

The Problem of Universals in Yogic Perception and Tsong kha pa's Solution

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The problem of universals is neither stranger to the West nor the East. In essence, it concerns the relationship between discrete objects and their properties. What, for example, is it that makes all discrete chairs belong to a singular class of things called "chair"? Do all chairs possess some chair-ness? That is, is there some essence that lurks in each chair and guarantees its membership in a more general class? Or is the property of being a chair a *post facto* conceptualization? That is, is there nothing in the chair that guarantees its being a chair other than our collective agreement that this group of otherwise discrete objects ought to be classified under a singular universal "chair"?

In Western philosophy, the former position is described as realist and the latter nominalist. In Indian philosophy, the former was championed by the Nyāya school, who argued that universals are robust entities that co-exist with (but independently from) the particulars that instantiate them. This was highly criticized by Buddhists, especially Dignāga in the 5th or 6th century CE, who subscribed to nominalism. According to Dignāga, the conceit of real universals was just another version of a false conceptual belief in an enduring Self (Skt. *ātman*, Tib. *bdag*) applied both to objects and persons. He considered reality itself, by contrast, to be populated with discrete particulars: momentary and infinitesimal particles that are only conceptually constructed into enduring objects, which are themselves further constructed into classes. While conceptualization (Skt. *vikalpa*, Tib. *rnam par rtog pa*) thus cognizes these false universals, real particulars are cognized nonconceptually (Skt. *nirvikalpa*, Tib. *rtog pa med pa*). These in turn are the respective objects of two distinct epistemic instruments (Skt. *pramāṇa*, Tib. *mtshad ma*), or ways of knowing the world: inference (Skt. *anumāna*, Tib. *rjes su dpag pa*) and perception (Skt. *pratyakṣa*, Tib. *mgnon sum*). According to Dignāga, these are the only two epistemic instruments.

Dignāga's nominalism creates a problem for the Buddhist soteriological project, however. Most Buddhist schools agree that

nonconceptual realization of the lack of Self is the *sine qua non* of spiritual advancement. This realization came to be understood as occurring through yogic perception (Skt. *yogipratyakṣa*, Tib. *rnal 'byor mngon sum*). As a type of perception, yogic perception should only perceive particulars. No-Self, however, is a type of universal, a property that is abstracted away from discrete particulars. How, then, can nonconceptual yogic perception perceive No-Self, a seeming universal dependent on conceptualization?

This paper explores Tsong kha pa's (1357–1419) unique solution to this conundrum. Tsong kha pa argues that universals are, in fact, not completely the product of mere conceptual concoction. Neither, however, does Tsong kha pa argue a robust realism for universals in a manner that abandons Buddhism's larger anti-realist agenda. Affording universals a quasi-real status, Tsong kha pa is able to salvage them from the deconstruction of conceptual superimposition, permitting their status as the object of nonconceptual yogic perception. This position fits squarely with Tsong kha pa and his Dge lugs school's wider realist ontological project.

1. Dharmakīrti and Dignāga: Imagined Concepts

The notion that yogins have special perceptual powers enjoys a long history among a myriad of Indian philosophical schools. In Buddhism, one of the earliest explicit terminological mentions of “yogic perception” may occur in the *Nyāyānusāra* by Saṅghabhadra (fl. 4th–5th century CE), Vasubandhu's main teacher. Therein, Saṅghabhadra tackles the ontological question of similarity. That is, if the Buddhist theory of momentariness necessitates that all phenomena are discrete momentary entities with distinct causes, how can two things ever be said to be similar in any real sense? Saṅghabhadra argues that homogeneity (Skt. *sabhāgatā*) is a causal property that inheres between any two similar things ensuring their common membership in a single class. Furthermore, homogeneity can be known both through inference as well as directly through yogic perception (Skt. **yogi-pratyakṣa*, Chin. *guan xing zhe xian zhen* 觀行者現證).¹

However, yogic perception's first formalization in Buddhism is most widely associated with Dignāga,² who, we will see, also employed it to explain the direct perception of a shared property, specifically, No-Self (Skt. *anātman*). Dignāga's interpretation of No-Self

¹ Saṅghabhadra 1995: 229–232. Saṅghabhadra's text is unfortunately lost in Sanskrit, but Collette Cox communicated to the author (April 2, 2019) that **yogi-pratyakṣa* or possibly **yogi-abhisamaya* is the most felicitous reconstruction from the Chinese.

