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Apoha

By   Prueitt, Catherine

Article Summary

Apoha, a Sanskrit term meaning exclusion, was used by the late fifth- to early sixth-century Buddhist philosopher Dignāga as a keystone in his theory of denotation. According to Dignāga, a word denotes its meaning through the exclusion of what is other (*anyāpoha*). This idea provoked celebration and controversy that would last through the end of Sanskritic Indian Buddhism. In the hands of Dignāga's successor Dharmakīrti (seventh century), who developed what became the normative version of this theory, *apoha* leverages the fact that a causally efficacious real thing is different from everything else to describe how the interaction between living beings and their worlds produces judgements that are either shared or not in accord with the various factors contributing to the judgement's formation. Dharmakīrti argues that there's an infinite number of ways that a real thing could be conceptualised since each real thing is different from the infinite expanse of other real things. Acting toward a real thing requires delimiting the scope of what one ignores so that just some of the differences are left over. A living being can afford to ignore the differences between the differences that are left over in this exclusion because these differences don't impact the specific goal based on which the living being judges an object to be efficacious or not.

NEW | Thematic

Apoha

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1. Dignāga on concepts and inference

Dignāga [see Dignāga] develops the *apoha* theory to account for how it's possible to use a concept in an inference to facilitate knowledge that some target property is present in a particular instance on the basis of perceiving a different, but invariably related, property in that instance. In line with other Classical South Asian theorists, Dignāga understands the basic structure of an inference as follows: an instance instantiates a target property because it instantiates some other generic property, common to both the current instance and the target property, that is being adduced as evidence [see Inference, Indian theories of]. Dignāga stipulates that there are three characteristics that the evidence must have if it is to invariably indicate that the target property is present in the current instance. The evidence must be 1) present in the current instance; 2) present in at least one other similar instance; and 3) never present in a dissimilar instance. Dignāga's characterisation serves to formalise, on the basis of empirical observations, when one can confirm an invariable relationship between two properties so that one may infer the presence of one in a particular location from the presence of the other there.

Dignāga's basic position is that a concept is able to facilitate knowledge of the presence of the target property in the current instance because a concept is able to denote its own meaning qualified by the exclusion of other meanings. A concept's own meaning is a mental particular, the cognitive image possessed by the living being who employs the concept. The concept denotes its object by differentiating its own meaning from the meanings of other concepts that are or are not properly employed in relation to the entity under consideration. In relation to an entity denoted as an 'oak', for example, a person may also employ the concepts 'tree' or 'solid', because one knows of instances where entities that were successfully designated using 'oak' were also successfully designated using 'tree' or 'solid', and one does not know of any instances where an entity designated 'oak' was unable to be designated by 'tree' or 'solid'. However, one couldn't appropriately use the concept 'maple' to designate the entity designated by 'oak' because one has never observed an instance where competent language users literally designated the same entity by both 'oak' and 'maple'. This is because the instances excluded by

the use of the concept 'oak' include the instances where the concept 'maple' is successfully used, and vice versa. In short, part of what it is to be an 'oak' is to not be a 'maple', even as part of what it is to be both an 'oak' and a 'maple' is to be a 'tree'. The scope of the application of a concept is delimited by the instances to which the concept cannot be successfully applied.

Dignāga's formulation drew immediate criticism from Brahmanical opponents. In particular, the Naiyāyika Uddyotakara [see Uddyotakara] argued that Dignāga's critiques of other theories of denotation either did not hold true or applied with equal force to *apoha*. A number of Uddyotakara's arguments, especially those concerning *apoha*'s alleged circularity and inapplicability, were picked up and refined by the Mīmāṃsaka Kumārila. Kumārila's most serious and influential objections were based on his interpretation of *apoha*s as absences or non-existences, on the basis of which he argued that 1) *apoha* is circular because a negation depends on the existence of a positive basis that is negated; and 2) since there is no way to differentiate one non-existent thing from another, all words would be synonymous. It is in light of Kumārila's critiques in particular that Dignāga's successor Dharmakīrti [see Dharmakīrti] presents his account of *apoha*.

