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## NOMINALISM, BUDDHIST DOCTRINE OF

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*entities are constructed through concepts and language and as such those entities exist only nominally or conventionally. Their semantics rejects the realist position that expressions refer to real, extra-mental universals that are instantiated in each particular of the class formed by the respective universal. Instead, these philosophers developed the unique theory of 'exclusion' whereby expressions convey meaning by the exclusion of some particulars from those which do not have the expected causal capacities. Dharmakīrti's nominalism is credited with a greater impact on Indian philosophy than Dignāga's.*

- 1 Ontology
- 2 Critique of universals
- 3 Theory of meaning

### 1 Ontology

One can reduce the concerns of Buddhist philosophers to a central preoccupation: the cessation of suffering. According to Buddhist philosophers, the elimination of suffering (*duḥkha*) requires the elimination of its cause, which is thought to be the belief in entities that in fact do not exist (see SUFFERING, BUDDHIST VIEWS OF ORIGINATION OF). Of particular concern is the belief in an eternal, unchanging self or soul (*ātman*), for this belief motivates the behaviour that produces suffering. Buddhists before DHARMAKĪRTI often employed part or whole arguments to refute the notion of self and eventually to reject all composite entities. These arguments, which inform much of Dharmakīrti's nominalism, can be summarized by briefly examining a composite entity, such as a table.

Although a table is apparently a single entity composed of various parts, Buddhists question whether any such entity actually exists. They ask whether the whole that is the table is the same as or different from its parts. If the whole differs from its parts, what evidence do we have for its existence? Immediate sensory perception yields information only about the parts. If the whole is the same as its parts, then it must be either fully or partially instantiated in each part. If it is fully instantiated in each part, then any single part is an entire table. If the table is only partially instantiated in its parts, then we should speak of many partial tables rather than one single table. If we were to claim that all the parts together are the table, then a heap of table-parts should be a table. Finally if the parts in a particular configuration are the table, one could again ask whether that configuration is the same as or different from the configured parts: an infinite regress ensues.

Expanding on this critique of spatial extension,

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*Buddhist nominalism refers to the nominalist ontology and semantics developed especially by the Indian Buddhist philosophers Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Elaborating on the arguments of their Buddhist predecessor Vasubandhu, they critically examine the notions of spatial and temporal extension. For Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, spatially and temporally composite*

Dharmakīrti also attacks temporal extension. In doing so, he affirms the doctrine of momentariness, whereby an ultimately real entity can only exist for an infinitesimal period of time (see MOMENTARINESS, BUDDHIST DOCTRINE OF). This doctrine is supported in part by the argument that an entity which does not change over time cannot produce any effects, for a cause must change from a pre-production state to a post-production state; otherwise, it would either produce its effects at all times eternally, or it would never produce any effect. Furthermore, Dharmakīrti maintained a causal model of sense perception whereby a sensed entity causes the content of one's sensory cognition. Since a nonmomentary entity could never act as a cause, it could never be perceived. As a result, one could never indubitably establish its existence, for in Dharmakīrti's words, 'to exist is to be perceived' (*sattvam upalabdhir eva*) (*Pramāṇavārttikasvopajñāvṛtti on Pramāṇavārttika* I.3ab).

In short, Dharmakīrti denies that any composite entity can be real in the strictest sense. However, following his predecessors, he admits that composite entities can be said to exist from the perspective of conceptual and linguistic conventions. These modes of existence yield two important categories: things that exist in the strictest sense are 'ultimately' real (*paramārthasat*), while those contingent upon linguistic and conceptual conventions are only 'nominally' (*prajñaptisat*) or 'conventionally' real (*samvṛtisat*).

## 2 Critique of universals

Dharmakīrti's most thorough analysis of semantic issues appears in the *Svopajñāvṛtti* (Interpretative Commentary), his lengthy remarks on the first chapter of his *Pramāṇavārttika* (Comments on Instrumental Knowledge). Much of his work concerns the problem of repeatability or universality (*anvaya*). In other words, when I use the expression 'cow', for example, what is it about all cows that allows me to apply this one word to all of them? On the pre-reflective intuitions suggested by language, it seems that there is something the same about all cows. Elaborating on this intuition, most Indian philosophers maintained that there is in fact some real entity – in this case, 'cowness' – that is instantiated in each cow. Entities such as 'cowness' are called 'universals' (*sāmānya, jāti*) and they are instantiated in 'particulars' (*vyakti, svalakṣaṇa*), the things that impinge on our senses and which we seem to identify as 'cows'. Here, the technical term 'referent' might be used in a way that differs from some of its more common uses in Western philosophy. That is, to describe the view of Indian realism, the actual referent of the expression

'cow' might best be considered the universal 'cowness' itself (see UNIVERSALS, INDIAN THEORIES OF).

When Dharmakīrti attacks this view, he maintains that an expression is successful in its semantic function only when it has induced an action (*pravṛtti*) towards the intended particular in the person who has apprehended that expression. Such action might be some physical manipulation of the particular or a mere cognitive act such as recognition. That being the case, ultimately real universals make meaning impossible because expressions which refer to ultimately real universals would be incapable of inducing action towards particulars.

