

analysis. Furthermore, the alternative to "buying" into an oppressive social system need not be a celebration of exclusion and the mechanisms of marginalization. The thesis that oppression may

bestow an epistemic advantage should not tempt us in the direction of idealizing or romanticizing oppression and blind us to its real material and psychic deprivations.

### Study Questions

1. Are any people, men or women, free of bias?
2. Do you acquire any specific items of knowledge as a result of being oppressed?
3. What does Narayan mean by "double vision"?
4. Would Narayan's analysis be equally applicable to those discriminated against based on age, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, bodily appearance, or other personal characteristics?

## Examination of the Senses

### NĀGĀRJUNA

Buddhism, with over 300 million adherents, is one of the world's leading religions. The older of its two main branches, Theravada Buddhism, or "The Doctrine of the Elders," is today found primarily in Sri Lanka and throughout Southeast Asia; the other branch, Mahāyāna Buddhism, or "The Greater Vehicle," is widespread in Vietnam, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Relatively few Buddhists remain in India, where the religion originated approximately 2,500 years ago.

Theravada Buddhism is atheistic, viewing the Buddha as a supreme teacher, and stressing individual effort to achieve understanding through intense concentration. In contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhism recognizes an ultimate reality, of which the Buddha is a manifestation, thus serving as a source of spiritual strength.

But just as Christianity has given rise to Christian philosophy, including inquiry into the nature of knowledge, reality, and the good, so Buddhism has given rise to Buddhist philosophy that covers similar ground. In either case you need not adhere to the religion in order to benefit from studying its philosophical literature.

The influential Mahāyāna Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna lived in South India in approximately the second century C.E., and his greatest work is the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or *The Fundamental Wisdom on the Middle Way*, written in Sanskrit. In this excerpt he suggests that sense faculties, sense organs, and sense objects are not autonomous entities but interdependent phenomena that depend on each other for their existence and character. Our translator and commentator is Jay L. Garfield, Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College.

Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom on the Middle Way*, translation and commentary by Jay L. Garfield. Copyright 1995. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

1. Seeing, hearing, smelling,  
Tasting, touching, and mind  
Are the six sense faculties.  
Their spheres are the visible objects, etc. . . .

This is a standard Buddhist catalog of the sense faculties. It differs from the standard Western catalog only in that the Buddhists regard introspection literally as an inner sense with the same epistemic structure as outer senses and presumably subserved by analogous physical structures. Nāgārjuna will not dispute the reality of these faculties or of their respective spheres. But he will insist that that reality must be characterized interdependently and conventionally.

2. That very seeing does not see  
Itself at all.  
How can something that cannot see itself  
See another?

This cryptic argument is aimed at any theory according to which vision is inherently existent. The idea is this: If the visual faculty were to be inherently existent, then seeing would be its essence. Its action would hence require no distinct conditions and no external object to be seen. That is, if vision were inherently existent, vision would occur simply in virtue of the existence of the visual faculty. Suppose then that there is an inherently existent visual faculty and no external sense object for it. It would then have only itself as a possible object of sight, yet it would be seeing and so would have to be seeing itself. Therefore, Nāgārjuna argues, a view of vision as inherently existent would entail the possibility of visual apperception. But there is no such possibility. So the fact that vision can see other things cannot be in virtue of its containing perception as an inherent property. . . .

3. The example of fire  
Cannot elucidate seeing.  
Along with the moved and not-moved and motion  
That has been answered.

. . . Fire burns other things, but does not burn itself. And it can be intrinsically identified.

Perhaps then vision is like fire, in that it can see others but not itself, while it does not need to be relationally identified. . . .

4. When there is not even the slightest  
Nonseeing seer,  
How could it make sense to say  
That seeing sees?

When all there is to vision is visual perception, what is the motivation for positing an entity to undertake the process of perception? All there is to vision is the perceptual process: We don't need to posit an entity—the visual faculty over and above the set of interdependent phenomena that subserve vision. The desire to do so is of a piece with the more general substantialist imperative to posit an independent substratum to support every capacity or property.

5. Seeing itself does not see.  
Nonseeing itself does not see.  
Through seeing itself  
The clear analysis of the seer is understood.

Perception is not accomplished by any independent entity known as vision. But that doesn't mean that things that are incapable of sight thereby perceive. In order to know what the proper subject of vision is, it is important to undertake a careful analysis of the perceptual process and not simply to posit a faculty with the nature of vision.

6. Without detachment from vision there is  
no seer.  
Nor is there a seer detached from it.  
If there is no seer  
How can there be seeing or the seen?

On Nāgārjuna's analysis, we can't make sense of an autonomous subject of visual perception. For such a subject would by definition have its identity as a visual subject independent of perception. But there is no sense in calling something that does not see a seer. On the other hand, if we pack vision into its definition, we thereby fail to identify the subject nonrelationally. Vision and its subject are thus relational, dependent phenomena and not substantial or

independent entities. So neither seeing nor seen nor the seen (conceived of as the object of sense perception) can be posited as entities with inherent existence. The point is just that sense perception cannot be understood as an autonomous phenomenon, but only as a dependent process.

7. Just as the birth of a son is said to occur  
In dependence on the mother and father,  
So consciousness is said to arise  
In dependence on the eye and material form.

Here the opponent offers yet another argument in favor of the inherent existence of the visual faculty (and, by extension, the other sense faculties): Consciousness is a consequence of vision, and it surely exists—in fact, its existence, one might say, is self-validating. Given the reality of the effect, the cause must also be real. The final two verses reply to this objection and state the obvious generalization to all other senses, sense objects, sense faculties, and faculties of knowledge. The reply consists in pointing out that the other faculties and aggregates, including introspection and consciousness, exist and fail to exist in exactly the senses that vision and its objects exist and fail to exist: All are empty of

inherent independent existence. But all exist conventionally. So the effect that, according to this interlocutor, exists inherently and demands an inherently existent cause does not so exist. And in the sense that it exists, its causes also exist:

8. From the nonexistence of seeing and the seen it follows that  
The other four faculties of knowledge do not exist.  
And all the aggregates, etc.,  
Are the same way.
9. Like the seen, the heard, the smelled,  
The tasted, and the touched,  
The hearer, sound, etc.,  
And consciousness should be understood.

Again, the point of this chapter is emphatically not that there is no perception, or that there are no sense faculties, sense organs, or sense objects. Rather the point is that none of these can be analyzed successfully as autonomous entities. They are interdependent phenomena that depend for their existence and their character on each other. None of them exists independently. They are all, hence, empty of inherent existence.

### *Study Questions*

1. What are the six sense faculties examined by Nāgārjuna?
2. In what respects are the six sense faculties like or unlike each other?
3. Does perception imply an independent entity that perceives?
4. Does perception imply an independent entity that is perceived?

## Part IV



## *Reality*