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*Précis of Perceiving Reality:  
Consciousness, Intentionality,  
and Cognition in  
Buddhist Philosophy*

**Introduction**

The central idea of this book is the continuity of *perception* and *the world as perceived*. To perceive is to open up to a horizon of elements or unique particulars (e.g. textures, arrays, intensities, magnitudes, etc.) that are inseparable from their mode of presentation. Perception is thus at once, and fundamentally, about an object of its own, which reflects its intentional structure, and endowed with a specific phenomenal character, which captures its affective and dispositional saliences.

I take a twofold approach to these ideas in *Perceiving Reality*. On the one hand, I try to show that Indian Buddhist thought is the source of a distinctive and influential philosophy of perception — one that entails that empirical awareness is intrinsically perspectival. On this account, perception does not simply manifest a given object, a particular, but is also in some sense self-manifesting, self-given. On the other hand, I try to develop a methodological framework that renders these Buddhist insights continuous with contemporary philosophical concerns in both phenomenology and analytic philosophy of mind. The emphasis on ‘continuity’ over the standard ‘comparative’ approach reflects a specific intuition about the scope of philosophical enquiry: one which says that its problems, though often couched in historically and culturally contingent terms, are nonetheless grounded in all aspects of conscious experience for a person at any given time.

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Furthermore, in so far as philosophical enquiry aims to get at the nature of things or perhaps at the things themselves, its arguments must be experientially and/or empirically grounded.

As the book's subtitle indicates, the material under discussion is drawn primarily from Buddhist philosophy, specifically from the Indian Buddhist philosophical tradition. But the analysis engages with, and is intended to contribute to, a number of contemporary debates in phenomenology and analytic philosophy of mind. Indeed, the central argument of the book is that Indian Buddhist epistemology — the main focus of the book — shares a common orientation towards the analysis of experience with naturalistic approaches in epistemology and philosophy of mind, and in many respects is continuous with some of the phenomenological theories of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Three concepts in particular provide the axis around which the book's theoretical landscape is mapped out: *consciousness*, which stands for the phenomenal or experiential dimension under scrutiny, *intentionality*, as a particular feature that concerns the structure of experience, and *cognition*, which captures the broader epistemic issues at work in Buddhist and contemporary phenomenology and philosophy of mind.

Any attempt to draw together such different and seemingly disparate philosophical programmes faces two obvious challenges. On the one hand, the concerns of pre-modern Buddhist philosophers reflect exegetical and even soteriological considerations and are seemingly at odds with the open-ended and scientifically informed modes of enquiry of contemporary western philosophy. On the other hand, there is the question of compatibility, first, between the positions of Buddhist epistemologists — narrowly focused here on the school of thought associated with Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their successors — variously interpreted as endorsing either idealism or global anti-realism, and the causal theories of knowledge of naturalistic epistemology; and second, between the anti-essentialism of Buddhist metaphysics and its no-self view, and Husserlian phenomenology with its commitment to eidetic essences. Hence, my book also aims to showcase the importance of constructive engagements with Buddhist ideas and methods by treating them not merely as exegetical materials, but rather as valuable conceptual resources and positions that can, and in my view do, advance our understanding of what there is, and the means by which we achieve epistemic certainty. I pursue this task especially in the last three chapters of the book, through an exploration of foundationalism and the phenomenology of perception

(Chapter 7), of the relation between perception, self-awareness, and intentionality (Chapter 8), and a defence of epistemological optimism (Chapter 9).

In lieu of a summary of the various theoretical proposals and their supporting arguments, the *Précis* will provide a guide to the book's main ideas as foregrounded by its stated aim.

### A Working Premise

The point of departure for *Perceiving Reality* is the idea that perception is an embodied structural feature of consciousness whose function is determined by phenomenal experiences in a corresponding domain (of visible, tangibles, etc.). This view is in sharp contrast with the notion, common among philosophers who espouse some version or another of direct realism, that 'perception' is simply a descriptive category whose meaning can be established by definition. As a phenomenal experience, perception can become the intentional object of a specific mode of cognitive awareness: call it direct, non-conceptual awareness (Skt. *nirvikalpa-jñāna*). As some Buddhist philosophers recognized a long time ago, phenomenal concepts (that is, concepts of experience, e.g. 'seeing' or 'discerning') are conceptually irreducible: thus, one does not acquire the notion of 'the which is before the eye' (the literal meaning of the Sanskrit technical term '*pratyakṣa*' or 'perception') by *a priori* postulation or definition. On this view, it is impossible to provide an account of phenomenal concepts in non-phenomenal terms. One cannot explain the experience of blue, the pitch of Middle C, or the attitude of concern in terms that make no reference to their phenomenal qualities.

