

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

DIGNĀGA AND DHARMAKĪRTI ON PERCEPTION AND SELF-AWARENESS

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INTRODUCTION

If Buddhist metaphysics grows out of a concern with explaining the nature of reality – such that gaining an insight into this nature leads to the gradual elimination of confusion – Buddhist epistemology provides the methodological foundation for pursuing this pragmatic goal. Two representative figures in particular stand at this defining turn in the development of a systematic theory of knowledge within the Indian Buddhist tradition: Dignāga (ca. 480–540) and Dharmakīrti (ca. seventh century). A pivotal figure in the development of Indian logic and epistemology, Dignāga challenged his contemporaries to justify their reliance on scriptural authority and shifted the focus of subsequent developments in Indian philosophy from a concern with the aims and rules of debate to an investigation of the means by which one may obtain reliable knowledge (*pramāṇa*). What is remarkable is that he accomplished this task, unlike his predecessors, by engaging his opponents largely on their own terms. His great successor, Dharmakīrti, would correct, defend, and further expand Dignāga’s epistemological project, making original contributions of his own and in many ways surpassing his predecessor. Indeed, Dharmakīrti’s overarching impact on subsequent generations of philosophers in India and beyond is such that he is often taken to represent the standard account of Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology. Only Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 CE) – and only much later with the ascendancy of Madhyamaka in Tibet – would come to command a more prominent status in the Buddhist philosophical canon.

Dignāga’s and Dharmakīrti’s contributions to what has come to be known as “Buddhist epistemology” (sometimes referred in the specialist literature by the Sanskrit neologism *pramāṇavāda*, lit. “doctrine of epistemic warrants”) range from precise accounts of the relation between language and conceptual thought to detailed explorations of the content and character of experience. Perhaps the most salient aspect of this new (and enduring) mode of critical inquiry is its attempt to synthesize a causal account of cognition with the dialogical-disputational concerns of validating belief. That is, Buddhist philosophers who follow in the footsteps of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti seek to explain cognition in causal terms and treat as warranted only that cognition that corresponds to its object and is produced in the right way. On this account, then, perceptual judgments of the sort that purport to give

us an object as qualified by a certain property, such as blueness (as captured by statements such as: “this is blue”) are not treated as warranted instances of perceptual cognition. The Buddhist epistemologists thus thematize the old philosophical problem of the difference between “seeing” and “seeing as” and contend that only direct and unmediated modes of awareness should be counted as instances of warranted perceptual cognition.

It is important to keep in mind that systematic inquiries into the foundations of our beliefs are a ubiquitous feature of early Buddhist thought in India. Indeed, seminal Abhidharma treatises like the *Points of Controversy* (*Kathāvattu*), which are specifically concerned with the rules of argumentation and the various types of debates, catalogue a wide range of doctrinal points of dispute (see the chapter by Hayes in this volume). Likewise, representative works such as Nāgārjuna’s *Dispelling of Disputes* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*), Āryadeva’s *One Hundred Verses Treatise* (*Sataśāstra*), and Vasubandhu’s *Rules of Debate* (*Vādaśāstra*) extend this preoccupation with codifying the rules of debate to include a range of metaphysical positions insofar as they rely on methods of positive argumentation (see the chapter by Gold in this volume). A systematic concern with issues that are recognizably epistemological in character (What are the sources of knowledge? What are its limits? What are its conditions?), however, only emerges with Dignāga. What makes Dignāga’s work (and that of his great successor, Dharmakīrti) particularly significant is a willingness to engage with, and pursue, philosophical problems that are central to the Sanskrit philosophical tradition. One of these central problems concerns the nature and scope of perceptual knowledge: that is, what specific type of awareness best captures what it is like to perceive, under which aspects a cognition (of this type) may be deemed epistemically reliable, and what may one reasonably assert on the basis of such empirical testimony.

