



Oren Hanner (ed.)

# Buddhism and Scepticism

Historical, Philosophical,  
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# Contents

Foreword by the Editors	7
Contributors	9
Acknowledgements	13
Introduction	15
<i>Oren Hanner</i>	
Some Sceptical Doubts about “Buddhist Scepticism”	21
<i>Mark Siderits</i>	
Beyond Reasonable Doubt? A Note on Dharmakīrti and Scepticism	37
<i>Vincent Eltschinger</i>	
Nāgārjuna’s Scepticism about Philosophy	55
<i>Ethan Mills</i>	
Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage	83
<i>Georgios T. Halkias</i>	
The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism	109
<i>Adrian Kuzminski</i>	
Scripture and Scepticism in Vasubandhu’s Exegetical Method	131
<i>Oren Hanner</i>	
Sceptical Buddhism as Provenance and Project	161
<i>James Mark Shields</i>	
Index	179

# Beyond Reasonable Doubt? A Note on Dharmakīrti and Scepticism\*

Vincent Eltschinger

Madhyamaka, to which several papers of the present volume are dedicated, is arguably the Indian tradition that is most relevant to a discussion of the theoretical and practical connections between Buddhism and scepticism: Nāgārjuna offers a striking counterpart to Pyrrho's (365–275 BCE?) tetralemma;<sup>1</sup> he refuses to endorse any philosophical position or to commit himself to any metaphysical framework, almost exclusively resorts to *reductio ad absurdum*,<sup>2</sup> and severely criticizes traditional Buddhist dogmatics and rival epistemologies; and his attack on key notions such as causality, production, motion, and sensation provides a striking parallel to Aenesidemus's (first century BCE) critique in his *Pyrrhonian Discourses*.<sup>3</sup> There is little doubt that Candrakīrti (c. 600 CE) and Mādhyamikas of the so-called \*Prāsaṅgika trend would have recognized themselves in scepticism understood as “an attempt to base its rejection of all doctrines on a methodical critique of all sources of knowledge allegedly available” (Brunschwig, 1997, p. 460). The present paper does not address Madhyamaka, however, but another major component of Indian Buddhist philosophy, the so-called epistemological tradition and its most prominent personality, Dharmakīrti (c. 600

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\* Most sincere thanks are due to my excellent friend John Taber for his invaluable comments on this paper.

<sup>1</sup> For a commentary on Timon's (315–225 BCE?)/Aristocles's (first century CE) well-known summary of Pyrrho's philosophy, see Brunschwig (1997, pp. 466–473), and, in the present volume, the essay by Georgios Halkias.

<sup>2</sup> The sceptic philosopher Arcesilaus (see below) is reported to have adopted an “essentially refutative didactic method.” According to Cicero's *De Finibus* (2.2), those who wanted to listen to him were prohibited from asking questions and requested to expound their own views, which he subsequently dismissed. See Brunschwig (1997, p. 568).

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2 as summarized by Photius in his *Myriobiblion*; see Brunschwig (1997, pp. 581–582).

CE). In spite of later attempts to interpret him as a Mādhyamika,<sup>4</sup> and irrespective of the abundant use later Mādhyamikas made of his epistemological principles (some major “epistemologists” were actually Mādhyamikas), Dharmakīrti has hardly anything to do with Madhyamaka, a tradition towards which he was, if not entirely hostile, at least (ironically?) indifferent.<sup>5</sup> Given the obvious (though sometimes perhaps superficial) similarities between Madhyamaka and scepticism, it is thus not entirely surprising that Dharmakīrti’s thought has only a little to offer in this connection. At least as far as his epistemology is concerned, the great Buddhist logician can even be said to stand much closer to ancient scepticism’s obsessional target, Stoicism, with which he shares several basic assumptions and attitudes regarding knowledge and its possibility. Without pushing the comparison too far, Stoicism and scepticism can be said to have the same kind of relationship as the Buddhist epistemologists and the Madhyamaka, with the first of each pair adopting a decidedly “dogmatic” and optimistic attitude towards knowledge, truth, and certainty.

