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SHIFTING BOUNDARIES: PRAMĀṆA AND  
ONTOLOGY IN DHARMAKĪRTI'S EPISTEMOLOGY★

INTRODUCTION

The systematic study and exposition of logic and epistemology by the Buddhist scholars started with Dignāga (480–540) and reached its climax in Dharmakīrti (600–660).<sup>1</sup> Although Dignāga is regarded as the founder of the Buddhist logico-epistemological tradition, Dharmakīrti surpassed him in both the number of written works and the degree of attraction of scholarly interest, so that the former even came to be studied by his followers through the grid of the latter's interpretations. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to claim that Dharmakīrti is the most prominent figure and that his *Pramāṇavārttika* (*Tshad ma rnam 'grel*) is the most important work in the Buddhist logico-epistemological system.

In his *Pramāṇavārttika* and other works, Dharmakīrti expounds a binary concept of *pramāṇa* based on a phenomenological dichotomy. He also adopts an anti-realist position and articulates several deductive reasonings to attack the realism of the Nyāya (*rigs pa can*) and Sāṃkhya (*grangs can*) schools. In the following pages, I shall present in brief Dharmakīrti's general theory of *pramāṇa* and discuss the ontological commitments made by him. I shall also state the reasoning he uses against Brahminical realism and study the complications it creates in his own ontological assertions, which he uses to justify his typology of correct cognition – the core of his epistemological framework.

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★ This paper was written in 1998 as part of my examination for the degree of Master of Studies at the University of Oxford. I thank Prof. Steinkellner, Prof. Gombich, Prof. Kvaerne and Prof. Isaacson for their corrections and comments and the ESA8047, CNRS for the research post during which I revised it for publication.

<sup>1</sup> The dates given here are from RR, pp. xvi–vii.

## THE NATURE OF PRAMĀṆA

The western term ‘epistemology’ that I use here is being used as an equivalent term for the Indian word *pramāṇa* (Tib. *tshad ma*), although I am fully aware of their variant usage and implications. When used as a technical term in Indo-Tibetan philosophical vocabulary, *pramāṇa* usually has two different connotations. In its wider sense, *pramāṇa* refers to the whole domain of logico-epistemology – one of the five traditional sciences – because logico-epistemology is the standard and proper way of refuting falsity and verifying truth. It validates correct information. In its narrower sense and in a strict epistemological context, it is the means of correct cognition or correct cognition itself.

While most of the Brahminical thinkers accept the first usage, the Buddhist and the Prabhākara Mīmāṃsaka epistemologists accept the second. For Dharmakīrti, true *pramāṇa* is a correct cognition and it is in this sense that I shall use ‘*pramāṇa*’ hereafter. He demonstrates this when he defines *pramāṇa* by saying “*Pramāṇa* is the cognition that is non-deceptive.”<sup>2</sup> He argues that *pramāṇa* as a standard method of validation must necessarily be a cognitive mind or consciousness. This, according to him, is because mind plays the chief role<sup>3</sup> in choosing what is to be accepted or rejected, or in other words in seeking what is good and avoiding what is bad.

He denies that means or instruments of correct cognition like scriptural quotations, reasoning and sensory faculties are genuine *pramāṇa*. To Dharmakīrti, as to other Buddhists,<sup>4</sup> mind is the chief thing among all phenomena. He argues that it is mind through which the reality of the objective world is presented to us and it is mind that determines our understanding of the world.<sup>5</sup> No means of knowledge other than mind can independently judge the nature of an object. The scope of his *pramāṇa* is strictly limited to conscious cognition and he also makes it clear that only non-deceptive cognition qualifies as a proper *pramāṇa*. What then counts as non-deceptive (*avisamvādi*,

<sup>2</sup> PV, *Pramāṇasiddhi*/3: *pramāṇam avisamvādi jñānam* / PVT, p. 214: *tshad ma bslu med can shes pa* / /.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5: *pravṛttes tatpradhānatvāt heyopādeyavastuni* / / PVT, p. 214: *blang dang dor bya'i dngos po yi* / / 'jug la de gtso yin phyir dang / /.

<sup>4</sup> *Dhammapada*, I/1: *mano pubbaṅgamā dhammā manoseṭṭhā manomayā* /.

<sup>5</sup> PV, *Pramāṇasiddhi*/6: *viśayākārabhedāc ca dhiyo 'dhigamabhedataḥ* / *bhāvād evāśya tadbhāve . . .* / / PVT, p. 214: *yul rnam can ni tha dad pas* / / *blo yi rtogs pa tha dad phyir* / / *de yod na 'di yod pyir ro* / /.

*mi slu ba*) in his theory? This, for Dharmakīrti, is determined by how the subjective cognition relates itself to its object. If a cognition apprehends its focal object in correct manner, the object being an entity capable of performing a function, then the cognition is considered to be non-deceptive.<sup>6</sup>

Mi pham (1846–1912) elaborates this point by articulating three aspects of non-deceptivity – the object, the subject and the mode of a non-deceptive cognition.<sup>7</sup> The object of *pramāṇa*, he says, should be a real thing and the subject should be a cognition based either on sound reasoning or on direct perception. The mode of non-deceptivity is fourfold: to cognise what exists (like a vase) to be existent, what does not exist (like a yellow snow mountain) to be non-existent, what is such (e.g. vase being impermanent) as such and what is not such (e.g. vase being permanent) as not such.

