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## **Book Review: Georges Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality***

by

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The second chapter of Dharmakīrti's *Commentary on [Dignāga's "Compendium of] Valid Cognition*" begins with the assertion:

Valid Cognition is that cognition [which is] nondeceptive.  
[Nondeceptiveness] consists in the readiness [for the object] to perform a  
function, also  
[Of an object] arisen from an unmistaken term.

This statement concerning the two possible objects of a valid cognition (*pramāṇa; tshad ma*) is the launching point for Georges Dreyfus's *Recognizing Reality*, an exploration of fifteen hundred years of Buddhist epistemology beginning in India with the writings of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and continuing on in Tibetan intellectual circles up until the present day. A revised presentation of what was originally written as his doctoral dissertation, Dreyfus lays out the fundamental issues central to the Buddhist theory of knowledge. He draws comparisons with non-Buddhist categories of thought subsumed under the rubrics of "idealism" and "realism" and an assessment of their applicability to a Buddhist context.

Throughout his presentation of the issues, Dreyfus offers both historical and doctrinal analyses of the central issues as they have been presented by competing commentarial traditions of Tibet. Though not strictly divisible along sectarian lines, these two traditions can be grouped as "Moderate Realists," Ge-luk commentators of the Sang-pu tradition drawing on the interpretations of Mokṣākaragupta and Cha-ba Cho-gyi-seng-gay (*phyi pa chos kyi seng ge*, 1109-1169), and "Conceptualists," mostly Sa-gya commentators relying on Sa-gya Paṇḍita (*sa skya paṇḍi ta*, 1182-1251) and his Indian teacher, Śākya Śrībhadrā. The limits of this rubric and its implications within the traditions are explored throughout the five major sections of the book: ontology, universals, philosophy of language, valid cognition, and perception.

Dreyfus's discussion of ontology (chapters 1-5) is centered around its link to epistemology, and in particular, to the presuppositions and ontological commitments associated with an epistemic event. In framing the discussion Dreyfus states,

We often take the vocabulary of an investigation for granted, and easily forget that philosophical concepts are rarely neutral, having acquired their significance as part of a tradition. Aristotle's categorical scheme is the clearest example of a vocabulary that has become so integrated within our worldview that we no longer see it as a system of reference but as the very structure of the world.

This issue, whether the use of specific terms necessarily commits one to asserting the existence of corresponding entities, lies at the heart of divergent opinions regarding Dharmakīrti's foundational ontology or, in doxographic terms, the ontology of the Sutra School Following Reasoning (*rigs rjes 'brang gi mdo sde pa*).

On the issue of the existential status of phenomena, Dreyfus draws on passages from both sides of the issue, laying out the arguments and counter-arguments presented by various authors. The position of Sa-gya scholars on Dharmakīrtian ontology he concludes, lies in a denial of any existential status to generally characterized phenomena (*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*; *spyi mtshan*) while maintaining their veridicality as objects of inference. The issue of how a phenomenon could be completely non-existent and yet have validity is explored by Dreyfus as it is justified in the subsequent Sa-gya literature. Hence, since they assert the non-existence of universals but do not deny their objective referents, Dreyfus categorizes these scholars as "conceptualist" as distinct from "nominalist."

In opposition to this view, Ge-luk scholars assert a division of existent phenomena into "real"—that is, "functioning things" (*bhāva*; *dngos po*), and "unreal"—that is, permanent phenomena (*nitya*; *rtag pa*). According to the standard Ge-luk presentation, permanent phenomena exist but are not real. These scholars assert the "reality" of universals, or general entities as more than linguistic creations without the proliferation of entities, as in the "extreme Realist" Hindu positions. Hence, Dreyfus feels justified in categorizing these scholars as "moderate realists."

In comparable detail Dreyfus explores divergent opinions on the criteria for distinguishing specifically characterized phenomena from generally characterized ones, an issue which centers around the question of extension in space and time. Here the diversity of opinions is less amenable to categorization, though Dreyfus' presentation is structured in such a way as to prevent a confusion of positions. He delineates three different ways of viewing spatio-temporal extension and the authors who distinguish between them. Each of these views on functioning things and generalities are thus clarified and compared with the assertions of their near contemporaries—the Hindu philosophical schools of the Sāṃkhya, Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā—and also with European philosophies of the past few hundred years as well. In this way, Dreyfus brings the issues presented not only into perspective within Indian philosophy but also into the context of the world history of human ideas.

In the second major section (chapters 6-10), Dreyfus addresses the issue of universals— Dharmakīrti's "objects arisen from terms," and explores the distinction between nominalism and conceptualism as it is founded on a resemblance theory of universals, looking in particular at the views of Śākya Chok-den (*shākya mchog ldan*, 1428-1507). While Dreyfus presents this interpretation as a closer representation of Dharmakīrti's antirealist position, he acknowledges and addresses the problems encountered by various Sa-gya scholars associated with this position. In the course of doing so, he raises many of the objections presented by Ge-luk scholars as they attempt to resolve these issues through a "moderate realist" stance.

Concluding his discussion of the issue as a general topic, Dreyfus adopts a different methodological perspective of the debate delving into the historical and socio-political circumstances surrounding the sectarian nature of the debate throughout Tibetan history. He discusses the roles of would-be lineage founder Bo-dong Chok-lay-Nam-gyel (*bo dong phyogs las rnam rgyal*, 1376-1451) and proponents of the "other-emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) doctrine, adding yet another level of colorful controversy to a topic which has so dominated intellectual concerns on the Tibetan plateau.