### Contrasting Epistemologies

To characterize it very briefly, Dharmakīrti’s philosophy is a practice-oriented epistemological system acknowledging two (and only two) reliable sources of knowledge (*pramāṇa*): perception (*pratyakṣa*, bare sensation) and inference (*anumāna*). Perception grasps bare uninterpreted particulars (*sva-lakṣaṇa*), which are the only things that can be said to exist according to Dharmakīrti’s strictly nominalistic account of reality (which states that universals are nothing more than useful intellectual constructs referring to shared functional differences). Perception is non-erroneous (*abhrānta*) and free from conceptual construction (*kalpanāpoḍha*) and thus provides an unbiased, unmediated, and positive access to (and image of) reality. Contrary to other types of awarenesses (conceptual, mnemonic, etc.), it displays a vivid (*spaṣṭa*, *sphuṭa*) image of its object. All cognitive events ultimately go back to perceptual awarenesses, and hence to the causality of real entities, includ-

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<sup>4</sup> See Steinkellner (1990) and Franco and Notake (2014, pp. 38–42).

<sup>5</sup> See PV 3.4 in Franco and Notake (2014, pp. 38–42). As noted by the translators, interpreting Dharmakīrti’s opponent as a Mādhyamika is only found in the earliest commentators (Devendrabuddhi, Śākyabuddhi, seventh century CE).

ing the conceptual traces subsisting in the mind in the form of latent tendencies imprinted by earlier experiences. Inasmuch as it “awakens” or actualizes one of these conceptual traces, perception triggers a judgement or ascertainment (*niścaya*) in which raw perceptual data are interpreted in the form “this is X.” However, due to ignorance (a kind of counter-science possessed by all ordinary humans), causes of error, and obstacles to the identification process, ascertainment can fail to occur, thus leaving room for errors and false superimpositions. The role of inference is to eliminate these errors and, as it were, to (re)establish the truth. This is why inference allows the wise to penetrate the true nature of reality (*tattvāvatāra*) and thus has a decisive role to play in the salvational process. Although concrete particulars are inexpressible, reality *can* be adequately described in its most general features: momentariness, selflessness, painfulness, and so on. According to Dharmakīrti, then, reality can be known and adequately described, and all of our reliable cognitions are causally related to it in a direct/positive or in an indirect/negative manner. Needless to say, most if not all of these points are challenged by the Mādhyamikas.

The “sceptic”<sup>6</sup> philosophies of Arcesilaus (316–241 BCE) and Carneades (214–129 BCE), both of whom were scholars of the New (or Middle) Academy, developed in reaction to Stoicism and its optimistic account of human knowledge (which they regarded as arrogant and breaking with the traditional humility of Greek epistemologies<sup>7</sup>), notably at the level of the so-called cognitive impression (*katalēptikē phantasia*).<sup>8</sup> This epistemological optimism was based on the identity between *logos* as human reason and *logos* as the underlying principle of the universe, an identity which warranted the world’s basic rationality and intelligibility, and on the fact that *epistēmē* and

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<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, only the Pyrrhonian philosophers labelled themselves “sceptics,” but they themselves recognized striking similarities between Pyrrhonian and Academic topics and approaches (see, e.g., Sextus Empiricus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.232). These representatives of the Academy clearly saw themselves as Platonists, a claim that becomes less surprising if one thinks of Plato’s first dialogues and their aporetic method. As Brunschwig (1997, p. 569) further argues, the form of Plato’s dialogues (in which Plato himself does not appear as a character) was abandoned after his death, so that “avec le recul, les dialogues de Platon pouvaient fort bien apparaître [...] comme des œuvres dont il était à peu près impossible d’extraire les vues personnelles de Platon.”

<sup>7</sup> See Cicero’s important testimony (*Academica* 1.43–46) in Brunschwig (1997, pp. 565–566).

<sup>8</sup> For interesting accounts of this controversy, see Lévy (2008, pp. 25–38) and Brunschwig (1997, pp. 566–568). On the Stoic representation/impression, see, for example, Muller (2006, pp. 146–167), Ildefonso (2004, pp. 75–109), and Long and Sedley (2001a, 174–236).

truth were regarded as being ultimately grounded in reality. A key Stoic concept in this connection was *sunkatathesis*, a word with marked political overtones pointing to the mind's capacity to judge or to assent to a certain impression or representation (*phantasia*) left by an object of the senses and hence to distinguish a true proposition from a false one. As allegedly reflected in the word's etymology, this *phantasia* was believed to project light (*phôs*) onto a certain aspect of reality and to be so irresistible as to lead the knowing subject to give his assent to it as though it were dragging him/her by the hair, according to Chrysippus (279–206 BCE). Once it has been legitimated by this active approval in the form “this is X,” the once-passive representation becomes “cognitive,” truly manifests the object's intrinsic character, and serves as a criterion of truth. In addition, this representation possesses a vividness that our representations of unreal objects in dreams, hallucinations, and so on, do not have, and according to Zeno (334–262 BCE?), it entails three basic elements: it “arises from that which is; is stamped and impressed in accordance with that very thing; and of such a kind as could not arise from what is not” (Sextus Empiricus in Long & Sedley, 1987, vol. 1, §40E; translated in Baltzly, 2018). There is much in Stoic epistemology, logic, and physics that can be compared with Dharmakīrti's system, even though, as is most often the case in such comparative ventures, not much would withstand a closer and *contextual* analysis.