It is crucial here to understand what exactly Dharmakīrti is referring to when he uses the term ‘object’ (*prameya*, *gzhäl bya*) as there is a certain degree of ambiguity in his use of this word. Let us therefore analyse this in the light of interpretations made by his commentators. Later Indian and Tibetan followers of Dharmakīrti systematised his words and expounded four kinds of objects. I shall explain here only the two – the Appearing Object (*pratibhāviṣaya*, *snang yul*) and the Object of Engagement (*\*praveṣṭavyaviṣaya*, *’jug yul*) – which I consider crucial to our understanding of the non-deceptiveness of cognition.

The appearing object is what appears directly to the apprehending cognition without any obstruction that could block the direct view. It is of two kinds: the appearance of real objects to direct perception and the appearance of mental concepts, which I call universal images (*arthasāmānya*, *don spyi*) here, to conceptual thought (*vikalpa*, *rnam rtog*). An example of a real object appearing to direct perception is the white colour which appears to our eye-perception when we read a white book, and a good example of a universal image appearing to our thought is the picture of fire that our mind holds when we, by the mark of seeing smoke, realise a fire to be burning behind a hill. The

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3: ... arthakriyā sthitiḥ / avisamvādanam ... // PVT, p. 214: don byed nus par gnas pa ni // mi bslu ... //.

<sup>7</sup> Mi pham, *Tshad ma rnam ’grel gyi gzhung gsal por bshad pa legs bshad snang ba’i gter*, p. 137: de la’ang las su bya ba yul gang la mi slu na / ji ltar bcad pa’i don rang mtshan de la’o // byed pa po gang gis mi slu na tshad ma gnyis kyi blo des so // ji ltar mi slu na de yod par bcad na yod par mi slu ba dang / med par bcad na med par mi slu ba dang / de bzhin du yin pa’am min par bcad pa ltar don la de ltar gnas par gyur pa’i phyir ro //.

example in the second instance is not a real thing but a mere mental construct.

The object of engagement, on the other hand, is not merely what appears to cognition but the main object to which the cognition refers and which it seeks to realise. The object of engagement of the direct perception in the first example is the white colour and the object of engagement of the inferential cognition in the second example is the real fire, but not the universal image of fire. Hence, the appearing object is same as the object of engagement in the case of direct perception and the appearing object and the object of engagement of a conceptual cognition are different. The object of engagement, also known as the final object (*prameyaṅsthā*, *gzhal bya mthar thug*), must be a real entity capable of performing a function according to Dharmakīrti and generic images are not really existent but mere nominal and conceptual universals superimposed by our conceptual thought. The cognitions in the above-mentioned cases can be considered correct and non-deceptive as in both cases the cognitions relate to their objects of engagement in proper mode. The three aspects of non-deceptivity of *Mi pham* are present in both cases.

Conversely, a deceptive cognition is like the thought of a rabbit's horn, the famous example of a non-entity, in which case the thought has no real object of engagement, or a visual consciousness that sees a snow mountain yellow due to jaundice, in which case it has a distorted view of the object of engagement. Thus, a thought, irrespective of what appears to it directly, is non-deceptive if and only if it correctly perceives a real object that is capable of performing a function, like the white colour or the burning fire. Dharmakīrti is seeking to make his concept of correct cognition practical, so that he builds a relation between his *pramāṇa* and matters that have significance in real life. We shall see this pragmatist approach strongly presented in his ontology as well.

#### PRAMĀṆA AND ITS TYPOLOGY

Let us now study the types of Dharmakīrti's *pramāṇa*. The typology of *pramāṇa* became the pivot of all epistemological differences and discussions in Indian epistemology; the treatment given to it is almost excessive. The Cārvāka accept only one kind of *pramāṇa*: perception (*pratyakṣa*, *mngon sum*), while the Vaiśeṣika accept two: perception and inference (*anumāna*, *rjes dpag*). The Sāṃkhya accept three,

adding verbal testimony (*śabda, sgra byung*) and Nyāya has four by accepting analogy (*upamāna, dpe nyer 'jal*).<sup>8</sup> The Prābhākara accept five, the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsaka<sup>9</sup> and Vedāntins six<sup>10</sup> and some others nine *pramāṇa*.<sup>11</sup> The Jain canonical scriptures mention four forms of *pramāṇa* like the Nyāya system but Siddhasena accepts two correct cognitions of perception and the knowledge of hidden object (*parokṣa, lkog gyur*) which is further divided into recollection (*smṛti, dran pa*), recognition (*pratyabhijñāna, mngon shes*), argumentation (*tarka, rtog ge*), inference (*anumāna, rjes dpag*) and scriptures (*āgama, lung*).<sup>12</sup>

Dharmakīrti, following Dignāga, divides *pramāṇa* into two kinds: perception (*pratyakṣa, mngon sum*) and inferential cognition (*anumāna, rjes dpag*).<sup>13</sup> To support his typology, he argues that there are only two categories of objects that a cognition can apprehend.<sup>14</sup> They are (1) specifically characterised phenomena (*svalakṣaṇa, rang mtshan*), real things that are substantially existent and (2) generally characterised phenomena (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa, spyi mtshan*), nominal and conceptual things like universals that are mere constructs. All knowable things (*jñeya, shes bya*) are included within this dichotomy. Among them, all specifically characterised phenomena can function only as appearing objects (note, I am using this as a technical term) for non-conceptual perception, while generally characterised phenomena can only serve as appearing objects for inferential cognition which is conceptual.