Disciplined observation, of the sort that purports to explain the role of consciousness and cognition in the acquisition of belief, has always been central to philosophical reflection in both India and the West. The notion that a characteristically perceptual mode of apprehension actually plays a far greater role in the formation of belief than hitherto thought, however, is relatively recent, and reflects seminal advances in the empirical study of cognition. What is particularly significant about the Buddhist epistemological project is that it provides an account of empirical awareness that is conspicuously modern in its outlook. Not only do Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their followers appeal to empirical observation as the ultimate source of evidence in explaining the epistemic status of a given cognitive event (and, furthermore, justify their position by invoking the Buddha’s own reliance on sound reasoning and careful empirical scrutiny); they do so in a way that does not overlook the psychological underpinnings of this specific mode of inquiry. If achieving practical ends is the goal, then reliance on accurate observations and on an understanding of the contextual and dispositional factors that constrain, condition, and direct our perceptual and intentional states is crucial.

Buddhist philosophers, like many of their counterparts in the West, realized a long time ago that our linguistic and conceptual practices are rooted in pre-predicative modes of apprehension that provide implicit access to whatever is immediately present to awareness. Indeed, if one fails to perceive the difference between a column of fire and one of dust, to use a stock example in the Sanskrit philosophical repertoire, then any inference based on this misapprehension will fail to yield reliable knowledge about the event in question. To early generations of scholars of Indian and Buddhist philosophy who came under the influence of logical positivism, this attempt to tie logical reasoning to observation seemed like a typical case of psychologism (that is, of conflating logical reasoning with the psychology of perception). Recent advances in the study of perception have demonstrated that our reasoning and deliberating practices are

grounded in perceptual and nondiscursive process in a far greater measure than most philosophers hitherto thought. Though the jury is still out on precisely what specific role different perceptual modalities play in grounding belief, these findings appear to vindicate an intuition that Buddhist epistemologists share with empiricist philosophers in the tradition of John Locke and David Hume, namely that perception is in some sense foundational for knowledge. In adopting this largely empiricist outlook, the Buddhist epistemological enterprise reflects a growing preoccupation with those types of pragmatic inquiry that alone can lead to achieving such desired ends as the elimination of suffering.

This chapter explores one particular aspect of the Buddhist epistemological enterprise: the notion that epistemological disputes cannot properly be settled without taking into account the particular understanding of the structure of awareness advanced by each school of thought. Our approach here is not merely exegetical and historical but descriptive and constructive. Its aim is to examine the contributions of Buddhist thinkers to this first-millennium pan-Indian philosophical conversation about perception and self-awareness in ways that also showcase the continuing relevance in contemporary philosophical debates of some of the issues with which they engage.

FROM SENSE AWARENESS TO EPISTEMIC ASCERTAINMENT

The descriptive analyses of consciousness and cognition found in the vast Abhidharma literature provide the foundation upon which Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their successors advance their claims to knowledge. The phenomenological stance at work in the Abhidharma means that the elements of existence and/or experience (or what the Ābhidharmikas call “dharmas”) are examined in such a way that they are never dissociated from the types of cognitive events in which they are instantiated. Thus, in the case of sensation, a distinction is made between any given sensory modality (say, vision) and the medium that implements it (the visual system). The senses are not treated as the instruments of an internal agent or as physical organs interacting with empirical objects, but rather as receptacles of experience. A distinction is thus observed between the object and its mode of presentation.

Thus, Abhidharma philosophers account for sense experience by reducing it to its constitutive elements and processes (see Joseph Walser’s chapter “Abhidharma” in this volume). This is the well-known reductionism that is a hallmark of the Abhidharma project, with the caveat that the Buddhist reductionist is not an eliminativist. Indeed, the no-self doctrine, on this view, is meant to dispel the illusion of permanent, substantive selves, not to dispense with any talk of subjective experience altogether. The phenomenological reduction at work in the Abhidharma is intended to provide a better account of the subjective character of experience, without which identifying and countering unwholesome dispositions and cultivating wholesome ones could not be achieved. Take, for instance, the well-known canonical account of the principle of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*). Things come together as a result of a series of mutually sustaining causal relationships: visual consciousness thus arises from the coming together of the eye and objects with reflectance properties, feeling from the affective and dispositional salencies that accompany this visual experience, perception from this feeling, and so on, leading up to conceptual processes where the dependency relation is far less obvious than it is for bare sensory awareness.