In order to justify the key concern of his philosophy, the universal suspension of judgement/assent (*epochê peri pantôn*), the Sceptic Arcesilaus fiercely attacked the Stoics' cataleptic impression, arguing that “no impression arising from something true is such that an impression arising from something false could not also be just like it” (Cicero in Long & Sedley, 1987, vol. 1, §40D; translated in Baltzly, 2018). In other words, the only legitimate consequence to be drawn from the unknowability of things (*akatalêpsia*) was that one should refrain from any assent. Arcesilaus's arguments are not well documented, but there are some reasons to believe that he was referring to cases of sensory errors, oniric or hallucinatory illusions, and so on. In any event, his point was apparently not that the Stoics misrepresented what legitimate assent or the criterion of truth was or should be, but rather that there was nothing in human experience to meet the necessary conditions. In parallel to his attack on representations, he claimed that every statement could be opposed with a contrary statement of equal force (*isotheneia*). Arcesilaus apparently laid emphasis on the pessimistic tendencies which the New Academy thought could be identified in some passages of *Phaedo* (for example, 66B): those in which Plato made the body responsible

for the soul's incapacity to achieve knowledge, or where he emphasized the intrinsic weakness of the sensory faculties and human understanding. More generally, Arcesilaus regarded the world as being shrouded in a profound obscurity where nothing could be discerned or understood. In sharp contrast to this, the Stoics and Dharmakīrti made frequent use of photic metaphors when analysing cognition and representation.

## Life and Action

One of the main objections that the Stoics levelled against scepticism was that the universal suspension of judgement made action impossible insofar as action requires an impression, the soul's assent, and an impulsion (*hormê*). According to Plutarch (46–120 CE), Arcesilaus (at least dialectically) admitted that sensory impressions could not be avoided, but denied that assent was a necessary element in the causal chain leading to action, arguing that having an opinion or hurriedly assenting to an impression could only result in falsity and error and thus had to be dispensed with (*Against Colotes*, 1122A–F, in Long & Sedley, 1987, vol. 1, §69A). Arcesilaus contended that the impression left by appropriate objects had a *natural* capacity to trigger an impulsion towards them by weighing upon or bending the soul's central commanding faculty (*hêgemonikon*). But on which basis is one to decide about the proper course of action in the absence of any certainty? If Sextus Empiricus (160–210 CE?) is correct, then Arcesilaus appointed *reasonability* as the criterion of right action: (s)he who suspends her/his judgement on everything still can make what is reasonable, or what can be given a reasonable justification (*eulogon*),<sup>9</sup> the guiding principle of her/his actions (choosing, avoiding, etc.). As Carlos Lévy puts it,

being fully conscious of the fallibility of one's representations and judgements does not prevent one, according to him [sc. Arcesilaus], from acting in the best possible way by resorting to a type of rationality capable of accounting for all of one's choices. (Lévy, 2008, p. 38; translation mine)

One of Arcesilaus's successors at the head of the Academy, Carneades, proposed a more sophisticated alternative to the Stoics' assent in order to make

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<sup>9</sup> This notion also has a Stoic background; see Long and Sedley (1987, vol. 1, §59B) and Lévy (2008, p. 38).

decisions in life and practice possible.<sup>10</sup> He appointed as a (purely subjective) criterion what he termed “convincing impressions”; namely, impressions that “strongly appear to be true” (but can turn out to be false) and their increasingly refined developments in the form of impressions that are “shaken by nothing” and “analysed in detail.” Carneades’s criterion remained entirely fallible, and hence allegedly true to the spirit of scepticism, in that it was not able to distinguish what is apparently true and is genuinely true from what is apparently true and is actually false. This doctrine has often been regarded as “probabilistic,” even if this designation owes more to Cicero’s Latin rendering (*probabile*) of the Greek word *pithanon* (“convincing”) than to the doctrine itself.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the case may be, Carneades’s project consisted, according to Carlos Lévy again, in “defining a purely relative cognition that made action possible without ever turning the bases of this action into dogmas” (Lévy, 2008, p. 44).