To demonstrate this conclusion, Dharmakīrti raises the problem of identity and difference as a species of the part or whole analyses previously mentioned. He asks whether the universal is the same as or different from the particulars in which it is instantiated. If the universal is different, then the expression 'cow' would not induce acts towards any particular because it refers only to the universal 'cowness', which is entirely distinct from any particular. One might still insist that the expression can induce action towards the intended particular, but then one must admit that an expression can induce action towards any entity, whether it be the same as or different from its referent.

On the other hand, if the universal is identical with the particulars, then the universal would lose its universality or repeatability. In other words, a cow-particular must be distinct from all other cow-particulars, otherwise, one would be unable to distinguish one cow from any other. Hence, a cow-particular is not repeatable – one cow-particular does not occur in or as any other cow-particular. But if the universal 'cowness' is identical with any cow-particular, then it would also be unrepeatable. One would need a new universal for every instance and the expression 'cow' could only be applied to that one particular, which is identical to the universal 'cowness'.

In response, some Indian realists admit that the particular and universal must be distinct, but they claim that an expression which refers to a universal can induce action towards a particular by virtue of the particular's relation to the universal. Among the more compelling criticisms of this position is Dharmakīrti's contention that any form of relation necessarily leads to either a contradiction or an infinite regress. That is, a relation's relata must be either the same or different. If they are the same, then there is no relation, for relations presuppose difference. If, on the other hand, the relata are different, then they cannot be in relation, for if entirely distinct entities can stand in relation, then one can haphazardly relate any entity to any other entity. The notion of relation would thus be

meaningless. Only a contradiction remains: the relata are both the same and different. If in response one posits a subsistent relation that 'ties' the relata together, one must then explain how the relata are related to the relation. If one then speaks of some second-order relation that connects the relata to the relation, one falls into an infinite regress.

### 3 Theory of meaning

Dharmakīrti's ontology can be reduced to the claim that the ultimately real is necessarily unique and unrepeatable. Hence, he rejects realist semantics because a universal must be in some sense repeatable in each of its instances. Yet without real universals, how do we explain our ability to use language? The Buddhist answer is that expressions convey meaning by the exclusion of some particulars from those which do not have the expected causal capacities. In this respect, meaning has three components: the cognitive image (*pratibhāsa, ākāra*), the particular and the exclusion (*vyārtti*).

For Dharmakīrti, language operates in the same fashion as conceptual thought. We can most easily examine the role of cognitive images by turning to the cognition called 'recognition' (*pratyabhijñāna*) – the conceptual act whereby a sensed object is identified or labelled. For recognition to occur, one must have learned the conventions that govern the appropriate expression or concept. If, for example, one knows the conventions that govern 'cow', one can have the recognition, 'that is a cow'. For Indian philosophers the important question is, what is it that we label with concepts or expressions such as 'cow'?

In discussing recognition, Dharmakīrti assumes a causal model of sense perception: when some particular impinges upon the senses, that particular creates an image in the mind. This image or *sensum* is what one knows in sense perception. This means that what we recognize as a 'cow' is not some particular that impinged upon the senses; rather, it is the image produced in our minds by that particular. Hence, if expressions and concepts give us any knowledge of particulars, they do so only by the mediation of the cognitive images caused by those particulars.

Objectors to this position point out that if concepts and language yield knowledge just of cognitive images, then actions based on such knowledge would be focused upon images and not upon particulars. Dharmakīrti responds that ordinary persons have a deeply inculcated cognitive habit of mistaking the images that arise from particulars for those particulars themselves. This claim leads to his assertion that all linguistic and conceptual knowledge is flawed in that it rests upon the conflation of the image with the

particular that caused it. Dharmakīrti remarks that this psychological apparatus explains how images can induce action towards particulars. He further notes that an image nevertheless can yield useful information because it directs one only towards the particular which acted as its cause.

In appealing to the causal link between images and particulars, Dharmakīrti makes a crucial statement about images. That is, Dharmakīrti argues that any entity which acts as a cause or effect is a particular and since images are effects, they must be mental particulars. As particulars, images are never repeatable, so images cannot be the same in all cases when we use a given concept or expression. Instead, Dharmakīrti maintains that what is actually the same in all cases are 'exclusions'.

His theory begins with the claim in the *Pramāṇavārttikasvopajñāvrtti on Pramāṇavārttika* (I, V 107–9; 119–43) that all images of tables, for example, produce an effect that no non-table produces: a second-order cognition called the 'determination of sameness' (*ekapratyavamarśajñāna*) in which any table-image is determined to be the same as every other table-image in that they are all imagined to be tables. Hence, all table-images are the same in that they all produce a cognition of their sameness. Since those images were produced by certain particulars, we can likewise say that those particulars are the same because they all produce images that all produce a second-order cognition of their sameness.

