Gaṅgeśa on Absence in Retrospect

**To appear in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy.***

**Please cite the published version.**

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19400 words

**Abstract**

Cases of past absence (*prāṅnâstitāsthala*) involve agents noticing in retrospect that an object or property was absent, such as when one notices later that a colleague was not at a talk. In Sanskrit philosophy, such cases are introduced by Kumārila as counterexamples to the claim that knowledge of absence (*abhāva)* is perceptual (*pratyakṣa*), but further take on a life of their own as a topic of inquiry among Kumārila’s commentators and their Nyāya interlocutors. In this essay, I examine the Nyāya philosopher Gaṅgeśa’s epistemology of past absence, according to which agents learn that a recollectable (*smaraṇârha*) object or property was absent by inferring its past absence from failing to recall (*asmaraṇa)* that object or property. Gaṅgeśa’s account is best appreciated against the backdrop of earlier theories and their shortcomings, and I begin by presenting historical views leading up to his. I identify two groups of views about the epistemology of past absence: recollection views, according to which cases of past absence involve agents recalling negative information; and recollection failure views, according to which cases of past absence involve agents failing to recall positive information. I reconstruct two early recollection views: a Bhāṭṭa view belonging to Uṃveka, and a competing Nyāya view belonging to Jayanta and Bhāsarvajña. I then examine Śālikanātha and Sucarita’s critiques of recollection views, following which I reconstruct a Bhāṭṭa recollection failure view belonging to Pārthasārathi. I then examine Gaṅgeśa’s critiques of Pārthasārathi’s account and the recollection failure view he constructs out of its shortcomings.

Gaṅgeśa on Absence in Retrospect

Jack Beaulieu

Not all absence is present absence. Sometimes something isn’t there, and we take notice. But other times something *was* not there, and we only take notice in retrospect. You might not have noticed that your colleague was not at the talk, since you were not looking for them at the time. But when another colleague asks if they were there, it occurs to you that they were *not.* You do not recall seeing your colleague at the talk. And in an even simpler situation, you may not have noticed that a piano had been absent until you see it back where it belongs. In Sanskrit terminology, these are *cases of past absence* (*prāṅnâstitāsthala*).[[1]](#footnote-2) They abound in everyday life. Our track records are admittedly imperfect: sometimes you may think that your colleague wasn’t there, when they were. But we still frequently get these cases *right*.

The epistemology of absence asks how we know that things are not, or were not, there. Since we make accurate judgements in cases of past absence, they pose substantive questions for the epistemology of absence: how is that we become aware that an object or property was previously absent, now that its absence is temporally and spatially distal? And in the process, do we *gain* knowledge that the object or property was absent? Or are we somehow *recalling* its absence, even though we did not take note of its absence at the time?

In the Sanskrit philosophical tradition, cases of past absence first appear in the work of the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā philosopher Kumārila (c 660) as counterexamples to perceptualist epistemologies of absence. *Perceptualism*, associated with philosophers belonging to the Nyāya tradition, maintains that we learn that an object or property is absent by *perceiving* (*pratyakṣa*) its absence (*abhāva*): among other modalities, we *see* absence in much the same sense that we *see* colour.[[2]](#footnote-3) But since past absence is temporally (and often spatially) distal, the absence is no longer around for us to perceive. Yet we apparently still *learn* of its absence. In addition to serving as counterexamples, however, cases of past absence take on a life of their own as an independent object of inquiry. My plan in this essay to examine the Nyāya philosopher Gaṅgeśa’s (c 1320) epistemology of past absence, according to which agents infer (*anumiti*) in retrospect that an object or property was absent on the basis of failing to recall (*asmaraṇa*) that object or property under conditions such that they would recall it, had it been there (*smṛtiyogyatā*). Or more succinctly: on the basis of failing to recall a recollectable (*smaraṇârha*). But Gaṅgeśa’s epistemology of past absence is in apparent tension with his more general perceptualist epistemology of absence. I will argue that he attempts to reconcile cases of past absence with perceptualism by treating perceptual knowledge of *present* absence as *fundamental*: no inferential knowledge of past absence without perceptual knowledge of present absence.

Gaṅgeśa’s epistemology of past absence is built out of the shortcomings of his predecessors’ theories—both those of his earlier Nyāya colleagues, as well as those of his Bhāṭṭa opponents. There are, I will argue, two distinct groups of views about the epistemology of past absence. Early epistemology of absence in the Sanskrit philosophical tradition favours what I will call *recollection views.* According to recollection views, cases of past absence involve recalling negative information. Uṃveka (c 710) gives us the earliest available Bhāṭṭa recollection view, and Jayanta (c 870) the earliest available Nyāya recollection view. But recollection views face difficulties*,* and *recollection failure views* take their place. These views flip the negative: according to recollection failure views, cases of past absence involve *failing* to recall positives. The Bhāṭṭa philosopher Pārthasārathi (c 1075) provides the earliest available recollection failure view, according to which recollection failure *on its own* is the means by which we know of past absence. Gaṅgeśa builds his own view out of Pārthasārathi’s, and treats recollection failure as the basis for inferential knowledge of past absence. My plan in what follows is therefore not only to examine Gaṅgeśa’s epistemology of past absence, but also to detail the history of the debate that leads up to his view. A journey through the history reveals a variety of theories that populate the option space. Gaṅgeśa’s theory is one among many in that option space, and best appreciated against the backdrop of earlier theories and their shortcomings.

# 1. Nyāya perceptualism

Sanskrit philosophy saw a variety of competing theories detailing how we come to know about absence. Prābhākaras, Bhāṭṭas, Naiyāyikas, and Buddhists following Dharmakīrti all had a stake in the debate and offered different theories.[[3]](#footnote-4) For our purposes, we will focus on Bhāṭṭa and Nyāya theories. Philosophers from these traditions offered detailed theories of the epistemology of past absence. Bhāṭṭas had a stake in the debate over past absence, since they were the first to offer cases of past absence as counterexamples to perceptualism. And Nyāya philosophers had a stake in the debate over past absence, since they defended perceptualism.

We will accordingly consider two *general* theories about the epistemology of absence, and look in detail at how variations of these theories answer questions about the epistemology of past absence. The first view, *perceptualism,* comes from Nyāya philosophers:

perceptualism: Perception (*pratyakṣa*) is the *most fundamental way* in which an agent knows (*pramāṇa*) that an object or property is absent.

The notion of fundamentality here is lightweight: for *φ* to be more fundamental than *ψ* is just for *ψ* to depend on *φ*, such that *ψ* cannot obtain without *φ*. Perceptualism does not make any reductive claims. This formulation of perceptualism is meant to capture Gaṅgeśa’s epistemology of absence, according to which knowledge of absence is not *exclusively* perceptual, but always depends on perceptual knowledge of absence. But this version of perceptualism is not unique to Gaṅgeśa: his predecessor Śaśadhara (c 1300) also articulates this view.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Perceptualism, for most Nyāya philosophers, is a theory about how we know that a *perceptible* (*dṛśya*, *yogya*) object or property is absent. An object or property is perceptible just in case the agent would have seen it, had it been there. This formulation rules out cases of perception under conditions such as complete darkness. Even if the object or property were absent, an agent has no knowledge of its absence in the dark. An object in the dark is not perceptible. But for Gaṅgeśa, perceptualism is not exclusively a theory about how we know that a perceptible object or property is absent. He grants that in cases of past absence the absent object or property is no longer perceptible. Even if the object or property had been there *in the past,* the agent could no longer see it *now*. But the agent nonetheless learns that it was absent. On Gaṅgeśa’s view, perceptualism is accordingly also a theory about how we know that a *recollectable* (*smṛtiyogya*, *smaraṇârha*) object or property is absent. An object or property is recollectable just in case the agent would recall it, had it been there. This notion will be introduced in more detail when we consider Pārthasārathi’s epistemology of past absence.

Perceptualism maintains that perceptual knowledge of absence is fundamental*.* It allows for non-perceptual knowledge of absence, but maintains that non-perceptual knowledge of absence depends on perceptual knowledge of absence: no knowledge of absence without perceptual knowledge of absence. This is distinct from the weaker claim that there is no knowledge of absence without perceptual knowledge of *positives.* The proponent of the weaker claim is not committed to absence perception. In contrast, the proponent of perceptualism *is*. Perceptualism is accordingly a *uniformity* view: it proposes that there is a uniquely fundamental route into knowledge (*pramāṇa*) of absence. Other routes into knowledge of absence, such as inference (*anumāna*) or testimony (*śabda*), are less fundamental than perception.

But while all Naiyāyikas accept absence perception, not all Naiyāyikas accept full-blown perceptualism (as construed above). Bhāsarvajña (c 950) has a *non-uniformity* view according to which perception, inference and testimony are all equally fundamental routes into knowledge of absence.[[5]](#footnote-6) Jayanta also accepts inferential and testimonial knowledge of absence, although it is unclear whether his view is non-uniform.[[6]](#footnote-7) Udayana’s (c 984) epistemology may also be non-uniform, since he allows that knowledge of past absence can be inferential but does not explicitly state that such inferential knowledge is rooted in perceptual knowledge of absence.[[7]](#footnote-8) Gaṅgeśa’s son Vardhamāna (c 1345) will, however, read his father’s uniformity view back into Udayana centuries later (NKP 429.9 ad *stabaka* 3.20).

Common to all Nyāya epistemology of absence is the commitment to absence perception: Nyāya philosophers deny that the contents of perception are exhaustively positive. To know that an object or property is absent is not merely for perception to fail to represent the absent object or property and for the agent to judge that it was absent. It is instead for the agent to *perceive* the absence. As Udayana explains the view, perception of absence is *causally* *direct* (*sākṣāt*).[[8]](#footnote-9) Since inference is performed on the basis of prior knowledge, inference is causally *in*direct (*parokṣa*), or involves an instrument of which the agent is aware (*jñātakaraṇa*).[[9]](#footnote-10) The claim is that an agent’s awareness of absence, in contrast, is directly caused by the senses (*indriya*). While Nyāya philosophers maintain that there is a sensory connection (*sannikarṣa*, *prāpti*) involving the senses, the absence and its locus, Nyāya philosophers do *not* maintain that there is any direct contact (*saṃyoga*) between the absence and the senses. Absence perception, on the Nyāya view, is always *mediated* by perception of the positive locus. But absence perception is no more indirect than colour perception.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Gaṅgeśa’s own perceptualism carries two other important background commitments, one metaphysical and the other epistemic. The metaphysical commitment is realism about absences as irreducible entities:

irreducible absence: Absence (*abhāva*) belongs to a fundamental ontological category (*padārtha*); absence cannot be reduced to any kind of positive.

The notion of fundamentality here is *not* lightweight: on Gaṅgeśa’s view, absences cannot be reduced to positives and stand in a unique ontological category of their own.[[11]](#footnote-12) This is a significant metaphysical commitment, but one that simplifies the overall theory: we see absences, because absences are out there. This becomes an explicit perceptualist commitment at least as early as when Śivāditya (c 1150) lists absence among the fundamental categories (SP 2-4).

The epistemic commitment is that we only ever perceive absence in the *epistemic* sense:

epistemic perception: Agents only *epistemically* (*savikalpaka*) perceive absence; agents always perceive *that* an object or property is absent.

To epistemically perceive is to perceive *that φ.*[[12]](#footnote-13) According to Gaṅgeśa’s view, conditions beyond those that enable us to perceive positives must obtain for us to perceive absence. Absences are always the absence *of something*, and Gaṅgeśa is committed to the view that we do not see absence just by looking, but instead must be familiar with what is absent (*pratiyogijñāna*, *pratiyogismaraṇa*) to see its absence. He claims that one undergoes a firsthand awareness (*anubhava*) of the absence *along with* the absent object or property (*sapratiyogika*), as evinced by our awareness of the absence *of a pot* or the absence *of a cloth* (TCM 751.1-2). Two people accordingly may look at the same scene and see different absences: someone unfamiliar with cellos does not see the absence of a cello. The commitment that conditions must obtain for an agent to perceive absence traces back to at least Uddyotakara (c 560–630).[[13]](#footnote-14) But Raghunātha (c 1510), after Gaṅgeśa and in a break with tradition, will eventually reject this commitment and argue that we can non-epistemically (*nirvikalpaka*) see absence (TCMD 665.1-5 ad *sāmānyalakṣaṇā*). Jayanta and Bhāsarvajña, we will see below, also allow that we initially see absence non-epistemically.

# 2. Bhāṭṭa absentialism

The other general view about the epistemology of absence we will be considering comes from Bhāṭṭa philosophers, who reject perceptualism. Instead, they prefer *absentialism:*

absentialism: Apprehension failure (*anupalabdhi*) is the only way in which an agent knows (*pramāṇa*) that an object or property is absent.

According to absentialism, we know *non-inferentially* that an object or property is absent by *failing to apprehend* the object or property under the appropriate conditions. Apprehension failure is a *sui generis* way of knowing absence. Kumārila refers to apprehension failure as *absence as* *an instrument of knowledge* (*abhāvapramāṇa*)*,* construed as the absence of the other instruments of knowledge (*pramāṇâbhāva*) by which we know positives (*bhāva*).[[14]](#footnote-15) According to this view, a specific kind of absence is the means by which we know of absence.

Absentialism denies that we can see absence or that we can infer absence. An agent knows that a pot is absent *just* by failing to see it, rather than by seeing its absence or inferring its absence from failing to see it. Absentialism, at least for Kumārila and Uṃveka, is again a theory about how we know that a *perceptible* object or property is absent: an agent fails to see many objects and properties in darkness, but does not thereby know they are absent. But for Pārthasārathi, as for Gaṅgeśa, absentialism is also a theory about how we know that a *recollectable* object or property is absent.