Dharmakīrti was by no means a Sceptic, as we have seen, but like all of his Hellenistic homologues, including the Sceptics, he had to account for the very possibility of successful life and practice. The problem he was facing, of course, differed both in terms and in scope from the one facing the Sceptics, for unlike them, he admitted the possibility of a true knowledge of empirical reality. His problem was quite clearly circumscribed: whereas action in general is by definition connected with *future* (and hence situationally imperceptible) results, religious practice understood as a kind of interaction with the invisible (by means of rites, formulas, etc.) is connected with *transempirical* (and hence intrinsically imperceptible) states of affairs. In other words, people engaging in action are not in a position to *ascertain* whether their endeavours will be successful and what types of consequences the said endeavours will have. Their decisions can thus be expected to rely on an epistemologically weaker criterion than the one(s) used in order to cognize empirical reality. When coping with this problem, Dharmakīrti was led to conclusions that are to some extent analogous to the New Academy’s in

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<sup>10</sup> See Long and Sedley (2001b, 42–46), Brunschwig (1997, pp. 570–573), and Lévy (2008, pp. 42–44).

<sup>11</sup> Note Lévy (2008, pp. 43–44): “Carnéade construisit ce que l’on a appelé improprement le ‘probabilisme.’ Il ne s’agissait pas, en effet, pour lui, de déterminer les conditions dans lesquelles un événement avait le plus de chances de se produire, mais de structurer le monde des représentations sans pour autant reconnaître l’existence d’un critère qui permettrait de distinguer infailliblement les *phantasiai* vraies de celles qui ne l’étaient pas.” Philo of Larissa (154–84 BCE) transferred Carneades’s practical criteria of plausibility to the field of theoretical research (see Brunschwig, 1997, pp. 572–574).

that they mobilize reasonable justification and a form of “probabilism” rather than objective knowledge and certainty.

Let us first consider everyday activities such as farming.<sup>12</sup> Since all the undertakings of so-called rational or judicious (*prekṣāvat*) persons imply a goal, these persons are justified in attempting to determine the results that they can reasonably expect from the use of a certain means. Repeated practice and observation has taught farmers that seeds of a given kind are capable of yielding the result they expect from them; that is, a good crop. Though their work (ploughing, sowing, etc.) and its expedients (seeds, etc.) generally brings about the desired result, agriculturists are not unaware of the fact that the ultimate occurrence of this result might well be impeded by unfortunate events such as drought or storms. In other words, they can at best infer their work’s *fitness* for bringing about the expected results, or equivalently, the *possibility* that these results may occur, because to infer the actual occurrence of the results themselves would be to suppose that they can ascertain the absence of any impediment.

Agriculturists, then, act with uncertainty or doubt (*saṃśaya*) regarding the future and hence imperceptible results of their endeavours. In other words, they find themselves in a situation in which they do not perceive things or states of affairs that are inaccessible with respect to space, time, and/or mode of being (*svabhāva, dravya*), which Dharmakīrti refers to as *adṛśyānupalabdhi*, the “non-perception of something imperceptible.” Since this does not allow for any certainty regarding the existence or non-existence of a given state of affairs, Dharmakīrti explicitly describes this kind of non-perception as a dubious cognition, which *should* compel our farmers *not* to cognize, describe, or treat this state of affairs as existent (*sajjñānaśabdavyavahāra*) and hence entice them to inactivity or abstaining from action (*apravṛtti, pravṛtiniṣedha*). However, one observes that they do *not* refrain from action; that is, they engage in action in spite of this uncertainty. Now, what can be said about that rationality of these persons, if uncertainty as to the existence of the desired result does not prevent them from engaging in action? Can they be described as rational at all? Here, Śākyabuddhi (660–720 CE?), one of Dharmakīrti’s early commentators, provides us with an important statement:

If one is acting out of doubt, how is it correct to say that people who do so are “rational”?—What is the contradiction here? It is the [person] who would act out of certainty [alone] that is irrational. There are indeed two causes that com-

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<sup>12</sup> See Eltschinger (2007).

pel one to act: doubt about an object(/profit) and certainty about an object(/profit). Inactivity also has two causes: doubt about [something possibly] unprofitable and certainty about [something] unprofitable. A person who acts out of the first two causes and a person who does not act out of the second two is what the world means by a rational person. If acting without certainty is so unusual, then it would be contradictory for farmers, etc., to work in the fields and so on, for they have no means of valid cognition that can ascertain that their future wheat and such will grow. (*PVT ñe* D72b2–5/P87b4–88a1, translated in Dunne, 2004, p. 291 n. 126, partly modified)

Śākyabuddhi's opponent contends that rationality entails acting out of certainty alone. Śākyabuddhi quite strikingly replies that it is just the opposite; that is, that one who only acts out of certainty is behaving in an irrational way, thus clearly implying that rational persons *also* act out of uncertainty, just as farmers do.

