s)
4.18	One sees “action in inaction and inaction in action”.	4.20-3(*) Many early options.
4.34	One sees all beings in the self and in Krishna.	2.17-39 (R), 14.2 (R)
5.18	One sees various classes of beings as equal.	5.13-16 (*)
6.29	One sees the self in all beings and all beings in the self.	5.19 (R) 2.17-39 (*)
6.30	One sees Krishna in all things and all things in Krishna.	Various later texts (see second chart)
13.29	One sees that the self does nothing; only <i>prakṛti</i> acts.	13.20 (R), 3.27 (*), 5.13-16 (*).
14.19	One sees that there is no agent besides the <i>guṇas</i> (and knows that which is beyond the <i>guṇas</i>).	Many options.

Vibhūti-yoga (First-person descriptions)

Verse(s)	Content	Connector verse(s)
7.7-12	Krishna (Brahman) as the essence, support, and controller of manifest things.	7.4-6 (Ś)
9.16-19	Krishna (Brahman) as the essence, support, and controller of manifest things.	9.4-10 (*)
10.19-42	Krishna (Brahman) as the essence, support, and controller of manifest things.	10.8 (R), 10.20 (R), 10.39 (R), 10.41-2 (*)
15.12-15	Krishna (Brahman) as the essence, support, and controller of manifest things.	15.4 (*)

¹⁹ Doubtless, this list is incomplete, and I am grateful for any suggestions regarding texts I may have overlooked. In the first chart, I only include texts which explicitly use perceptual language. I have omitted the many texts that speak of merely *knowing* something in the world to be connected with Brahman in some way and also those which describe a direct kind of religious perception. A letter or symbol in parentheses in the right column indicates the commentator (Ś = Śaṅkara; R = Rāmānuja; * = me) who suggests that the verses mentioned serve to provide the conceptual connections for displaced perception. In many places, Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja cite Upaniṣadic passages which provide such connections, but here, I will focus only on Gītā texts. Moreover, when identifying the connector verses, I will try to focus on texts which are somewhat local to the others in question.