Some Indian realists maintain that this claim leads to an infinite regress. That is, in this respect all images of tables are the same because they produce the same effect, namely, second-order cognitions of their sameness. But since those second-order cognitions are all effects, they must be unique mental particulars. Thus, we must also prove that those second-order cognitions are the same. To do so, we must show that they all produce the same third-order cognition and an infinite regress ensues. In response, Dharmakīrti admits that the sameness of a certain set of images is constituted by their production of the same second-order cognitions. Nevertheless, the sameness of the second-order cognitions is not constituted by the sameness of their effects. Rather, they are all said to be the same in that they determine the first-order cognitions to be the same. This is an appeal to experience: the fact that the second-order cognitions include this determination of sameness is established by the apperceptive aspect of those second-order cognitions themselves.

It might appear that Dharmakīrti has opted for a realist theory of resemblance: certain particulars are the same in that they have the same causal capacity to produce images that in turn produce a determination

of their sameness. But he rejects the notion of some shared causal capacity precisely for the reasons mentioned above: such an entity would have to be either the same as or different from the particulars in which it is instantiated and neither possibility makes sense.

Given that there can be no single entity that is the same in all cases, how then can we use this information that all tables, for example, produce the same effect? If we cannot even conclude that there is some repeatable causal capacity, then what will provide the commonality in all table-particulars such that we can use the expression 'table' for each one of them? Dharmakīrti answers that we need not find any repeatable entity at all. Instead, we need only admit that if all tables produce the same effect, this necessarily distinguishes them from all other particulars. In short, what is the same about all tables is that they are excluded from non-tables.

This move seems tantamount to calling a table a non-non-table and one might wonder why we should resort to this double negative: why not simply say that a table is a table? Although modern interpreters have taken this objection seriously, Dharmakīrti noted that this qualm is misplaced for it fails to see how anti-realist ontological claims inform his semantics. Dharmakīrti's theory rests on the argument that repeatable entities are impossible. Since we undeniably experience particulars in such a way that we are able to classify them, our cognitions must group particulars into classes without having to pinpoint any repeatable entity. But since it is impossible to group particulars positively, we must do so negatively. The point here is that while we cannot posit any single, repeated entity that accounts for the fact that the particulars of a given class produce cognitive images that in turn produce the determination of their sameness, we are still able to distinguish between particulars that lead to that determination and particulars that do not.

The Mīmāṃsaka philosopher Kumāṛila (*fl.* c.625) responds that the reasoning employed is circular. That is, if Buddhists define 'tree' as the negation of 'non-tree', then one must be able to specify non-trees. Either this requires that one has already specified what trees are, or that one is somehow able to specify directly what non-trees are. In the former case, the theory of exclusion is superfluous since one can specify trees before excluding them from non-trees. In the latter case, one has specified what are non-trees without the negation of their complement. If this is possible in the case of non-trees, why should it not also be possible in the case of trees? The answer is the one stated above: we know that images are different by the apperceptive second-order cognitions that they

induce. Nevertheless, we cannot specify any repeatable entity possessed by a certain set of images and not possessed by the set of all other images. We can only appeal to the difference and we use that difference to define both sets. Dharmakīrti suggests that if this theory is circular, then no theory of semantics will be able to avoid circularity.

Clearly, the theory of exclusion assumes some cognitive means of comparing images. Dharmakīrti notes that this process involves imprints (*vāsanā*) placed in the mind by previous experiences and that in the act of comparison those imprints become active. Another crucial factor enters into comparison: the intentions and expectations present in one's mind when one uses concepts and expressions. That is, since any cognitive image is necessarily unique it can be excluded from an infinite range of other images. For example, any table-image is unique and one can focus on its uniqueness by excluding it from all other images, even other table-images. If we wish to say that the particular which produced that image is a 'table', we ignore that image's difference from other table-images. Also, if we wish to speak of it as 'furniture' we widen our scope by ignoring its difference from chairs and such while maintaining its difference from all non-furniture, such as ping-pong balls. This process is a function of the goals, expectations and other disposition that we bring to any use of language and concepts. While accounting for the importance of dispositions in the determination of meaning, the theory of exclusion also allows Dharmakīrti to account for repeatability and reference without making any ontological commitments to universals. As far as the Indian realist account is concerned, it would seem that exclusions are universals instantiated in images. Hence, Dharmakīrti would face the same identity/difference objection that he levelled against the realists. To avoid this problem, Dharmakīrti resorts to the aforementioned distinction between ultimate and conventional reality. As a species of negation, exclusions cannot exist ultimately. Hence, no expression has any real referent. Nevertheless, in conventional terms exclusions can be said to qualify cognitive images and since any image is the unique effect of some particular, that causal link enables Dharmakīrti to claim that the particulars which cause images are the indirect referents of expressions. His semantic theory enables him to avoid the realist doctrine of universals when he claims that the information derived from language can lead to successful activity in the world.

*See also:* BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY, INDIAN; DIGNĀGA; MEANING, INDIAN THEORIES OF; NOMINALISM; VASUBANDHU

## References and further reading

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- (c.625) *Pramāṇavārttika of Ācārya Dharmakīrti with Manorathanandin's Commentary*, ed. S. Dvārikādāsa Śāstrī, Bauddha Bharata Series 3, Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 2nd edn, 1984. (Sanskrit edition; portions of the chapter on direct awareness (*pratyakṣa*) are particularly relevant to §1.)
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