Now, what about the religious practice of judicious persons? To put it in a nutshell, Dharmakīrti acknowledges three types of objects: perceptible objects (*pratyakṣa*, such as a table), imperceptible *hic and nunc* objects (*parokṣa*, such as a fire on a hill), and intrinsically or radically imperceptible objects (*atyantaparokṣa*, such as the details of the law of karmic retribution). Whereas the first type of objects can be grasped by perception, the second falls within the jurisdiction of inference (i.e., from perceiving smoke, I can infer the existence of a fire on the hill). As for the third type of objects, they can be apprehended neither by perception nor by inference. It should be emphasized, however, that it is by no means the case that in Dharmakīrti's eyes, the transempirical realm cannot be known at all, for it can be apprehended by various types of personalities, from omniscient buddhas to much lower types of mystics and spirituals, thanks to their extraordinary perceptual, "prophetic" abilities.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Dharmakīrti's claim is that *ordinary* human cognition, which is limited to sense perception and inference, and hence to the empirical realm, has no access to supersensuous states of affairs. Given that a significant part of religious practice pertains to the latter, these gnoseological limitations put human beings with religious expectations in a fairly difficult situation. Those who wish to improve their condition (e.g., by obtaining a better existential status after death) or to reach salvation therefore have *no*

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<sup>13</sup> By "prophetic," I do not mean, at least primarily, the ability of these persons to predict future events (though some of them are credited with such powers), but their "visionary" capacity to perceive ordinarily imperceptible states of affairs. Their paradigmatic ancestors in ancient India are the Vedic "seers" (*rṣi*), who are credited with a direct encounter with the otherwise invisible *dharmā*.

other possibility than to rely on religious revelation, because the supersensible realm is the jurisdiction of scriptures (*āgama*) or the “prophets” alone.<sup>14</sup> This is what Dharmakīrti says in an important statement:

The person [who wishes to engage in religious practice] cannot live without resorting to scriptural authority. [This for two reasons: first,] because [it is only in scripture that (s)he] learns the great benefits and evils [that are to be expected from] engaging in and refraining from certain [actions] whose results [remain entirely] imperceptible [to her/him; and second,] because [this person] does not see [anything] contradictory to the existence of these [desirable or undesirable results]. (*PVSV* 108.2–5)

There is thus no other reason to resort to scripture than the inability of ordinary human beings to perceive supernatural things. Therefore, Dharmakīrti says,

it is [only] the ignorant person who looks at scripture as a means of valid cognition in order to put into practice its teachings, because [those] who have thoroughly understood the truth do not [need to] resort to the instruction [of others any longer]. (*PVSV* 175.27–28, translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, 75)

However, this outlines what could be described as a religious anthropology from an epistemological point of view, but it does not solve the problem, all the more so since ancient India’s marked religious pluralism presupposed numerous and often mutually contradictory scriptures. For which scripture should one opt, then? And how can we evaluate its reliability? For, bearing as they do on invisible things, scriptural statements are *ipso facto* unverifiable and unfalsifiable for ordinary human beings, and since they have no invariable connection with any meaning, they cannot be expected to express their invisible object in a “natural” and unbiased way. What to choose, then, and on what basis?

Dharmakīrti credits Dignāga (480–540 CE?), the “founding father” of Buddhist epistemology, with an original approach to the problem:

If [a person] is [necessarily] to act [on a scriptural basis], it is better that (s)he act in this way [i.e., after evaluating scripture, and] this is the reason why [Dignāga recommends that scriptural] authority [be decided] through [critical] examination. (*PVSV* 108.5–6)

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<sup>14</sup> This is either because their words and phrases have an authorless, natural relationship with their supersensible meanings (which is the position of the Mīmāṃsā school) or because their authors (generally referred to as *āptas* or “credible persons/persons of authority”) have a supernatural access to the invisible (which is the position of most other schools, including Buddhism).