If perception is continuous with what it apprehends how can it get to the things themselves? How can it acquaint us with the world, and guarantee effective action? To answer this question we need to recall the Buddhist's austere and highly fragmented ontology of partless atoms. As Vasubandhu, a key forerunner of the Buddhist epistemological programme, notes, the senses are not the instruments of some internal agent (a self or mind), extending the latter's reach into the natural world. Rather, the concreteness of sense experience discloses a world of objects as defined by specific phenomenal properties such as resistance, transformation, and dissolution. In a distinctly phenomenological idiom developed centuries before Husserl, Vasubandhu clarifies that the nature of materiality (*rūpa* or 'form') is such that it can be disrupted as a result of impact with an agent or as something

that can oppose resistance. These properties (e.g. alteration, resistance), however, do not extend to the atoms themselves, which form the building blocks of materiality. As monadic units, the atoms are regarded as lacking any formal properties, which they can only acquire as atomic compounds.

The difficulty of reconciling atomism, a fundamental tenet of Buddhist ontology, with the phenomenology of perception is apparent in early debates between various schools of thought (chiefly those of the Vaibhāṣikas and the Sautrāntikas) on the issue of whether the sensible qualities of objects (e.g. shape, colour) supervene on the atoms. On some accounts colour, for instance, is treated as a substance, while on others merely as a potentiality to occasion different types of experience. The line of thought that gets most traction is the one that regards atoms not as substantial impartite entities, but as the subtlest conceivable collection of elements (see de la Vallee Poussin, 1971, II, 22ab.). These subtle elements, when compounded, acquire emergent properties, but their apprehension as aggregated wholes also reflects the constitution and function of the perceptual systems.

Consider, for instance, fluidity. It is not a primary property of water atoms (those atoms that, when compounded, manifest as water), but rather a secondary property of water elements. The structure of emergent phenomena reflects this elemental level of organization, which depends on a vast array of causal and conditioning factors. A different configuration of the same elements may produce the sensation of hardness and coldness, as is the case with ice.

With Dignāga and Dharmakīrti — the key protagonists of the Buddhist epistemological enterprise — there is an important shift of emphasis from ontological to epistemological concerns. The ‘real’ is described in pragmatic rather than ontological terms. If reality were made up of changeless and enduring entities, the argument goes, the effects produced by such entities would be equally changeless and enduring. But what does not change cannot produce any effect, for the effect in this case would either be identical with the generating cause or consist in a perpetual reiteration of it. Such is, then, the conclusion that Dharmakīrti draws following his appraisal of Vasubandhu’s notion that only partless entities are ultimately real. For Dharmakīrti, causal efficacy, essentially the ability of an object to perform a function (*arthakriyāsamartha*), is the true mark of the real:

This particular alone constitutes an object of perception; others (viz., universals and the like) are concealed from the purview of perception. This particular is referred to as ‘cause and effect’ and is what we mean

by the notion of ‘particular.’ As we have said, only an entity that has causal efficacy is deemed a real object of perception. And it is this specific particular that we have called an individual object. (Pandeya, 1989, p. 258)

The language of particulars and universals, claims Dharmakīrti, applies to objects only in terms of their specific phenomenal qualities (qualities that reflect the efficacy of the entities that produce them). These are not external referents, but defining characteristics of singles, types of which there can be any number of tokens. But even if the Buddhist epistemologist shifts the focus of perception from unique particulars (tokens) to phenomenal properties (types), the ‘uniqueness’ of the perceived *as perceived* also stems from its mode of presentation. Where at one time the unique and irreducible elements of Buddhist ontology were related to conceptually cognate terms such as ‘unique particular’ (*svalakṣaṇa*) and ‘intrinsic nature’ (*svabhāva*), now they are seen as embedded in the very cognitive structures that manifest them: feelings and thoughts, for instance, are unique particulars too, but their apprehension is continuous with their mode of disclosure; as specific kinds of self-awareness (e.g. of painful, pleasant, or alert states). The content of a particular mental state may be momentary and discrete, but recurrent, and reflective of the dynamics of the psychophysical aggregates that sustain human experience. Ultimately, however, the phenomenal content of experience reflects our condition of embodiment to which perceptual awareness provides constant, uninterrupted, and unmediated access.