In another argument, Dharmakīrti classifies all things into evident (*abhimukhī, mngon gyur*) and hidden objects (*parokṣa, lkog gyur*).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Vidyabhusana (1921: 9, 54–56, 90–95). See also RR, pp. 293–294.

<sup>9</sup> Jhā (1942: 90).

<sup>10</sup> Datta (1932: 19).

<sup>11</sup> RR, pp. 293–294 and Monier-Williams (1899: 685).

<sup>12</sup> Vidyabhusana (1921: 162, 174–175).

<sup>13</sup> Dignāga, *Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti*, p. 28: de la mngon gsum dang ni rjes su dpag / tshad ma gnyis kho na'o / gang gi phyir / mtshan nyid gnyis gzhal bya /rang dang spyi'i mtshan nyid dag las gzhan pa'i mtshan nyid gzhal bar bya ba gzhan ni med do // and see also *Nyāyabindu*, p. 461 and *Pramānaviniścaya*, p. 304: yang dag pa'i shes pa ni rnam pa gnyis te / mngon sum dang rjes su dpag pa'o // original sanskrit: dvividham samyagjñānam pratyakṣam anumānam ca /.

<sup>14</sup> PV, Pratyakṣa/1: mānam dvividham meadvaidhyāt ... / and 63: tasmāt prameyadvitvena pramānavitvam iṣyate / PVT, p. 236: gzhal bya gnyis phyir tshad ma gnyis // and p. 241: de phyir gzhal bya gnyis nyid kyis // tshad ma gnyis su bzhed pa dang //.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63: na pratyakṣaparokṣābhyām meyasānyasya sambhavam / PVT, p. 241: mngon sum lkog tu gyur pa las // gzhal bya gzhan ni yod ma yin //.

Those phenomena that appear directly to a cognition are classed as evident objects and those that cannot be perceived directly but cognised through the mediation of universal images and reasoning are regarded as hidden objects. An object is hidden or evident depending upon its circumstantial relationship with the cognition. The fire behind the hill is an evident object to the perception of the person standing near it but hidden to the cognition of the person who sees the smoke from afar. In this case Dharmakīrti is dichotomising the object of engagement, not the appearing object as mentioned above, in order to support his dichotomy of *pramāṇa*. The correct cognition to which its object of engagement is evident is perception and the correct cognition to which its object of engagement is hidden is inferential cognition. He mentions that there is no correct cognition whose object of engagement is neither evident nor hidden and therefore, there is no third correct cognition.<sup>16</sup>

To Dharmakīrti, it is as important to relate subjective phenomena to the objective world as to do vice versa. To support his limitation of *pramāṇa* to conscious cognition above, he argued that mind determines our understanding of the objective phenomena and that objective world is presented to us through the mind. Here he argues from the opposite perspective, saying that correct cognition can only be of two types, no more and no less, because objective phenomena exist in two different forms. It is through the support of such a phenomenological dichotomy that he delineates his binary theory of correct cognitions.

Thus, perception and inferential cognition are the only two *pramāṇa* and valid form of knowledge to Dharmakīrti. In both the *Pramāṇavārttika* and *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, he presents elaborate arguments to authenticate his classification of *pramāṇa* into two and to impose restrictions to any other form of *pramāṇa* that is not included in the dichotomy. It is no wonder that he did so because this dichotomy of *pramāṇa* forms the keystone of his and Dignāga's entire epistemological system. It is quite appropriate at this point to turn to study briefly Dharmakīrti's phenomenology and assess his ontological commitments and their relevance to his *pramāṇa* assertions.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 63–65: na pratyakṣaparokṣābhyāṃ meyasānyasya sambhavaḥ/ tasmāt prameyadvitvena pramāṇadvitvam iṣyate // tryekasamkhyānirāso vā prameyadvayadarśanāt / PVT, p. 241: mngon sum lkog tu gyur pa las // gzhal bya gzhan ni yod ma yin // de phyir gzhal bya gnyis nyid kyis // tshad ma gnyis su bzhed pa dang // gzhal bya gnyis ni mthong ba'i phyir // gsum gcig grangs ni bsal ba yin //.

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL DICHOTOMY

Dignāga and Dharmakīrti hold a rather unusual position in the Indian philosophical paradigm. They base their general philosophical and epistemological assertions and arguments on the tenets of the Sautrāntika (*mdo sde pa*) school of Buddhist thought with frequent allusions to the Cittamātra (*sems tsam*) philosophy. Dharmakīrti, who could shift his philosophical position even in one single text, adopts mainly a Sautrāntika position but professes Cittamātra doctrines, specially with regard to his ultimate view, thereby giving rise to a new Sautrāntika–Cittamātra school of thought that posterity came to know as the Buddhist epistemological tradition. This practice of making frequent transition between Sūtrānta and Cittamātra and the change of positions within Sūtrānta itself have complicated the ontological concepts of Dharmakīrti.

