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A "Restricted" Interpretation of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy

The continuing surge in work on Dharmak?rti represents one of the most fertile enterprises within the field of Buddhist Studies. The only South Asian philosopher to have been the subject of four international conferences, Dharmak?rti commands a veritable legacy of scholarship, whether directly, through the translation and study of his own works, or indirectly, through the study of his followers, commentators, and one-time opponents.[1] In the context of this burgeoning enterprise, characterized by a high degree of specialization, any attempt to bear on the totality of Dharmak?rti's thought is challenging at best and downright frustrating at worst. John Dunne's recent volume, *Foundations of Dharmak?rti's Philosophy*, meets this challenge in a novel and effective way.

Unlike most attempts to interpret Dharmak?rti, which deploy the lenses of his most influential commentators, Dunne proposes a "restricted" interpretation of his philosophy based on "the painstaking task of separating commentarial layers so as to learn the insights that characterize each commentator's work" (p. 11). The primary intent of this work is thus to provide an overall perspective on the historical development of Buddhist thought as reflected in the *pram??a* literature. While Dunne is committed to constraining his approach in "historical terms," he does not ignore its hermeneutical implications: the historical distance cannot be bridged without the interpreter's active participation in, and sharing of, some of the concerns and presuppositions that inform the Buddhist tradition, with the caveat that "reverence for an influential thinker" need not imply a willingness to "bow unconditionally at Dharmak?rti's feet" (p. 11).

Dunne starts with a reconstruction of the conceptual context of the *pram??a* discourse, with its emphasis on the analysis of the process of knowing. Here Dunne marks the difference between the early Naiy?yika philosophers V?tsy?yana and Uddyotakara, for whom the act of knowing involves a relation between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge, and Dign?ga and Dharmak?rti, who conflate the cognitive event with the means of knowledge. The rest of this introductory section examines perception and inference (the two criteria of knowledge deemed reliable by nearly all pram?-?a theorists), concluding with a detailed review of the dispute over the ontological status of "real" particulars. These themes are then explored at length in the remaining three chapters of the book, starting with Dharmak?-rti's method and ontology (chapter 2), continuing with his examination of the relation among the terms of a valid inference (chapter 3), and concluding with Dharmak?rti's extensive account of the purposive function (*arthakriy?*) of cognition (chapter 4). Dharmak?rti's principal work, the *Pram??av?rttika* (and its autocommentary), along with the two early commentaries of Devendrabuddhi and ??kyabuddhi (and several other primary sources), are cited at length throughout the book. Dunne provides expanded portions of all these citations in a final appendix of translations–a useful addition that makes this volume one of the most comprehensive anthologies of primary sources for Dharmak?rti's philosophy in any modern language.

Dunne's main interpretive stance has it that Dharmak?rti's philosophical method relies on multiple descriptions of reality that *appear* to be mutually contradictory. This method, characterized by Dharmak?rti scholars as involving an "ascending" or "sliding" scale of analysis, reflects Dharmak?rti's pragmatic approach to ontological questions–an approach according to which different descriptions of reality can be seen as hierarchically structured.[2] Scrutinizing Dharmak?rti's motives for the employment of such a method, Dunne contends that in some instances "a less accurate description is didactically or soteriologically preferable" (p. 53). Dharmak?rti's reliance on apparently contradictory ontological positions in his philosophical analysis is certainly not new. His rationale is provided by the pragmatic need, encountered in nearly all Mah?y?na thinkers, of distancing their views

from those of early Buddhists by incorporating the latter as provisional stages on the path to a higher understanding. Rather than rejecting divergent or early views wholesale, this strategy of hierarchical inclusivism exploits the familiar Buddhist trope of "skill in means" (*up?yakau?alya*)–the Buddha's skill in addressing any given audience depending on its specific needs.

