

A Review of Recognizing Reality: Dharmakirti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretation

Recognizing Reality: Dharmakirti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretation. By Georges B. J. Dreyfus. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997, xxi + 622 pages, ISBN 0-7914-3097-9 (hardcover), ISBN 0-7914-3098-7 (paperback), US \$68.50 (hardcover), US \$22.95 (paperback)

Reviewed By Pascale Hugon

Doctoral Candidate
University of Lausanne

pascalehugon@hotmail.com

This book is a thorough and profound study of the philosophy of Dharmakirti, a seventh-century Indian Buddhist thinker of the Vijñānavāda school. Dharmakirti's impact extended far beyond the boundaries of his own school: his ideas influenced the whole of the Buddhist tradition as well as thinkers of other Indian schools of thought. His ideas are also a basis for the Buddhist epistemology that developed in Tibet. By interpreting Dharmakirti's texts, Tibetan thinkers developed his philosophy in a most enriching way. Dreyfus's book makes an innovative contribution to the research in this area of Buddhist studies by considering not only the interface between Indian and Tibetan epistemologies, but also the dialogue between competing Tibetan schools. *Recognizing Reality* is based on Dreyfus's Ph.D. dissertation, *Ontology, Philosophy of Language, and Epistemology in Buddhist Tradition* (University of Virginia, 1991). It is worth noting that in addition to this degree, Dreyfus also followed the curriculum of Tibetan Buddhist universities up to the achievement of the title of *dge bshes*—the highest degree awarded by monastic universities. In addition to having access to the original texts, Dreyfus had the opportunity to have direct contact with modern Tibetan scholars perpetuating the tradition. This inside knowledge of the tradition combined with a critical attitude toward its content gives Dreyfus's work its unique perspective.

Dreyfus's book, as its title and organizational layout implies, focuses on the two principal projects in Dharmakirti's philosophy, one seeking to answer the ontological question "What is reality?" and the other the epistemological question as to how one recognizes it. (Note that Dreyfus seems to take "recognition" as meaning the ensemble of mental events taking place in the course of our interaction with the world and includes under this term both more or less passive cognitions and recognitions in the sense of interpretations according to mental schemas—"recognition" in this latter sense also leads to the search for evaluative criteria.)

The first question is dealt with in book I part one entitled "Ontology." There, Dreyfus presents Dharmakirti's strict ontological dichotomy—subordinated to a strict epistemological dichotomy—between the real and the unreal by means of a list of the major oppositions:

impermanent versus permanent, thing versus non-thing, specific versus general. Dreyfus tries to make sense of Dharmakirti's conflicting views on ontology by understanding them to follow an ascending scale of analysis (p. 98) in which each step represents the answer to specific problem (p. 104). He also presents Tibetan views on three problems left unsolved by Dharmakirti concerning things the ontological status of which is dubious: conceptual constructs, which are "less real without being completely nonexistent" (p. 71), macroscopic objects (having extension in space and/or time), and the external world.

The main issue in ontology, however, is the status of universals. This problem is at the center of inter- and extra-sectarian disputes and becomes a major point of dissention between Tibetan interpreters of Dharmakirti. It constitutes the core theme around which Dreyfus's discussion of ontological issues revolves. Accordingly, book I part two deals specifically with universals, whereas part three treats two of their aspects as objects designated by words and as contents of conceptual thought. Dharmakirti's anti-realism and conceptualism is contrasted with the Nyaya's extreme realism (that is, their acceptance of real universals, distinct from particulars) and is also contrasted with what Dreyfus terms "moderate realism," or the position that universals exist only *in re*, that is, in the particular entities themselves (see p. 134). This "moderate" form of realism was advocated by most Tibetans (and especially the dGe lugs pa), who sought stronger support in reality for logic than that implied by the more radical disavowal of universals. The exception to this rather complex position was to be found in the Sa skya school, which remained fiercely opposed to any hint of a realist interpretation of Dharmakirti. As for the semantic role of universals, it is discussed by way of introducing the famous theory of *apoha* (exclusion or elimination). Dreyfus traces its historical development from Dignaga, through Dharmakirti and Santarakṣita, on to Tibetan interpreters.