As mentioned above, the whole domain of existence in Dharmakīrti's phenomenology is divided into two mutually exclusive categories: the specifically characterised phenomena and the generally characterised phenomena. He justifies his categorisation by stating three reasons:<sup>17</sup> (1) that things are either capable of performing a function or incapable of performing a function, (2) that things are either non-generalised individuals or generalised universals and (3) that things are either not direct objects of words and names or they are direct objects of words and names. The specifically characterised phenomena are real things that are created (*kr̥ta, byas pa*), impermanent (*anitya, mi rtag pa*) and capable of performing a function (*arthakriyāsamartha, don byed nus pa*). They are called specifically characterised because they are discrete entities that have distinct and specific characteristics that exist ontologically in a definite point of space and time. They are capable of performing a function because they are causally efficient and are themselves produced by causes and conditions.

On the contrary, the generally characterised phenomena are not real things but universals (*sāmānya* or *jāti, spyi* or *rigs*) that are imputed by the conceptual mind. They are called generally characterised because they are conceptual generalities pervading many individuals in a given spatio-temporal sphere and do not have specific existence. They are unborn (*ajāta, ma skyes pa*) and uncreated

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1–2: ... artho 'narthādhimokṣataḥ / sadṛśāsadrśatvācca, viṣayāviṣayatvataḥ / śabdasya ... / PVT, p. 236: don byed nus dang mi nus phyir // 'dra dang mi 'dra nyid phyir dang // sgra yi yul dang yul min phyir //.

(*asaṃskṛta*, 'dus ma byas pa), permanent (*nitya*, rtag pa) and not capable of performing a function (*anarthakriyāsamārtha*, don byed mi nus pa), as they cannot produce any result. To Dharmakīrti, change can occur only to a created thing that depends on the causes and conditions. The generally characterised phenomena are uncreated and unaffected by causes and conditions and are therefore permanent.

The generality 'bookness', for example, is a gross universal concept that extends over several individuals such as the white book, red book, thick book, etc. belonging to a certain spatio-temporal dimension. However, there is no such 'bookness' ontologically except for specific individual books. In contrast, the specifically characterised phenomena are spatio-temporally defined and limited. A white book in my hand cannot be in some other place at the same time and nor can some other book be this white book in my hand. The same is true with reference to time. The same book that was existing yesterday cannot exist today and what exists today cannot exist tomorrow. To Dharmakīrti, as to many other Buddhists, all conditioned things exist only for an infinitesimal duration of time and therefore no conditioned thing lasts longer than a minute fraction of a second. He strongly defended the Buddhist theory of momentariness employing many autonomous and apagogic arguments.

The commonsensical notion of a book existing for many days, according to him, is a misunderstanding and erroneous. When we see a book lying on the table for many days, we actually see different, but similar, books every second. Hume's words describe this effectively: "...the objects", says Hume, "which are variable or interrupted, and yet are supposed to continue the same, are such only as consist of a succession of parts, connected together by resemblance, congruity or causation. For as such succession answers evidently to our notion of diversity, it can only be by mistake that we ascribe to it an identity."<sup>18</sup> Dharmakīrti also attacks the non-Buddhist and Vaibhāṣika Buddhist theory that things are temporarily unchanging and their change is wrought by agents other than the things themselves. He argues that all compounded things change naturally without the need of an external agent for change and are therefore continuously changing since the moment of their creation.

The specifically characterised phenomena, in his phenomenological system, are substantially existent entities (*dn̄gos po*), and are called

<sup>18</sup> Hume (1874: 536, Vol I).

ultimately existent things (*paramārthasat, don dam par yod pa*). On the other hand, he calls the universals which are generally characterised phenomena, conventionally existent things (*samvrtisat, kun rdzob tu yod pa*). His concept of the two truths, later attributed to the Sautrāntika school, was unique. For him, practicality is extremely important and the value and reality of a thing lay in its capacity to be useful in practical life.<sup>19</sup> He defined ultimate truth as that which can perform a function and conventional truth as that which cannot function. He says in the third chapter of his *Pramānavārttika*: “That which is capable of performing a function is here ultimately existent. Others are said to be conventionally existent and these two are the specifically and generally characterised [phenomena].”<sup>20</sup>

Things that perform functions are counted as real, as proper objects of correct cognition and are regarded as instrumental to the welfare of the world. He calls them “real objects, isolates, causes, results, specifically characterised, effective for accepting and rejecting and the object of engagement for all persons.”<sup>21</sup> Conventional things that cannot function are considered to be unworthy of any effort to accept or reject. He compares the things which cannot function to a eunuch, who is not worth examining in order to find a sexual partner. He states: “What benefit is there in examining those that cannot perform a function? What use is it for the passionate person to examine whether a eunuch is handsome or not.”<sup>22</sup> He makes, in these words, the pragmatic trend of his philosophy very explicit.

<sup>19</sup> PV, Svārthānumāna/211: vastv eva cintyate hy atra pratibaddhaḥ phalodayaḥ / PVT, p. 204: ngos po nyid ni dpyad bya ste // de la 'bras 'byung rag las phyr //.