As formulated above, absentialism is also a uniformity view. But it is more stringent than perceptualism: apprehension failure is not only the most fundamental route into knowledge of absence, it is the *only route* into knowledge of absence.[[15]](#footnote-16) This formulation of absentialism is meant to capture Kumārila’s epistemology. But his own iteration of absentialism, although the first, is not the only iteration. As we will see, the later commentator Pārthasārathi will argue that the way in which we know of past absence is *recollection failure* (*asmaraṇa*).

Like perceptualism, absentialism comes with an important metaphysical commitment and an important epistemic commitment. As with perceptualism, that metaphysical commitment is realism about absence. For Kumārila, absences must be real “things” (*vastu*), and not unreal entities (*tuccha*, *avastu*).[[16]](#footnote-17) But absences are not *sui generis* entities on this view. They are aspects:

absence as aspect: Absences are negative aspects (*asadrūpa*) of positives.

Every object has a positive aspect (*bhāvâṃśa*) and negative aspect (*abhāvâṃśa*).[[17]](#footnote-18) An empty floor has the positive aspect of being a floor and the negative aspect of lacking a pot, among other negative aspects. In general, we tend not to notice the negative aspects of floors: one tends not to return home and remark that their floor is not covered in pottery. But with the appropriate shift in attention, one can come to notice the negative aspect of the floor and see it as lacking pottery. According to this view, absences are always parasitic on positives: an absence can only exist while its positive host exists. No floor, no absence of pots. Nonetheless, Kumārila maintains that absences can enter into causal relations. Kumārila commits himself to a form of aspect causation.[[18]](#footnote-19)

As with perceptualism, absentialism’s background epistemic commitment specifies the conditions under which an agent notices absence. According to Kumārila, conditions must prime us to notice absence:

expectation failure: To notice absence, an agent must either be searching for the absent property or object (*jighṛkṣā*) or their attention must be captured because they expect its presence (*udbhūti*).

According to this commitment, merely failing to see an object or property is not enough for us to notice its absence. Instead, we must be searching for that absent object or property. Or we must expect its presence even if not actively searching, so that its absence captures our attention.[[19]](#footnote-20) Uncountably many objects are currently not on my desk. But when I’m searching for my keys or expect to find them on my desk, I notice *only* the absence of my keys.

# 3. Kumārila’s case

Cases of past absence begin their lives as counterexamples to perceptualism. Kumārila is apparently the first philosopher to bring attention to them. He has various arguments against perceptualism, but he and his commentators treat cases of past absence as decisive counterexamples. He gives his case in the twenty-eighth verse of the chapter on absence in his *Ślokavārttika*. Kumārila writes:

Someone, after seeing something just on its own, also later recalls that thing.

When asked, *right* *then* he becomes aware of the absence of something else there (ŚV 416.1-2 *abhāva* 28).[[20]](#footnote-21)

The case starts with the agent becoming aware of the locus of an absence on its own, lacking further positives (*svarūpamātra*). But the agent is not primed to notice the relevant absence. Later, someone asks them about the absent object—the “something else”, or the thing *other* than the locus—and the agent immediately understands that it was not *there* at the time that they saw the empty locus. They understand as much in virtue of failing to apprehend the absent object. To flesh out the case: an agent is in a house and observes its bare floor. But they were not out in search of pottery nor expecting to find pottery, and they failed to notice the absence of the pots on the floor. A friend with an interest in pottery later asks them whether there were any pots in the house. They then recall the house and become aware—*non-inferentially,* according to Kumārila—that there *were* no pots on the floor from their failure to see any pots on the floor. The crucial claim: they learn of past absence *right upon* (*tadaîva*) receiving the prompt. As we will see when we turn to Gaṅgeśa, whether the agent notices past absence right upon receiving the prompt becomes a significant point of contention.

The datum, on a surface reading, is that the agent can’t be seeing the past absence precisely because the absence is *in the past*. But how exactly does the datum mean that Kumārila’s cases constitute a counterexample to perceptualism? Consider the following construal of perceptualism:

global perceptualism: Perception is the *only way* in which we know that an object or property is absent.

Since global perceptualism claims that there are *no* cases of non-perceptual knowledge of absence, cases of past absence on their own are straightforward counterexamples: the mere fact that an agent can know that something was absent without seeing its absence means global perceptualism is false. The most straightforward reading of Kumārila and his commentators and of Śālikanātha (c 825) suggests that they are targeting this view, since they appear to understand any case of non-perceptual knowledge of absence as a counterexample.[[21]](#footnote-22) But the more nuanced construal of perceptualism claims that perception is the *most fundamental way* in which an agent knows about absence. This restricted version of perceptualism is more robust than global perceptualism. If past absence is a counterexample only insofar as past absence is not perceptible, the restricted version of perceptualism comes out unscathed by leaving room for non-perceptual knowledge of absence. Gaṅgeśa’s perceptualism would straightforwardly resist counterexample.

Can cases of past absence constitute a counterexample to the more robust form of perceptualism? Yes. To do so, cases of past absence have to show that the agent’s knowledge of past absence is *completely independent* of perceptual knowledge of absence. Namely, that there can be knowledge of past absence without perceptual knowledge of absence. This *may* be the point Kumārila has in mind. In verse twenty seven, Kumārila (ŚV 416.2 *abhāva* 27cd) argues that knowledge of absence in general is *not dependent* on perception (*akṣânapekṣaṇa*). And according to Sucarita’s (c 950) reading, Kumārila’s case is meant to motivate this claim: knowledge of past absence does not depend upon the senses (*indriyâdhīna*). We encounter Sucarita below. But Kumārila’s cases *on their own* don’t secure this claim. For that, Bhāṭṭas need to provide a detailed theory about how agents come to know that the object was absent in the past. Their theory must be one in which perceptual knowledge of absence plays no role. Uṃveka attempts this strategy. We now turn to his view.

# 4. Uṃveka’s recollection view

Cases of past absence pose important questions for the epistemology of absence. We can helpfully distinguish theories by their answers to two of those questions. There is the means question: *how* does the agent become aware of past absence in retrospect? And there is the novelty question: does the agent *gain* knowledge about past absence? Recollection views are united by a shared minimal answer to the means question:

recollection thesis: An agent becomes aware that a perceptible object or property was absent in the past by recalling negative information about that object or property.

Negative information conveys information about absence. *That the object was absent* and *that one failed to see the object* are examples of negative information. But the recollection thesis is *only* the minimal commitment that unites recollection views. The precise answer to the means question varies. Recollection views specify differently which negative information the agent recalls. The precise answer to the means question will in turn deliver a verdict about the novelty question.

Our first recollection view—an absentialist view—comes from Uṃveka, the first of the classical trio of commentators on Kumārila. Uṃveka’s theory answers the means question by claiming that the agent recalls, with the right prompt, that *they failed to apprehend* the absent object or property. They do not recall *the* *absence* of the object or property itself. And once they recall that they failed to apprehend that object or property, they come to know non-inferentially that the object or property was absent. This view in turn delivers a verdict about the novelty question. The information they recall is not the past absence itself, but information which provides the basis for them to acquire knowledge of past absence: the agent gains knowledge about the past absence.

Uṃveka’s account is the natural extension of Kumārila’s account. Kumārila offers only a minimal account of past absence, according to which an agent who failed to notice a perceptible object or property at a location subsequently knows that the object or property was absent upon being asked. They do so simply from failing to apprehend that object or property. But past absence is temporally distal, and the *object* or *property* that is absent therefore not perceptible.[[22]](#footnote-23) Even if the object or property *had* been there*,* the agent could no longer perceive it *now*. *Present* failure to apprehend a perceptible cannot be the route into knowledge of past absence. A theory that intends to remain faithful to Kumārila’s view must therefore claim that *past* apprehension failure brings about knowledge of past absence*.* Only in retrospect does the agent recall that they failed to apprehend the perceptible object or property. The agent failed to apprehend it, back when it *was* perceptible. This is the view that Uṃveka provides.

Kumārila’s commentators all develop their views about past absence in their commentaries on verse twenty eight, the verse we saw above. Uṃveka begins by providing the case of absent devadatta in his explanation of verse twenty eight. He writes:

Someone, after seeing some place on its own, has at a later time left for another place where someone asks him “was Devadatta there?”. After recalling the place, he becomes aware that Devadatta was not there. Given that this awareness is what causes the agent to grasp the past absence, how could his knowledge be produced by perception? This is what Kumārila means (ŚVTṬ 416.15-18 ad *abhāva* 28).[[23]](#footnote-24)

absent devadatta sets the example for filling in Kumārila’s template. An agent was at a location where they failed to see Devadatta. But they were not looking for Devadatta, nor expecting him to be there. They accordingly take no notice of his absence. Someone later asks them whether Devadatta was there. After receiving this prompt, the agent recalls the earlier location and comes to know that Devadatta was not there.

Uṃveka intends absent devadatta to spell out Kumārila’s counterexample: since the agent clearly becomes aware that Devadatta was absent *without seeing* his absence, this is a case in which our knowledge of absence is not perceptual. How then are they coming to know of Devadatta’s absence? Uṃveka continues on to explain just what causes the agent to grasp the past absence:

Therefore, we explain the case as follows: At the time when the agent was aware of the place, he failed to perceive a perceptible, the object of which was Devadatta. And at that time, the awareness ⌜Devadatta is not there⌝ did not arise, since the agent was not searching for Devadatta and since there was no assisting cause. But now that he is asked by someone else, after recalling his failure to perceive a perceptible the object of which was Devadatta at that place, he comes to be aware that Devadatta was not there. Since Devadatta is the object of his non-awareness, the agent’s knowledge of Devadatta’s absence could not be produced by perception. This is what Kumārila means (ŚVTṬ 417.3-7 ad *abhāva* 28).[[24]](#footnote-25)

According to Uṃveka’s recollection view, an agent comes to know non-inferentially that a perceptible object or property was absent by recalling (*smaraṇa*) that they failed to perceive that perceptible object or property (*dṛśyâdarśana*)*.* The prompt triggers recollection, and they immediately come to know that the object or property was absent. This is the case even though, at the time of failing to perceive the perceptible, the agent did not know that the perceptible was absent. Since the agent was neither searching for Devadatta nor expecting to find him, they failed to register his absence. The crucial upshot: perceptual knowledge of absence plays *no role* in the agent coming to know about past absence.

There is a running ambiguity in Uṃveka’s account. The agent recalls, upon the prompt, that they failed to perceive Devadatta. But at the time when the agent failed to see Devadatta, were they aware that they were failing to see him or not? Uṃveka’s thought must be that they were *not*. Since, were the agent aware that they failed to see Devadatta, they *should* have registered his absence. Moreover, no conditions primed the agent to notice that they were failing to see Devadatta. Because they were not looking for Devadatta, they would not have been monitoring for their failure to see him. And because they were not expecting him to be there, they should not have been expecting to see him.

Uṃveka is therefore apparently committed to the following principle:

unconscious negatives: Agents encode unconscious negative information into memory.

Even though they were not aware that they failed to perceive the perceptible, the agent can nonetheless subsequently recall that they failed to do so. Being asked about the presence of the perceptible is then the prompt that causes the agent to retrieve the relevant negative information. All recollection views, we will see, rely upon unconscious negatives. We now turn to the next recollection view from Jayanta and Bhāsarvajña. They *explicitly* commit themselves to this principle.

# 5. Jayanta’s recollection view

Gaṅgeśa’s response to cases of past absence is to allow that knowledge of past absence is not perceptual, but depends on perceptual knowledge of absence. Some earlier Naiyāyikas, in contrast, respond by attempting to explain our knowledge of past absence as perceptual. They deny the datum: the agent *did* in fact see the absence, because the relevant moment in which the agent acquires knowledge of past absence is at the *time of encountering the absence*—not afterwards, as Kumārila and Uṃveka claimed. The philosophers Jayanta and Bhāsarvajña attempt this solution, and in doing so provide our second major recollection view. Since Bhāsarvajña holds a non-uniformity view and Jayanta *may* as well, in Bhāsarvajña’s hands this view is not truly perceptualist and in Jayanta’s *may* not be*.* But it is perfectly consistent with perceptualism, and a straightforward way for a perceptualist to deny that cases of past absence are counterexamples.

This account answers the means question by claiming that the agent recalls *the* *absence* of the property or object. At the time when the agent encounters the absence, they unconsciously perceive the *absence of everything* at the location and encode that absence into memory. A specific absence out of that more general absence is then selected for recall with the right prompt: when asked whether Garga was there, the agent recalls his absence at that location. The agent has perceptual knowledge of the absence of everything absent at that location, in which the absence of Garga is included. This delivers a response to the novelty question: the agent is *not* gaining knowledge. They are simply retrieving information they already knew.