What is peculiar about this account of cognitive dynamics is the notion that some type of awareness accompanies each sensory modality by virtue of the fact that it arises together

with it. In other words, one does not merely see or hear; rather, one sees shapes of a particular kind and under specific circumstances. Abhidharma philosophers would eventually come to make progressively finer dissociations between different types of cognitive awareness and to identify the causal order in which conscious cognitive awareness emerges in the psychophysical or pheno-physical domain. Since the mere presence of an object within the range of a specific sense modality is not enough for a percept to arise, there must be, so the argument goes, an additional element (or step) in the process: attention. Indeed, without attentive awareness being directed to a specific region of the perceptual field, it is hard to explain how the steady flow of sensory impressions may give rise to a percept. By singling out attention as a crucial contributing factor in the emergence of intentional states of cognitive awareness, Abhidharma philosophers concede that causation in the physical domain can only be understood from the perspective of consciousness, because consciousness is indispensable to effecting the changes that an individual engaged on the noble eightfold path must undergo in order to make any real progress toward awakening.

Of course, the Abhidharma reductionist project is not limited simply to identifying presumably irreducible elements in the causal chain of events, or their constitutive order, but extends to the fundamental units of human experience. Breaking down each cognitive event to its irreducible constitutive elements holds the key to understanding the most fundamental aspects of the human condition. Ultimately, as we have already noted, this reductive analysis seeks to map out the mental domain such that afflictive tendencies may be properly identified and eradicated. A difficulty arises when we consider that Abhidharma philosophers must reconcile the seeming continuance of cognitive awareness with the view that phenomena do not endure for more than a moment. Indeed, on the typical Buddhist account of the momentariness of all phenomena, visual awareness and visual object are both events within an ongoing stream of relations. If the mental domain comprises nothing but discrete series of cognitive episodes, how is one to account for appropriation, grasping, and recognition? How, that is, does it come to be that the blue sky is for me to see, that it happens in my mental series? The causal account of cognition at work in the Abhidharma literature thus provides only an incomplete picture of cognitive dynamics, for it cannot explain how such episodic cognitive events can effectively sort between an inner and outer domain of experience. Even though consciousness itself is but another event in the series of dependently arisen phenomena, later Abhidharma thinkers like Vasubandhu would come to realize that it stands apart from the other elements in the series as possessing this unique capacity to sort through the constitutive elements of experience.

Neither the canonical literature nor the Abhidharma provide detailed and systematic accounts of the means by which one can discriminate between veridical and nonveridical states of cognitive awareness. As we noted above, works such as the *Points of Controversy* at best identify and sort through a range of views the aim of which is principally that of establishing adequate rules of debate. Typically, these debates revolve around issues such as whether all knowledge is analytic, whether one can know the minds of others, and whether sensations, as mental states, follow one another continuously. Such debates, which involve a back-and-forth exchange concerning statements of the sort “Is *a* *b*? (“Is knowledge analytic?”), most certainly appeal to principles that are discerningly like forms of material implication, contraposition, and some version of *reductio ad absurdum*. These “reasoned examinations” (*yukti*) of controversial points, which are typical examples of what philosophers call noneristic dialogues, do not, however, explore the sources of epistemically warranted belief in any systematic way.