To explain, although religious scriptures deal with supersensible states of affairs, they generally also contain numerous statements that bear on empirical reality and are therefore in principle verifiable or falsifiable. Assessing the truth or falsity of these statements is the core of Dharmakīrti's method of critical evaluation: a scripture can be said to be reliable as regards the supersensible realm if (1) whatever it says about empirical facts is true and (2) it does not entail internal contradictions. A given scripture's reliability in transempirical matters is thus *inferred* from its reliability in the empirical ones. This is the method outlined in *PVSV* 108.20–109.3, which Dharmakīrti adapts from Vasubandhu's (350–430?) *Vyākhyāyukti* (*VY*)<sup>15</sup> and ascribes to Dignāga:

[A treatise's] not being invalidated by perception consists [first] in the fact that the things it holds to be perceptible are indeed such [i.e., perceptible], as [the five *skandhas*, i.e., colours] such as blue, [affective sensations such as] pleasure and pain, [ideation consisting in one's] grasping the characteristics [of things, conditioning factors] such as desire, and cognitions [which are all perceived by sensory perception and self-awareness. Second, a treatise's not being invalidated by perception consists] in the fact that the [things] it does not hold to be such [i.e., perceptible] are [indeed] imperceptible, as [pseudo-constituents] such as pleasure, which [the Sāṅkhya erroneously takes to] combine in the form of sounds, etc., and [categories] such as substances, motions, universals, and connections [which the Vaiśeṣika erroneously takes to be perceptible]. Similarly, [a treatise's not being invalidated by inference] consists [first] in the fact that the [things] it holds to be the objects of an inference that does not depend on scripture are really such [i.e., inferable], as the four nobles' truths, [and second] in the fact that the [things it holds to be] non-inferable are really such [i.e., noninferable], like the self, [God,] etc. [And this type of invalidation is] also [relevant] concerning an inference that depends on scripture [which consists in identifying internal contradictions within a treatise]. For example, once it is admitted that demerit has the nature of [defilements] such as desire and the [corporeal and verbal acts] that originate from them, one does not prescribe [things] such as ablutions and fire oblation in order to remove it [i.e., demerit, because they cannot annihilate its cause].

Dharmakīrti presents this method as being of universal application, but it is quite clear that in actual practice, he limited its use to the critical evaluation of non-Buddhist scriptures and made it a tool of interreligious polemics and apologetics. *PV* 1.332–334 provides a memorable application of its principles to the Veda:

[The Veda] says that a permanent soul is the agent [of action], [indeed] that there are permanent entities, [and] that supersensible [things] are sensible. [It declares] a wrong cause, a wrong duration as well as a [wrong] cessation of

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<sup>15</sup> See *VY* 169.14 ff.

entities, or [puts forward yet] other [things] whose possibility is excluded by the two means of valid cognition or contradicted by inference based on scripture. He who would pretend that [such a treatise] is veracious without having set aside [its] contradictions and without exhibiting the purpose of the treatise, would surpass an unchaste woman in audacity. (*PV* 1.332–334, translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, p. 65)

Here is Dharmakīrti's autocommentary thereon:

The Veda declares that a soul, which neither loses its former nature nor assumes a new one, [i.e., which is permanent] is successively the agent of [good and bad] deeds and the experiencer of the fruits of [those] deeds. [It is supposedly the experiencer] due to being the inherence cause [of pleasant and unpleasant sensations,] and [the agent] due to assuming the supervision [of bodily actions], etc. And this has repeatedly been shown to be incorrect. And [the Veda also states] the permanence of certain entities, [which] is incorrect, because a non-momentary [entity] violates the criterion of something real. [Moreover, the Veda says that things which are] indeed strictly imperceptible, such as universals, are perceptible, and [declares] a wrong origination, duration, and cessation of entities: [Indeed, it proclaims that something] which initially is not an agent [and which, being permanent,] cannot receive [any] new property, can generate [an effect] through dependence on [something] else; [that something] whose nature is no [longer] to be brought about since it has [already] been completed [by its own causes can] last by virtue of a substratum [upon which it depends]; and [that entities] perish due to a cause, etc. [The Veda states] yet other [things] which are contrary to what is established by perception and inference and are negated by inference based on scripture, such as the capacity of the Agnihotra and [ablutions] to purify one of sin, etc. [He who,] failing to set aside the contradictions of the *pramāṇas* in the entire body of the treatise [and] failing to exhibit [that it has] the properties of a [sound] treatise, viz., [its] expressing [internal] consistency, appropriate means, and a human purpose, [and even] wishing to prove, just by [resorting to] the [occasional] truthful indication of something trivial, that the Veda which says these things is equally faultless when it comes to [those] profundities which can scarcely be penetrated by great insight—he surpasses the unchaste woman in audacity. (*PVSV* 174.14–28, translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, pp. 65–71)