Bhāsarvajña provides the same theory of past absence as Jayanta. Since Bhāsarvajña does not quote Jayanta, there is no definitive evidence that he is borrowing his account from him. For the following, I will focus on Jayanta, given his close engagement with Kumārila. Jayanta denies Kumārila’s claim that the agent’s knowledge cannot be perceptual. After repeating Kumārila’s verse (NM 142.2-3 ad *sūtra* 1.1.3), he writes:

This, too, is not right. Since our awareness of darkness establishes that, just at the time of grasping Gauramūlaka on its own lacking anything further, the agent grasps the (now) distal absence of everything there. Now he recalls the absence of Garga among that absence; he does not undergo a firsthand awareness of Garga’s absence, which is now imperceptible. To explain—the agent, after recalling Garga’s absence, correctly reports as much: “Garga was not there at that time.” He would only now be unsure whether he is or is not there, given the possibility that Garga, who has come from somewhere else, is *now* there (NM 142.4-9 ad *sūtra* 1.1.3).[[25]](#footnote-26)

Jayanta’s case is structurally identical to absent devadatta, only differing in its characters and location of Gauramūlaka, the village of his grandfather. Jayanta draws an analogy with darkness. The thought appears to be this: consider a scene in which many light sources are present, but all are perfectly blocked. This creates pitch-black darkness. The darkness is the absence of those light sources. But an agent just consciously sees darkness *in general*. They cannot discern which sources of light are absent. They encode only the general darkness—the absence of all the sources of light—into memory.[[26]](#footnote-27)

Analogously, the agent visited the village of Gauramūlaka and experienced it on its own lacking further things (*vastvantara*) other than the positives in the scene. At the time of visiting, just as an agent in darkness sees the absence of *all* the sources of light but only encodes the general absence into memory, the agent *perceives* the absence of *all* those further things (*sakalapadârthâbhāva*) in the town and encodes the general absence into memory. Then, when asked whether Garga was at Gauramūlaka, they recall his absence: upon the prompt, Garga’s absence is selected out of the general absence for recall. Even though the agent is not seeing his absence now because it is distal, they are recalling an absence that they did in fact see earlier. Jayanta also notes that the agent in this cases *gets it right*: Garga was not there. He would only have reason to wonder whether Garga was actually now at Gauramūlaka if he could have recently arrived.

Jayanta importantly claims the agent is not simply recalling the general absence and then *judging* that Garga’s absence was included in that absence.[[27]](#footnote-28) They instead *recall* the specific absence itself: the absence of *everything* the agent encountered was encoded into memory, and then one absence among the whole absence is later selected for recall. As we will see below, Sucarita later reconstructs the claim to be that general absence (*sāmānya*) is encoded into memory, and then specific absence (*viśeṣa*) is recalled. Jayanta explains that prompts, such as questions, cause the agent to recall *only* the absence that they are prompted to recall, rather than to recall the absence of everything that was not there (NM 143.2-3 ad *sūtra* 1.1.3). This is meant to guarantee that the agent does not randomly, or suddenly (*sahasā*), recall everything that was absent at Gauramūlaka.

Uṃveka was apparently implicitly committed to unconscious negatives, according to which unconscious negative information is encoded into memory. In contrast, Jayanta explicitly commits to this principle: even though the agent grasps the absence of everything they encounter, they are not aware firsthand (*ananubhūyamāna*) that they are grasping the absence (NM 142.11-12 ad *sūtra* 1.1.3). That is, they do not grasp the absence of everything *consciously*. As Bhāsarvajña explains, we initially grasp the whole absence *non-epistemically* (*nirvikalpaka*), and after recalling the absent property or object we *epistemically* (*savikalpaka*) grasp the specific absence.[[28]](#footnote-29) In their efforts to provide a perceptualist account of past absence, Jayanta and Bhāsarvajña reject the standard Nyāya commitment to epistemic perception and accept unconscious negatives. These two commitments are mutually exclusive.

Gaṅgeśa does not engage with Jayanta’s theory. But no matter what, given Gaṅgeśa’s commitment to epistemic perception, he could *not* accept Jayanta’s theory. Moreover, there’s a serious difficulty with Jayanta’s account: *innumerably* many objects and properties are absent at a location at any given time. Jayanta commits to the claim that a considerable amount of unconscious negative information is encoded into memory every time an agent surveys a scene. Again: his theory is *not* that the agent judges Garga to be absent. His theory is rather that the encoded absence *includes* all the absences, and then one more specific absence is selected for recall. Since the absence of Garga is a specific absence among that absence, the agent sees his absence when they see the larger absence. With the right prompt, they can then recall that any one of the innumerably many objects was absent. But this looks implausible. We do not even have this recall of the *positives* in a scene. Nor does his example of darkness help him. While a person who sees darkness may be able to parse by inference that a specific light source was absent, they cannot *recall* which sources of light were absent. The problems with recollection views did not go unnoticed.

# 6. Śālikanātha against recollection views

Recollection views suffer from a series of problems, and Pārthasārathi and Gaṅgeśa will leave them behind. The first of two challenges that we will examine comes from the Prābhākara philosopher Śālikanātha. His problem exclusively targets the absentialist account of past absence that Kumārila and Uṃveka offer. The objection is a regress problem, and Gaṅgeśa will eventually reuse the objection. Here is how Śālikanātha puts the point:

Moreover, even the proponent of the claim that absence is a further instrument of knowledge must accept that the absence of the other sources of knowledge does not produce awareness of absence merely by obtaining, but rather by being known. To explain—consider some object *O* that an agent did not see at some location *L*. An agent becomes aware that *O*—which is now seen at *L*—was absent at the time when *O* was not seen at *L*: ⌜this was not here⌝. How would the ceased absence of seeing produce awareness of absence at that later time and location? If an agent becomes aware of absence through the absence of seeing obtaining, then there would not be subsequent awareness of absence. Since, if the absence of seeing which has entered into the content of an awareness can produce awareness even though it is in the past, once known it is certainly able to give rise to awareness of absence. Just as the visual sense and the other modalities produce their effects just by existing and do not produce a past effect. But an inferential mark which has entered into the content of an awareness produces inferential awareness: when an inferential mark is recalled, even though it was in the past, it brings about inferential awareness that occurs at a subsequent time. The ability to bring about awareness of absence is to be observed as being such. And in this way, because the past absence of the other sources of knowledge can also bring about awareness of absence, we must accept that the absence of the other sources of knowledge that has entered into the content of an awareness brings about awareness of absence. In that case, if the absence of the other sources of knowledge is an absence by nature, then we must accept that awareness of it as well is due to the absence of the other sources of knowledge only when known. This is a regress (PP 291.6-18).[[29]](#footnote-30)

The case of past absence that Śālikanātha is considering differs structurally from those we have been considering. To fill in the template he offers:

missing piano: A piano has recently been removed from a room for repair. After the piano has been taken away, someone enters this room for the first time. Since they have no idea that a piano used to occupy space in the room, they do not register its absence. But when they next enter the room, the piano has returned. Upon seeing the piano, they realize that it wasn’t there last time.

There are even simpler cases: you walk past a restaurant that you have never seen before on a street you frequent. Upon seeing the restaurant, you know that it is *new*. Which is to say, that it was not there before.

Śālikanātha asks the question: supposing that apprehension failure is the means by which we know of absence, could the agent have realized that the piano was absent if they were not aware that they had failed to see it? He answers in the negative: for apprehension failure to bring about knowledge of absence at a later time, the agent must be *aware* that they failed to see the absent property or object. Having failed to see the object is not enough; being aware that one failed to see the absent object is necessary for knowing that it was absent.[[30]](#footnote-31) Even Uṃveka admits that the agent must *recall* that they failed to see the absent object or property.

He draws a disanalogy with perception and an analogy with inference. The senses on their own result in *present* perceptual awareness: we do not have to be aware of the visual sense to see. But this isn’t the right model for understanding cases of past absence, where apprehension failure brings about awareness *at a later time*. Inference, in contrast, yields knowledge *after* one learns the information they need to perform the inference. This makes inference the best model for understanding the relation between apprehension failure and knowledge of past absence. But inference is only possible when we are aware of the inferential mark: an agent could not infer fire, were they not aware of the smoke. By analogy, apprehension failure does not bring about later awareness of absence unless the agent is aware that they failed to apprehend the absent object or property.

This triggers the regress. Knowing that one failed to apprehend the absent object or property is necessary for knowing that it was absent. But apprehension failure is itself an absence. Since apprehension failure is the only route into knowledge of absence, that means the agent must have failed to apprehend their failure to apprehend the absent object or property. But knowing that one failed to apprehend one’s failure to apprehend the absent object or property is necessary for knowing that one failed to apprehend the absent object or property. Since apprehension failure is the only route into knowledge of absence, that means the agent must have failed to apprehend their failure to apprehend their failure to apprehend the absent object or property. And so on.

# 7. Sucarita against recollection views

A further problem comes from Sucarita, the second commentator of the classical trio on Kumārila. Sucarita’s problem is a *selection problem,* and poses difficulties for both Uṃveka and Jayanta’s respective recollection views. The objection states that recollection views arbitrarily specify which items of negative information are selected for encoding. No conditions obtain at the time when the absence is initially encountered that restrict which negative information is encoded. Therefore, if recollection views maintain that *any* unconscious negative information is encoded into memory, they should maintain that *all* unconscious negative information encountered is encoded into memory. Sucarita’s problem is a problem for any theory that accepts unconscious negatives, a principle upon which recollection views are built.

Sucarita does not offer a detailed account of past absence. He instead spends his commentary on verse twenty eight undermining a recollection view seemingly identical with Jayanta’s. In his commentary on verse twenty eight, Sucarita begins a series of objections:

To explain—someone, after apprehending a house just on its own, has left to somewhere where he is asked “was Caitra there or not?”. Then, this person who was asked undergoes an awareness *right then* of Caitra’s absence at that location. But if awareness of absence depends on the senses, then awareness of absence would not arise were there no activity of the senses. Nor should one reply that the agent recalls an absence of which he was previously aware. Since an agent does not see absence without recalling the counterpositive. And he did *not* recall the counterpositive at the time that he grasped the locus of the absence. Since the agent who is asked would report the absence of *many* things (ŚVK 204.14-19 ad *abhāva* 28).[[31]](#footnote-32)

This is the selection problem. Sucarita again quotes neither Jayanta nor Bhāsarvajña, but the theory under consideration here is the same theory they both offer. Sucarita argues that the agent, at the time of encountering the absence, could not have seen the absence. He cites the Nyāya commitment to epistemic perception: the agent must recall the counterpositive, or recall the object or property that is absent (*pratiyogismaraṇa*), to see *that* it is absent at the time of encounter. But, he argues, the agent could not have recalled the absent object. If they could have, because there is no principle in play that restricts which absences are encoded, they should have been able to recall *numerous* absent objects and properties and subsequently report their absences. But they cannot report numerous absences. There is no principled way to maintain that they are *seeing* the absence and later recalling it.

Jayanta and Bhāsarvajña deny the principle that Sucarita cites. On their view, recalling the absent object or property is not necessary for perceiving its absence. On Bhāsarvajña’s view, it is only necessary for *epistemically* (*savikalpaka*) perceiving absence. Instead an agent unconsciously encodes general absence and then later recalls specific absences among that absence. This is where it becomes clear that Sucarita is responding to the same account to which Jayanta subscribed. He writes that “if one maintains that the agent was aware of absence *in general* (*sāmānyena*)*,* and now recalls absence specifically: this would be wrong. Since *absencehood* is not a general kind (*sāmānya*)” (ŚVK 204.20-21 ad *abhāva* 28).[[32]](#footnote-33) Sucarita’s response is to deny the metaphysics in play in Jayanta’s theory. He also denies the principle that we can *recall* the specific out of the general, and therefore can recall specific absence out of general absence. On his view, we recall *only* the information that was encoded. Not more specific portions of that information (ŚVK 204.21-23 ad *abhāva* 28).

Whether Sucarita’s argument is successful need not hinge on the metaphysics and psychology. Sucarita’s dilemma is that either no unconscious absence is encoded into memory, or the unconscious absence of *everything* is encoded. Jayanta commits to the latter; he claims that the absence of everything is encoded into memory and that specific absences among that absence are made available for recall and subsequent report upon the right prompt. But we noted that this was independently implausible. To avoid accepting the former horn of the dilemma, Jayanta needs a principle that restricts which absences are encoded into memory. Restricting which absences an agent can perceive secures this principle. But to maintain that agents see the absence in Kumārila’s cases, he eschews exactly such a restriction on which absences are perceived. Even if Sucarita gets the metaphysics wrong, Jayanta’s account still fares poorly in light of Sucarita’s problem. The shortcomings of his account show that it is better to concede that our knowledge of past absence is not perceptual, rather than attempt to deny the datum.

Sucarita’s selection problem is also a problem for Uṃveka. Uṃveka maintains that, upon the prompt, the agent recalls that they failed to apprehend Devadatta. But Uṃveka is implicitly committed to the view that, at the earlier time, the agent was not conscious of failing to apprehend Devadatta. This is because no conditions obtained, on Uṃveka’s view, that primed the agent to see his absence. There is therefore no principle in play to determine which of the agent’s apprehension failures are encoded into memory. But again, innumerably many objects and properties were absent. Since there is no principle in play, there is no way for Uṃveka to maintain that the agent’s failures to apprehend these other objects were *not* encoded into memory. He must therefore either maintain that the agent could recall *any* of these absences, or he must abandon his account and maintain that the agent is not recalling their failure to see Devadatta. The first horn of the dilemma is implausible, given bottlenecks on how much information can be encoded. Uṃveka’s recollection view is therefore vulnerable to Sucarita’s problem.

# 8. Pārthasārathi’s recollection failure view

Recollection views were united by a minimal answer to the means question: agents become aware of past absence by recalling negative information. The next set of views we will consider are *recollection failure views.* They are also united by a minimal answer to the means question:

recollection failure thesis: An agent becomes aware that a *recollectable* object or property was absent in the past by *failing* to recall *positive* information about that object or property.