THE CONDITIONS FOR PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE

Philosophical positions do not arise in a vacuum. Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's epistemological project develops in the context of concerted efforts to answer a series of challenges: first, from Brahmanical philosophers who doubted that Buddhists had the requisite capacity to deploy the methods of investigative reasoning devised by the Naiyāyikas, and second, from Buddhist thinkers like Nāgārjuna, whose dialectical stance with regard to the nature of reality is that it is inaccessible to thought: although we may form useful approximations about how things (or the cognitive events that instantiate them) are, these are at best mere conventions and reflect the conceptual practices of a given philosophical culture and epoch. Indeed, Nāgārjuna, much like Wittgenstein, invites us to abandon the illusions of the knowledge project and come to terms with the view that in effect there are no genuine epistemological problems. Since on the view advanced by Nāgārjuna and his followers all things are empty of essence or intrinsic existence, they do not exist apart from the web of interrelated causes and conditions that instantiate them. The emptiness thesis captures not only the condition of entities in the class of what J. L. Austin calls "medium-sized dry goods," but also the character of the mental domain itself. That is, no cognition obtains on its own, but itself is the result of multiple causal and conditioning factors. On this dialectical stance, we can no more give an account of our subjective experience in phenomenologically neutral terms than we can give an account of the experienced objectivity (of the things themselves) in physically neutral terms. Reality itself, as a concept encompassing the totality of existents that populate any complete ontology, is a relational concept and, as such, is subject to the fourfold logical possibilities (A, not A, both A and not A, neither A nor not A). Take the example of a conscious awareness that, given its association with the capacity to reveal, is examined by drawing an analogy with fire. Since, like fire, cognition apparently has the capacity to illuminate, it may be assumed that this capacity is something that consciousness awareness possesses intrinsically. But just as fire depends on fuel, so also conscious awareness must owe its existence (and also its illuminating capacity) to something other than itself.

Unlike Nāgārjuna's assumption of a dialectical stance, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti adopt the methodology of Nyāya philosophers (though not their metaphysical and epistemological convictions) and assert that what exists (and how) can actually become an object of both empirical scrutiny and conceptual analysis. In other words, for Dignāga and Dharmakīrti *there is* a way that things are that is actually quite different from how they show up to us in discerning awareness. As Bimal Krishna Matilal (1986: 26) noted some time ago, there is a convergence (indeed, with few exceptions, a coincidence) between the domain of the knowables and the domain of "existents." Nearly all South Asian philosophers who reject in some form or another the skeptical position agree upon this much. A problem arises when one attempts to establish the number and nature of those sources or instruments by which such knowledge is actually obtained.

Traditionally, Indian philosophers have tended to be inclusive and exhaustive in their identification of possible sources of knowledge. Apart from perception and inference, analogy to a known fact of experience and verbal testimony are also taken to provide doxastic types of evidence. For Dignāga, who champions a rather spartan epistemology, analogy and verbal testimony are but aspects of inference and do not deserve to be treated as separate instruments of knowledge. As he puts it in his now-classic work, the *Collection on the Sources of Knowledge* (*Pramāṇa-samuccaya* I, 1):

The sources of knowledge are perception and inference because the object of cognition has only two characteristics. There is no object of cognition other than the particular characteristic and the universal characteristic because perception has as its object the particular and inference the universal characteristic of the thing (Hattori 1968, 24)

What we encounter here is an attempt to establish epistemology on a neutral ground by limiting the evidence to what can be perceptually apprehended. Thus, unlike Nāgārjuna and his Mādhyamika followers, Dignāga not only asserts (as most philosophers do) the possibility of knowledge, but also specifies the constraints and conditions for the acquisition thereof. Thus perception performs its epistemic role not merely by virtue of attending to the object at hand, but by doing so under a specific modality that is nonconceptual in character. In short, perceptual judgment – by means of which we apprehend an object as the locus of a specific quality or as belonging to a given class – is excluded from the domain of warranted empirical awareness. Perceiving a cow as a member of a specific mammalian species, or as possessing such characteristics as dewlap and so on, is not an instance of veridical perception. Perception can only give us the phenomena as directly present to awareness, as textures or clusters of sensory experience in a continuum that does not set strict boundaries between the world and its apprehension. That is, perception gives us the world *as perceived*. Of course, restricting the domain of perception solely to types of nonconceptual awareness raises a problem: how are we to explain perceptual illusions? Furthermore, if in perceiving we do not discern the characteristics of objects, then the content of perception cannot form an object of conceptual analysis.