In *Perceiving Reality*, I try to develop a way of conceiving of our most basic mode of being in the world that resists attempts to cleave reality into an inner and outer, a mental and a physical domain (Chapter 1 through 3). I argue that what we apprehend in perception are not, to paraphrase J.L. Austin, the external, mind-independent, medium-sized dry goods that populate the realist’s ontology (Chapter 4). Rather, to paraphrase Husserl and a group of Buddhist philosophers in league with Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, the objects in question are the intentional or aspectual objects: the blue sky *as seen*, the pot *as grasped*, and pain *as felt*. As a fundamental experience that grounds our sense of being and what there is, perception marks the beginning and end of our conscious lives. Charting out the structure, content, and character of this perceptual awareness is therefore both an epistemic good in its own right and key to advancing any metaphysical claim (Chapters 5 through to 9). After all, as Peter Strawson famously wrote more than thirty years ago: ‘a philosopher’s views on

[perception] are a key to his theory of knowledge and to his metaphysics' (Strawson, 1979, p. 141).

### An Enduring Dispute

A central problem in contemporary discussions of consciousness is the problem of determining precisely what a mental state's being conscious consists in. This problem raises a range of conceptual issues about the nature and structure of consciousness. Of particular importance here is the relation between consciousness and self-awareness. The key question is: does consciousness imply self-consciousness or is self-consciousness the result of a higher-order cognition (a metacognition) co-occurrent with, and taking a previous instance of cognition as, its object? In perceiving an object, is the content of perception the exclusive focus of attention or is there an implicit awareness of the perceiving act itself? The analysis of this issue typically divides between those that take conscious cognition to be a 'one-state' and those that regard it as a 'two-state' process.

One-state proponents argue that a mental state can be deemed conscious if and only if it possesses a specific character: it is reflexive or self-reflexive. This view finds its clearest modern articulation in Franz Brentano: 'Every consciousness upon whatever object it is primarily directed, is constantly directed upon itself' (Brentano, 1982, p. 25). This thesis of the unity of consciousness as reflexive awareness, which we encounter in various forms in Descartes, Kant and, following Brentano, in Husserl, Sartre, and many contemporary philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition, has its roots not only in Greek philosophy (specifically in Aristotle), but also in classical Indian philosophy. As Dharmakīrti, one of the strongest defenders of this thesis, declares in his *Drop of Reasoning* (*Nyāya-bindu*): 'every mental state is reflexively aware of itself' (Malvania, 1971, p. 64). In *Perceiving Reality* I offer a detailed reworking of this Buddhist defence of the reflexivity thesis, presenting its arguments as live options for ongoing dialogue and debate.

Critics of the reflexivity thesis of consciousness in both India and the west have traditionally pointed to such issues as the conceptual problem of other minds, and more recently to the findings of cognitive science about the opacity of most of our conscious mental states. Proposing an alternative, two-state (or higher-order thought, or HOT) conception of consciousness, they argue that a mental state is conscious in virtue of a distinct second-order state that is directed toward

it. This later group includes, among others, David Armstrong (1968; 1981/1997), David Rosenthal (1986; 2004), William Lycan (1996), and Rocco Gennaro (1996; 2006).

