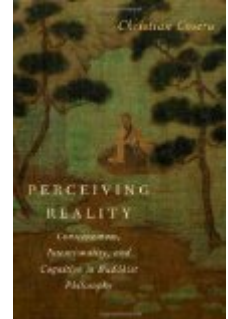


Christian Coseru. *Perceiving Reality: Consciousness, Intentionality, and Cognition in Buddhist Philosophy.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xvii + 356 pp. \$78.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-984338-1.



Reviewed by David Tomlinson

Published on H-Buddhism (October, 2014)

Commissioned by Daniel A. Arnold (University of Chicago)

When we seek to define perception, what is it we are talking about? Are we concerned with "medium-sized dry goods" and their causal interactions with our sense faculties, with the phenomenology of perception (with *what it is like* to perceive rather than what and how we perceive), or with something else altogether? In his ambitious *Perceiving Reality: Consciousness, Intentionality, and Cognition in Buddhist Philosophy*, Christian Coseru presents answers from the Indian Buddhist epistemological tradition. Focusing on the position developed in Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṃgraha* and his student Kamalaśīla's commentary thereon (both from the late eighth century), Coseru argues that "it is the experience of perception itself, rather than any theoretical assumptions about it, which must serve as the reference for our use of the term 'perception'" (p. 167), and that this presupposition of these Buddhists is congruent with some modern accounts of consciousness, both naturalistic and phenomenological. Coseru's work is ambitious not just in its scope—he seems as much at home with Nyāya,

contemporary cognitive neuroscience, and the work of Sanskrit grammarians as he does with the Buddhist epistemological texts that are his focus—but also in the aims of its central theses: Coseru is concerned with what Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, among others, had to say about perception, as well as with how presently ongoing conversation about Buddhist philosophy is conducted, and with the place of naturalism and phenomenology in that conversation.

We might break the book into three sections. Chapters 1 through 4 are concerned with methodological points and the provision of the relevant philosophical background to the *Tattvasaṃgraha*. In chapters 5 and 6, Coseru presents close readings of Śāntarakṣita's and Kamalaśīla's general introduction to the purpose of their encyclopedic work and of its "Examination of Perception" chapter. In chapters 7 through 9, Coseru uses the reading he has developed thus far to critically and constructively engage with the contemporary study of Buddhist philosophy.

The book begins with a veritable catalogue of all the attempts over the last century to come to terms with whatever it is we think we are doing when we read Buddhist texts philosophically. Coseru constructively engages with this work in order to develop and clarify his own methodology. As he writes, "the goal is to go beyond the task of historical reconstruction and endeavor to propose novel solutions to enduring and genuinely universal philosophical problems" (p. 6). Coseru suggests a method of "discourse analysis" wherein the interrogation of Buddhist philosophical texts takes place only after these texts have been translated into modern philosophical parlance (p. 39). This process of decontextualization can never remain neutral and makes no claim to achieve some definitive authorial intent. Laying his methodological cards on the table, Coseru welcomes this fact in an effort to engage constructively with contemporary philosophical debates (see section 2.3, "Interpretation and Discourse Analysis").

The chosen philosophical parlance here is what Coseru calls "phenomenological naturalism" (pp. 3, 283-284), or the position that the intrinsically perspectival and world-situated nature of perception is answerable to—though not reducible to—the findings of the sciences of cognition. Coseru does not argue explicitly that phenomenology should be answerable to cognitive science. Rather, he begins in medias res, assuming a good deal of knowledge of (and a fair amount of sympathy with) contemporary positions on the topic. To this reviewer at least, this is a shame: a concise consideration of why phenomenology should be answerable to naturalism in the first place—especially given traditional phenomenology's resistance to naturalistic explanations of consciousness—would have done much in situating Buddhist epistemology as a version of phenomenological naturalism.

So situating Buddhist epistemology is, in any case, Coseru's goal. On his account, epistemological inquiry in India is driven by pragmatic con-

cerns that can, at least for Buddhists like Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, be described in terms of a causal account of our cognitive architecture at work in the world. Not only, though, must Buddhist explanations thus be answerable to the causal account of perception elaborated in the Buddhist tradition's Abhidharma literature, but they must also stay true to the phenomenology of perception.