<sup>20</sup> PV, Pratyakṣa/3: arthakriyāsamarthaṃ yat tad atra paramārthasat / anyat samvrtisat proktaṃte svasāmānyalakṣaṇe // PVT, p. 236: don dam don byed nus pa gang // de 'dir don dam yod pa yin // gzhan ni kun rdzob yod pa ste // de dag rang spyi mtshan nyid bshad // and Svārthānumāna/166: sa pāramārthiko bhāvo ya evārthakriyākṣamaḥ // PVT, p. 201: don byed nus pa gang yin pa // de nyid don dam yod pa yin // cf. note 31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Svārthānumāna/172–173 ...sa evārthas tasya vyāvṛttayo 'pare / tat kāryakāraṇaṃ cōktaṃ tat svalakṣaṇaṃ iṣyate // tattyāgāptiphalāḥ sarvāḥ purūṣāṇāṃ pravṛttayaḥ / PVT, p. 201: ...de nyid don // de ni gzhan las log pa yin // de ni rgyu dang 'bras bur bshad // de ni rang gi mtshan nyid 'dod // de ni blang 'dor 'bras can pas // skyes bu thams cad 'jug pa yin //.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 211: arthakriyā samarthasya vicāraiḥ kiṃ parīkṣayā / ṣaṇḍhasya rūpe vairūpye kāminyāḥ kiṃ parīkṣayā // PVT, p. 204: don byed nus pa ma yin la // don gnyer brtag pas ci zhig phan // ma ning gzugs bzang mi bzang zhes // 'dod ldan rnam kyis brtag ci phan //.

However, Dharmakīrti's pragmatism, founded on sophisticated arguments and thorough analyses, was not short of a transcendental philosophy that repudiated the ordinary realist understanding of the world. Throughout his works, Dharmakīrti refutes the realism of Brahminical schools and holds a conceptionalist and nominalist position as far his ontological views are concerned. In the present context, I am taking the meaning of realism, nominalism and conceptualism with respect to the existence of universals. Dravid took Dharmakīrti as a nominalist when he said, "However, it must be granted that the Buddhist is the most thorough going nominalist in the history of thought."<sup>23</sup> George Dreyfus regards Dharmakīrti as a conceptionalist.<sup>24</sup> Both are partly correct as Dharmakīrti professes both nominalism and conceptualism. He is a nominalist as he asserts some universals to be names (*śabdāsāmānya*, *sgra spyi*) and a conceptualist as he also asserts universals to be mental concepts (*arthasāmānya*, *don spyi*). Dharmakīrti devotes much of his *Pramāṇavārttika* and other works to attacking non-Buddhist realism, specially the Nyāya reification of universals (*sāmānya*, *spyi*) and wholes (*avayavin*, *yan lag can*) that are believed to pervade individuals (*viśeṣa*, *bye brag*) and parts (*avayava*, *yan lag*),<sup>25</sup> and the overtly reified Sāṃkhya concept of 'Primal Matter' (*prakṛti*, *gtso bo*) which is believed to be the holistic source and basis of all phenomena.<sup>26</sup>

He argues that if universals and wholes exist as substantial realities, as asserted by his opponents, they should be either identical to or separate from the reality of the individuals and parts.<sup>27</sup> If, for example, the universal cow has a separate reality from the black cow and the brown cow as Nyāya thinkers accept, it would entail that there is no relation between the universal cow and the individual black cow and the brown cow. They must also accept a universal cow which is separate from all individual cows as an undeniable consequence of their assertions. Beside, if such a cow exists, it should be

<sup>23</sup> Dravid (1974: 345).

<sup>24</sup> RR, p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Vidyabhusana (1921: 105).

<sup>26</sup> Lawl (1921: 40–45).

<sup>27</sup> PV, Svāsthānumāna/139–155: na bhāve sarvabhāvānām svasvabhāvavyavasthiteḥ / yad rūpam śābaleyasya bāhuleyasya nāsti tat / / ... kim apy etan mahādbhutam / PVT, p. 198–200: dngos po la min dngos po kun / / rang rang ngo bo la gnas phyr / / khra bo yi ni ngo bo gang / / de ni ser skya la yod min / / ..... ci ga 'di ni ngo mtshar che / /.

seen somewhere and owned by somebody. Otherwise, it follows that the universal cow is not a real cow and thus, it has to be something other than a cow. If that is so, what relation and relevance is there in having a universal entity which is not a cow pervading the real cows?

If the universal cow has a reality that is one with the individuals as the Sāṃkhya accepts, the universal cow should either be identical with (a) the brown cow or (b) other cows. It cannot be identical with both because that would mean that the brown cow and other cows are identical. In that case, when the brown cow is born, others will have to be born, when the brown cow dies other cows will have to die and vice versa, because they are identical. This is not acceptable because it contradicts the obvious fact that not all cows are born and die simultaneously. Hence, the universal cow cannot be identical with all the cows simultaneously. Accepting the first case (a), if they assert that the universal cow is identical only with the brown cow, it would follow that the universal cow does not pervade other cows. If the universal cow is identical with other cows, then it cannot be identical with the brown cow.