Like the one-state model, the higher-order thought view too has antecedents in the Indian philosophical tradition. Indeed, Nyāya philosophers and notable Buddhist thinkers like Candrakīrti and Śāntideva (fl. eighth century) defend versions of the higher-order view. For Candrakīrti in particular, who critically engages Dignāga's thought, consciousness cannot be thought of as reflexive, even on a conventional level, for that would imply that consciousness is self-validating (de la Vallée Poussin, 1970, VI, pp. 74–6). What Candrakīrti takes issue with is the view (typically associated with the 'Practice of Yoga' or Yogācāra School) that the object of cognition is not extrinsic to cognition but is an aspect of cognition itself. As I write (p. 239): 'Candrakīrti's critique of reflexive awareness, then, targets this notion that there is a class of cognitive events that are essentially self-characterizing: they reveal their own content without recourse to an additional instance of cognitive awareness, an object, or the positing of a subject of experience. More to the point, Candrakīrti rejects the notion that reflexive awareness has this unique property of giving access to the pure datum of experience.'

The contemporary version of this view is that for a given mental state to be conscious a subject must have an appropriate higher-order belief, thought, or judgment that he or she is in that mental state. Take, for instance, Rosenthal's influential defence of the higher-order view: 'Conscious states are simply mental states we are conscious of being in. And, in general, our being conscious of something is just a matter of our having a thought of some sort about it' (Rosenthal, 1986, p. 465). According to Rosenthal, for consciousness to be intelligible and analysable, one must assume it to be an external, relational property of mental states, and of having something like an articulable structure.

Here's what I see as the main difficulty with this theory. Rosenthal argues that it is possible, in principle, that I be persuaded of my being angry through someone else's testimony. Thus, I may realize that I am angry in the absence of any conscious feeling of anger, that is, without feeling angry much like a depressive might learn about her condition from a therapist without having any awareness of it. This example underscores the inferential character of one's access to subjective experience. On the higher-order theory, an individual must have a suitably unmediated higher-order thought about being in that state. But this higher-order state will not itself be conscious unless subject to

another higher-order thought about it (thus leading to infinite regress). That means, a fairly large number of these higher-order thoughts are in fact unconscious. How exactly series of unconscious cognitive events generate conscious apprehension is not at all clear. As Dharmakīrti, a critic of the regress argument, famously puts it his *Ascertainment of the Sources of Reliable Cognition* (*Pramāṇaviniścaya*):

Awaiting the end of a series of successive cognitions, a person does not comprehend any object, because a cognition cannot be established as cognition when that cognition which is first-personally known (i.e. self-awareness) has not been first established. And since there is no end to the arising of cognitions, the whole world would be blind and deaf. (Steinkellner, 1973, p. 41)

How, might we ask, can an unconscious mental state operate to confer consciousness on another unconscious mental state? In other words, if the HOT theory claims that the thoughts required for consciousness can themselves be unconscious, we are owed an explanation of how the unconscious mental states can be a source for consciousness.

Given these problematic issues, defenders of the higher-order view should not be allowed to gloss over the question of the phenomenal character of consciousness by assuming that consciousness owes its phenomenal character, indeed its very subjectivity, to an external relation of some sort. Instead, the relational scenario ought to be unpacked in considerable detail so as to explain how it is possible for there to be such a thing as pain that is unconscious or unknown until it becomes the object of a suitably co-occurrent cognition. Indeed, on the view that ‘pain’ is a phenomenal concept that can only be acquired experientially, talk of ‘unconscious pain’ would be akin to committing a category mistake. Someone who has suffered no injury, discomfort, or distress cannot in principle grasp the concept of pain. Furthermore, assuming that one can learn the concept by definition does not entail that one grasps the property expressed by the concept (Nida-Rümelin, 2007, p. 312). One need only point to conditions typically associated with various kinds of psychopathy and sociopathy to provide critical evidence for the relevance of phenomenal experience to phenomenal knowledge.

These considerations should give pause and raise concerns that the higher-order theories, in view of their commitment to grounding consciousness in non-conscious mental (and even physical) states, are both more problematic and less equipped to handle analyses of phenomenal consciousness. Specifically, these considerations invite us



to go beyond traditional positions in metaphysics concerning the relation between mind and world, and corresponding debates in epistemology concerning externalist accounts of mental content. For these reasons, in *Perceiving Reality* I offer an alternative account of experience that requires a completely new vocabulary for its expression, one capable of capturing the specific ways of our *being in the world*.