In chapters 3 and 4, Coseru grounds this Buddhist naturalist account of perception on consideration of (especially Vasubandhu's) Abhidharma and the works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Coseru first offers a reconstruction of Abhidharma that can serve as an empirical basis for Dignāga's insistence that perception is nonconceptual. Abhidharma, in other words, provides the naturalist account of cognition to which Dignāga's phenomenological considerations remain answerable. On the way to this conclusion, Coseru's wide-ranging work considers the phenomenological terms in which Dignāga and Dharmakīrti characterize perception (specifically, in terms of its non-erroneousness and vividness), their treatment of perceptual illusions, their philosophy of language, and their logic. One of the admirable strengths of Coseru's presentation is his attention to Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's interaction with the grammarian Bhartṛhāri and the Naiyāyika Uddyotakara, in addition to the Mīmāṃsaka Kumārila. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti are thus presented as integral to (and exemplary of) a larger Indian tradition of philosophy.

In chapter 6, Coseru begins his careful and sustained reading of the "Examination of Perception" chapter of the *Tattvasaṃgraha*. While tracking the complexities of his reading is beyond the scope of a short review—as he interprets the chapter, Coseru is again careful to keep in view all of the work's influences and its various interlocutors—some important work is done here to ground Coseru's later theses. We see this, for example, in his attention to Kamalaśīla's discussion

of the illusory apprehension of simultaneity. Kamalaśīla argues that supposed instances of experiencing various things at once—the case he considers is that of thinking about offering gifts to a dancer while watching her perform and listening to the music she is dancing to—are in fact just that: merely *supposed* experiences of simultaneity. Upon introspection we discover that perception is not merely an impingement upon us, but is instead "something we do" (p. 175): our attention moves from the dancer to the thought of a gift; it can be focused or allowed to wander; and it is in an intimate and necessary relationship to our body, our perspective, and so on. The important point for Coseru here is that "*phenomenal character* (that is, how things show up to discerning awareness) is not a theoretical construct, but the pre-theoretical givenness that any theory of cognition must explain" (p. 176).

He returns to this in his discussion of self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*), or what he calls, echoing Jean-Paul Sartre, the "pre-reflective form of self-awareness" (p. 235).[1] Here, Coseru comes to the heart of his position concerning intentionality, arguing that "for Dignāga, just as for Husserl, perception is ultimately constituted by intentional content: perceiving is an intentional (that is, object-directed) and self-revealing (*svapṛakāśa*) cognition" (p. 237). The phenomenal character of every perception reveals perception's unique mode of givenness: the objects of perception are given in the world to a particular embodied perspective. Coseru claims that self-awareness, in turn, is how the Buddhist epistemologists characterize the at once *situated* and *object-directed* phenomenal character of perception. It is the fact that mental events have both character and content that is captured by the notion of self-awareness. Dignāga's traditional consideration of cognition's two aspects, then, is interpreted to mean that, in every experience, one implicitly grasps one's own being situated in the world (this is Dignāga's *grāhakākāra*), as well as the intentional object (Dignāga's *grāhyākāra*, or apprehended aspect).

The *grāhakākāra*, which Coseru glosses as "a self-apprehensive intentional act" (p. 259), is thus the vantage point from which we experience objects and of which we are implicitly aware. A good deal of weight is given to this point: for Coseru's account of Dignāga and others as doing embodied phenomenology to work, he must find some concept in Dignāga's epistemology that fills in as our implicit awareness of our body, our perspective, and our horizon. It is unclear whether his interpretation of *svasaṃvedana* and the *grāhakākāra* fulfills this admittedly complex task.