In the third major section of his book (chapters 11-15), Dreyfus brings into consideration the conflicting epistemologies and philosophies of language which realism and antirealism yield. Beginning with a review of the significance of linguistics and grammar in Indian thought, Dreyfus introduces into this discussion *apoha* theory, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's theory of the formation of concepts through elimination. Building on the work of Dignāga scholars such as Hattori, Hayes and Katsura, Dreyfus presents the many subtle refinements proposed by later scholars in the Tibetan tradition elucidating both the negative and intuitional aspects of the theory.

Drawing particularly on the early Indian commentators such as Devendrabuddhi and Śāntarakṣita, Dreyfus divides Tibetan scholars into two divergent camps: those who assert that real objects appear to conceptual cognitions (the Ge-luk Realists), and those who hold to a more representationalist perspective, that awareness is in contact with only aspects (*ākāra; rnam pa*) or representations (the Sa-gya Antirealists). Points such as Go-ram-ba's (*go rams pa bsod nams seng ge*, 1429-1489) distinction between psychological and epistemological interpretations of *apoha*, and the various ways Tibetan scholars have distinguished affirmations from negations come forward in "subtle but often artificial exegeses." Throughout them all, however, Dreyfus manages to maintain the clarity and global perspective of the endeavor which allows the reader to place the issues contextually without losing sight of the forest while examining the trees.

The fourth major section of the book (chapters 16-18) deals explicitly with the issue of valid cognition (*pramāṇa; tshad ma*). Dreyfus approaches the issue methodically by first considering the problematics associated with various English equivalents for the Indian and Tibetan vocabularies of *pramāṇa*. Like the many Inuit words for snow, the language of Indo-Tibetan epistemology contains a plethora of highly specific terms denoting states of mind, the subtlety of which is easily lost in English. Defining in precise terms the language of his inquiry, Dreyfus presents the various problems associated with Dharmakīrti's multiple accounts of *pramāṇa* and distinguishes between a pragmatic understanding and an intentional understanding of the term. Bringing the topic back into the wider context of an examination

of the typology of *pramāṇa*, Dreyfus presents the central issue of Dharmakīrti's epistemology: the differentiation between perception and inference and their objects. Throughout his presentation Dreyfus lays the ground work for the foundation of Dharmakīrti's system and the largest section of Dreyfus's book, the *Theory of Perception*.

This last major section (chapters 19-27), hinges on the nature of "knowledge derived from the senses," the Buddhist definition of perception. It is the nature of this physical environment and the question of whether this perception is direct or mediated that is the central topic which, building on his earlier presentation of object universals, is explored here. The first interpretation, a moderate vindication of commonsense intuition, is the view espoused by the Ge-luk school which makes the distinction between the direct perception of the sensible qualities of common sense objects, and the more reified view of the direct perception of the objects themselves. In the course of his analysis, Dreyfus draws out the issues related to both the textual justification for such a view, and the problems associated with it—for instance, the apparent blurring of the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual states of mind—and presents their proposed solutions.

Looking at the second presentation of perception—as mediated by aspects, Sa-gya scholars assert that knowledge of an object is made possible by virtue of its leaving the impression of its likeness upon the consciousness apprehending it. In this presentation,

The nature of perception is explained in terms of the immediate objects, the aspects, which do not themselves provide knowledge. Perception, that is, a sensing of bare particulars, is valid inasmuch as it is able to induce appropriate forms of conceptualization that provide cognitive content to our experiences.

According to Dreyfus, this latter presentation is more in accord with the writings of Dharmakīrti, the explanation of what bridges the two, perception and conception, proves to be the central problematic to be elucidated by Sa-gya scholars.

The interplay of these two theories as they are argued back and forth by scholars over the centuries presents a fascinating insight into the religious methodologies of the Tibetan plateau. Pedagogical presentations such the seven-fold typology of mental states are critiqued by Sa-gya Paṇḍita for their lack of textual support, only to be defended by later Ge-luk authors who hold to the view of perception as an active propositional form of knowledge. Their counter-argument, that a non-propositional form of perception cannot be a form of knowledge, is presented with equal ferocity and highlights the methodological battle in Tibetan scholarly circles between the faithful allegiance to the intellectual traditions of India and the hermeneutical imperative to maintain coherency and internal consistency within the system.

Given the scope of the issues considered, Dreyfus has done an excellent job in maintaining a lucidity of prose and thematic organization. Dreyfus's clarity is in part due to his deduction of four ascending scales of analysis used by Dharmakīrti. It is Dreyfus's opinion that a lack of understanding concerning the use of these hierarchical, and at times, dialectical devices within Dharmakīrti's writings is the greatest contributing factor to much of the confusion

generated by his apparent contradictory statements. Dreyfus discusses three levels which assert the existence of external objects and one final level articulating the Yogācāra view. As he says:

Rather than proposing a unified system, Dharmakīrti offers a variety of conflicting views which he sees as pragmatically compatible. These different strands have not been always recognized by both modern and traditional scholars, with the consequence that Dharmakīrti's system has been oversimplified.

In this manner, Dreyfus manages to explain the various positions taken without relying on oversimplification.

Dreyfus's *Recognizing Reality* stands in the tradition of such groundbreaking works as Stcherbatsky's *Buddhist Logic* and Mookerjee's *Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux* and contributes to the growing list of works in European languages devoted to a detailed analysis of Buddhist epistemology and the epistemological endeavor in general. The usefulness and applicability of Dreyfus's research is not limited to these fields alone, however. Insight will be gained into various other fields of higher Buddhist studies such as Madhyamaka, Abhidharma, and Tantra, for Dreyfus explains the reasonings behind subtle philosophical positions which seem to rise *ex nihilo* in these other subject areas. *Recognizing Reality* is an insightful and stimulating work that can help one gain an understanding of the pervasiveness of Dharmakīrti's thought in Tibetan religious theory and practice over the past millennium.

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