Confronted with similar sorts of problems, Nyāya philosophers eventually came to define perception as “a cognition generated through the contact between the object and the sensory faculty, which is inexpressible, inerrant, and definitive” (*Nyāya Sūtra* I: 14). Indeed, Buddhist philosophers like Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (ca. fourth century) agree with the Naiyāyikas that inerrancy is an essential condition for the reliability of empirical awareness: how else would one exclude from the domain of perception illusory experiences (like the appearance of a circle of fire in a twirling firebrand or a moving tree when running through a forest)? Dignāga’s failure to recognize the perceptual basis of certain types of cognitive error, and his insistence on attributing all instances of defective perception to higher order cognitive process, would eventually meet with strong criticism from his opponents. In his magnum opus, the *Commentary on the Sources of Knowledge (Pramāṇa-vārttika)*, which is essentially an extensive commentary on Dignāga’s principal work (and which it would eventually supplant), Dharmakīrti retains Dignāga’s definition of perception unaltered. Only in a later work, the *Settling on the Sources of Reliable Cognition (Pramāṇa-viniścaya)*, does Dharmakīrti append the qualifier “nonerroneous” as a condition for the reliability of perceptual cognitions. This alteration and the implications thereof for any robust theory of perceptual knowledge constitute an important point of debate for subsequent generations of Buddhist and Brahmanical philosophers: what precisely does it mean for cognition to be nonerroneous (*abhrānta*)? Should nonerroneous be interpreted to mean nondeceptive, thus calling into question the conditions under which a cognition may be said to deviate (*avyabhicāra*) from the object that is immediately present to awareness?

It is true that Dignāga does distinguish between perceptual judgments and pseudo-perceptions (lumping together cases such as the illusory motion of the river bank when floating down a river with conditions like cloudy vision (*timira*), the apparent perception of thread-like fragments in the visual field), but he is not very clear about whether these

instances of pseudo-perception are caused by impaired sensory organs or by some kind of conceptual misapprehension. Dharmakīrti, however, is less ambivalent. For him cases of cloudy vision are unmistakably forms of cognitive impairment.

We have already established that the defining characteristic of Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's epistemological project is its thoroughgoing empiricism: indeed, the notion that perception – specifically a direct mode of cognitive awareness – can serve as evidential ground for knowledge, including knowledge gained by other means (such as inference), is central to this project. Of course, in adopting this empirical approach to knowledge, the Buddhist epistemologists were not necessarily innovators. Already in the canonical literature we come across injunctions that challenge appeals to reason and logical inquiry as acceptable pursuits for the Buddhist adept. Rather, as the Buddha urges, one ought to train oneself to discern wholesome from unwholesome states of mind and deploy that discernment for the purpose of undertaking specific practical tasks. But such discernment is in effect a type of cognitive awareness that is essentially perceptual in character. The question arises: what could serve as a basis for such discriminating awareness?

Continuing a tradition of analysis with deep roots in the Abhidharma – in this case the specifically Sautrāntika Abhidharma position of his teacher Vasubandhu – Dignāga identifies a certain state of cognitive awareness that, while lacking in any conceptual discrimination, is nonetheless inherently reflexive, as the best type of evidential ground there is. Veridical perceptions are thus constitutively self-intimating: that is, they disclose both the objective and subjective aspects of cognitive apprehension. Only these instances of knowledge intimation can be said to provide access to the domain of unique particulars that populate the austere ontology of the Buddhist epistemologist.

Delineating the contours of the perceptual domain and providing a systematic analysis of its content are central to any epistemological enterprise. For the Buddhist, and for reasons that will be discussed below, mapping out the empirical domain is of the utmost importance. Indeed, without some way of differentiating veridical perceptions from, say, perceptual illusions or pseudo-perceptions, it would be practically impossible to effectively navigate one's environment or achieve any pragmatic ends. Although the Buddhist epistemologist shares with his Brahmanical opponents the view that perceptual awareness necessarily involves some kind of contact between the sense and the object or, at the very least, the presence of some object (whose ontological status may be ambiguous) before awareness, they disagree about both the constitutive character of this perceptual awareness and the kinds of objects that it ultimately intends.

On a superficial level one could plausibly argue that the Buddhist epistemologist's definition of perception is informed by his ontological commitments, specifically by the stipulation, common to Abhidharma metaphysics, that what should count as the ultimately real is whatever can be neither physically nor analytically reduced any further: thus, a partless entity. But the Buddhist epistemologist does not deny that partite entities such as chariots and forests are real (unlike the antirealist position that Mādhyamika philosophers adopt), only that their reality is merely conventional, the result of social conventions and common linguistic practices. Why, then, should epistemology be pressed into service to defend an ontology of partless atoms (or of indivisible moments of consciousness), as demanded by the provisions of Abhidharma metaphysics? This is one of the most pervasive criticisms that Buddhist epistemologists must confront, and one that leads to a revision of both Abhidharma reductionism and Madhyamaka dialectics.