Likewise, Dharmakīrti deduces that all universals are unreal because they are mere thought constructs which are generalised by our mind on the basis of individuals of the same sorts. Dharmakīrti applies the same kind of reasoning to refute all kinds of reified concepts of wholes and objects of commonsense such as body, heap, crowd and continuity that are deemed to be real by the ordinary world. Dharmakīrti, in his *Pramāṇavārttika* and *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, argues against the Nyāya saying that if the body as a partless whole is present in all the parts as they claim, then when you move a hand, the whole body must move. At the same time the whole body must also be at rest because other parts are at rest. If some parts of the body move and some do not move, it follows that the body is not partless but divisible into moving and unmoving parts. He goes on to say, “Are all parts of the body covered when one is covered?” and “Do all parts change colour when one part gets painted?”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> PV, *Pramāṇasiddhi*/86–88: pāṇyādīkampe sarvasya kampaprāpter virodhinaḥ / ekasmin karmaṇo 'yogāt syāt prthak siddhir anyathā // ekasya cāvṛtau sarvasyāvṛtiḥ syād anāvṛtau / dr̥ṣyeta rakte caikasmin rāgo 'raktasya vā 'gatiḥ // nāsty ekasamudāyaḥ ... / PVT, p. 220: lag sogs g.yo na thams cad dag // g.yo bar 'gyur phyir 'gal ba can // las ni gcig la mi rung phyir // gzhan du tha dad grub par 'gyur // gcig bsgribs pa na thams cad dag // bsgribs par 'gyur ba'am ma bsgribs na // mthong 'gyur gcig tshon gyis sgyur na // sgyur ba'am ma bsgyur rtogs par 'gyur // de phyir tshogs pa gcig yod min //.

## THREATENED WITH HIS OWN REASONING

Dharmakīrti's reasonings are terse and sharp. Such entities as continuity, crowd, heap and body, in his theory, are considered as mere abstracts superimposed by the mind on an assembly of individual things. Things such as a forest, which represent a collection of separate parts, and transformation, which represents a collection of sequential events, are no more than mental constructs. Hence they are clearly universals, but are they permanent in his system? His view that all universals are unchanging and void of causation suggests that he cannot deny that forests, transformation, etc. are unchanging and permanent. Will he accept that they are permanent despite the empirical evidence that they are changing and impermanent? The contradiction that this poses is severe and we cannot be sure what he would say.

His ontological problems become more serious when this same analysis is applied further to other entities. If a library, like a forest, does not have reality because it is a mere collection of individual books, a book would not be real because it is a collection of individual pages. The pages, on their part, are again made up of paragraphs, the paragraphs of lines, lines of words and so on. The application of this kind of analysis thus leads to reduction of all macroscopic things *ad infinitum*. Finally, even the partless atoms of the Externalists (\**Bāhyārthavādin*, *Phyi don smra ba*),<sup>29</sup> are at the mercy of this analysis. The Externalists go as far as the atoms and stop their investigation there accepting the real existence of partless atoms. The Cīttamātra thinkers and the Mādhyamika continue with this reductive analysis even with atoms to establish the emptiness of the atoms and thereby all external phenomena.

For Dharmakīrti, even when he bases his epistemological argumentation at the Sautrāntika level, there seems to be virtually nothing left over to be substantial and specifically characterised phenomena except the partless atoms at this subtle stage of analysis. All divisible entities are proved to be unreal universals and wholes. This unfortunately creates certain complications with regard to the general assertions he makes on epistemological and ontological issues. We have seen before that he asserts all things that can perform a function to be real and specifically characterised entities. However, the reductive reasoning he adopts undeniably proves that all

<sup>29</sup> The Externalists (perhaps a Tibetan category) are the proponents of real existence of external matter. This term includes Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika.

material things, save partless atoms, are unreal compilations of atoms. Fearing this contradiction, some of his followers like Karma pa Chos grags rGya mtsho (1454–1506) accepted that only atoms are really capable of performing functions. They claimed that this is implied by the adverb 'ultimately' that is used to qualify function when Dharmakīrti said, "Whatever is capable of performing a function 'ultimately' is ultimately existent."<sup>30</sup> This does not, however, seem to be Dharmakīrti's intention as, the Sanskrit original does not mention 'ultimately' twice, and even in Tibetan translation, he simply says, in another verse, "Whatever is capable of performing a function is ultimately existent."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Dharmakīrti explicitly mentions that real and specifically characterised phenomena are objects that can be accepted and rejected and are matters relevant to the practical life of beings. What direct relevance do atoms have for the welfare of beings in either worldly or soteriological matters?

Of all his assertions, his validation of the *pramāṇa* dichotomisation through the phenomenological dichotomy seems to be the most vulnerable. It is one of his main assertions that there are two correct cognitions because there are two different types of objects. Perception is said to perceive specifically characterised objects, whereas inferential cognition apprehends universals. If only atoms were specifically characterised phenomena and all divisible things unreal and universal, it would mean that what perceptions apprehend are not specially characterised phenomena. It would also bring an unacceptable consequence that specifically characterised phenomena are not perceived by perception or otherwise an absurd conclusion that perception perceives only atoms. Dignāga clearly states in his *Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti* (*dMigs pa brtag pa'i 'grel pa*) that atoms are not visible to ordinary perceptions.<sup>32</sup> If atoms are not perceived by direct perception, there would not be any specifically characterised entity that is perceivable. The whole system seems to collapse with internal contradictions.