² White 2012: 70–72. Pradeep Gokhale, personal communication, April 2019.

extends beyond the rejection of a reified personal Self (Skt. *pudgala*) superimposed on the five aggregates (Skt. *pañca-skandha*).³ In his interpretation, No-Self deconstructs the reification of *all* objects. While such objects appear as *res extensa*, they are, in fact, discrete particulars. Any universal projected onto these particulars—whether of an entity extended over its supposed parts or of a type extended over its supposed tokens—is the product of conceptual reification superimposed on a group of particulars. The superimposition of a personal Self on the aggregates is thus just one type of a much more pervasive tendency to reify real discrete particles and moments into objects with spatial and temporal extension. Belief in the Self—and based thereon, the existence of suffering in general—is predicated on this reification, with the realization of No-Self as its antidote, so Dignāga argues.

Understanding No-Self intellectually, however, is insufficient for liberation. The Buddhist path involves a process of converting the conceptual understanding of the Buddha's *teaching* that phenomena are without Self into a direct nonconceptual realization of that same truth afforded by yogic perception. Thus, Dignāga's *Compendium of Valid Cognition* (Skt. *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, Tib. *Tshad ma kun btus*) verse 1.6 states that "yogins see just the object, unmixed with the guru's instructions," denoting a type of nonconceptual understanding of No-Self.⁴ Indeed, to see No-Self otherwise—that is conceptually—is self-defeating. Since all conceptualization involves reification, even the concept of No-Self involves the superimposition of a type of Self. Through yogic perception, by contrast, the aspirant directly sees that all objects are selfless without this superimposition.

Dignāga's explanation, however, leaves his successors in somewhat of a thorny philosophical thicket. Saṅghabhadra can account for the perception of homogeneity, since it is a real property that extends over multiple objects. But on Dignāga's metaphysics, by contrast, No-Self cannot be said to really inhere in objects in the same fashion. Because No-Self is the absence of a fictional entity—the Self—it is a negative property and therefore a type of reification. It therefore must be a conceptual superimposition—a universal. Universals, however, are vitiated at the level of nonconceptual perception. It is unclear, therefore, how No-Self could be an object of *yogic perception*, which only perceives real positive entities and not abstract properties or universals like No-Self. Furthermore, a real positive particular would

³ Though, for the story of how he came to reject of the *pudgala* as well, see Eckel, Garfield, and Powers 2016: 4.

⁴ *yoginām guru-nirdeśa-avyavakīrṇa-artha-mātra-dṛk* || (Dignāga 2005: 3). I also consulted Dignāga 2008: 4: *rnal 'byor rnam kyī bla mas bstan* / *lma 'dres pa yi don tsaṃ mthong*/.

seem mutually exclusive with a negative property, such as the *lack* of Self. The two could theoretically co-exist, but it would seem strange to say they share an identity. How, then, can positive particulars cogently instantiate a negative property like No-Self—the foundational Buddhist truth?

In the *Commentary on Valid Cognition* (Skt. *Pramāṇavarttika*, Tib. *Tshad ma rnam 'grel*), Dharmakīrti (fl. 6th–7th century CE) hedges Dignāga's project in order to resolve the epistemological conundrum he inherited, relying on a psychology of mental images (Skt. *ākāra*, Tib. *rnam pa*) to negotiate between the conceptuality of Buddhism's negative truth⁵ and Dignāga's insistence that only positive particulars are real and perceptible. Mental images describe mental pictures or representations that always attend conceptual thinking and are positive particulars. Therefore, Dharmakīrti argues that even conceptualization has a nonconceptual component, since mental images arise in conjunction with conceptual superimposition.⁶ Simply by fixating on a concept in meditation, the conceptual overlay will eventually fall away, leaving only a nonconceptual perception of the attendant mental image. Quoting verse 3.284–285:⁷

Although considered unreal, meditative bases,
Like the ugliness [of the body], the earth, etc.,⁸
Can arise as a nonconceptual clear appearance
Constructed by the power of meditation.
Whether existing or non-existing,
Whatever one meditates upon intently
Will end up forming a nonconceptual cognition,
Once that meditation is perfected.⁹

Thus, meditation on any concept will eventually give way to a nonconceptual cognition, since every concept has a nonconceptual

⁵ All conceptualization is, in fact, negative on Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. This constitutes their *apoha* theory.