### Perception and Causation

The Buddhist epistemologist's broadly empirical approach to knowledge means that reasons are meant to provide an account of how things are before we set out to theorize about them. For the Buddhist, this theorizing accords with the phenomenological stance that perception represents a form of implicit knowing that cannot be improved upon by inferential reasoning. There is no cognitive penetrability of perception for the Buddhist, only discoverable salient features of perceptual phenomenology. In so grounding our enquiries we can think along with (rather than simply *about*) these Buddhist philosophers, guided by a principle that most phenomenologists and many philosophers of mind today share: our considerations about what perception can and does disclose trump ontological assumptions about what there *is*. The leading question is not whether the dress *is* blue and black or white and gold. Rather, the question is just what it is about the structure of awareness that causes things to appear as such: that is, as occasioning different types of experience.

This picture of the structure of awareness and its underlying causal factors has deep roots in the Buddhist canonical literature. The Buddhist, like Hume, is a bundle theorist. But what is it that holds together the aggregates (of body, sensation, apperception, volition, and consciousness), and generates the sense of personal identity? Answer: the proliferating tendencies (*prapañca*) of a reflecting and deliberating (*vitarka-vicāra*) mind. On this standard picture, perception and causation are locked in a dynamic, recursive, and co-emergent process:

Dependent on the eye and forms, visual-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates (*papañceti*). With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perception and notions resulting from mental proliferation beset a man

with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye. (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2001, p. 203)

In mapping out the co-arising of perception, object perceived, and perceptual awareness, the Buddhist puts forth a different conception of naturalism: specifically, one that regards empirical awareness as grounding our sense of being and what there is. This is a naturalism that takes cognition to be a constitutive feature of the world, not merely a by-product of it. Although a discerning type of consciousness (e.g. visual, tactile, etc.) accompanies each of the sensory modalities, ultimately the relation between perception and its content, while determined by features that are inherent to perception itself, is driven by habitual practices. This notion that the ordinary mind is characterized by habitual modes of thinking becomes crucial in the Abhidharma analyses of consciousness and cognition. As I write, (p. 63): in the *Discourses*, this tendency toward the proliferation of mental imagery is more closely associated with sensation and is connected with consciousness only in so far as perception is considered to be proliferating and constructive in its character, that is, in so far as perception is taken to primarily refer to perceptual judgments. Because the six spheres of contact furnish the mind, its dynamics are sustained by the constant flow of mental and sensory impressions. Ordinarily, one is constantly assailed by proliferating thoughts and desires, which compromise the capacity for having veridical perceptual experiences. The psychological impact of this proliferating process on perception is significant: due to ongoing mental activity (pondering, judging, recollecting, etc.), perceptual objects are apprehended only as grasped by our conceptual and categorizing practices. In short, ordinary, untutored perception is laden with judgment.

Thus, although at the basic, functional level the perceptual systems present the world in its immediacy, what an individual apprehends also depends upon his or her discerning and attentional capacities. There are no fixed markers, no system of checks and balances to ensure the reliability of perception even under optimal circumstances. And since the domain of sensory phenomena is in constant flux, there are no independent entities either, only textures or clusters of sensory impressions that ebb and flow depending at once upon the level of attentiveness and the intensity and vividness of the manifest object.

At first blush, it may seem as though the notion of a mind-dependent world — or simply a world as experienced — is suggestive of idealism. But neither the Buddha nor the Abhidharma philosophers

deny the reality of the elements of existence and/or experience (*dharmas*) and their causal efficacy. Rather, what is put forward here is the view that we cannot properly discern the phenomenal character and content of experience in a way that makes no reference to the aggregates of consciousness. Likewise, we cannot properly understand the aggregates of form or body if we don't realize that, as an instrument (*karana*) of sensory activity, the body is both the medium of contact with the world and the world with which it comes in contact.

Such a view, I argue, finds an interesting parallel in Husserl's account of the paradoxical nature of the body as revealed through phenomenological reduction.