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NEW | Thematic

Apoha

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---

2. Dharmakīrti on *apoha*: an overview

For Dharmakīrti, the primary function of a concept is to identify two things as being the same based on a living being's previous experiences that things like these produce the same effect in relation to the living being's goals. It would be impossible and useless for a living being to develop a unique concept in relation to each unique particular that they experience. One would have no reason to act toward something experienced as unique, for one's desires are constituted by past experiences. If a living being were to treat each unique thing as unique, they wouldn't have any relevant past experiences to draw on; they would exist in a perpetual flux of uncategorisable instants. So, although all things are actually unique, if someone wants to act in the world, they have to treat some of these unique things as if they were the same. As Dharmakīrti details: 'Particular words are applied to a particular situation for a particular purpose. If multiple entities serve to fulfil that single purpose, then that multiplicity should be expressed in relation to that single purpose' (Sanskrit in Dharmakīrti 1960: 67; all translations are by the author). Language use is purely pragmatic: its role is to successfully direct practical activity in line with the goals of the living being employing it, even if this direction forces the living being to incorrectly judge that different things are the same.

Although the judgement that two real things are the same necessarily equates things that are actually different, the fact that real things are causally efficacious still secures the trustworthiness of a properly formed judgement. Say that a person is looking at a field containing many four-legged, medium-sized mammals. The person judges that all of the animals are cows. This judgement is erroneous in that it ignores all the ways in which the individuals designated as 'cows' are different. But, if the judgement tracks the causal capacities of the real things in question, it's not practically misleading. Say this person has both correctly judged these animals to be cows and is interested in milking cows. In this case, all of the animals may be properly designated as 'cows' for the purpose of getting bovine milk, which the person can then drink, sell, offer to others, turn into cheese, and so on. Although there isn't really any 'cowness' present in all of these unique things that the person judges to be cows, the concept 'cow' may

successfully guide practical activity as long as it tracks the actual causal capacities of the real things on which it is based.

Dharmakīrti recognises that his appeal that the causal efficacy of a real thing is not enough to explain why a living being would judge any particular subset of things to be the same, for, in line with Buddhist argumentation that only particulars are causally efficacious [see Causation, Indian theories of], each real thing is unique. The fact that a particular is unique means that it is excluded from everything else. It is therefore possible to associate an infinite number of exclusions with any real thing, for there is an infinite number of other real things from which it is excluded. Each of these exclusions represents a particular way of delimiting its difference from everything else. So, why choose one and not another? Dharmakīrti states that additional factors related to the embodied conditioning, habits, and goals of the living being performing an exclusion lead to a certain subset of these exclusions being ignored. The imprints left in the minds of living beings by previous experiences of real things are responsible for a living being's conditioned ability to judge that two distinct things are the same in relation to accomplishing some goal. These imprints are also the link between causally efficacious real things and the habituated conceptual judgements that motivate practical activity. The crucial factor that allows a judgement that excludes some, but not all, of a real thing's differences from everything else to occur is the past habituation of the living being performing the exclusion.

Dharmakīrti specifies that the employment of a specific concept will be shaped by factors such as

> proximity, salience, and so on, just like how, having seen one's father approaching, even though there is no difference between his being a teacher and his being a progenitor and so on, one thinks 'My father is coming,' not that a teacher is coming.
>
> (Sanskrit in Dharmakīrti 1960: 32)

This example points to how a single living being will experience the same object differently depending on the context. Some concepts will arise more readily than others depending on the strength of the factors that support their formation. One's lifelong relationship with another person as one's father will generally (but not always) trump one's more limited relationship with that person as one's teacher. The judgement that this person is one's father is more broadly applicable than the judgement that this person is one's teacher. According to the concept of 'father', one's father has always been one's father, and always will be. In contrast, one's father may only be one's teacher for a short period, and only in relation to a specific context. Although one concept is more limited than another, within the contexts that produce each judgement, each is correct because each maps the relevant causal capacities of its object.

A living being's past habituation channels conditioned expectations, norms, and embodied capacities along courses driven by goal-oriented desires. Living beings act out these norms