On the basis of a summary of Dharmak?rti's employment of this sliding scale of analysis, Dunne identifies, in ascending order, the following four specific positions: (1), the belief of ordinary persons, seen as the most basic and "most inaccurate description of reality"; (2), the Abhidharma typology, with its doctrines of the aggregate and momentary nature of phenomena, which represents a higher and more accurate description of reality; (3), external realism, in the form of the theory of external things as unique, momentary particles–a view (generally associated with the Sautr?ntika school) that postulates the existence of mereologically irreducible extra-mental entities; and (4) idealism, the notion that all entities are mental. This highest level of analysis, associated with Yog?c?ra, is a view that relegates the subject-object duality to ignorance and essentially contends that "objects of awareness are internal" (p. 59).

While these four ontological positions encompass the whole range of Dharmak?rti's philosophical method, it is the defense of his peculiar notion of external realism that the sliding scale of analysis is apparently aimed at. Other than treating them as *svalak?a?as*, in the specific sense that term has for Buddhist *pram??a* theorists, Dharmak?rti's commentators generally disagree on the precise nature of external objects. Dharmak?rti's extended treatment of the *svalak?a?as*, understood as irreducible real individuals and not (as for Vasubandhu in his *Abhidharmako?a*) as real properties of *dharmas*, might suggest that Dharmak?rti is committed to external realism. Even so, Dharmak?rti's most frequently adopted position, that of external realism, is not held from an ultimate point of view.

Dunne's discussion of Dharmak?rti's use of external realism is further framed by an analysis of the objects of cognition (*prameya*), which concludes with a detailed exposition of the *apoha* doctrine in its specifically Dharmak?rtian formulation. On Dunne's interpretation, the operation of *apoha* gives us the "isolated," the "extracted" and the "excluded," that from which all others have been excluded, in other words, "an utterly unique entity" (p. 133). Thus, while Dharmak?rti's main opponents, the Naiy?yikas, would regard universals as real and essential to bridging the gap between the perception and cognition, Dharmak?rti himself sees them as pragmatically efficient (or, to use Dunne's felicitous terminology, as performing a "telic" function) in their heuristic role: aids that help reach the only true real–the particular itself.

In unpacking the epistemological implications of the *apoha* doctrine, Dunne develops a noteworthy discussion of a threefold definition of the particular by ??kyabuddhi, which is also an explanation of the function of the Sanskrit compound *any?poha*. First, the particular or the excluded (the *vy?v?tta*) is "that from which other is excluded." Second, the gesture by which the particular is excluded, i.e., the exclusion itself (*vy?v?tti*), is simply the "exclusion of the other." Third, the cognitive image or the internal representation is what provides the support for the exclusion of the other (p. 133). Dunne examines the implications of this threefold interpretive schema for each of the four problems that any *apoha*-theorist must address: the relation between the universal and the particular; the universal's extension or "distribution," which allows it to apply to all the members of a given class of particulars; the question of what mental content, if any, corresponds to the particular, especially when negatively construed (as the "absence" of the other); and the role of mental image in the construction of universals. Coming to terms with Dharmak?rti's unique account of the role of mental images in the construction of universals, Dunne takes recourse to Tillemans's proposal that we see Dharmak?rti as advancing a "theory of unconscious error," taken here to mean that, on Dharmak?rti's view, we effectively "mistake" the content of our conceptual cognitions, or our representations, for the actual particulars (p. 143).

The last two chapters of the book are devoted to a detailed analysis of Dharmak?rti's novel contributions, first, to obtaining reliable inferential knowledge, and second, to justifying the "instrumentality" (*pr?m??ya*) of the two sources of knowledge (perception and inference) accepted by the Buddhist *pram??a* theorists. In the first case, it is well known that Dharmak?rti's innovations are centered on his interpretation of the relation among the different terms of an inference. Responding to critics of Dign?ga's triple inferential method (*trair?pya*), Dharmak?rti seeks to ground the pervasion relation (*vy?pti*) that obtains between the reason (*hetu*) and what is to be proved thereby (*s?dhya*) on a stronger foundation than mere appeal to "observation and nonobservation." Dharmak?rti's theory of the basis for inference thus centers on the notion of *svabh?vapratibandha*–the notion that there must exist some sort of nomological rule to control the relation between evidence and conclusion. (Dunne interprets this to mean that the "conceptually constructed

sameness that accounts for a correct judgement's reference" is based on the "nomological natures of causally efficient things" [p. 332f.].) This is one of the most technical aspects of Dharmak?rti's theory of inference, marked by his peculiar use of the notion of essential nature (*svabh?va*). By forging a new, if at times idiosyncratic, technical vocabulary, including types such as "*svabh?va*-nature," "*svabh?va*-evidence" and "property-*svabh?va*," Dunne's schematic and comprehensive presentation does a good job of explaining the various aspects and implications of this theory for *pram??a* theorists.