To see how Buddhist epistemology (as envisioned by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti) meets this challenge, let us finally pursue two related questions: first, what do Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's analyses of the content of perception tell us about their metaphysical commitments? And second, how do Abhidharma descriptions of the structure of awareness inform the Buddhist epistemologist's understanding of the role that this aspect of cognition plays in achieving practical ends?

PERCEPTION, SELF-AWARENESS, AND THE DUAL-ASPECT THEORY OF MENTAL STATES

How do we know *that* we know? That is, how, and by what means, are we justified in ascertaining that a particular cognitive event, say an instance of perception or judgment, counts as knowledge and can lead to successful practice? Furthermore, how do we know *when* we know? How do we know when all the conditions for the reliability of a cognitive event have been met such that, for instance, my awareness of a seeming conch shell is veridical, or my belief in the impermanence of sound is a true belief? In the first instance, my perception is veridical when it is prompted by the appropriate causal and conditional factors. In the second, my belief is correct or justified because it is consistent with a set of basic beliefs about causality and the emergent character of phenomena. But this manner of proceeding merely states the answer without addressing the deeper issue that is at stake in the Buddhist epistemological account of cognition: it (*viz.*, cognition) achieves its condition of veridicality only insofar as it happens within a given mental series. No epistemic account of cognition is complete that does not explain this horizon structure that, among all the elements in the chain of dependently arisen phenomena, cognition alone possesses.

As we noted above with regard to the canonical account of dependent arising, things and the cognitive events that instantiate them arise together in a mutually sustaining chain of causal relationships. Considerations about the direction of the dependency relation apart, Buddhist philosophers are quite clear that cognition supervenes on some basis. Disagreements only arise with regard to whether this basis should be located in the physical or the mental domain. For an Abhidharma philosopher like Saṃghabhadra (ca. late fourth–early fifth century), it is obvious that any alteration in the physical substrate of cognition, say in the eye, must elicit an alteration in the quality of the corresponding sense modality, in this case of visual experience. The question is: does apperceptive cognition itself, as one of five basic modes of cognitive activity, supervene on some more fundamental basis? Or is it merely affected by such things as changes in body orientation, the intensity and type of the stimulus involved, and other dispositional factors? In other words, where exactly in this dynamic process of cognitive emergence do we locate self-awareness? Should apperception be taken to play the function that is assigned to self-awareness, or is it rather the case that self-awareness is an aspect of cognition simpliciter rather than another (perhaps irreducible) type of cognitive awareness?

Like his predecessors, Dignāga too seems intent on securing an epistemological foundation for his analysis of the constitutive elements of existence and/or experience. For him the question is not simply (or no longer) what I must know in order to achieve a given goal, but rather what specifically are the means for acquiring such knowledge. If attending to the unfolding of mental and physical events as they arise is the key to, say, Buddhist contemplative practice, then this attending capacity must be assigned a greater epistemic role. It is likely that in problematizing empirical knowledge as he does, and in distinguishing

between different types of perception (sensory, mental, introspective, and yogic), Dignāga is simply extending this Abhidharma quest for the ultimate basis of cognitive activity, which eventually he comes to locate in a form of pre-reflective self-awareness (*svasaṃvedaṇā*)

It is an axiomatic principle of Abhidharma philosophy of mind that empirical awareness is modality-specific: the content and character of visual experience is different from that of feelings, smells, or tastes. It is obvious that content plays an important role here: what it is like to encounter objects with reflectance properties is quite different from what it is like to come across objects that elicit affective response. Following Vasubandhu, the Buddhist epistemologists recognize that cognition has an intentional character, that it is in some sense always about an object of its own, whether external or internal. But whereas Vasubandhu still sees this mental faculty as the repository of ordinary afflictive tendencies – that is, as essentially an afflicted mind (*kliṣṭa-manas*) responsible for perpetuating a sense of oneself as a substantive self – for Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their successors self-awareness is no longer the mistaken awareness of oneself as an enduring locus of awareness, but a fundamental pre-reflective cognitive modality. The Buddhist epistemologists thus advance a thesis that is best described as reflexivism: roughly, the notion that self-awareness consists in conscious cognitive events being inherently self-revealing.