⁶ For a discussion of Dharmakīrti's combination of mental images and conceptualization, see Dunne 2004: 116–119.

⁷ For an excellent analysis on these verses, see Dunne 2007.

⁸ Ugliness is meditated upon in order to cultivate renunciation. The earth meditative base (*prthivī kṛtsna*) involves meditating on a disk of earth until the meditator can take control of the earth element. See Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa 1991: 111 and 118–264 respectively for a discussion of each.

⁹ *mi gtsang zad par sa la sogs/ /yang dag min pa'ang bsgoms pa yi/ /stobs kyis sprul pa rtog med dang/ /gsal bar snang ba can du mthong/ /de phyir yang dag yang dag min/ /gang gang shin tu bsgoms gyur pa/ /bsgom pa yongs su rdzogs pa na/ /de gsal mi rtog blo 'bras can/* (Dharmakīrti n.d.: 129a). Also consulted in Sanskrit: *aśubhā prthivī kṛtsna-ādy-abhūtam api varṇyate | spaṣṭa-ābhaṃ nirvikalpaṃ ca bhāvanā-bala-nirmitam || tasmād bhūtam abhūtaṃ vā yad eva abhibhāvayate | bhāvanā-pariṇiṣpattau tat sphuṭa-akalpa-dhī-phalam ||* (Dharmakīrti 1972: verses 3.284–285).

mental image that attends it. If any concept—even those which represent “non-existing” things—can become vivid in this manner, then Dharmakīrti seems to suggest that meditation is a process of self-induced hallucination. Still, he seems to argue that not all hallucinations are equally fictitious. Specifically, meditation on the attendant mental image of the concept of No-Self must be a valid cognition (Skt. *pramāṇa*, Tib. *mtshad ma*) because that image is non-deceiving (Skt. *samvādin*, Tib. *mi bslu ba*) with respect to the goal of liberation.¹⁰ While that mental image does not represent a particular in the world—since although particulars do not have a Self, they do not instantiate No-Self as a property in a realist sense—it is still an authentic cause for enlightenment. When considering validity, the salvific capacity of the mental image of No-Self, thus trumps its failure to represent real particulars. This reading of Dharmakīrti aligns with his more general doctrine of causal efficacy (Skt. *arthakṛtyā*, Tib. *don byed*), wherein valid cognition is marked by its ability to achieve desired ends more so than its capacity to accurately represent. Thus, if the mental image of No-Self helps one achieve enlightenment, it is irrelevant whether it truly corresponds with the world.¹¹

2. Tsong kha pa: Real Concepts

Even when restricting himself to the viewpoint of Dharmakīrti’s school, Tsong kha pa did not feel comfortable abandoning the epistemological framework of reference in favor of pure pragmatism. Tsong kha pa, therefore, is not only charged with explaining how it is that universals or meditation upon them lead to desired ends, but how those universals accurately map onto reality. Tsong kha pa’s project here was carried forward by his successors in the Dge lugs school. Georges Dreyfus thus calls their position “moderate realism,” given their insistence that universals are not purely fictional entities. Neither, however, do they argue—as the Naiyāyikas do—that universals exist independently from the particulars that instantiate them. Universals are moderately real, impossible to disentangle from the objects to which they belong, yet equally impossible to substantiate independent of those particulars.¹² Because objects can be said to instantiate

¹⁰ Tib. *de la sngar bshad dngos po bzhin/ /bslu ba med can gang yin de/ /bsgoms byung mngon sum tshad mar 'dod/ /lhag ma nye bar bslad pa yin/* Skt. *tatra pramāṇaṃ samvādi yat prāṇa nirmāta-vastu-vat | tad-bhāvanāṃ pratyakṣam iṣṭaṃ śeṣā upaplavāḥ* || (Dharmakīrti n.d.: 129b and Dharmakīrti 1972: verse 3.286).