Dharmakīrti devised a second method, which he presented as an alternative, but which is the one he operated with while evaluating the reliability of the four Buddhist truths in the second chapter of his *Pramāṇavārttika* (*PV* 2.146 ff.). This method, which goes back to Āryadeva (third century CE?) and Dharmapāla (530–561 CE?),<sup>16</sup> is presented as follows in *PV* 1.217 and *PVSV* 115.15–19 thereon:

Or [scripture] is inference with regard to the other [domain] due to its being not belying with regard to the principal points [i.e., the Four Noble Truths],

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<sup>16</sup> See Tillemans (1986) and Tillemans (1990, 1:29–32).

because the nature of what is to be abandoned and what is to be realized together with their means is well established [by it]. Reliability consists in the fact that what is to be obtained and what is to be avoided [together with] their means, which has been taught by that [credible person], corresponds to reality (*avaiparītya*); like the Four Noble Truths in the way it will be explained [in the *Pramāṇasiddhi* chapter]. Because that very [thing that has been taught], which serves the human goal, [and hence] is suitable to be practised, is reliable, the assumption that this is so also in the case of the other, transcendent realm may not lead to one's deception. [And this is for two reasons:] (1) because there is no counter-evidence (*anuparodha*), and (2) because it is pointless for a speaker to make false statements without a purpose.

This second method is less systematic and significantly more economical, for instead of checking each and every point of the treatise under consideration, one focuses on the central doctrinal points: the Four Noble Truths, emptiness, etc. Nevertheless, the overall strategy remains that of an inferential transference of authority from one type of statement to another.

However, far from simply adopting it from Dignāga, Dharmakīrti problematized this strategy by questioning its formal and epistemic aspects and concluding quite unambiguously that the inference at stake was formally flawed:

Thus, this scripture has been explained in both ways to be inference for want of [any other] possibility (*agatyā*), [having in mind:] ‘Given that one has to proceed on account of scripture it is still better to proceed in such a way.’ However, inference in such a way indeed is not without problems (*na [...] anapāyam*), for words are not invariably concomitant with [their] objects. (*PVS* 109.19–22, translated in Krasser, 2012, p. 101)

Claiming that such an inference is unsatisfactory is tantamount to saying that scripture is not a full-fledged means of valid cognition, a consequence that Dharmakīrti actually draws in the fourth chapter of his *Pramāṇavārttika* when referring to some of the passages just considered: “Now, it had already been refuted earlier that scriptures were *pramāṇas*” (*PV* 4.101ab, translated in Dharmakīrti, 2000, p. 141). In these and other passages, Dharmakīrti thus relativizes the epistemic status of scripture qua inference and at least provisionally<sup>17</sup> denies it any reliability in supersensible matters—a rather surprising and provocative position for someone who was likely a Buddhist monk

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<sup>17</sup>“Provisionally” because the proof-strategy at work in the second chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika* aims to demonstrate that the core of the Buddha’s teachings, the Four Noble Truths, is reliable, hence that the compassionate Buddha who taught them is/has become (like) a means of valid cognition. On the structure of the *Pramāṇasiddhi* chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika*, see Franco (1997, 15–43); on Dharmakīrti’s conception of the Buddha as *pramāṇabhūta* in this demonstration, see Krasser (2001).

in a Buddhist institution of learning. One of Dharmakīrti's clearest statements concerning the deceptive character of such an inference is the following:

Objection: Isn't it the case that such a thing as the arrangement of the world, even though it is not an object [accessible] to reason,<sup>18</sup> is known [by you Buddhists] from the statement of a person which must be assumed [to be true, on the basis of his reliability in regard to other things]? [Answer:] No, because [we have] no confidence [in such a person]. It is indeed not the case that, since [a person has been observed] not to err with respect to a certain [matter], everything [that person says] is like that [i.e., true, and this for two reasons: first], because one observes that [people who are known to be reliable in regard to a certain thing do in fact] err [in regard to other things]; and [second,] because a concomitance between the [verbal] activity of this [allegedly superior person] and reliability is not established. Beyond that, the [aforementioned] definition of scripture has been accepted for lack of [any other] recourse. There is [indeed] no ascertainment [of supersensible things] from [scripture thus defined, and] this is the reason why [we have] also stated [above] that scripture is not a means of valid cognition. (*PVSV* 167.23–168.3, translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, pp. 42–44)