A great deal of Buddhist epistemological reflection in India is concerned with explaining the role of this pre-reflective self-awareness in settling disputes about whether certain cognitions are intrinsically or extrinsically ascertained. In spelling out the conditions of ascertainment, a syncretic Buddhist thinker like Dharmottara (ca. eighth century) contends that perceptions of the sort that are associated with achieving practical ends may be intrinsically ascertained simply because they are intentionally constituted, whereas perceptions that are prompted by some external object are not. Thus, the apprehension of fire as having the capacity to burn and cause heat may be intrinsically ascertained, whereas the apprehension of its generating causal totality (whether it is fuelled by wood or some other flammable substance) is not. But the conditions of ascertainment are not the only issues that preoccupy the Buddhist reflexivist. Equal attention is given to the emergence and role of the first-person stance. How, asks the Buddhist epistemologist, does this primitive or pre-reflective form of self-awareness underwrite the activity of conscious awareness we typically associate with the use of personal and possessive pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘mine’? Is this ‘I’ merely a conventional designation that does not apply to anything real, as Nāgasena had claimed in his exchange with the King Milinda (in the *Milinda-pañhā*)? Is the ‘I’ merely a placeholder or a linguistic device that lacks a fixed referent, as the doctrine of no-self would have it? Or is it rather the case that this pre-reflective self-awareness is an explanatory primitive, without which we cannot make sense of the fact that experience has a specific first-personal character?

We began our discussion with the observation that one of the defining characteristics of the Buddhist epistemological project is reconciliation of analyses of the character of cognitive awareness (as inherited from the Abhidharma) with dialogical-disputational needs of validating belief. Indeed, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their successors are concerned, in true epistemological fashion, not simply with how things and the mental states that instantiate them are judged to be (disregarding any account of their mode of presentation), but with how things show up to discerning awareness. This specific ability not only to attend to the contents of experience but also to reflect upon them (thus to inhabit a particular stance) captures a characteristically philosophical orientation. Without this orientation there is no view from

somewhere and thus no position to defend. Against the allegedly positionless stance of Madhyamaka, the Buddhist epistemologists seek not simply to defend the notion that there are real epistemological problems, and effective means for addressing them, but also show an (if one may venture to add) honest appreciation for the first-personal stance. Cognitive events do not just occur in the mental stream; rather, they present themselves to individual subjects of experience as theirs to have or be in them. In effect, by claiming that perceptual awareness has this two-aspectual character (involving both an objectual-aspect (*viṣṭābhāsa*) and the cognition's own self-apprehension (*svābhāsa*), the Buddhist epistemologist joins contemporary philosophers like Peter Strawson, who claims that statements of the sort that ask whether some inner occurrent experience is mine are nonsensical. A person cannot simply feel pain and wonder whether the pain is hers, for feeling pain is constitutively something it is like to be in. Pain is not merely an event in consciousness, but something that discloses the first-personal character of experience, any experience.

Dignāga's original insight about the subjective character of experience is thus meant to capture the specific ways of being that Western existentialist phenomenology refers to as being-in-the-world and Abhidharma philosophy terms the phenomenal world of experience (*loka-samjñā*). His concern is to provide an explanatory account of those types of cognitive events that, while intentionally constituted, are not prompted by the coming together of object and attentiveness. Seeing requires that there be objects that are seen (under the right conditions of luminescence), but self-awareness, especially for the Buddhist who is committed to the no-self doctrine, lacks such anchorage. What most Buddhists prior to Dignāga failed to notice (perhaps given doctrinal commitments to the no-self view) is the fact that experience is not simply contentful- (that is, it is not simply of an object or intentional) but also *character*-possessing (it has a particular feel, mode of disclosure, and horizon structure).