Recollection failure views are no longer views about the absence of *perceptibles*, but about the absence of *recollectables.* Recollection failure views build on the shortcomings of recollection views by flipping the negative. According to these views, instead of knowing that an object was absent from recalling negative information, we know that an object was absent from *failing to recall* positive information. These views are not subject to Sucarita’s problem, because they do not rely on unconscious negatives.

The first recollection failure view that we will be considering comes from the third member of the classical trio, Pārthasārathi, who breaks with Kumārila and Uṃveka’s account. On their account, the means by which we know of absence is *always* failure to apprehend a perceptible. But on Pārthasārathi’s account, the means by which we know of absence is only failure to apprehend a perceptible *in most cases.* Cases of past absence are the exception. In a break with Uṃveka, Pārthasārathi answers the means question by claiming that we come to know of past absence by *failing to recall* (*asmaraṇa*) an object or property under conditions in which one would recall that object or property had it been there (*smṛtiyogyatā*). Or as Nyāya authors will more succinctly put it: failure to recall a recollectable (*smaraṇârhasya asmaraṇa*, *yogyâsmaraṇa*).[[33]](#footnote-34) This in turn delivers a verdict on the novelty question: we *gain* knowledge about absence. Pārthasārathi does not, however, explain why he eschews the earlier absentialist recollection view. We can cautiously assume that it was in response to Śālikanātha’s critique.

Pārthasārathi motivates this account by providing a novel case of past absence. He explains verse twenty eight by providing his case:

To explain—someone is seated at some place in the morning. After seeing no tigers and such there, after also *not* grasping their absence through his failure to recall them, and after seeing the mere place, he moved to another location at midday when someone asks him: “did you come across a tiger, an elephant, a lion or a king at that place this morning?”. Right then*,* recalling that place because he had been aware of it, he grasps the absence of those other tigers and such at that place, which he had not previously grasped. And it cannot be that, at midday, he perceptually grasps the absence from the morning which is not in contact with his senses. Because the intentional objects of perception are present objects in contact with the senses (NR 343.6-11 ad *abhāva* 28).[[34]](#footnote-35)

In this case, an agent takes no note of any tigers, lions, elephants or kings at the initial location in the morning. But they also do not take note of their absence, since they were not looking for them. Then with the right prompt later in the day, they recall the place where they sat in the morning and come to know *non-inferentially* that there were no tigers and such there. Call this case absent tigers and kings.

Pārthasārathi again intends this case to be a counterexample to Nyāya perceptualism. But absent tigers and kings differs from absent devadatta on one very important detail: tigers and kings are *highly salient* features of an environment*.* The conditions for *rememberability* (*smṛtiyogyatā*)—a concept Pārthasārathi introduces immediately after the above passage—determine whether an object or property is *recollectable.* They render true the counterfactual “had the object or property been there, the agent would recall it.” These conditions explain why recollection failure does not produce knowledge of past absence in all cases. Consider the following case:

random numbers: After a day of no sleep, you are given under a minute to look at a random list of numbers. One week later, on another day without sleep, you are then asked to recall whether the number 73 was on that list.

Will you be able to recall whether 73 was on that list? Presumably not. In which case you are *failing to recall* that the number 73 was on that list. But that doesn’t mean you *know* that 73 was absent from that list. That is because the numbers on the list are not *recollectable*: even if 73 had been there, you would not recall it. You looked at the list too quickly, you were and are sleep-deprived, and it’s been too long since you saw the list.

But since tigers and kings are highly salient features of the environment, the counterfactual in Pārthasārathi’s case is highly robust. Given that he intends the process in his case to be non-inferential, this is exactly what he needs. The robust counterfactual is meant to guarantee that, upon failing to recall the tiger or king, the agent immediately knows that they were absent. But an object or property can be recollectable without being *so robustly* recollectable. Consider the difference between the following scenarios. In one scenario, your colleague asks you whether another colleague was at a crowded department talk. You can still come to know that they were absent. But if you did not take note of their absence at the time, you would have to take a moment to think. Consider in contrast being asked whether the prime minister was at the talk. You *immediately* know that they were not; had they been there, you certainly would recall. But you do *not* recall the prime minister being at the talk, so you know that they were not. This is Pārthasārathi’s failure to recall a recollectable. absent tigers and kings tracks scenarios like being asked about the prime minister.

Pārthasārathi puts this forcefully by tweaking the case and introducing his positive view:

Granted: the conditions for being perceptible do not obtain. But the conditions for being recollectable *do.* Since it must be that those seated in an assembly attended by thousands of people should right away grasp a lion or a king that came to the assembly. And if at midday they wanted to recall the lion or the king, they should recall. And *this* *very* *failure to recall* even when one should recall obtaining at the time of midday produces awareness of the absence from the morning (NR 343.13-16 ad *abhāva* 28).[[35]](#footnote-36)

The *rememberability* conditions in the tweaked case yield an even more robust counterfactual. Since there are thousands in the assembly, some would notice a lion or the king. Just as whispers of the prime minister’s presence would abound, the members of the assembly would then notify others. Eventually the members of the assembly would all be aware that the king had joined or that a lion had wandered into the assembly. When prompted to recall whether there were kings or lions at at the assembly, the agent moves directly from failing to recall the king to knowing that the king was absent. No inference is involved: on this view, recollection failure *in and of itself* is an instrument of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) under the right conditions.

Pārthasārathi’s account is the most well-developed absentialist account of past absence that we will be considering. Most importantly for our purposes, Gaṅgeśa is indebted to Pārthasārathi’s work: he will develop Pārthasārathi’s account further for his own purposes. But there are looming concerns with the account. Significantly, Pārthasārathi has cherry-picked a case in which the rememberability conditions yield a robust counterfactual. But we’ve noted that not all cases of past absence yield such robustly true counterfactuals. Sometimes the rememberability conditions are weaker, but *still* sufficient for knowledge of past absence. Gaṅgeśa picks up on exactly this problem. We turn now to his criticisms.

# 9. Gaṅgeśa against a Pārthasārathian account

Gaṅgeśa never quotes Pārthasārathi nor demonstrates familiarity with his cases, but he engages with the same account that Pārthasārathi offers. Gaṅgeśa’s own theory of past absence is just a tweak of the Pārthasārathian account. According to Gaṅgeśa, failing to recall a recollectable is the basis for knowledge of past absence. But knowledge of past absence is *inferential*: we infer that a recollectable object or property was absent in the past on the basis of failing to recall an object or property when we would recall it, had it been there. This tweak allows Gaṅgeśa both to provide a perceptualist account of past absence and mend problems he finds with the Pārthasārathian account.[[36]](#footnote-37)

Gaṅgeśa’s underlying strategy is to create a case in which the rememberability conditions are *weaker,* but still sufficient for knowledge of past absence. That is to say, a case in which the object is recollectable, but not so recollectable that the agent does not need to reflect on whether the object was absent or not. Much of the initial work begins in the voice of a Bhāṭṭa opponent, but Gaṅgeśa will ultimately accept the datum of the case. The opponent writes:

Consider the following. In the case where Caitra has left after seeing the interior of a house and is asked by someone “is Maitra there?”—in this case, after thinking for a moment and after becoming aware of Maitra’s absence by having failed to apprehend him, he says “Maitra wasn’t there”. Caitra’s awareness of past absence is not recollection, since he did not undergo a firsthand awareness of Maitra’s absence, insofar as he did not recall Maitra when he previously was undergoing a firsthand awareness of the house. And so in this case as well as in others, apprehension failure alone must be the cause of Caitra’s awareness of Maitra’s absence, given that Caitra undergoes a firsthand awareness of absence by means of apprehension failure without any activity of the senses (TCM 721.1-722.2).[[37]](#footnote-38)

This case is structurally similar to Uṃveka’s case of absent devadatta. Here, Caitra found himself inside a house. While in the house, he was not searching for Maitra and took no note of his absence. But later on, after he has left the house, someone asks him whether Maitra was there. He then has to *think* for a moment to reflect on the question, and whatever process he engages in results in him coming to know that Maitra was absent. But this case differs from absent devadatta in one crucial way: Gaṅgeśa builds into the case the claim that Caitra has to pause to think. Maitra is like your colleague at the talk: unlike a king or a tiger, Maitra is not quite so salient. Call this case absent maitra.

Consistent with all Bhāṭṭa philosophers we’ve seen, the opponent claims that Caitra’s knowledge of Maitra’s absence cannot be perceptual. Since Maitra’s absence is spatially and temporally distal, there can be no sensory connection between the absence and the senses. And whether Jayanta is the target, Gaṅgeśa’s opponent explicitly rejects the idea that Caitra unconsciously saw Maitra’s absence and then later recalls his absence. The opponent cites Gaṅgeśa’s commitment to epistemic perception: Caitra did not recall Maitra. Therefore, Caitra could not have seen *that* Maitra was absent. The opponent concludes that apprehension failure (*anupalabdhi*) must be the cause of Caitra’s knowledge of past absence. This provides a partial answer to the means question: *some* form of apprehension failure must be the basis for knowledge of past absence. This in turn entails an answer to the novelty question: Caitra *gains* knowledge about past absence.

But the account so far leaves details open. Apprehension failure could be the cause of Caitra’s knowledge in two ways: it might directly cause Caitra’s knowledge of Maitra’s absence, or it might be the cause insofar as it serves as the *inferential mark* (*liṅga*) for *inferential* knowledge of Maitra’s absence. The Bhāṭṭa opponent argues that absent maitra supports the former view. Gaṅgeśa has the opponent provide a paraphrase of Kumārila’s verse:

Therefore, they say:

“Since someone, recalling the initial object that he saw just on its own, such as a house, then

When asked, *right* *then* he becomes aware of the absence of something else there*”* (TCM 722.3-4).[[38]](#footnote-39)

Note the tension between the verse and the way Gaṅgeśa has set up absent maitra: Gaṅgeśa has the opponent stipulate that Caitra pauses to think, while the verse reiterates the immediacy claim.

Gaṅgeśa does not dispute the datum of absent maitra, but argues that the Bhāṭṭa opponent’s move to fill in the details is unsuccessful. He begins by rejecting the account of past absence we saw from Kumārila and Uṃveka. Pārthasārathi has already abandoned the old view, and Gaṅgeśa makes quick work of it. Returning to his own voice, he responds:

Don’t say that. Since, first of all, unconscious apprehension failure is not what causes an agent to grasp absence in the case of past absence, unlike the absence of a pot on the floor. Because, at the time of the prompt, the agent does not fail to apprehend a perceptible object, since the house is not in contact with his senses. Nor is conscious apprehension failure what causes an agent to grasp past absence, because there would be a regress. Since apprehension failure would need to be grasped by further apprehension failure, insofar as apprehension failure is also by its nature an absence (TCM 722.5-8).[[39]](#footnote-40)

Gaṅgeśa provides and rejects two options: the means by which we know of past absence is either *unconscious* (*ajñāta*) or *conscious* (*jñāta*) apprehension failure of a perceptible. Unconscious apprehension failure here maps on to the idea that *present* apprehension failure *of a perceptible* could bring about knowledge of past absence. We already noted when we considered Uṃveka’s view that this cannot be the case, since the object is no longer perceptible relative to the agent’s situation. The notion of conscious apprehension failure maps on to Uṃveka’s own view that we recall that we failed to apprehend a perceptible. This view requires that the agent be aware that they failed to apprehend the object or property. Gaṅgeśa accordingly rehearses Śālikanātha’s regress problem for the second option.

Gaṅgeśa takes these considerations against the old account to be decisive. The next account he considers is clearly a Pārthasārathian account. The Pārthasārathian opponent offers an alternative way to fill in the details of absent maitra:

In that case, what causes an agent to grasp Maitra’s absence in the house is just unconscious failure to recall the house, which is recollectable (*smaraṇârha*) as containing recollectable (*yogya*) Maitra (TCM 723.1-2).[[40]](#footnote-41)

According to this account, the agent comes to know about the past absence of Maitra by failing to recall Maitra’s presence in the house. Failing to recall Maitra yields knowledge, since Maitra is recollectable *and* the house is recollectable as containing Maitra. However, the opponent maintains that the recollection failure is *always unconscious* (*ajñāta eva*). This makes explicit what had been implicit in Pārthasārathi and captures the *immediacy* of the process, both causal and phenomenological. The thought is that the agent in Pārthasārathi’s case does not need to consciously reason from the fact that they do not recall the king. Instead, they immediately know he was absent. Importantly, this is also a way for the opponent to avoid Śālikanātha’s regress.

Gaṅgeśa has two straightforward but powerful objections to the Pārthasārathian account. His arguments expose its shortcomings while providing desiderata for an improved theory to satisfy. Both objections proceed from the *weaker* rememberability conditions that Gaṅgeśa builds into absent maitra. Respectively, they state that the Pārthasārathian account leaves no room for error (*viparyaya*) or doubt (*saṃśaya*), and that the Pārthasārathian account cannot explain why Caitra has to pause to think about Maitra’s absence.