<sup>30</sup> PV, Pratyakṣa/3: arthakriyāsamartham yat tad atra paramārthasat / The PVT, p. 236 reads: don dam don byed nus pa gang // de 'dir don dam yod pa yin // The term *don dam* / *paramārtha* in the first *pāda* does not appear in the Sanskrit edition.

<sup>31</sup> PV, Svārthānumāna/166: sa pāramārthiko bhāvo ya evārthakriyākṣamaḥ // PVT, p. 201: don byed nus pa gang yin pa // de nyid don dam yod pa yin //.

<sup>32</sup> Dignāga, *Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti*, commentary on verse 2: anuḥ kalāpaś ceti bāhyo 'rthaḥ, nālabanam ekāṅgavaikalyāt / yan lag gcig ma tshang ba'i phyir phyi rol gyi rdul phra mo dang tshogs pa zhes bya ba'i don ni dmigs pa ma yin no //.

However, Dharmakīrti gives his own explanation to defend his point. He states that perception, especially sense-perceptions such as visual perception, apprehends neither gross universals such as forests and libraries nor tiny atoms, but sense-field substances that he calls ‘aggregates’.<sup>33</sup> According to him, when we see an apple, we see the colour-substance and shape-substance of the apple, when we touch it, we feel the tactile-substance and when we taste it, we feel taste-substance of it. However, in ordinary convention we say, “I saw an apple” because we have seen its colour and shape. This is also stated by Vasubandhu (400–480) in his *Abhidharmakośa*.<sup>34</sup> Hence, to Dharmakīrti, an apple is an unreal constitution of several sense-field substances like colour, shape, taste, smell, etc. which are real constituents. This indicates that Dharmakīrti denies objects of commonsense such as houses, trees, gardens, jars, etc. to be real. Are they generally characterised phenomena and therefore permanent? This is far from acceptable to any Buddhist. Contradiction appears to be inevitable as long as all generally characterised things are asserted to be permanent. Dharmakīrti surely must have been aware of his own assertions and the method and consequences of his reasoning.

As we have seen above, the most serious threat to his ontological position comes when the same reductive analysis he uses against Nyāya and Sāṃkhya is applied to real and ultimate things in his own system. Even atoms cannot withstand the examination and theoretically fall apart. At such a point, Dharmakīrti escapes to the realm of Yogācāra idealism and denies the true existence of material entities. He then expounds that every phenomenon which cognition perceives is a purely mental event, a projection of the subjective mind. It arises from the propensities (*vāsanā*, *bag chags*) left on the mind in the past. Thus it is mind having a reflexive experience of its own nature without the duality of a separate subject and object.

Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251), the foremost exponent of Dharmakīrti’s thought in Tibet, took Dharmakīrti’s ultimate position to be False Aspectarian Yogācāra (*Alīkākāravāda Cittamātra*, *Sems tsam rnam rdzun pa*) whereas the dGe lugs pa following Dharmottara’s (750–810) viewpoint regard him as Non-pluralist (*sNa*

<sup>33</sup> PV, Pratyakṣa/104: arhāntarābhisambandhāj jāyante ye ’ṇavo ’pare / uktās te sañcitās te hi nimittam jñānajanmanah // PVT, p. 251: don gzhan dang ni mngon ’brel phyir // rdul phran gzhan gang skye ’gyur ba // de dag bsags bshad de dag ni // shes pa skye ba’i rgyu mtshan yin // .

<sup>34</sup> *Abhidharmakośakārikā* I/13: prthivi varṇasamsthānam ucyate lokasamjñayā / ’jig rten gyi ni tha snyad du // kha dog dbyibs la sa zhes brjod // .

*tshogs gnyis med pa*) among the True Aspectarian Yogācāra (*Satyākāravāda Cittamātra, Sems tsam rnam bden pa*). Mi pham, agreeing with Śāntarakṣita (725–783), considers the ultimate philosophy of Dharmakīrti, as presented in his seven *pramāṇa* works, to be that of True Aspectarian Yogācāra who propounds that the number of external aspects and consciousness are equal (*gZung 'dzin grangs mnyam pa*).<sup>35</sup> Some of his followers including Prajñākaragupta (740–800) and Karma pa Chos grags rGya mtsho even regard Dharmakīrti as Mādhyamika and interpret his works accordingly.

It is clear that Dharmakīrti shifts his ontological position according to circumstances. When he argues to establish basic things like rebirth and the validity of the Buddha, he bases his argument on ordinary convention, using analogies and objects of commonsense. His position changes as he begins to refute the theory of substantial universals posited by the non-Buddhist realists. At that point, he differentiates between what is ontologically real and what is not. Universals are only conventionally existent and permanent and the sense-fields are real and impermanent at this stage. I take this stage from his many ontological positions, as one wherein he delineates the dichotomy of his *pramāṇa* as well as phenomena. There perhaps is another level of his understanding at which he regards only the atoms and moments of mind to be real but that is not quite clear although some of his commentators claim so. When the reductive analysis goes so far as to dismantle even the foundation of atoms, he resorts to idealism adopting the Yogācāra system.