¹¹ See Dunne 2007. However, Dharmakīrti’s later commentators do not similarly eschew the issue of reference.

¹² Dreyfus 1997: 179–182.

universals in a robust sense, Tsong kha pa does not have to opt for Dharmakīrti's pragmatism, which affords universals a teleological role, but undermines their veridical correspondence with the world. This reformulation of universals has significant ramifications for Tsong kha pa's analysis of yogic perception.

The source for Tsong kha pa's view on yogic perception comes from his *Notes on the Perception Chapter* (Tib. *Mngon sum le'u'i brjed byang*), a commentary on the perception chapter of Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavarttika* composed from notes that Rgyal tshab rje Dar ma rin chen (1364–1432) purportedly took from an oral teaching on the subject given by his teacher. The relevant section concerns the taxonomy of universals (*spyi mtshan*) and particulars (*rang mtshan*). Tsong kha pa argues that within Dharmakīrti's system, there is no possible third ontological category. An interlocutor argues that an illusion—in this case, a falling hair (*skra shad*), what today we call “eye floaters”—fits into neither of these two categories. Why? “When a falling hair appears clearly, it is not a particular, since it has no causal efficacy, nor is it a universal, since it appears clearly, and there is not some other type of clear appearance it could be.”¹³ Despite this, Tsong kha pa insists, “there is no necessity that [the falling hair] is some third type of object.” Tsong kha pa gives the following rationale:

The falling hair is not an object. If the falling hair were an object, then we would have to assert that an object exists however it appears (*snang*) as per its linguistic sign (*brda la byang*), and, similarly, there would be no need to establish its existence with reference to a conceived object (*zhen*). Therefore, while we deny that a falling hair appearing to a sense consciousness plagued with apparitions of falling hairs is an object, what about the knowledge of the *appearance* of a falling hair? We do not deny that the mental image of the appearance of a falling hair is an object.¹⁴

In other words, only an *existing* thing must be either a universal or a particular. Falling hairs, by contrast, are not objects, and thus there is no necessity they fit into either category. Tsong kha pa uses the novel Tibetan distinction between appearing object (*snang yul*) and conceived object (*zhen yul*) to substantiate why falling hairs are illusory

¹³ *skra shad sogs gsal bar snang ba'i tshe skra shad de nyid rang mtshan ma yin te/ don byed mi nus pa'i phyir ro/ spyi mtshan ma yin te/ gsal bar snang ba'i phyir dang/ gsal ba gzhan la rjes 'gro mi byed pa'i phyir/* (Tsong kha pa 1999a: 346).

¹⁴ *phung gsum du thal mi 'gyur ro/ skra shad de nyid yul ma yin te/ yul yin na brda la byang bas gang du snang ba de nyid du grub par mos shing zhen dgos pa la de ltar ma grub pa'i phyir/ 'dir ni skra shad 'dzag snang gi dbang shes la snang ba'i skra shad nyid yul yin pa 'gog pa yin gyi/ skra shad du snang ba shes sam/ skra shad du snang ba'i nam pa yul yin pa 'gog pa ma yin no/* (Ibid: 347).

and unreal. Namely, while their appearance *qua* a mental image exists, that appearance *qua* the conceived falling hairs themselves—that is, in reference to their actually being falling hairs—is false.¹⁵ We also see Tsong kha pa drawing on Dharmakīrti’s discussion of yogic perception, where he argued that there can be a clear appearance of an object, “whether existing or non-existing.” As Tsong kha pa notes, though a concept as designated by its linguistic sign may appear (*snang*), this appearance in and of itself is insufficient to substantiate the existence of its referent. If it were, any clear appearance of some linguistic object (*brda la byang*) would necessitate that object’s existence. While such appearances *qua* appearances exist, they fail to do so *qua* their conceived objects, which do not exist. It is this latter criterion of the conceived object that differentiates illusions from accurate cognitions.