within their embodied worlds through the patterns of what they ignore while examining what could be approached to accomplish a goal. As Dharmakīrti rhetorically queries: 'What would be the point of analyzing something that is not capable of accomplishing one's goal? Why would a woman seeking sex inquire after whether or not a eunuch is beautiful?' (Sanskrit in Dharmakīrti 1960: 106). To update Dharmakīrti's example here, think about how search parameters and algorithms shape who appears on a dating app. Say a heterosexual woman fills out her search preferences and asks to be shown only heterosexual men. The profiles that show up will be the ones that have been tagged with these concepts – 'heterosexual' and 'man' – but there's no essence uniting all of these different profiles. Not all of these profiles will point toward real individuals who could meet the searching woman's goals. What the search parameters serve to do is more to exclude other particular possibilities than to latch on to some real, positive thing. Applying filters narrows possibilities until what's left doesn't seem like it's not worth a shot. The shape of the concepts that guide these levels of exclusion makes it so that many possibilities are never even considered. The woman may miss out on an individual who would actually fulfil her desires because that individual doesn't fall within the scope of the concepts 'man' and 'heterosexual' as she employs them in the app. But it's just not possible to review every single profile. If the exclusion does manage to point her to someone who works well enough, the exclusion is pragmatically helpful. Yet what even these successful exclusions share is just that the people left over aren't not worth a further look.

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NEW | Thematic

Apoha

By   Prueitt, Catherine

---

3. Intersubjectivity and partially overlapping judgements

The concepts that a living being constructs and how that living being navigates their world are intertwined. Dharmakīrti stages a striking scene:

> Even when a form that is seen is not different, an experience produces determinate cognitions in accord with a habituation for concepts, as in the case of the concepts 'corpse,' 'desirable woman,' and 'food'. In that case, the acuity of the cognition, habituation to the imprint for it, the context, etc., are supporting conditions for the arisal of a particular determination from the experience.
>
> (Sanskrit in <u>Dharmakīrti 1960</u>: 32)

Say that three different living beings go to a graveyard seeking a dead body. A Buddhist ascetic intending to engage in meditation on impermanence may go to a graveyard and regard a dead body as a decaying corpse, the embodiment of everything repulsive and dissatisfactory about this mortal world. A necrophiliac approaching the same dead body would have quite the opposite reaction, seeing the dead body as something desirable. A dog may see this same form in an entirely different register: to the dog, the dead body may be simply something to be eaten. This same material form is able to produce these radically different judgements because the judgements do not rest on the real presence of the universals 'repulsivity', 'desirability', and 'edibility'. Since these universals are contradictory, they simply cannot all truly be properties of a real thing; real things are not internally contradictory. Rather, these different living beings simply carve up the field of possible exclusions in different ways based on their past conditioning.

This conditioning includes everything that would drive the living beings to ignore certain aspects of the causal field of information available to them. For instance, the ascetic would apply the concept 'human' to the dead body since they are concerned specifically with interacting with a

human form. Human corpses make the best subjects for meditation on mortality since their bodies are just like ours. We will die and rot just like they do – so the thinking goes. But of course, this dead body is *not* just like mine, and mine is not just like yours, and neither of us is just like the ascetic. It's only by selectively ignoring the information that would get in the way of accomplishing their goal that the ascetic can effectively engage with this clump of decaying matter as a human corpse just like their own. This kind of conceptualisation serves the larger purpose of engendering the firm conviction that things in the world will never lead to lasting happiness, because life itself will end. Each conceptualisation arises in relation to overlapping fields of goals, desires, and expectations. Taken together, these conceptualisations form the habituated map by which the ascetic navigates their world.

But note that this map, and the possibilities for action it delimits, shares only partial overlaps with the maps of other living beings operating within the same causal field. These overlaps come about not through the positive presence of real universals supporting various judgements, but merely through shared exclusions. Like the ascetic, the necrophiliac sees the dead body as specifically human and dead, but instead of conceptualising this body as a repulsive indicator of the dissatisfactory nature of life in the world, the necrophiliac sees the corpse as an object that's capable of satisfying their sexual desires. The judgement of the ascetic and the judgement of the necrophiliac are both right in the sense that both living beings have constructed concepts that accurately track the causal capacities of the object in question. It is true that repulsivity can be appropriately attributed to the dead body by the ascetic, and it is true that desirability can be appropriately attributed to the dead body by the necrophiliac.

And then into this very human set of concerns comes the dog. The dog doesn't care about the existential dread of mortality or about sexual desirability. The dog just wants something to eat. The wood stacked beside the corpse, laden with significance for the humans as the fuel for tomorrow's funeral pyre, is irrelevant and ignored. So is the body's being different from the dead bird the dog ate yesterday. The body is close enough in a way that the wood is not. What's left now is just this material form, utterly disconnected from the concepts superimposed on it by humans, and yet the dog's judgement 'food' is also correct. The judgement tracks the causal capacities of the particulars upon which it's superimposed, even as both the ascetic and the necrophiliac would reject the idea that the body is to be eaten.