Turning to Dreyfus's discussion of epistemology taken up in book II, the author focuses almost exclusively upon perceptual "valid cognitions" (*pramāṇa*). It shows the problems that are encountered by a Dharmakirtian system when it seeks to provide an account of knowledge, all the while maintaining a rarefied ontology that rejects real universals. Dreyfus describes in detail the attempts by Tibetan authors to resolve this tension. He shows how the dGe lugs pa revised and reinterpreted Dharmakirti, giving perception a more active role in order to bridge the gap between perception and conceptual thought.

Broader issues such as the place of epistemology in the religious system and vice versa, political implications of philosophical disagreements, and historical consideration of the reception of epistemology are also taken up in the course of the book. Some matters not directly related to the main subject are also introduced, although some are presented too briefly to be fully comprehended by the unspecialized reader (for instance, *pratityasamutpada* [p. 61] or *vinasitvanumana* [p. 63]).

The fact that the various key ontological and epistemological themes are so intimately related seems to have made it difficult to avoid a rather significant amount of repetition and rendered certain chapter divisions more artificial than their content would warrant (for instance, the question of predication in chapter eight, which might have been better placed in part two on the philosophy of language).

The book relies to a large extent on original texts and their Tibetan translations and often presents quotes from them. It is, however, primarily a philosophical, rather than a philological, work. Dreyfus proceeds very methodically, first introducing the problem, then presenting Dharmakīrti's ideas and the respective views found in the Tibetan tradition, which he explains, compares, and criticizes. Ideas belonging to the Buddhist tradition are explained using a philosophical vocabulary that can be understood in terms of Western concepts, and references to Western philosophy help the reader not familiar with Indian philosophy to situate the issues at stake.

Although Dreyfus frequently gives the original term in parentheses, the choice to translate all technical terms into English might make the reading more difficult for readers who are used to interpreting the texts in their own terms. The same remark applies to Dreyfus's use of a modified version of Hopkins's "essay phonetic" system to phoneticize Tibetan names (used even in the index and bibliography) and to his use of an abbreviated English title when quoting texts, so that Dharmakīrti's *Pramaṇavarttika* appears simply as *Commentary*. In addition, there is a certain opaqueness in translating *rang mtshan/svalakṣaṇa* and *spyi mtshan/samanyalakṣaṇa* as "specifically characterized phenomenon" and as "generally characterized phenomenon" that risks confusing the philosophical reader. Although these translations are grammatically correct and are justified when dealing with the dGe lugs pa (see p. 116–117), who do not equate *rang mtshan* with individuals and who distinguish *spyi* and *spyi mtshan*, they could be more simply replaced by the familiar pair "particular-universal" when dealing with Dharmakīrti and Sa skya Paṇḍita.

Dreyfus's book addresses epistemology, ontology, and the philosophy of language, but deliberately does not take up logical aspects such as the study of formal properties or reasoning (p. 1), nor the relation between Dharmakīrti's ontology and logical reasoning (p. 143). Generally speaking, the presentation of Indian views serves to contextualize Dharmakīrti (p. 50), while on the Tibetan side of things the most extensive treatment is reserved for Tibetan thinkers from the end of the fourteenth to the end of the fifteenth century (p. 1). The main Tibetan authors referred to are the following: for the Sa skya pa (cf. p. xvii "Sa-gya Lineages"), Dreyfus deals mainly with g.Yag ston sangs rgyas dpal (1348–1414), Rong ston Sakya rgyal mtshan (1367–1449), gSer mdog pan chen Sakya mchog ldan (1428–1507), Go rams pa bSod nams seng ge (1429–1489), and Glo bo mkhan chen bSod nams lhun grub (1456–1532). Dreyfus also regularly discusses the works of Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) himself, although curiously enough he attributes to him a "summary" (*bsdus pa*) that I do not think Sa skya Paṇḍita ever composed. (At any rate, Sa skya Paṇḍita would certainly not have wanted his *Rigs gter* to be considered to be a *Summary*.) (Cf. p. 22: "With this work, Cha-ba initiated a literary genre of Summaries that has proven immensely successful. Sa-gya Paṇḍita [sa skya paṇḍita], Kay-drup [mkhas grub], and Ge-dun grup [dge 'dun grub] all wrote important summaries".)