Dharmakīrti remains true to his position even when he is asked about the reliability of the Buddha's (rather than Vasubandhu's) statements about things that are beyond the grasp of reason, such as cosmology: it is not because this eminent person is seen not to speak falsely about certain empirical things that he can be ascertained to always speak the truth. In other words, no invariable correlation can be established between his statements and reliability (in the form "whatever this person says is true"), because one cannot rule out the possibility that some of his statements, notably those that pertain to the supersensible, are unreliable. This fallacious type of inference is generally referred to as being "with a remainder" (*śeṣavat*): it is an inference in which the absence of logical reason (being this person's statement) from the counter-instances (unreliable statements) of the property to be proven (being reliable) is doubtful (*sandigdha*).

Dharmakīrti makes this explicit in the framework of his controversy against a Brahmanical opponent (Naiyāyika or "vetero-Mīmāṃsaka") who wishes to prove the authority of the Veda by resorting to the following strategy: "[Those] Vedic sentences for which there is no cognition [on the part of Buddhists as being true] are [in fact] true, because they are part of the [same] Veda, just like the sentence 'Fire is the remedy for cold,' etc." (*PVSV* 173.17–

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<sup>18</sup> That is, the operation of the two means of valid cognition, perception and inference.

19, translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, p. 62). Even if the opponent infers the reliability of the entire Veda (including those of its statements that relate to the supersensible) on the rather weak basis of a single trivial statement, his strategy is structurally similar to the one ascribed to Dignāga. According to Dharmakīrti,

the [argument] of this [adversary] is [an inference of the type known as] *śeṣavat*, like [the inference that something has a certain] taste [as other fruits] from having the same color and like [the inference that something is] cooked [from being] in one [and the same] pot. This type of [inference] has been rejected by the Logician<sup>19</sup> because it deviates [from the property-to-be-proved]. (PVSV 173.19 and PV 1.331, translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, p. 62)<sup>20</sup>

Now, of course, the opponent is well aware of the structural similarity between the two approaches and criticizes Dharmakīrti for adopting the very same strategy. In his reply, Dharmakīrti has to concede that Dignāga's method also amounts to a *śeṣavat* inference and thus does not dispel doubt, but he recommends that *all* scriptural statements be checked, not just one, as his Brahmanical opponent claims. This, he says, is the only way in which one can hope to maximize the chances of being successful and avoiding deception:

And [true,] we have stated this definition of scripture [too]. However, this [is justified only] if, for every object capable of being examined, there is correctness of positive and negative assertions by appropriate means of valid cognition. [And] even if there is no necessary relation between words and [their] meanings [which would ensure the validity of scripture], it is better that a [person] act in [a state of] doubt [when it comes to matters relating to worldly prosperity and salvation]; for [scripture] may occasionally be reliable in this case. (PVSV 173.26–174.1, translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, pp. 63–64)

Dharmakīrti fully admits that the criterion to which he resorts for deciding on a certain scripture, an inferential transfer of authority, is formally flawed and thus epistemologically unsatisfactory. However, he says, it is the least unsatisfactory or best possible strategy in that it significantly increases the

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<sup>19</sup> Dignāga.

<sup>20</sup> Note also PVSV 173.22–25: “This kind of inference was declared to be not [really] a proof by the master [Dignāga] himself in pointing out the deviating character of the Naiyāyikas' *śeṣavat*-inference, like the [so-called] proof that fruit [one has not tasted] has the same taste [as fruit one has tasted] because it has the same color, and the [so-called] proof that rice grains one has not observed are cooked, like those which one has observed, because they are in one [and the same] vessel” (translated in Eltschinger, Krasser, & Taber, 2012, p. 63).

probability that the treatise under consideration is reliable and allows a successful interaction with the transempirical realm. In other words, it is reasonable for judicious persons to use this criterion when it comes to making decisions about things that are beyond the scope of reason and empirical knowledge; that is, in situations that are essentially characterized by doubt and uncertainty. Dharmakīrti is not a sceptic, not even a “local” sceptic, but his way of dealing with the unknowability of the supersensible is similar to that of the Sceptics in that it appeals, albeit on a much narrower scale, to reasonability and rational justification.

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