For Dharmakīrti, the fact that the dead body supports all of these judgements indicates that the concepts superimposed on the dead body cannot be a real things, for a real thing has a singular, non-self-contradictory nature. Saying that a real thing is both desirable and repulsive would be like saying that a real fire is both hot and cold. If something can correctly bear contradictory attributes, it must be because what it means for the judgement to be correct is simply that the judgement facilitates accomplishing a subject-indexed goal through excluding what would not allow for this goal to be accomplished. Since the particulars onto which the concepts are superimposed do in fact have unique causal capacities, they are in fact capable of supporting

some judgements, not others. But just because these judgements motivate successful action doesn't mean that the concepts they superimpose on the world actually exist independent of this superimposition.

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Apoha

By   Prueitt, Catherine

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4. Error and verification

All this raises the question of how one verifies one's judgements, if all concepts are errors superimposed on a world of unique particulars. Both perception and inference can serve to verify the trustworthiness of an awareness [see Knowledge, Indian views of]. Perception does this by immediately encountering the accomplishment of one's goal: a judgement that something is fire, for instance, is trustworthy if one experiences the fire's warmth. An inference does this by eliminating doubt or confusion about the object of a perception through the establishment of an invariable relationship between the uncertain object and something that is clearly perceived: a cognition of smoke determines the trustworthiness of a possible cognition of fire once the source of the smoke is reached. In both cases, the identity of the object is confirmed through an awareness that leaves no doubt as to the causal capacities of the object in question.

A problem arises. Since this account of how one verifies a judgement depends on a living being's subsequent interaction with a causally efficacious object, it seems to require the continued existence of the object in question. However, according to Dharmakīrti's own position that all things are momentary, by the time one could act to verify one's awareness, the particular that produced it would already be gone. But if the object is gone by the time one acts to verify it, how could anything ever be verified?

In response, Dharmakīrti indicates that, in addition to the error of equating things that are actually different, two other necessary errors guide people engaged in practical activity. First, people treat the particulars out in the world as if they instantiate the concept, thereby motivating themselves to seek confirmation by acting toward things in the world. Second, they treat the particular that produced a perception and its causal descendent that could verify that perception's trustworthiness as the same thing. So long as the concept continues to track the causal descendants of the particulars on which it was based, it is connected enough to reality to make it trustworthy. A living being encounters this trustworthiness precisely in their perception that their goal has been accomplished: a judgement that something is 'food' is correct if one

eats what one takes to be food and is nourished. What one actually eats isn't the exact same object onto which one originally superimposed the concept 'food'. It's just that, as the causal descendent of the object, it can still fulfil this purpose.

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Apoha

By   Prueitt, Catherine

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5. In conclusion, looking forward

Dharmakīrti's articulation of *apoha* was massively influential. It was celebrated by Buddhists in various lineages, who fiercely disagreed over the fine points as they claimed the theory as their own. It also remained a target for rival philosophers, who continued to push objections often inspired by Kumārila's arguments, which many Mīmāṃsakas and Naiyāyikas found convincing. It was even appropriated by one rival tradition, Pratyabhijñā, and used to argue (against Dharmakīrtian Buddhists) that the entire universe must be Śiva! *Apoha* became a flash point for some of the most technical and sophisticated debates in Classical Sanskritic philosophy, reaching far beyond philosophy of language narrowly construed.

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NEW | Thematic

Apoha

By   Prueitt, Catherine

References and further Reading

(There is a long history of scholarship on apoha. This list highlights recent book-length presentations of primary texts, along with their translations and studies.)

- Dharmakīrti. (1960) *The Pramāṇavārttikam of Dharmakīrti: The First Chapter with the Autocommentary*. Edited by Raniero Gnoli, Rome: Istituto italiano per il medio ed estremo oriente. (This is the Sanskrit standard edition of Dharmakīrti's auto-commentary on the first chapter of his magnum opus. It contains Dharmakīrti's longest sustained discussion of apoha. This text is not available in a full English translation; see Eltschinger et al. for an English translation of the beginning of the *apoha* section.)

- Dunne, John. (2004) *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*, Boston: Wisdom Publications. (This comprehensive overview of Dharmakīrti's philosophy both explicitly discusses apoha and contains valuable framing information for those not familiar with Dharmakīrti's thought.)