For the dGe lugs pa, the positions of rGyal Tshab rje (1364–1432), mKhas grub rje (1385–1438), and dGe 'dun grub pa (1391–1474) are discussed in extenso, considerably more so than those of Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), whose epistemology (however important it might have been) was only laid out in limited and problematical textual sources.

Although chapter twenty-three is specifically dedicated to the philosophy of mind of Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge (1109–1169), texts of the early periods are considered outside the scope of the work (p. 189). It is true that few of these texts are extant. Nonetheless, it is generally assumed that the modern dGe lugs pa tradition of epistemology is largely indebted to Phya pa's *Summaries (bsdus pa)*, and the question remains to what extent other logicians such as gTsang nag pa brtson 'grus seng ge (?–1171) also had an impact on this tradition. Indeed it is certain that his ideas were very influential at the time, the proof being the effort taken by Sa skya Paṇḍita to refute them in his *Rigs gter*. It is therefore somewhat surprising that gTsang nag pa was mentioned only twice in Dreyfus's book. (For example, on page 194, Dreyfus quotes a passage from Sakya mchog ldan suggesting that realism was pervasive in Tibet from Phya pa's time: "All thinkers from Cha-ba and Dzang-ngak-ba [reviewer's note: =gTsang nag pa] up to modern [times] agree that individuations and universals are substantially identical on the basis of [their] being one thing"; furthermore, on page 195, Dreyfus notes that "The turn toward Prasaṅgika ... is noticeable among Cha-ba's disciples such as Dzang-ngak-ba.") Contrary to the case of Phya pa, whose texts are not extant (with the exception of the *dBu ma shar gsum gyi stong thun* recently edited by Helmut Tauscher in the *Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde*, Wien 1999), gTsang nag pa's *Tshad ma rnam par nges pa 'i'i ka legs bshad bsdus pa*—a commentary on Dharmakīrti's *Pramaṇaviniscaya*—is extant, and a reproduction of it has been published by Rinsen Book Co. (Otani University, Kyoto, 1989). A study of gTsang nag pa's ideas would be extremely meaningful in discussing realism in Tibetan interpretations of Dharmakīrti from the point of view of their historical development.

An original contribution of Dreyfus's book is the use of the third chapter of Dharmakīrti's *Pramaṇavarttika* (PV III) in addition to the first chapter (PV I) to present the theory of *apoha*. This allows Dreyfus to bring to light another aspect of the *apoha* theory, as PV III emphasizes the notion of "ideational meaning" (*pratibha*) inherited from Dignaga. As Dreyfus mentions, most studies put their emphasis on PV I, thus giving a purely "negative" presentation of Dharmakīrti's *apoha* as mere elimination. (He notes, for example, that "My discussion of this articulation draws from Dharmakīrti's treatment of *apoha* theory in Commentary III, a text that has not received as much attention from the scholarly community as has his discussion in Commentary I. As a result of this neglect, excessive emphasis has been placed on the negative aspect of the *apoha* theory at the expense of the more positive elements, which have been largely ignored" [p. 217].) It must be said that this attitude is reflected in the works of earlier interpreters themselves. For instance, in the fourth chapter of his *Tshad ma rigs pa'i gter* (RT IV) dedicated to *apoha*, Sa skya Paṇḍita bases his explanation only on PV I and never quotes PV III. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that Sa skya Paṇḍita primarily had to oppose other Tibetan views supporting things such as real exclusions and was therefore reluctant to introduce in his explanation any positive element that could support the realist views of his opponents. However, the so-called "positive elements" pertaining to *apoha* are already expressed in key passages of PV I, a presentation of which can be found, for instance, in Vetter's *Erkenntnisprobleme bei Dharmakīrti* (Oesterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 1964, p. 49ff).