Of course, reclaiming the character of awareness for Buddhist epistemology is not a novel enterprise. Dignāga's approach is mainly concerned with the epistemological implications of nonreflexivist accounts of cognition, which he views as vulnerable to the problem of infinite regress. If it takes a subsequent instance of awareness to apprehend this occurrent cognition, then another instance will be required to know the latter and so on. Even assuming that this retrospective awareness of one's mental states is made possible by a special type of recognition (as a cognition occurring after a cognition of the same type), this could not explain why this sort of cognition emerges at all, and why in one mental stream and not another. Dignāga's defense of the reflexivity thesis is also meant to counter what he essentially regards as the regressive character of representational or higher-order theories of consciousness.

CONCLUSION: INTENTIONALITY AND THE STRUCTURE OF EXPERIENCE

The dual-aspect theory of mental states that Dignāga advances (much like its Western endorsement by philosophers like Brentano and Sartre) is meant to capture this notion that cognition's intentional content (its object directedness) cannot be accounted for without its subjective aspect, without reference to its mode of presentation. Thus, Dignāga states: "That cognition has two aspects is [known] from the difference between the cognition of the object and the cognition of that [cognition]" (*Pramāṇa-samuccaya* I.11ab). In other words, mental events such as perceiving, judging, or remembering cannot be distinguished as such only on the basis of the objects they intend: a physical entity of some kind, a concept or a

past experience. Without cognition’s self-intimating aspect – that is, without this implicitly self-aware aspect of cognition – one could not tell the difference between perception and conception or judgment and desire. How are we to account for Dignāga’s position on the subjective aspect of experience?

One possibility is to adopt the intentionalist stance and state that the subjective aspect captures the content of one’s experience as the perspectival stance from which it is an experience of a particular type of world-presenting content. This interpretation avoids collapsing Dignāga’s subjective aspect of cognition into an account of the character of experience as evinced by locutions of the “what it is like” type. But this move comes at the heavy cost of sacrificing the feasibility of the first-personal account of experience. Even assuming that the subjective aspect is nothing but the mode of presentation of an intentional mental state, it cannot explain why the content in question is object-directed rather than subject-directed. It is noncontroversial for both Buddhist and Brahmanical philosophers that cognitions are intentionally constituted, that they are about an object of their own (*saviṣayaka*). But just because the mode of presentations of cognitions is itself intentionally constituted does not mean that cognition can be explained entirely in terms of its intentional content. An interpretation of the dual-aspect theory of mental states that reduces intentionality to the various aspects of a mental state’s intentional content in effect reduces intentionality to a function that cognition has, namely that of aboutness. As such it faces the same problem of infinite regress that confronts higher-order or representationalist theories of cognition.

Another possibility – and one more likely to capture the intent of Dignāga’s epistemological stance on self-awareness (*svasamvedana*) – is that the dual-aspect theory of mental states is meant to capture both the phenomenal content (*viṣaya-ākāra*) and the phenomenal character (*jñāna-ākāra*) of experience. On this latter interpretation, the dual-aspect theory captures both the content and the horizon structure of awareness (or its perspectival outlook).

The principle of momentariness posed a challenge to Abhidharma philosophers concerned with explaining the sense of recollection that accompanies each mental series: if discrete and episodic events are all there is to have a mind and be conscious, how do grasping and appropriation occur? The causal account of cognition at work in the Abhidharma, it seems, offers only an incomplete picture of the mental domain. While *vijñāna*, the Sanskrit term typically translated as “consciousness,” conveys a sense both of differentiation and of discernment (between mental states and their types), the problem of how one comes to sort between an inner and outer domain of experience remains unexplained.

Reclaiming the subjective character of experience is thus indispensable to any robust account of cognition, its mode of ascertainment, and its epistemic status. Whether or not the reflexivity thesis advances the Buddhist epistemological account of perception and self-awareness in a fruitful direction is a subject of much debate among Dignāga’s and Dharmakīrti’s Indian and Tibetan interpreters. What is less controversial is that, following Dharmakīrti, the attempt to reposition the debate about the phenomenal qualities of experience in terms of relations between the aspects of cognition can no longer proceed without making fundamental assumptions about the character of experience.

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