For Husserl, phenomenological reduction (*époche*) — essentially a method of bracketing ontological assumptions about the natural world in order to examine the intentional structures of consciousness — reveals the twofold appearance of the body, first as a biological entity (*Körper*) connected to the continuum of life, and second as a medium for the expression of life (*Leib*). The body is thus the locus of lived experience and, as such, has the capacity for both exploration and receptivity. It is this intuition about the dual nature of sensation, in its transitive and intransitive aspects, which led Husserl to the concept of the life-world (*die Lebenswelt*): a world of lived experience whose boundaries are not fixed but constantly shifting in relation to the desires, actions, and attitudes of an agent (Husserl, 1970, Part III, A). As Merleau-Ponty, who appropriates Husserl's notion of the life-world as the lived-world (*le monde vécu*), clearly suggests, 'I cannot understand the function of living body except by enacting it myself', for 'my body appears to me as an attitude with a view to a certain actual or possible task' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. 87, 114). For Merleau-Ponty, the world or, better still, the environment is not just a structured domain of causally nested objects and relations, but a meaningful realm of experience. This world *qua* world, as Taylor Carman (echoing Merleau-Ponty) has recently argued, 'affords, invites, and facilitates, just as it obtrudes, resists, thwarts, eludes, and coerces' (Carman, 2005, p. 86).

The model of phenomenal consciousness put forward in *Perceiving Reality* is thus that of a non-reductive, one-state theory of consciousness: a theory which proposes that consciousness is essentially a matter of being or having an awareness of a world that does not presuppose a prior (representational) awareness of its own mental states.

### **Phenomenology, Buddhist Epistemology, and the Project of Naturalization**

A central argument of *Perceiving Reality* is that epistemological enquiries in India, unlike those in the west that follow Descartes' and Kant's *a priori* framework of justification, show a strong commitment to naturalist accounts of belief formation. The return to naturalism in contemporary epistemology, hence to understanding cognition in embodied and causal terms, is good news for Buddhist epistemology. Indeed, a focus on causal accounts of cognition is shared by all Indian epistemological theories, Buddhist or otherwise. But it is Dharmakīrti in particular who focuses on the ways in which the underlying processes of cognition become instrumental in determining which epistemic practices are conducive to effective action. If, indeed, Buddhist epistemological enquiries are driven by pragmatic rather than normative concerns (that is, by concerns about how we come to believe something rather than why might we be justified in believing it) then we have a better way of explaining our epistemic dispositions (one that reflects our embodied cognition rather than a disembodied *cogito*).

Perhaps the methodological framework best suited to translate and incorporate the Buddhist contribution to philosophy of mind is one that closely aligns with embodied approaches to cognition such as have been developed in the past three decades by Hubert Dreyfus (1979), Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991), Edwin Hutchins (1995), Andy Clark (1997), Susan Hurley (1998), Alva Noë (2004), Shaun Gallagher (2006), and Evan Thompson (2007). On this model, cognitive awareness is to be thought not as an internal state of mind or brain locked into linear causal chains of sensory input and behavioural output. Rather, it is to be understood as a structure of comportment, an intentional orientation and attunement to a world of actions, objects, and meaning.

I call this approach *phenomenological naturalism*. I am well aware that, on some accounts, stringing together 'phenomenology' and 'naturalism' can seem confusing, paradoxical, or even oxymoronic. Phenomenology, as Dan Zahavi (2004; 2013) reminds us, is at its core an apodictic and transcendental enterprise. On the other hand, scientific naturalism rests on the assumption that nature is all there is. For the naturalist, consciousness, if it is to belong in our ultimate ontology, must be part of the natural world. But the natural world, claims the phenomenologist, is only as described, and as made

available by and for a conscious mind. Phenomenological naturalism is one way to spell out the relation between phenomenology and the project of naturalization that neither eliminates the givenness of experience, nor collapses all of nature into what is experientially available. I will have more to say about this issue in my response to the commentators.

Furthermore, I take the view that perception plays a far greater role in any theory of consciousness, intentionality, and cognition than hitherto acknowledged. Specifically, I defend the view that perception is in effect normative: how an object appears depends in large measure on there being an optimal context for its apprehension. When Buddhist philosophers insist on taking ‘clarity’ (*spaṣṭa*) as a criterion for differentiating perceptual apprehension from other, more indirect modes of apprehension, they have in mind its proprietary phenomenology. An effective account of perception’s epistemic role, therefore, cannot ignore its complex phenomenology, the concrete ways in which each perceptual occasion also entails an engagement and entanglement with situations, attitudes, and things. If perception is a type of embodied action, a view that is most often associated with Merleau-Ponty, then questions about what it is like to see, hear, or feel cannot be pursued in isolation from questions about nature and character of action and agency, and ultimately about the structure of awareness itself.