The analysis of the positive elements rests mainly on the understanding of the notion of "representation" that Dharmakīrti adopts from Dignaga's *pratibha* (which Dreyfus translates as "appearance," "ideational meaning," or "intuitional ideation"). This representation, through

which objects appear to consciousness in the case of cognitive knowledge, which is fit (*yogyā*) to be associated with words, is also explained by Dharmakīrti in terms of aspects (*ākāra*, *rnam pa*) of consciousness. In addition, it is also depicted as the reflection (*pratibimba*, *gzugs brnyan*) of the object appearing to cognition. When dealing with conceptual cognition, Dreyfus raises the following questions: “What is the nature of concepts? Are they mental entities; that is, Dharmakīrti’s reflections? Are they eliminations? Here Dharmakīrti is not explicit, and as a result his commentators differ on the relation between reflections, concepts, and elimination” (p. 228). Dreyfus rejects the idea that conceptual representations or concepts are mental images (p. 228) and presents them instead as mental events because they consist of “an assumption of the existence of a fictional commonality projected onto things” (p. 227). Thus “the formation of a concept consists of the assumption that mental representations stand for an agreed-on imagined commonality” (p. 227). There is, hence, a radical difference between the concept “Being mental events, concepts are real and individual in nature” (p. 228) and the object of concepts, the universals—“Such a concept, which is a real mental event, has a content, which is nothing but the fictional universal assumed to be instantiated by real individual objects” (p. 231). According to Dreyfus, it is this content, and not the conceptual representation that is taken by Dharmakīrti to be Dignāga’s “intuitional ideation” (*pratibha*) (cf. p. 231). Dreyfus’s presentation of concepts, aspects, and so forth as mental events appears to be grounded on the interpretation of Dharmakīrti’s ideas put forth by Sakya mchog ldan in his *Defeater* (that is, *tshad ma rigs gter gyi dgongs rgyan rigs pa’i ’khor los lugs ngan pham byed*) and by Go rams pa in his *Explanation* (that is, *tshad ma’i rigs gter gyi dka’ gnas rnam par bshad pa de bdun rab gsal*). As Dreyfus says on page 256, “For Sakya Chok-den, an appearance is a conceptual reflection. It is a real mental event, produced by causes and conditions... Thus it is impermanent and hence, by definition, real. In fact, the appearance is the aspect or form that the conceptual consciousness takes in apprehending its object.” Furthermore, he notes that “For Sakya Chok-den appearances do not appear, they are just representations. They do not appear to mental states but are the forms that those take. This is what Dharmakīrti describes as aspect or reflection.” And on page 257, Dreyfus quotes Go rams pa’s *Explanation* 47.a.6–b.1, which states, “‘Here, [I would like to distinguish] two factors: a cognitive factor and a factor superimposed onto the external jar. Among those two, the former is a [real] appearance because it is the object that is taken as an object of self-cognition (*rang rig*, *svasaṃvitti*) of a conceptual thought. The latter is an elimination because it is an imputation.’” Dreyfus then comments, “The conceptual representation of the object is the objective aspect, a real mental event. It is Dharmakīrti’s reflection and, hence, not an actual elimination.” It must be noted that Go rams pa considers representations to be mental events in the case of perception as well (cf. *Explanation* 206.b.2–6, quoted on page 408: “[T]he appearance is just a representation of the external object. It is internal to the awareness, being nothing but the form that the awareness takes under the influence of the external object.”) The question remains however whether taking representations as mental events rather than mental images is the correct interpretation of Dharmakīrti’s thought. For an alternative explanation that takes representations as mental images/mental contents, the reader might refer to the recent work of John Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy: A Study of the Central Issues in his Ontology, Logic and Epistemology with Particular Attention to the Svopajñavṛtti*. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1999 (see in particular pp. 134–137).

In conclusion, Dreyfus has given us an ambitious work that has been designed to accomplish several goals: he aims to explain Dharmakīrti’s philosophy in his Indian context, present the

Tibetan developments, and, finally, reinterpret key ideas of this philosophy in terms that are accessible to the modern mind. All of these goals are to a very significant degree satisfied. Dreyfus's book is a key to the understanding of some of the most crucial aspects of Dharmakirti's philosophy. Although it is addressed mainly to students and scholars interested in Tibetan civilization, Buddhism, and Indian philosophy, it would also be of interest to those without a background in Indian or Tibetan studies or those without a liking of technical discussions (which, although numerous in the book, are warned of in advance and may be overlooked without losing track of the main argument). This book may be used as an introduction to Dharmakirti and to Tibetan epistemology. It will satisfy the specialist by bringing out new material and interpretations that enhance the discussion on major issues. The expansive index makes it a practical tool that can be recommended as a reference work of remarkable worth.

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