The concern about infallibility stems from the Pārthasārathian claim that the failure to recollect a recollectable is sufficient, in and of itself, for knowledge of past absence*.* According to the account, if an agent fails to recollect a recollectable object or property, they immediately know with the right prompt that the object or property is absent. This looks plausible in the case of absent tigers and kings, where the absent objects are highly salient features of an environment. Consider being asked whether you recently came across the prime minister: there is little room to be wrong and little room to wonder whether you *maybe* saw them. But this looks less plausible in the case of absent maitra, where Maitra is not as salient as a tiger or king. Here is how Gaṅgeśa puts the concern in response to the Pārthasārathian opponent:

No. Since, if recollection failure *in and of itself* causes an agent to grasp absence, it follows problematically that there would be no error or doubt with respect to absence. And sometimes there *is* error (“it was there”) and doubt (“was it there or not?”) (TCM 723.2-4).[[41]](#footnote-42)

To see Gaṅgeśa’s point, we can flesh out his case:

absent maitra: Caitra has just left a crowded house where an event was being held. During his time in the house, he variously visited all the rooms. On his way home, he bumps into a friend who then asks whether Maitra was there. Maitra is a colleague from another department, but he and Caitra are by no means close. It happens, however, that Caitra never saw Maitra at the event. So he thinks briefly and realizes that Maitra was not there. He then reports as much.[[42]](#footnote-43)

In the modified case, Maitra *is* recollectable. In cases like these, we *do* notice in retrospect that someone was absent. Maitra is just not *strongly* recollectable: the house was crowded, and Caitra is not very close with Maitra. Whereas a tiger or king could hardly escape Caitra’s notice, Maitra simply might have gone unnoticed. Suppose then that Caitra receives the prompt. Does he know *immediately* that Maitra was absent, just from failing to recall his presence? The Pārthasārathian account delivers a positive verdict: Caitra does not need to reflect on whether Maitra was there. But Gaṅgeśa’s argument is that Caitra could not immediately know *merely* from failing to recall Maitra. Given the chance that Maitra may have escaped his notice, there’s room for Caitra to be wrong and room for Caitra to wonder whether Maitra was there or not. The Pārthasārathian account delivers the wrong verdict.

This leads to the second problem. Since Caitra might have missed Maitra, he needs to pause and think. But the Pārthasārathian account, like all Bhāṭṭa absentialist accounts, starts with cases like absent tigers and kings in which the process culminating in knowledge of past absence is *phenomenologically immediate*. Kumārila’s case stipulates that the agent becomes aware of past absence right upon receiving the prompt (*tadaîva*). Sucarita and Pārthasārathi both repeat this claim in their commentaries. The Pārthasārathian account then makes the problematic move of explaining the *phenomenological* immediacy as stemming from underlying *causal* immediacy: failing to recall a recollectable is *all an agent needs* for knowledge of past absence.

Since causal immediacy should entail phenomenological immediacy, this should be a plausible attempt at explaining the phenomenological immediacy of our knowledge of past absence. But this entailment is exactly what sets up the problem: since the Pārthasārathian account maintains that all knowledge of past absence is causally immediate, it predicts that all knowledge of past absence should be phenomenologically immediate. But absent maitra presents a case in which the rememberability conditions are too weak for phenomenological immediacy and therefore constitutes a counterexample to the Pārthasārathian account. What is more, most cases of past absence are cases like absent maitra. We are more likely to wonder whether a colleague was at the talk or whether a specific plant was at the nursery than we are to wonder whether we encountered the prime minister or dangerous wildlife on our walk to work. Strong rememberability conditions like those in absent tigers and kings are the exception, rather than the norm. Gaṅgeśa’s point in the larger dialectic is that apprehension failure cannot be a *sui generis* means of knowing that an object or property is absent. This holds true even in cases of past absence, where the absentialist account looked most plausible.

Bhāṭṭa philosophers take the wrong class of case as their starting point. Theories of past absence should instead be built out of cases like absent maitra, and *then* tested against cases like absent tigers and kings. And since cases like absent maitra involve agents reflecting, the process must be *conscious*. This is the tweak that Gaṅgeśa makes to the Pārthasārathian account. We now turn to his account.

# 10. Gaṅgeśa’s recollection failure view

Gaṅgeśa’s account of past absence starts from Pārthasārathi’s insight: recollection failure views are on better footing than recollection views. Gaṅgeśa himself thinks that failing to recall a recollectable is the basis for our knowledge of past absence. But he starts with cases like absent maitra, and as a result his account starts from the datum that the process leading to knowledge of past absence is often conscious. He tweaks the Pārthasārathian account accordingly.

The shortcomings of the Pārthasārathian account presented two important desiderata:

fallibility and uncertainty: An account of past absence must explain how an agent can be wrong about or doubt whether a recollectable object or property was absent, *even if* they fail to recall the object or property.

conscious reasoning: An account of past absence must explain why an agent *in many cases* consciously reasons about whether a recollectable object or property was absent.

Pārthasārathi’s account is unable to capture fallibility and uncertainty, because according to his account the failure to recollect a recollectable is sufficient for knowledge *in and of itself*. And his account is unable to capture conscious reasoning, precisely because the account specifies that knowledge of past absence is due to *unconscious* failure to recollect a recollectable.

There is one more important desiderata for Gaṅgeśa’s purpose. Within the larger dialectic, the purpose of Gaṅgeśa’s account of past absence is to maintain a perceptualist epistemology of absence in the face of Bhāṭṭa arguments that apprehension failure is a unique route into knowledge of absence. Given as much, Gaṅgeśa’s account must also satisfy the following desideratum:

perception as fundamental: A *perceptualist* account of past absence must explain how inferential knowledge of past absence depends on perceptual knowledge of absence.

Again, perception as fundamental is stronger than the claim that inferential knowledge of absence depends on perceptual knowledge of *positives*. Failure to satisfy perception as fundamental would leave Gaṅgeśa’s theory no longer genuinely perceptualist, even if he accepts absence perception.

Gaṅgeśa’s tweak to capture the above desiderata is to treat knowledge of past absence as *inferential* and to treat the failure to recall a recollectable as the *basis* for the inference. Here is the final view, in his own words:

When an agent paying careful attention (*sunipuṇa*) ascertains that he fails to recall Maitra, who can enter into the content of a single awareness and whom he would recall had he undergone a firsthand awareness of him, then he has inferential knowledge of his absence. It follows that, having observed the deviation of mere recollection failure and having set it aside, a specific kind of failure to recollect—deliberate recollection on the part of the person inquiring—is employed. Otherwise, reflection would be unexplained, since recollection failure *just by itself* would cause an agent to grasp absence. Therefore, failure to recall a recollectable is employed *as an inferential mark* (TCM 724.3-7).[[43]](#footnote-44)

Gaṅgeśa’s final view is that an agent who is actively inquiring into, or desires to know (*jñātukāma*), whether a recollectable object or property was absent *at a location* can infer that it was absent at that location on the basis of deliberately directing their attention towards attempting to recall (*praṇidhāna*) the object or property at that location and failing to recall.[[44]](#footnote-45) Gaṅgeśa thereby provides his preferred way to fill in the details of absent maitra: upon the prompt, Caitra wonders whether Maitra was absent at the house. Caitra pauses to deliberately direct his attention in an attempt to retrieve the relevant information. He recalls the house but is unable to recall Maitra’s presence there.[[45]](#footnote-46) On this basis, Caitra infers his absence: Caitra’s knowledge of Maitra’s past absence is *inferential.* Note that this account is neutral on whether episodic memory is in play. This account allows that agents engage in mental time travel in attempting to recall the absent object or property, but does *not* require that the retrieval attempt involve mental time travel.

How does this account satisfy the above desiderata? Consider fallibility and uncertainty. The Pārthasārathian opponent tries to throw Gaṅgeśa’s objection back at him. He asks: “for you as well, how could there be doubt or error with respect to absence?” (TCM 724.1-2).[[46]](#footnote-47) Gaṅgeśa responds that the *inference* leaves room for doubt and error: “because we observe inferential doubt and error due to doubt and error about the inferential mark” (TCM 724.2).[[47]](#footnote-48) An inferential mark (*liṅga*) always entails the target property (*sādhya*): smoke always entails fire. But there are cases in which smoke obtains, but the agent is *mistaken* about whether the smoke obtains or doubts whether the smoke obtains. They may mistake the smoke for morning mist or wonder whether the smoke is actually just morning mist.

Analogously, the following principle is in play in Gaṅgeśa’s theory:

absence-recollection failure link: An agent fails to recall a recollectable object or property when attentively and deliberately attempting to do so *just in case* that recollectable object or property was absent.

The absence-recollection failure link is meant to provide a robust, invariable relation (*vyāpti*) between absence and recollection failure. It is a very strong principle, but the agent would not be able to make the inference without this relation. Gaṅgeśa’s emphasis on attention is apparently to help motivate the principle. According to the absence-recollection failure link, if the agent fails to recall the recollectable object or property when attentively and deliberately attempting to do so, then the object or property *was* absent. But the agent can still be *mistaken* about whether they are failing to recall the object or doubt whether they are failing to do so. This is how the account captures fallibility and uncertainty.[[48]](#footnote-49)

The most straightforward reading of this argument suggests that agents do not have infallible access to the contents of memory. Under the right conditions, an agent’s failure to recollect a recollectable object or property entails its absence. The agent simply is mistaken or unsure about whether they are failing to recall the object or property. Consider the positive misplacement error, in which an agent erroneously thinks that an object or property was present when it was absent: the best explanation of this error is that the agent *thinks* that they recall the recollectable object or property. But if the object or property was genuinely absent, genuinely recollectable and the agent is deliberately attempting to recall, then by the absence-recollection failure link the agent actually does fail to recall the object or property. They must therefore be mistaken about whether they are failing to recall the object or property. But this argument is surprising, since Gaṅgeśa elsewhere accepts that introspective awareness (*anuvyavasāya*) is *always* knowledge (*pramā*).[[49]](#footnote-50) This is an important interpretive upshot about Gaṅgeśa’s theory of self-knowledge.[[50]](#footnote-51)

Gaṅgeśa’s account captures conscious reasoning easily. Pārthasārathi’s account foregrounds quick, indeliberate attempts to retrieve information from memory. On this view, the cause of the agent’s attempt to retrieve information from memory is largely *exogenous*—it is the external prompt that causes the agent to attempt to retrieve the information. Gaṅgeśa’s account instead relies on slower, deliberate attempts to retrieve information from memory. On his view, the cause of the agent’s attempt to retrieve information is largely *endogenous*—the agent themselves is actively inquiring about past absence and consciously directs resources towards attempting to recall the relevant information. By shifting the emphasis from indeliberate to deliberate recollection, Gaṅgeśa captures conscious reasoning.

According to the Pārthasārathian account as Gaṅgeśa reconstructs it, *unconscious* (*ajñāta*) recollection failure produces knowledge of past absence. But according to Gaṅgeśa’s account, the agent is *inferring* that Maitra is absent and therefore must be conscious of the information that serves as the basis for the inference—that they fail to recall Maitra. So how does the agent become aware that they are failing to recall Maitra? Gaṅgeśa’s answer to this question is how he secures perception as fundamental. In first introducing the idea that our knowledge of past absence is inferential, he writes:

Rather, we do not posit apprehension failure as a *sui generis* instrument of knowledge. Since we can explain awareness of absence in cases of past absence as due to an inferential mark—failure to recollect a recollectable—posited as an instrumental cause of knowledge known by means of the inner sense (TCM 723.10-11).[[51]](#footnote-52)

Gaṅgeśa maintains a kind of inner sense theory of self-knowledge, according to which the inner sense (*manas*) perceives one’s awareness-events and their contents. His view is that knowledge of our awareness-events and their contents is *perceptual*. By extension, his view is that knowledge of the *absence* of awareness-events is also perceptual. As this applies to the case of absent maitra: the key claim here is that Caitra becomes aware that he is failing to recall Maitra by means of the inner sense, in which case his knowledge of his failure to recall Maitra is perceptual. Since this knowledge is a necessary condition for knowing that Maitra was absent, Caitra’s knowledge of Maitra’s past absence depends on his perceptual knowledge of failing to recall Maitra. Recollection failure is a kind of absence. Every case of non-perceptual knowledge of absence therefore depends on perceptual knowledge of absence. Gaṅgeśa’s tweak to the Pārthasārian account captures desiderata that the original account could not. And if the account is correct, Gaṅgeśa successfully offers a perceptualist account of past absence.

But *is* the account correct?[[52]](#footnote-53) As a defense of perceptualism*,* Gaṅgeśa’s account does hinge on whether inner sense theories of self-knowledge are correct. Bhāṭṭa philosophers like Pārthasārathi—at least as Gaṅgeśa thinks of Bhāṭṭa philosophers—prefer *inferentialist* theories of self-knowledge, according to which one’s awareness-events and their contents are inferred from the fact that the object and its properties are presenting to oneself (*jñātatā, prākaṭya*).[[53]](#footnote-54) Within the dialectic, Gaṅgeśa has already rejected the Bhāṭṭa theory of self-knowledge—as he points out.[[54]](#footnote-55) But philosophers who reject inner sense theories are under no pressure to accept Gaṅgeśa’s account of past absence *as a perceptualist account*. Gaṅgeśa brings in an inner sense theory for his own purposes, and his account can readily be adapted to alternative theories of self-knowledge. The success of Gaṅgeśa’s defense of perceptualism is therefore conditional on the truth of inner sense theories of self-knowledge.[[55]](#footnote-56)

Questions of perceptualism aside, we can also ask whether his recollection failure view *as a standalone account* adequately explains how agents learn in retrospect that an object or property was absent. And of all the views introduced, Gaṅgeśa’s fares the best. It does not suffer from the same problems as recollection views. It captures cases like absent maitra better than the opposing recollection failure view. But Pārthasārathi’s account fell short when applied to cases like absent maitra in which the rememberability conditions were too weak for felt immediacy. What happens when we reverse this strategy and apply Gaṅgeśa’s account to cases like absent tigers and kings, where the rememberability conditions *are* strong enough for felt immediacy?