The language Buddhist epistemologists use to discuss the phenomenology of perception suggests a similar account: take the example of hearing a string of successive sounds rhythmically rendered (Dhin Dhin Dha Dha Tin Na, the six beat *dadratala* of classical Indian music) or the twirling of a firebrand by a performer at a country fair. It might seem as though perception represents the datum of experience as a particular event with shared, discoverable features: simultaneity for the sounds and sameness for the circle of fire. But, argue Śāntaraṅkṣita and Kamalaśīla, two of the key figures in this tradition of thought (whose arguments are examined at length in Chapter 6), simultaneity is not a characteristic of the perceptual occasion, but a conceptual construct. It is obvious that the sounds are discerned as different auditory events and, as such, have different phonetic markers, and that circularity is a construct of quick spinning. Assuming otherwise leads to undesirable outcomes, such as the notion that all perceptual phenomena are type identical.

### Conclusion

*Perceiving Reality* seeks to make headway on the problem of epistemic authority in the context of the phenomenology of perception. Against the charge that Buddhist epistemology is committed to some version of the ‘Myth of the Given’, that is, to the view that all knowledge ultimately rests on a self-justifying foundation of non-inferential, belief-based knowledge, I argue that the epistemic justification of perception is not intrinsically ascertained (*svataḥ prāmānya*). The mere occurrence of a perceptual event does not suffice to ascertain its epistemic status. Only the pragmatic attainment of the objects they present confirms their veridicality, attainment that must consider the causal totality and the phenomenal character of the perceptual occasion. On this account, perceptions are intrinsically ascertained only with regard to their mode of self-presentation as experiences of a certain kind, even though on its own the reflexivity of awareness does not establish the epistemic status of perception with regard to its content. In other words, that an instance of cognitive awareness is *of seeing* as opposed to, say, *of imagining* is ascertained independently of the ontological status of its contents. That an instance of cognitive awareness is of resistance or of passage is ascertained on the basis of considerations about the causal efficacy of these obstructing or facilitating factors. Causal efficacy on this model is the true mark of the real.

Perception is not a passive relay of sensory input, not even the apprehension of an internal representation of external reality. It is not something that happens to us; rather it is something we do. Objects are apprehended depending on the perceiver’s orientation and situatedness: before statements such as ‘the hill has smoke which is invariably accompanied by fire’ (a common premise in evidence-based modes of reasoning) can serve as a reason (*hetu*) for ascertaining the invariable concomitance with the predicate as stated in the exemplification, the subject must be located within reach of the relevant domain: ‘I see the fire on the hill *from afar*.’

The book pursues three interrelated themes. *First*, it argues that the complex analyses of mental states in the early Abhidharma and the discourses of the Buddha inform a *sui generis* phenomenalism that rejects external realism: what we perceive, on this account, is constituted at once by the activity of our sensory and cognitive systems, underlying causal factors, and an attentive capacity that gives sentience its distinctive intentional character. *Second*, it recognizes in the

notion of *ākāra* ('phenomenal aspect') a key conceptual framework for mapping out the dual-aspect nature of mental states that informs the Buddhist epistemological project: each episode of awareness, on this account, has two aspects, the 'objective' or 'intentional', which presents the object or content toward which awareness is directed, and the 'subjective', which captures the qualitative character of that object-directed awareness as first-personally given. *Third*, it claims that these two aspects are best understood as capturing the phenomenal content and character of experience. As such they are continuous with Husserl's understanding of the nature of noematic content: an object of intentional awareness is constituted by its manner of conscious presentation. The systematic claim is that intentionality cannot be understood apart from phenomenality: the Buddhist notion that awareness is reflexive or implicitly self-aware (*svasaṃvedana*) is thus meant to capture both the phenomenal content and character of conscious mental states.

In this *Précis*, I have focused on the book's main themes with the intention of orientating the readers to the commentaries and my replies, rather than providing a detailed summary of its contents and arguments. It is my hope that readers find this presentation sufficiently compelling to be motivated to delve deeper into the critical discussion that follows.

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