One of Coseru's central theses is that Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and the inheritors of their tradition are in no way committed to foundationalism. Perhaps we could say this is the force of Coseru's title: if one is committed to perception's exclusively being in touch with *reality*, then it is wrong to try to justify ordinary empirical beliefs by what is given in perception—given, that is, the view (axiomatic for Buddhists) that our ordinary experience of selves and persisting objects is mistaken. Perception cannot be considered the foundation of everyday beliefs that are ultimately false. Indeed, as Coseru stresses: "*ordinary, untutored perception, as conceived by the realist, does not count as an epistemic warrant, and ... an effective epistemology can neither rely on the testimony of common sense nor on any inferential process thereof*" (pp. 219–220). Coseru thus presents Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's accounts of perception not as being foundational for an account of empirical knowledge, but rather, as yielding the only phenomenologically accurate account of our experience when we consider it in itself. On this reading, the influential account of perception elaborated by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti should be understood as a *phenomenological* description to which Buddhist explanations must be adequate. In this vein, Dharmakīrti's position that perception is utterly devoid of interpretive processes is likened by Coseru to the Husserlian *epoché*, a process of phenomenological bracketing whereby "the detached awareness by means of which one attends

to phenomena directly without any mediation reveals the secondary order character of conceptual elaborations" (p. 171). For Coseru, Dharmakīrti's wager is that, through the repeated exercise of this bracketing technique, secondary conceptual elaborations will gradually be whittled away.

One of the most challenging and interesting guiding threads of the book follows from this distrust of ordinary perception. Coseru seeks to remind us that "Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti before them, propose new standards of common sense" (p. 142). Our ordinary experience of persisting objects and selves is, for the Buddhist epistemologists under discussion in Coseru's work, fundamentally mistaken; getting a handle on just what this counterintuitive claim means for a systematic epistemology, however, is no easy task. As Coseru asks, how are Dignāga and Dharmakīrti ultimately justified in their commitment to perception's involving no interpretive or conceptual work? Or again, how is Śāntarakṣita justified in saying that reflexivity is constitutive of consciousness? Are we dealing here, as Coseru asks, "with attempts to work out the implications of a deep phenomenology of non-ordinary experience for a theory of perception" (p. 243)? Coseru answers affirmatively. By undertaking the sort of phenomenological bracketing proposed above, we are said to find an implicit, pre-reflective form of knowing; it is, as Dharmakīrti writes, perception itself that tells us what perception is. Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and Śāntarakṣita, then, are justified in their respective commitments to perception or consciousness being a certain way by the fact that, after careful consideration of the phenomenology of perception, we discover that we have an implicit, immediate, pre-reflective awareness of our situatedness in the world. The success of their characterization of perception, in other words, depends on their *getting the phenomenology right*.

However, there are moments when Coseru presents another way to articulate the problem.

Following Buddhologist Roger Jackson, he calls the stance shared by these Buddhists a sort of "epistemological optimism" (p. 297ff.). Buddhist epistemologists defend the nonconceptual character of perception and the reflexivity of consciousness in defense of the thought that "progress toward Buddhahood depends on the possibility of effecting some radical change in the mental continuum" (p. 46). In other words, epistemological optimism reflects a commitment both to the fact that the Buddha's awareness is radically different from our own, and to the capacity of ordinary minds, such as they are, to transform into just such awareness. The argument might run something like this: because the nonconceptual awareness constitutive of buddhahood is possible for us, some aspect of our epistemological architecture must always already be nonconceptual—otherwise, there is no way to explain how our ordinary, concept-laden experience of the world can come to transcend itself. Perception affords the requisite basis when it is attended to properly and discovered to be free of interpretive processes. As Coseru writes, "mention must be made that even the Buddhist epistemologists rest their proof of self-awareness on the experience of states of pure luminosity that presumably transcend the subject-object dichotomy" (p. 265). This seems to echo Jackson's point, cited by Coseru, that "optimists rely on observations gleaned from meditative states that are not commonly accessible"; as Coseru says, "what seems to motivate the Buddhist epistemological enterprise are the findings of extraordinary perceivers" (pp. 198, 300).