Gaṅgeśa has presented a unified view, according to which the process leading to knowledge of past absence does not change as the rememberability conditions shift. His theory suggests that in *all* cases, our knowledge of past absence is inferential and based on deliberate attempts to retrieve information about a recollectable object or property from memory. Applied to cases in which the rememberability conditions are very strong, Gaṅgeśa’s account therefore has the opposite problem: it entails that knowledge in such cases should *not* feel immediate. But in cases like absent tigers and kings there is no felt pause. When prompted to answer whether the prime minister was at the department talk, you answer *immediately*. Had the prime minister been there, you would have noticed. The process is not slow and deliberate.

Gaṅgeśa’s account therefore delivers the wrong verdict when rememberability conditions are strong enough for phenomenological immediacy. Cases like absent tigers and kings therefore present a desideratum that escaped Gaṅgeśa’s notice:

immediacy: An account of past absence must explain why an agent *in some cases* immediately knows that a highly salient, recollectable object or property was absent.

immediacy and conscious reasoning are not in tension, since neither desideratum applies across all cases of past absence. Pārthasārathi’s account captures immediacy while failing to capture other significant desiderata. Gaṅgeśa’s captures a wider variety of desiderata but fails to capture immediacy.

But a solution is readily available to Gaṅgeśa. To capture immediacy, he needs to allow that shifts in the rememberability conditions entail shifts in how demanding the recall attempt is. As the rememberability conditions *weaken*, the attempt to recall the information about the recollectable object or property becomes increasingly demanding and deliberate. But as the rememberability conditions *strengthen,* the recall attempt becomes increasingly immediate and less deliberate. This allows for Gaṅgeśa to handle a *gamut* of cases: there can be in between cases where the retrieval attempt is more or less deliberate. At a crowded department talk, the prime minister is more recollectable than your good friend whose office is across from yours, who is in turn more recollectable than a colleague from another department whom you once met briefly. In cases across the gamut, however, Gaṅgeśa can hold fixed that the agent’s knowledge of past absence is inferential. The inference simply becomes increasingly immediate, insofar as the retrieval attempt becomes increasingly immediate as the absent object or property becomes increasingly recollectable. Gaṅgeśa can therefore straightforwardly mend his account to capture Pārthasārathi’s cases by maintaining that quick and indeliberate recall attempts sometimes serve as the basis for inferential knowledge of past absence. Pārthasārathi, in contrast, cannot mend his account to capture Gaṅgeśa’s cases.

Gaṅgeśa’s account comes against a backdrop of earlier theories and their shortcomings, and a journey through the history of the debate over past absence revealed a variety of theories that populate the option space. Two groups of views emerged. According to recollection views, cases of past absence involve recalling negative information. But the recollection views on offer from Uṃveka, Jayanta and Bhāsarvajña suffered variously from Sucarita’s selection problem and from Śālikanātha’s regress problem. Pārthasārathi’s insight was to notice that these problems can be handled by flipping the negative: cases of past absence instead involve *failing* to recall *positive* information. But Gaṅgeśa shows that Pārthasārathi’s recollection failure view suffers from further serious difficulties. In taking as his starting point cases like absent tigers and kings in which the absent object is highly recollectable, Pārthasārathi arrives at a view according to which agents learn *non-inferentially* that a recollectable object or property was absent just by failing to recall that object or property. Applied to cases like absent maitra in which the rememberability conditions are weaker but still sufficient for knowledge of past absence, Pārthasārathi’s account falls short by foregrounding quick and indeliberate recall attempts. Gaṅgeśa’s repurposed account mends those issues by foregrounding slower and deliberate recall attempts, treating the agent's failure to recall the recollectable object or property as the *basis* for *inferential* knowledge of past absence. And while Gaṅgeśa’s account fails to capture the felt immediacy at play in Pārthasārathi’s cases, we saw that a solution is readily available to him. The lesson: among the theories in the option space, Gaṅgeśa’s presents arguably the most plausible account of how we know of absence in retrospect.

**Acknowledgements**

I am especially grateful to Elisa Freschi for extensive discussion, for reading with me, and for detailed comments on drafts; and to Nilanjan Das for extensive discussion and for reading with me. I am also grateful to Anya Farennikova, Jonardon Ganeri, Alessandro Graheli, Alexandra Gustafson, Jennifer Nagel, Zain Raza, Anand Vaidya and Mason Westfall, variously for comments on drafts and for discussion; and to an anonymous referee for the *Journal of Indian Philosophy,* whose precise comments led to improvements throughout.