Dunne's propensity toward "terminological habits" (p. 225) becomes all-pervasive in his discussion of the status of perception and inference as reliable sources of knowledge. Here we are offered both a critique of the usage of current philosophical concepts in translating Dharmak?rti's ideas, and alternatives to prevailing terminological standards. By his own admission, Dunne's rendition of *pr?m??ya* as "instrumentality" (based on its being a derivative form of *pram??a*, which Dunne sometimes renders as "instrument"), may not be well received in philosophical circles, where Dharmak?rti's ideas ought to have the most impact. For Dharmak?rti, *pr?m??ya* pertains not only to "that which is a means of knowledge," but also to its result (*pram??aphala*), and to knowledge itself (*pram?*). "Instrumentality" would thus cover only one of the senses in which *pr?m??ya* is used by Dharmak?rti, that of "means" or "sources," leaving the resulting knowledge ("the truth") and the question of justification out. Dunne rightly points out "Dharmak?rti's discussion of *pr?m??ya* is more closely allied with questions of justification" (p. 225), but the issue of how to account for cognitions that are true, yet do not and cannot count as instruments of knowledge, remains problematic on a translation of *pram??a* as "instrument of knowledge."

Dharmak?rti's discussion of the cognitive function of universals is linked both to his theory of word meaning and to his pragmatics of purposive action (*arthakriy?*). Whether we are dealing here with an externalist, reliabilist theory of justification or with an internalist, evidential theory of truth is open to discussion. Dunne rightly points out that using "truth" or "validity" for *pr?m??ya* (and thus talking, for instance, about "valid perception") can either obscure or limit our understanding of whether or not we are dealing here with problems of justification and/or with a formal theory of truth (p. 225f). In using "instrumentality" and epistemic "warrant" as equivalents for *pr?m??ya* and *pram??a*, respectively, Dunne shows greater sensitivity to current debates in epistemology than one usually encounters in the scholarly literature on Dharmak?rti, even though his analysis is largely confined to issues of textual analysis. It could well be that the philosophical categories of neither epistemology nor logic exhaustively map the types of activities subsumed under *pram??av?da*. Perhaps we are dealing here with attempts to devise a cohesive "cognitive theory" in the sense in which "cognitive" is currently used in cognitive psychology or in the sciences of cognition. Either way, mere text-critical studies of his philosophical works will not afford Dharmak?rti (or, for that matter, any other South Asian philosopher) the kind of transparency required to make his ideas intelligible to a receptive Western philosophical audience.

Throughout this book, Dunne displays a commendable mastery of primary and secondary sources, and, given the semantic fluidity of Sanskrit technical terms, an admirable stylistic consistency. Terminological issues aside, *Foundations of Dharmak?rti's Philosophy* stands as one of the most innovative and sophisticated attempts to engage with Dharmak?rti's project in a systematic way.

Notes

[1]. The first conference took place in Kyoto (1982), followed by Vienna (1989), Hiroshima (1997), and Vienna (2005). The proceedings of the second and third Dharmak?rti Conferences have appeared in print as E. Steinkellner , ed., *Studies in the Buddhist Epistemological Tradition: Proceedings of the Second International Dharmak?rti Conference* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1991); and S. Katsura, ed., *Dharmak?rti's Thought and Its Impact on Indian and Tibetan Philosophy: Proceedings of the Third International Dharmak?rti Conference*, (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, (1997).

[2]. See, e.g., Georges Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmak?rti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 83, 99, 104.

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