- Eltschinger, Vincent, John Taber, Michael Torsten Much, and Isabelle Ratié. (2018) *Dharmakīrti's Theory of Exclusion (Apoha), Vol. 1: On Concealing. An Annotated Translation of Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti 24,16–45,20 (Pramāṇavārttika 1.40–91)*, Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies. (This volume provides an invaluable English translation of the beginning of the apoha section in Dharmakīrti's *Autocommentary on The Explanation of the Sources of Knowledge*, along with a useful Introduction, synopsis of arguments, and critical edition of the Tibetan version of the text (for the Sanskrit, see Dharmakīrti 1960).)

- Kataoka, Kei, and John Taber. (2021) *Meaning and Non-existence: Kumārila's Refutation of Dignāga's Theory of Exclusion*, Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press. (This work contains a Sanskrit critical edition, English translation, and two studies of the Apohavāda (Discussion of Exclusion) chapter of Kumārila's *Ślokavārttika* (Commentary on the Verses [of the Mīmāṃsāsūtra]). In addition to the invaluable contribution of making Kumārila's text available, Taber's study in Part Three, 'The Place of the *Apohavāda* Chapter in the Early Debate about *Apoha*', lucidly maps the early debates and convincingly argues that

Dharmakīrti's presentation of *apoha* was in direct response to Kumārila's critiques, which are detailed with a good deal of philosophical sophistication.)

- McAllister, Patrick. (2019) *Ratnakīrti's Proof of Exclusion*, Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press. (As the title indicates, this work is a critical edition, translation, and study of the eleventh-century Buddhist scholar Ratnakīrti's Proof of Exclusion. Since Ratnakīrti was one of the last Buddhists who wrote in Sanskrit, his *Proof of Exclusion* provides a snapshot of the final stages of the debate on *apoha* in India. McAllister's study provides ample historical contextualisation and insightful analysis of not just Ratnakīrti's work, but also the works of many prominent earlier Buddhists. McAllister even includes appendixes with translations of relevant passages from Dharmakīrti, as well as from Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla's works.)

- McCrea, Lawrence and Parimal Patil. (2010) *Buddhist Philosophy of Language in India: Jñānaśrīmitra on Exclusion*, New York: Columbia University Press. (This volume provides a translation, study, and Sanskrit reading edition of the early eleventh-century Buddhist philosopher Jñānaśrīmitra's innovative Monograph on Exclusion. McCrea and Patil usefully contextualise the *Monograph* in relation to the earlier views of Dharmottara in particular.)

- McAllister, Patrick, ed. (2017) *Reading Bhaṭṭa Jayanta on Buddhist Nominalism*, Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press. (The title of this volume does not do justice to the importance of the contributions within. The book presents a Sanskrit critical edition and English translation of a section of the late ninth-century Nyāya philosopher Bhaṭṭa Jayanta's Nyāyamañjarī (Raceme of Reason) that presents various Buddhist understandings of *apoha* in order to refute them, along with discussions by eight leading scholars of the issues raised therein. The studies are excellent. To highlight a few: Hideyo Ogawa's chapter 'The Qualifier-Qualificand Relation and Coreferentiality' provides what I consider to be the single best introduction to Dignāga's *apoha* theory available in English. Pascale Hugon's chapter 'On *vyāvṛtta*' is a sophisticated discussion of why the circularity objection articulated by Bhaṭṭa Jayanta fails, with attention to how this critique could play out in relation to both Dharmakīrti's articulation of *apoha* and Dharmottara's reformulation of the theory. Kei Kataoka's chapter 'Dharmottara's Notion of *āropita*' gives a subtle analysis of Dharmottara's views. Elisa Freschi and Artemij Keidan's chapter 'Understanding a Philosophical Text: The Problem of "Meaning" in Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī*, Book 5' is methodologically beautiful and provides invaluable clarifications of the nuances of different often-conflated terms in Jayanta's work (and by extension, many other studies of Sanskrit texts in English).)

- Pind, Ole. (2015) *Dignāga's Philosophy of Language. Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti V on anyāpoha*. 2 vols., Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press. (Based on Pind's 2009 PhD dissertation at the University of Vienna (which is itself still commonly cited in the literature), this two-volume study presents a reconstruction of the Sanskrit of the apoha chapter of Dignāga's magnum opus, based on the single surviving Sanskrit manuscript of Jinendrabuddhi's commentary

thereon, along with an English translation. It also contains comprehensive notes and contextualisation.)

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