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1. Vardhamāna (NKP 429.2 ad *stabaka* 3.20) and Rucidatta (TCMP 721.4-722.1 ad *anupalabdhi*) for this exact formulation of the term. An important note for those familiar with theories of absence in the Sanskrit philosophical tradition: *prāṅnâstitā* and its synonyms *atītâbhāva* (ŚVTṬ 416.17 ad *abhāva* 28) and *prācīnâbhāva* (ŚVK 191.2 ad *abhāva* 1) are not *prāgabhāva.* There is a common metaphysical distinction between three kinds of absence (see TS 312.12-16): prior absence (*prāgabhāva*), posterior absence (*pradhvaṃsâbhāva*) and constant absence (*atyantâbhāva*). Prior absence is the absence of an object or property that will exist, posterior absence the absence of a property or object that previously existed, and constant absence the absence of an object or property that did not, does not, and will not ever exist. But past absence is *not* prior absence*.* Past absence is *merely* an absence that an agent *encountered* *in the past*: any of the three distinct kinds of absence can qualify as past absence. An agent can also encounter *prior* absence in the present. The difference between past absence and prior absence is exhibited by a difference in epistemology within the standard Nyāya framework: prior absence is perceptible, while past absence is not. In the non-standard framework, however, Raghunātha and Veṇīdatta deny that prior absence is perceptible, since they argue that prior absence does not exist. See the former’s TCMD (669-678 ad *sāmānyalakṣaṇā*) and the latter’s PM (27-28), as well as Jayarāma’s PMā (222–32) for a response to Raghunātha. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See Udayana (NK 427.5 ad *stabaka* 3.20) for the analogy with colour perception. While the analogy only runs so far, the point is that agents literally *perceive* absence. Absence perception in the Nyāya framework is, however, mediated by perception of the positive locus. More on this point below. For recent defenses of absence perception, see especially Farrenikova (2013, 2015) and Sorensen (2008, 2015). See also Martin and Dokic (2013) for challenges. In *The Subject as Freedom,* K C Bhattacharya (1976, 128-35) also defends the claim that we see absence, without reference to any Sanskrit sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For some secondary literature, see Taber (2001), Freschi (2010), Guha (2013), and Vaidya et al (2016). Dharmakīrti and his followers held an inferentialist view, according to which one infers the absence of a perceptible object or property from failing to see it (*dṛśyâdarśana*). See Kellner (2001, 2003) for discussion. The general Prābhākara metaphysics of absence claims that absence is just another kind of positive (*bhāva*), and the general Prābhākara epistemology of absence claims against Bhāṭṭa philosophers that there is no *sui generis* route into knowledge (*pramāṇa*) of absence. Śālikanātha (PP 289.4) explicitly maintains that absences are nothing other than positives. He apparently argues that absence is a kind of positive awareness-event (*buddhi*): “But rather, that awareness-event which has as its intentional object only *φ* when the counterpositive is perceptible, that awareness-event is called the absence of that counterpositive.” *kintu dṛśye pratiyogiṇi yā tadekaviṣayā buddhiḥ sā tadabhāvaḥ iti vyapadiśyate* | (PP 291.1-2). According to this view, the absence of an object is just an awareness-event whose intentional object is only the locus of the absent object under conditions such that the agent would have seen the object, had it been there. The absence of a pot on the floor, for example, is identified with an awareness-event whose intentional object is only the “mere” floor (*bhūtalamātra*) but not the perceptible (*dṛśya*) pot (PP 291.3-5). Knowledge of absence thereby reduces to *self-knowledge*, and Śālikanātha’s theory of self-knowledge claims that awareness-events are *self-luminous* (*svaprakāśa*), or constitute awareness-events of themselves. This view rules out a *sui generis* route into knowledge of absence: “And an awareness-event whose intentional object is only *φ,* insofar as it is self-luminous, does not require a further instrument of knowledge.” *tadekaviṣayā ca saṃvittis svaprakāśatayā na pramāṇântaram apekṣate* | (PP 291.5). See Gaṅgeśa’s (TCM 730-65) *abhāvavāda* for engagement with other Prābhākara philosophers who are apparently not Śālikanātha, but who share the same general project of reducing absences to positives. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “[Objection:] How does an agent undergo an awareness of their failure to apprehend a perceptible? [Response:] Only by the inner sense.” *yogyânupalabdheḥ kathaṃ jñānam iti cet* | *manasaîva* | (NSD 127.11). Śaśadhara’s (NSD 127.8-10) view is that agents infer past absence on the basis of failing to apprehend a perceptible object or property (*yogyânupalabdhi*). Apprehension failure is itself an absence. And an agent’s knowledge of apprehension failure is perceptual, insofar as apprehension failure is known by the inner sense (*manas*)*.* Therefore, agents cannot infer past absence without prior perceptual knowledge of absence. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Absence is included in the three instruments of knowledge according to the case. To explain—awareness of the absence of being a Kuru and so forth is due to testimony. Awareness of the absence of colour in the self and so forth is due to inference. Awareness of the absence of a pot on the ground and so forth is due to perception.” *abhāvasya tu triṣv api yathāsambhavena antarbhāvaḥ* | *tathā hi kauravâdyabhāvapratiprattir āgamāt* || (NS 114.6-7) *ātmâdiṣu rūpâdyabhāvapratipattir anumānāt* || (NS 114.10) *bhūtalâdiṣu ghaṭâdyabhāvapratipattiḥ pratyakṣāt* || (NS 114.15-16). The inferential and testimonial cases are apparently meant to provide cases in which non-perceptual knowledge of absence is not dependent on perceptual knowledge of absence. Note that Bhāsarvajña does not accept *upamāna* as a unique *pramāṇa*; thus the reference to the “three instruments of knowledge*”.* The Dvaita Vedānta philosopher Jayatīrtha appears to hold the same non-uniformity view as Bhāsarvajña, and cites the same example of testimonial knowledge. See his PPa (46.10-11) for the *Kaurava* example and PPa (46.10-47.7) for his general discussion of the epistemology of absence. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Jayanta’s case of testimonial knowledge, for example, involves travelers learning that there are no thieves on the road: “Sometimes, an agent ascertains absence on the basis of testimony as well. Like travelers who undergo an awareness, due to a trustworthy source, of the absence of thieves and other sources of danger.” *āgamād apy abhāvasya kvacid bhavati niścayaḥ* | *corâdinâstitājñānaṃ adhvagānām ivâptataḥ* || (NM 144.7-8 ad *sūtra* 1.1.3). But a perceptualist account is straightforward: the testifying agent saw the absence of the thieves. Genuine testimony, for Nyāya philosophers, requires that the testifying agent be an *āpta.* And early Nyāya philosophers held that to be an *āpta* involves having perceived the object of testimony. See Vātsyāyana (NBh 14.5 ad *sūtra* 1.1.7). On this view, the agent testifying about the absence must have themselves perceived the absence. See NM (144.2-6 ad *sūtra* 1.1.3) for the claim that knowledge of absence is sometimes inferential. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “[Objection:] Where then does conscious apprehension failure bring about causally indirect awareness of absence? [Response:] For example, after hearing “I searched very carefully in the temple for Maitra, but did not apprehend him” the hearer infers ⌜he must not have been there⌝. Past absence is also explained in this way.” *nanu kva nāma jñātânupalabdhir asākṣātkāriṇīm abhāvapratītiṃ janayati* | *tad yathā nipuṇataram anusṛto mayā mandire caitro na côpalabdha iti śrutvā śrotânuminoti nūnaṃ nâsīd eva iti* | *etena prāṅnâstitâpi vyākhyātā* | (NK 429.1-3 ad *stabaka* 3.20). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. “Since that awareness which is causally direct has the senses as its instrument. Like awareness of colour. So it is for the awareness ⌜there is no pot here on the floor⌝.” *yā hi sākṣātkāriṇī pratītiḥ sêndriyakaraṇikā yathā rūpâdipratītiḥ* | *tathêha bhūtale ghaṭo nâstîtyapi* | (NK 427.5-428.1 ad *stabaka* 3.20). Gaṅgeśa rehearses this argument at TCM (709.2-9), but ultimately argues that it fails. Jayatīrtha rehearses this argument in favour of absence perception at PPa (46.13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See Udayana (NK 428.2 ad *stabaka* 3.20) for the notion of *jñātakaraṇa*. Gaṅgeśa (TCM 709.7) glosses the property of having an instrumental cause of which one is aware (*jñātakaraṇatva*) as the property of having an awareness-event as the instrumental cause (*jñānakaraṇatva*). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In his handbook, Annaṃbhaṭṭa summarizes the standard view: “In absence perception, the sensory connection is the qualifier-qualified relation. Because, in the awareness ⌜the floor possesses the absence of a pot⌝, the absence of the pot on the floor, where the floor is in contact with the senses, is the qualifier” *abhāvapratyakṣe viśeṣaṇaviśeṣyabhāvaḥ sannikarṣaḥ* | *bhutalaṃ ghaṭâbhāvavad ity atra cakṣussaṃyukte bhutale ghaṭâbhāvasya viśeṣaṇatvāt* | (TS 137.15-17). According to this view, the sensory connection (*sannikarṣa*) that obtains in the case of absence perception is the *qualifier-qualified* relation (*viśeṣaṇaviśeṣyabhāva*). This is the relation that obtains between a qualifying property and that which it qualifies. As it applies to absence perception: when an agent sees that the floor possesses the absence of a pot, the absence of the pot is the *qualifier* (*viśeṣaṇa*) of the floor, and the floor in turn is the *qualificand* (*viśeṣya*) of the absence. In such cases, the sensory connection is more specifically the *qualifierhood* (*viśeṣaṇatā*) relational abstract, which is “resident” (*niṣṭha*) in the absence and “conditioned” (*nirūpita*) by the floor (see Matilal 1968, 31-44 for discussion of this terminology). The crucial claim for our purposes is that the floor is in contact (*saṃyukta*) with the visual sense, while the absence of the pot enters into the content of the perception as the *qualifier* of the floor. In some cases, the structure is reversed and the absence becomes the qualificand (TSD 138.9-10). In such cases, the sensory connection is more specifically the *qualificandhood* (*viśeṣyatā*) relational abstract. The important detail is again that, even in such cases, perception of absence is *still* mediated by perception of its positive locus: the visual sense is in contact with the floor, but not the absence of the pot. Details about the sensory connection aside, the point therefore is this: *in the limited sense* that absence perception is mediated by perception of the positive locus, absence perception is indirect. But it’s important to note that Nyāya philosophers think of colour (*rūpa*) perception in the same way: in colour perception, the visual sense makes contact with the object but not its colour. According to this view, colour perception is always mediated by perception of the object that instantiates the colour. Absence perception is therefore no more indirect than colour perception. For a summary of the view on colour perception, see Annaṃbhaṭṭa (TS 137.9-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See especially TCM (730-65) for his *abhāvavāda*, where Gaṅgeśa engages with Prābhākara opponents who argue that absences are just another kind of positive. For a translation and commentary, see Matilal (1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Dretske (1969) for the contemporary terminology*.* The pair *savikalpaka/nirvikalpaka* is often translated as “conceptually/non-conceptually.” A central question in the contemporary literature on absence perception is whether there can be non-epistemic perception of absence (see especially Sorensen 2008). To render the Sanskrit literature mutually intelligible with the contemporary literature, I translate *savikalpaka* as “epistemic” in this context. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See his NBhV (9.7-8 ad *sūtra* 1.1.1). Vācaspati (NBhVTṬ 28.9-11 ad *sūtra* 1.1.1) comments on this passage by noting that awareness of absence is dependent (*paratantra*) on the absence and the locus of the absence (*niṣedhyaniṣedhâdhikaraṇa*)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Kumārila begins his chapter on absence by setting out the view: “Where the five instruments of knowledge that are for being aware of positive real things do not arise with respect to a real thing, there absence is the instrument of knowledge.” *pramāṇapañcikaṃ yatra vasturūpe na jāyate* | *vastusattâvabodhârthaṃ tatrâbhāvapramāṇatā* || (ŚV 409.1-2 *abhāva* 1). Pārthasārathi unpacks the view: “The expression “instrument of knowledge” means the five instruments of knowledge previously stated [in the previous chapters of the *Ślokavārttika*] that apprehend positives; their absence *is* the proper defining characteristic of the sixth instrument of knowledge...” *pūrvôktasadupalambhakapramāṇapañcikâbhiprāyo ’yaṃ pramāṇaśabdaḥ, tadabhāvaś ca ṣaṣṭhasya yuktam eva lakṣaṇam*... | (NR 336.1-2 ad *abhāva* 1). As all three commentators (ŚVTṬ 409.1 ad *abhāva* 1; ŚVK 189.1-2 ad *abhāva* 1; NR 335.24-25 ad *abhāva* 1) note, the concern is providing an interpretation of Śabara’s cryptic claim that “absence in turn is the absence of the instruments of knowledge*...” abhāvo ’pi pramāṇâbhāvaḥ...* | (ŚBh 32.9 ad 1.1.5)*.* This passage creates a rift between Bhāṭṭa and Prābhākara philosophers, who offer competing readings. Śālikanātha comments on Prabhākara’s commentary on Śabara’s passage by arguing that Śabara is not offering a definition of an instrument of knowledge (*pramāṇalakṣaṇa*). According to Śālikanātha’s reading, Śabara is instead *denying* that absence is an instrument of knowledge: “When it is said that “the absence of the instruments of knowledge is absence”, one understands ⌜there is no instrument of knowledge⌝. Since it’s not possible to say, “an instrument of knowledge is the absence of the instruments of knowldege.” Therefore, this is not a definition of an instrument of knowledge.” *pramāṇâbhavo ’bhāvaḥ ity ukte pramāṇaṃ na bhavatîti pratīyate* | *na hi pramāṇam pramāṇâbhāvaḥ iti śakyate vaktum* | *tasmān nêdaṃ pramāṇalakṣaṇam* | (ṚV 120.17-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. This is the most straightforward reading of Kumārila’s view. Kumārila and his commentators clearly do not allow for perceptual knowledge of absence, as we will see below. Kumārila also claims that there can be no inferential mark (*liṅga*) by which agents gain inferential knowledge of absence (ŚV 417.1 *abhāva* 29ab). He considers various candidates that could serve as the inferential mark, and among possible candidates rejects the claim that the non-arising of perception and the other instruments of knowledge (*pratyakṣâdeḥ anutpatti*)—apprehension failure—could serve as the inferential mark (ŚV 419.1 *abhāva* 38ab). Moreover, we will see below that Śālikanātha’s regress argument against the Bhāṭṭa view apparently proceeds on the assumption that apprehension failure is the only route into knowledge of absence. Gaṅgeśa’s reuse of Śālikanātha’s argument, which we also look at below, makes the same assumption. The tradition ultimately ascribes to Bhāṭṭas the view that apprehension failure is the *only* route into knowledge of absence. I therefore maintain this reading as the working reading of the view throughout. But it is worth flagging that there are complications. Kumārila never rules out cases of testimonial (*śabda*) knowledge of absence. And we *do* often rely on testimony to learn of absence: when a friend tells me not to go to the store because the item I’m after is out of stock, I learn that the item is not there. Moreover, Pārthasārathi (NR 76.22-23 ad *codanā* 188) elsewhere suggests that agents learn by inference that they are *not* undergoing an awareness-event (*ajñāna*)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. “Nor would there be these distinctions [between kinds of absence, such as prior absence] for things that are unreal; therefore, absence is real.” *na câvastuna ete syur bhedās tenâsya vastutā* | (ŚV 410.11 *abhāva* 8ab). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. The terms *sadrūpa/asadrūpa* and *sadâtmaka/asadâtmaka* are also used. For the terminology, see eg ŚV (412.1 *abhāva* 12ab), (413.7-8 *abhāva* 17) and (415.6 *abhāva* 25cd). Uṃveka (ŚVTṬ 409.10-12 ad *abhāva* 2) clarifies that absences are negative *properties* (*dharma*) of positive property-bearers (*dharmin*). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Cf. Paul (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. See eg ŚV (412.3-4 *abhāva* 13) and (413.7-8 *abhāva* 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. *svarūpamātraṃ dṛṣtvâpi paścāt kiṃcit smarann api* | *tatrânyanâstitāṃ pṛṣṭas tadaîva pratipadyate* || A note about translations: throughout, I largely forgo the standard practice of using square brackets to denote content that is implicit, but not given outright, in the underlying Sanskrit text. Sanskritists will notice, for instance, that I translate ambiguous pronouns by supplying their unstated referent. The omission of square brackets is intended to render translations more readable. It is important that the Sanskrit philosophical tradition be made available to a contemporary analytic audience. This comes with no costs to accuracy: my translations do not supply anything not implicit (on a reasonable reading) in the Sanskrit texts. See McCrea and Patil (2010, 34-40) for a discussion of similar translation practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Śālikanātha especially seems to target this view. He suggests that any case of non-perceptual knowledge of absence—or knowledge of absence in which there is no connection between the senses and the absence—is enough to refute perceptualism: “As regards that, first of all absence is not an object of perception, because there is awareness of absence without any functioning of the senses.” *tatra pratyakṣaprameyaṃ tāvan na bhavati indriyavyāpāram antareṇa pratīteḥ* | (PP 284.1). Elsewhere, he rejects the view that knowledge of absence is perceptual on the grounds that knowledge of absence is not produced by contact (*saṃprayoga*) with the senses (ṚV 119.1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Throughout, it will be important to keep track of the difference between the following two claims: that *an absence* is perceptible, and that the absent *object or property* is perceptible. The concern here is the latter: that the absent object or property is no longer perceptible. The concern could not be the former, since Bhāṭṭa absentialism rejects the claim that absences themselves are perceptible. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. *kañcit pradeśaṃ svarūpeṇa dṛṣṭvā punaḥ kālântare pradeśântaragatasyâsīt tatra devadatta ity anyena pṛṣṭasya pradeśaṃ smṛtvā nâsīt tatra devadatta iti jñānam utpadyamānam atītâbhāvagrāhakatvena katham akṣajaṃ syād ity arthaḥ* | [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. *tasmād evaṃ vyākhyeyam* | *bhūpradeśapratipattivelāyām devadattaviṣayaṃ dṛśyâdarśanam āsīt* | *na ca tadā nâsti iti vijñānam utpannam, ajighṛkṣitatvena sahakārikāraṇâbhāvena ca* | *idānīm tu anyena pṛṣṭasya pradeśadevadattaviṣayadṛśyâdarśanaṃ ca smṛtvā nâsīt tatra devadatta iti jñānam upajāyamānam anavagativiṣayatvena pramāṇam anakṣajaṃ syād ity arthaḥ* | The assisting cause (*sahakārikāraṇa*) in this case must be *udbhūti.* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. *tad api na yuktam* | *vastvantaraviviktagauramūlakasvarūpagrahạnasamaya eva tatrâsannihitasakalapadârthâbhāvagrahaṇasya mecakabuddhyā siddhatvāt idānīṃ tadgatagargâbhāvasmaraṇaṃ na tasya parokṣasyânubhavaḥ* || *tathā hi tadānīṃ gargas tatra nâsīd ity evam asau smṛtvā satyavādī vadati, idānīm astitvanâstitve prati saṃśeta evâsau, gargasya kutaścid āgatasya idānīṃ tatra astitvasaṃbhavāt* || [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. While there is no reason to believe there is direct influence, this is strikingly similar to Raghunātha’s argument that *pratiyogijñāna* is not necessary for perceiving absence. Raghunātha argues that agents non-epistemically (*nirvikalpaka*) see absence, since agents see darkness (*tamas*) without being aware of all the individual sources of light that are absent. See again Raghunātha’s TCMD (665.1-5 ad *sāmānyalakṣaṇā*) and Bhattacharya (1978, 60-62) for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Vardhamāna, however, does note that someone holds a view according to which agents infer specific absence from general absence. According to this view, general absence is the inferential mark (*liṅga*) for inferring specific absence. Commenting on Udayana, he writes: “But some say that the meaning of the passage [NK 429.1-3 ad *stabaka* 3.20] is the following: in a case where an agent infers specific absence by means of the general absence that is the inferential mark, in this case conscious apprehension failure is part of the inference.” *kecit tu yatra sāmānyâbhāvena liṅgena viśeṣâbhāvânumānaṃ tatra jñātânupalabdhir anumānâṅgam iti tatparo ayaṃ grantha ity āhuḥ* | (NKP 429.9-10 ad *stabaka* 3.20). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. “[Objection:] It is not right that an agent epistemically sees absence without awareness of its counterpositive. [Response:] Granted. Even so, after an agent grasps the whole absence non-epistemically: when at time *t* the assisting cause obtains—namely, the agent grasps the counterpositive of an absence *A—*then at *t* the agent *does* epistemically grasp *A.*” *pratiyogijñānaṃ vinā na yuktaṃ savikalpakam iti cet, satyam, tathâpi nirvikalpakenâśeṣâbhāvagrahaṇe sati paścād yadā yasya pratiyogismṛtyādisahakārī sampadyate, tadā tasya savikalpakaṃ grahanaṃ bhavaty evêti* | (NB 434.15-17). Note that the assisting cause (*sahakārin*) in this case is *pratiyogismaraṇa,* in contrast to the Uṃveka passage in which the assisting cause is *udbhūti.* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. *kiṃ ca pramāṇântaravādinâpi pramāṇâbhāvas sattvamātreṇâbhāvabuddhijanako nâbhyupagamanīyaḥ kintu viditatvena* | *tathā hi kasyacid vastunaḥ kvacid dṛṣṭasya punas tasminn eva dṛśyamānasyâdarśanakālabhāvinam abhāvaṃ pratipadyate nâsīd ayam ihêti* | *tadā tatra darśanâbhavaḥ nivṛttaḥ katham abhāvâvagamaṃ janayet* | *yadi sattayâbhāvabodhaḥ tato na bhavet* | *buddhyupārūḍhasya hi janakatve ’tītasyâpi samprati anusandhīyamānasya ghaṭata evâbhāvabodhôpapādakatvam* | *yathā cakṣurādikaṃ svasattāmātreṇa svakāryakāri, na câtivṛttaṃ svakāryam janayati liṅgaṃ ca buddhiviṣayâpannaṃ laiṅgikâvabodhajanakam smaryamāṇam atītam api sat svakālavṛtti laiṅgikam anumāpayati tathêdam draṣṭavyam* | *evañ câtītasyâpi pramāṇâbhāvasyâbhāvâvagamakatvāt buddhyârūḍhasya janakatvam aṅgīkaraṇīyam* | *tatra yadi pramāṇâbhāvo yaḥ so ’bhāvarūpas tadā tasyâpy avagatir viditād eva pramāṇâbhāvād aṅgīkartavyêty anavasthā* | [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Sucarita denies this principle, seemingly without argument, in an attempt to block the regress: “Nor is it that in this way apprehension failure, being known*,* causes an agent to be aware of absence. Since there would be a regress if awareness of apprehension failure were to depend on something else of the same kind, insofar as apprehension failure is also an absence.” *na ca tathânupalabdhir jñātā saty abhāvaṃ prakāśayati* | *tasyā apy abhāvarūpatvena aparasaṃjātīyâpekṣāyām anavasthâpātāt* | (ŚVK 190.4-6 ad *abhāva* 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. *yo hi gṛhasvarūpam evâvadhārya kvacid gataḥ pṛcchyate tatra caitro ’sti na vêti, tadâsau pṛṣṭas tatra nâstitāṃ tadâiva pratipadyate* | *yadi tu indriyâdhīnam abhāvajñānaṃ bhavet nâsati tadvyāpāre jāyate* | *na ca pūrvâvagatâbhāvasmaraṇam evêti vācyam* | *na hy asati pratiyogismaraṇe ’bhāvo dṛśyate* | *na ca āśrayagrahaṇakāle pratiyogismaraṇam asti* | *bahūnām eva hi pṛṣṭena abhāvaḥ kathyate* | Note that I read *kathyate* with optatival force—as *kathyeta*—to best make sense of the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. *yadi tûcyate sāmānyenâbhāvo ’vagataḥ samprati viśeṣeṇa smaryate iti tad ayuktam* | *na hi abhāvatvaṃ nāma sāmānyam asti* | [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. The earliest occurrence of the former term I have been able to locate is in Śaśadhara: “According to others, agents apprehend absence in cases of past absence by failing to recall a recollectable.” *smaraṇârhasy*⟨*â*⟩*smaraṇena tatrâbhāvâvadhāraṇam iti anye* | (NSD 127.12). I read an a-privative into the edition, emending Matilal’s reading of “*smaraṇârhasya smaraṇena*”. Śaśadhara is Gaṅgeśa’s predecessor, but this is very close to the view that Gaṅgeśa will develop. It is unclear whose view he is citing. Śaśadhara’s (NSD 127.8-10) own view, in contrast, is that we infer past absence (*prāṅnâstitā*) on the basis of *previously* (*pūrva*) failing to apprehend a perceptible (*yogyânupalabdhi*). Śaśadhara therefore holds a recollection view vulnerable to Sucarita’s selection problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. *yadā hi kaścit prātaḥkāle kañcid deśam adhyāsīnas tatra vyāghrādikam adṛṣṭvā tadasmaraṇāc ca tadabhāvam apy agṛhītva deśamātraṃ dṛṣṭvā deśântaragato madhyandine pṛcchyate kaścit tasmin deśe prātaḥkāle vyāghro gajaḥ siṃhaḥ pārthivo vā samāgata iti sa tadā taṃ deśam avagatatvāt smarann api tatra deśe ’nyeṣāṃ vyāghrâdīnām abhāvaṃ prāgagṛhītaṃ tadaîva gṛhṇāti* | *na ca madhyandine samaye prātaḥkālikasyâbhāvasyânindriyasaṃnikṛṣtasya saṃbhavati pratyakṣeṇa grahaṇam, tasyêndriyasaṃnikṛṣṭaviṣayatvāt* | [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. *satyaṃ pratyakṣayogyatā nâsti, smṛtiyogyatā tv asty eva* | *avaśyaṃ hy anekasahasrajanâdhiṣṭhām api sabhām adhyasīnais tatra āgataḥ siṃhaḥ pārthivaḥ vā tadaîva grahītavyo madhyandine ca satyāṃ susmūrṣāyāṃ smarttavyaḥ* | *tad idaṃ smarttavyatve ’pi saty asmaraṇam madhyandinavelāyāṃ vidyamānaṃ prātastanam abhāvaṃ bodhayati* | [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. For an alternative commentary and translation of the subsection under discussion below, see Phillips and Tatacharya (2004, 429-435). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. *syād etat* | *gṛham upalabhya nirgataś caitra yatra kenacit pṛṣṭaḥ tatra maitra āsīd iti, sa ca kṣaṇam dhyātvânupalabdhyā tatra maitrâbhāvam avagamyâha nâsīt tatra maitra iti* | *sêyam prāṅnâstitādhiḥ na smṛtiḥ purā gehe ’nubhūyamāne maitrâsmaraṇena tadabhāvânanubhavāt* | *evaṃ ca tatraîva indriyavyāpāraṃ vinaîvânupalabdhyā abhāvânubhavāt anyatrâpi saîva hetuḥ kḷptatvāt* | [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. *tad āhuḥ — svarūpamātraṃ dṛṣṭam hi veśam ādyârthaṃ smarann atha* | *tatrâny*⟨*a*⟩*nâstitāṃ pṛṣṭas tadaîva pratipadyate* || *iti* | Emending Tatacharya’s reading of “*tatrânyenâstitāṃ*” to “*tatrânyanâstitāṃ*”, to bring the second line of the verse in line with Kumārila’s original verse. Without this emendation, the second line reads: “asked by someone else about its presence, *right* *then* he becomes aware [of its absence] at that location*.”* The point remains the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. *maîvam* | *prāṅnâstitāyāṃ hi na tāvad ajñātânupalabdhiḥ bhūtale ghaṭâbhāvasyêvâbhāvagrāhikā, tadānīṃ gehasya viprakṛṣṭatvena yogyânupalabdher abhāvat* | *nâpi jñātā, anavasthāprasaṅgāt* | *anupalabdher apy abhāvarūpatayā anupalabdhyantareṇa grāhyatvāt* | [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. *atha gehasya yogyamaitravattayā smaraṇârhasya smaraṇâbhāvas tatra ajñāta eva gehe maitrâbhāvagrāhaka iti cet* | Read with the background knowledge of Pārthasārathi’s account, *yogya* here is best taken to mean “recollectable” rather than “perceptible”. Recall Pārthasārathi’s concept of *smṛtiyogyatā*, and that Gaṅgeśa in the previous passage rejected the claim that Maitra is perceptible. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. *na* | *svarupasataḥ smaraṇâbhavasya grāhakatve tasmin saty abhāvasaṃśayaviparyayâbhāvaprasaṅgāt* | *bhavati ca kadācit tatrâsīd iti viparyayas tatrâsīn na vêti saṃśayaś ca* | [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. This reworked version of absent maitra differs from Vardhamāna’s reworking of his father’s case. In Vardhamāna’s case, Maitra is very dear (*preṣṭha*) to Caitra, which is meant to guarantee that Caitra would have noticed him. See his NKP (429.6-7 ad *stabaka* 3.20). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. *yadā tu sunipuṇenaîkajñānaviṣayatāyogyasya maitrasyânubhave sati smaraṇârhasya asmaraṇam avadhāryate tadânumitiḥ pramā* | *ata evâsmaraṇamātrasya vyabhicāram upalabhya tad upekṣya viśiṣṭâsmaraṇaṃ jñātukāmasya praṇidhānam upayujyate* | *anyathā dhyānam anupapannam, svarūpasata evâsmaraṇasya abhāvagrāhakatvāt* | *tasmād yogyâsmaraṇaṃ liṅgatvenaîvôpayujyate* | [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. *Praṇidhāna,* which I translate as “deliberate recollection,” is a concept that only appears occasionally in Nyāya texts. Strictly speaking, *praṇidhāna* is not a kind of memory, but a kind of *cause* of memory. Vātsyāyana explains the term: “The cause of recalling an object is *praṇidhāna*—placing the inner sense out a desire to recall—or reflecting on the inferential mark that one desires to recall.” *susmūrṣayā manaso dhāraṇaṃ praṇidhānam* | *susmūrṣitaliṇgânucintanaṃ vârthasmṛtikāraṇam* | (NBh 198.11-12 ad *sūtra* 3.2.41). *Praṇidhāna* is apparently the cause of endogenous memory in which the agent deliberately tries to recall an object or property and directs their attention towards doing so. In the passage from Gaṅgeśa, however, *praṇidhāna* is in clear apposition with *viśiṣṭâsmaraṇa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. The second step of the inference requires recalling the space where Maitra would have been: “Because the house is *not* recalled as possessing Maitra, even though there is recollection of it as having a space equivalent in dimension to him.” *tattulyaparimāṇâdiyogitayā smaraṇe ’pi tadvattayā asmaryamāṇatvāt* (TCM 724.8-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. *tavâpi katham abhāve saṃśayaviparyayāv iti cet* | [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. *liṅgasaṃśayaviparyayābhyām laiṅgikasaṃśayaviparyayadarśanāt* | [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Śaśadhara has an analogous method of capturing fallibility and uncertainty for his view. Gaṅgeśa clearly draws upon his predecessor in this context. Śaśadhara writes: “When the agent undergoes uncertainty with respect to his failure to apprehend a perceptible, then he says “I do not know whether he was there or not”.” *yadā yogyânupalabdhau sandehaḥ tadā vadati na jānāmi tatrâsīn na vêti* | (NSD 127.11). According to Śaśadhara’s view, apprehension failure is the inferential mark. Uncertainty about past absence is therefore explained by uncertainty about the inferential mark. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. For example, he cites this principle to argue that agents never suspect introspective error: “In this way, agents undergo no uncertainty about whether introspective awareness is knowledge, because introspective awareness is restricted to being knowledge. Since an agent who is not undergoing an awareness-event does not think ⌜I am undergoing an awareness-event⌝. Nor does an agent, if undergoing an awareness-event of a pot, think ⌜I am aware of a cloth⌝.” *evam anuvyavasāyasya prāmāṇyaniyatatvān na prāmāṇyaśaṅkā* | *na hy ajñānan jānāmîti pratyeti* | *na vā ghaṭajñāne paṭaṃ jānāmîti* | (TCM 301.1-302.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Another response: if Gaṅgeśa genuinely holds the principle that introspection is always knowledge, he could diagnose the problem as the agent failing to know that the absence-recollection failure link obtains. This would involve a lack of *vyāptijñāna*—the agent would fail to know that the right link obtains. But Gaṅgeśa does not diagnose the problem in this way. Moreover, this would involve the agent realizing that they fail to recall Maitra but nonetheless thinking that he was there. This is *irrational* error. And agents can still surely make mistakes about past absence when the rememberability conditions are weaker, *even if* they’ve successfully performed the inference in the past on the basis of the absence-recollection failure link. A further response: introspection, on the Nyāya view, cannot fail to accurately represent the existence and contents of the lower-order awareness-event. But introspection cannot deliver information about the *accuracy* of the first-order awareness-event, and recollection (*smṛti*) can be accurate or inaccurate (TS 298.8-9). Error is therefore the result of the agent undergoing an *inaccurate* (*ayathârtha*) recollective awareness of the absent object or property—they recall it being there, when it wasn’t—that the agent employs in their inferential reasoning. Uncertainty in turn is the result of the agent questioning the accuracy of their recollective awareness. But this explanation only captures cases in which the agent *does* undergo a recollective awareness-event. It does not account for error or uncertainty in cases in which the agent fails to recall an object or property that *was* there, since the *absence* of recollection is not truth-apt. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. *kiṃ tu manasā jñātād yogyâsmaraṇāl liṅgāt pramāṇatvena kḷptāt tatra abhāvapratītyupapattau nânupalabdhiḥ pramāṇântaram kalpyate* | [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. One interesting concern comes from Vyāsatīrtha in an unrelated context. Gaṅgeśa accepts the existence of non-conceptual perceptual events that are not perceptible (*atīndriya*) and therefore not introspectible by the inner sense. Vyāsatīrtha (TT 499.10-12) argues that this undermines the possibility of the inference, because it could be that Caitra had a non-introspectible perception of Maitra. In which case he would have no memory of Maitra, but would not be in a position to infer his past absence. This is not an objection to the account, but to the existence of perceptual states which are not introspectible. See Chaturvedi (2020) for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. This is how the later tradition represents the view. Strictly speaking, this is “inference” in the sense of “postulation” (*arthâpatti*). As Uṃveka (ŚVTṬ 67.10-11 ad *codanā* 83) puts the earlier view elsewhere, one infers that one is undergoing an awareness-event of an object on the basis that one has no other explanation for one’s apprehension of that object (*arthaparicchityanyathânupapatti*). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. “Because the firsthand awareness-event ⌜I am undergoing an awareness-event⌝ is not produced by an inferential mark. Nor is *knownness* the inferential mark, because we have refuted that.” *jānāmîty anubhavasya liṅgâdyajanyatvāt* | *na ca jñātatā liṅgam, nirākṛtatvāt* | (TCM 723.15-724.1) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. We might therefore understand one of the core upshots of Gaṅgeśa’s account as follows: since the means by which an agent comes to know that they failed to recall a recollectable is more fundamental than inferential knowledge of past absence, *theories of self-knowledge* determine which means of knowing absence is more fundamental than inferential knowledge of past absence. For example: in tandem with Gaṅgeśa’s account of past absence, theories according to which self-knowledge is inferential deliver the verdict that *every step* involves inferential knowledge of absence. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)