Hence, like the cave analogy of Socrates in Plato's *Republic* shows graduated levels of understanding indicated by the shadows, fire and sunlight,<sup>36</sup> Dharmakīrti holds graduated levels of philosophical viewpoints, the later ones being regarded as superior to the former ones. This practice of approaching the reality by getting deeper into investigation is termed *the ascending scale of analysis* by George Dreyfus.<sup>37</sup> From a Mahāyāna philosophical point of view, which is dominant in the societies where Dharmakīrti is mostly studied, Dharmakīrti is moving closer to the reality of things at each level of his ontology.

<sup>35</sup> For further information on False and True Aspectarian Yogācāra and their sub-divisions, see Guenther (1976: 104–107) and Sopa and Hopkins (1976: 107–112).

<sup>36</sup> Plato (1972: 278).

<sup>37</sup> RR, p. 49, 59.

## DID DHARMAKĪRTI BASE HIMSELF ON SŪTRĀNTA?

Although Dharmakīrti may well transcend the Externalist's atomism in his ultimate views, he is well known to his followers as a master of Buddhist epistemology based on Sautrāntika philosophy. We know clearly that he professes certain Sautrāntika concepts like representationalism (*sākāra, rnam bcas*) and apperception (*svasamvitti, rang rig*) while he and Dignāga also introduced new theories like eliminativism (*apoha, gzhan sel*). How concordant are Dharmakīrti's ontological commitments with the ontology generally attributed to the Sautrāntika?

One of the ontological assertions of Sautrāntika, which sets it apart from its rival Externalist school, Vaibhāṣika, is the denial of the substantiality of permanent entities (*nitya, rtag pa*) and conditioned factors unassociated with the mind (*cittaviprayuktasamskāra, sems dang mtshungs ldan min pa'i 'du byed*). Permanent entities are conceptual things like ether and universals, and unassociated conditioned factors are a category of impermanent things which includes such things as clusters of words, names, syllables, and characteristics such as arising, abiding, decaying and ceasing and abstract states like life, equality, gain, etc. These, according to the Vaibhāṣika, are substantial realities, but in the Sautrāntika philosophy are mere constructs.

The proponents of Sūtrānta claim that all substantial entities are either matter or mind. Dharmakīrti, unlike other Sautrāntikas, does not mention anything about unassociated conditioned factors (*viprayuktasamskāra, ldan min 'du byed*) and asserts that all impermanent entities are specifically characterised phenomena, thereby implying that they are substantial. This makes us question the compatibility of Dharmakīrti's general ontological assertions with the Sautrāntika position, though it is widely believed that he adopted Sautrāntika tenets for his general epistemological arguments. His exposition that all things that are capable of a function are specifically characterised entities implies that even unassociated conditioned factors, which Sautrāntika asserts to be mere abstracts, are specific and discrete entities in his system.

## WHAT WAS DHARMAKĪRTI UPTO?

The reductive reasoning of Dharmakīrti hits back at his own system in two different ways. Firstly, it smashes his two truth theory and

phenomenological dichotomy of specifically and generally characterised phenomena. It does not merely reduce commonsense objects to unreal concepts but dismantles even the sense-fields that he claims as substantial. The reasoning goes so far that it even splits atoms, making Dharmakīrti seek an escape in Yogācāra idealism. Secondly, the consequences of the reasoning invalidates Dharmakīrti's epistemological assertion of *pramāna* dichotomy by destroying his phenomenological basis for this dichotomy.

It makes us ask why, in spite of all these contradictions and irrespective of his ultimate profession of Yogācāra idealism, Dharmakīrti adopts the various ontological positions. I shall conclude by providing three reasons for it.

(1) Dharmakīrti is reacting according to the needs of his circumstances. He uses the lower positions – where he accepts external phenomena – as a provisional basis to formulate his epistemology which he, like Dignāga before him, developed to defend the Buddhist doctrine against growing criticism from non-Buddhist epistemology. His acceptance of external phenomena is a provisional ground on which he could discuss his epistemology embodying Buddhist principles with a larger audience of both Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

(2) Dharmakīrti, as we have seen, is a pragmatist. Theories are subordinate to practical issues. Following the skill-in-means of the Buddha, he uses his lower positions as a strategy to help people understand the higher reality, which according to him is idealism.

(3) The soteriological element in Dharmakīrti's epistemology is so strong that it undermines his epistemological and ontological positions. Unlike Dignāga, who did not approve of epistemology as a proper method to understand the truth the Buddha taught,<sup>38</sup> he frequently linked his epistemology to Buddhist soteriology. Thus, we see that Dharmakīrti gave higher priority to the soteriological goal than to expounding a coherent epistemological system. It is his skillful art of combining soteriology and epistemology that, I think, gives him and his *Pramāṇavārttika* the foremost place in the field of Buddhist epistemology.

<sup>38</sup> *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, p. 25, 170: gang zhig rtog ge'i lam nas chos nyid la khrid na // thub pa'i bstan las ches sring nyams par byas pa yin //.

## ABBREVIATIONS

DT	Derge Edition of Tibetan Tangyur
PV	<i>Pramānavārttikakārikā</i>
PVT	<i>Pramānavārttikakārikā</i> in Tibetan translation
RR	<i>Recognizing Reality</i>

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