But is it right that meditative states present evidence that is then, out of a commitment to the observations of a particular set of yogis (i.e., Buddhist yogis), considered normative for the epistemological tradition? Are Buddhist epistemologists so committed to the *findings*—one might say the *testimony* (with Coseru, p. 281)—of particular yogis as to ground their whole epistemological enterprise on those findings?[2] Or is it merely their commitment to the possibility of enlightenment

that shapes their understanding of perception's being nonconceptual and consciousness's being naturally reflexive and self-illuminating? We might state this another way: Śāntarakṣita's commitment to the natural luminosity or reflexivity of consciousness may be based on either the testimony of yogic perception or "a metaphysical commitment to pure consciousness that is stated without argument" (p. 265n99). It seems that Coseru considers the testimony of yogic perception to be foundational for Śāntarakṣita's understanding of consciousness, even if the fact that "such testimony alone is not sufficient to justify Śāntarakṣita's and Kamalaśīla's epistemological optimism is amply indicated by their readiness to defend their view on rational grounds" (p. 301). The perception of yogis—the cognitive neuroscientists of the first millennium—thus presents the findings to which a rational phenomenology must remain ever faithful. This challenges, however, Coseru's commitment to the Buddhist epistemologists' phenomenology. This is no longer a pre-theoretical return to the things themselves; we can no longer say that "the experience of perception itself, rather than any theoretical assumptions about it" guides the inquiry into the nature of perception (p. 167). Rather, the phenomenological inquiry is guided by theoretical assumptions about a privileged type of perception we ordinary beings do not yet have.

If, however, Śāntarakṣita's commitment to the natural luminosity or reflexivity of consciousness were based instead on a metaphysical or axiological commitment to pure consciousness, his view of consciousness should be understood to result not from his commitment to what some yogi saw, but rather from an attempt to make sense of the Buddhist commitment to the possibility of enlightenment. Śāntarakṣita would be after a rational answer to the question: what is the ordinary mind such that its achievement of enlightenment is possible? Coseru writes that "the Buddhist epistemologist's justification for taking reflexivity as the condition of the possibility for warranted states of

cognitive awareness is simply an extension of his or her *theoretical commitment* to the self-luminosity theory of mental states" (p. 287, emphasis added). We can agree on this point. But then perhaps this is the position's optimism: a rational, foundational commitment to the mind's intrinsic compatibility with enlightenment, rather than a commitment to the observations of privileged perceivers. It would be, then, the mere possibility of buddhahood that drives the epistemology, rather than a privileged description of what buddhahood is like. Which position better captures Śāntarakṣita's and Kamalaśīla's views, and which position better engages with which present-day philosophical debates are, I think, important questions.

In both the breadth of his study and the important questions it raises, Coseru's work accomplishes a great deal. It will find an important place in the study of Buddhist philosophy.

Notes

[1]. The nature of this self-awareness is not entirely unproblematic in Coseru's presentation. In section 8.4, he is clearly committed to the position that self-awareness must itself be an intentional, object-directed sort of awareness, writing, for example, that "if self-awareness were not implicitly intentional, it could not be a necessary condition for genuine aboutness" (p. 264). On the very next page, however, he notes that "even the Buddhist epistemologists rest their proof of self-awareness on the experience of *states of pure luminosity that presumably transcend the subject-object dichotomy*" (p. 265, emphasis added). Coseru's effort to avoid attributing theoretical or metaphysical presuppositions to his Buddhist subjects is revealed in this tension. If "a metaphysical commitment to pure consciousness that is stated without argument" lies behind the Buddhist epistemologists' discussion of self-awareness (p. 265n99), then their problem might be precisely how self-awareness—which is *not* intentional and is devoid of any subject-object dichotomy—can be

the condition for the possibility of every intentional act. This is a larger and far more fascinating problem than can be given its full due here, and it is to Coseru's credit that he states his position so clearly. I will return to these thoughts in my concluding paragraphs.

[2]. I am here echoing Kumārila's refutation of yogic perception, on which, see Lawrence McCrea, "'Just Like Us, Just Like Now': The Tactical Implications of the Mīmāṃsā Rejection of Yogic Perception," in *Yogic Perception, Meditation, and Altered States of Consciousness*, ed. Eli Franco (in collaboration with Dagmar Eigner) (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009); and Coseru, *Perceiving Reality*, 92-93.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: David Tomlinson. Review of Coseru, Christian. *Perceiving Reality: Consciousness, Intentionality, and Cognition in Buddhist Philosophy*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. October, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42477>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.