In other words, Tsong kha pa, like Dharmakīrti, argues that clear appearances are not limited to existing or non-existing objects. The yogin, for example, can develop both.¹⁶ There is disagreement, however, about what it means for such an appearance to be accurate. While Dharmakīrti forgoes the question of whether appearances accurately refer, arguing that it is pragmatically irrelevant, Tsong kha pa avails himself of an explanatory framework foreign to Dharmakīrti in order to incorporate reference: the distinction between an appearing (*snang yul*) and conceived object (*zhen yul*).¹⁷ The introduction of these two concepts radically reformulates Dharmakīrti under a type of correspondence theory—that the truth of appearances is determined by the felicity of their representation of some conceived object, not merely their pragmatic efficacy in achieving desired ends.

Dharmakīrti, in fact, would argue that appearances invariably fail with respect to their conceived object, hallucination, or otherwise. On his theory of momentariness, cognition of an object never occurs simultaneously with the object itself, which (as momentary) has disappeared by the time it appears to consciousness. The object as conceived—that real object that is thought still to be “out there” when it appears—ceases to exist by the time it appears. This is why reference is irrelevant in light of causal efficacy: the real object has a causal relationship with cognition but can never be its object proper, and so cognition can never represent an existing object. Thus, differentiating the validity of cognitions in relation to their conceived object is

¹⁵ This statement is not uncontroversial. Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251), by contrast, denies that invalid cognitions can have real appearances. See Stoltz 2006.

¹⁶ One famous story of a yogin meditating on an unreal object is found in Tā ra nā tha 1994: 113–114, where he meditated that he had horns on his head to the point that they were so convincing he could not fit out the entrance of his cave.

¹⁷ See Dreyfus 1997: 384–385 for a discussion.

vacuous, since all cognitions involve appearances of conceived objects that no longer exist.¹⁸ Even more than this, the conceived object is a conceptual entity and therefore unreal per Dharmakīrti. If we restrict the analysis to correspondence, falling hairs are not uniquely false with respect to a conceived object, since all objects so conceived fail to represent reality by virtue of being conceptual. The question for Dharmakīrti is whether such false concepts are effective.

According to Tsong kha pa, on the other hand, the conceived object is not a categorical representational fiction. Even though this conceived object is conceptual, concepts only misrepresent the *manner* in which an object exists—superimposing permanence and a Self. They can be valid to the degree they accurately correspond with *what* that object is—a chair, a table, etc. This accurate correspondence is in turn predicated on the existence of spatio-temporally extended objects which the conceived object correctly captures, albeit failing insofar as it makes such objects appear permanent and endowed with a Self.¹⁹ The falling hair, by contrast, is an illusion because its conceived object fails in a second regard: not only is it a reification, but it fails to correspond with any actual hairs. In other words, accurate conceptualization is nondeceptive (*mi bslu ba*) in a manner that conceiving of falling hairs is not, even though both involve a reification error (*'khrul pa*).

The introduction of appearing objects and conceived objects gives Tsong kha pa a method for differentiating false conceptual cognitions—like that of falling hairs—from veridical ones—that of chairs, etc. Again, this strategy relies on some notion of those cognitions accurately or failing to correspond with real spatio-temporally extended objects—correctly conceived real universals. But this strategy now creates a new issue for Tsong kha pa. Since it seems suspiciously like the falling hair, how can the universal perceived in yogic perception cogently be part of the world? Like the falling hair, it cannot be a causally effective particular, since it is a negative property. Nor, however, can it be a universal, because it too appears clearly in yogic perception. Unlike the falling hair, however, No-Self cannot be a non-object, since this would entail that the fundamental Buddhist truth does not exist. While Dharmakīrti bites the bullet on this, arguing whether No-Self is “real” is pragmatically irrelevant, Tsong kha pa’s reliance on correspondence to real universals precludes this dismissal.

Tsong kha pa actually gives two solutions, one from the perspective of the Cittamātra (Sems tsam pa) school and another from the Sautrantika (Mdo sde pa) perspective. He first sets up the problem.

¹⁸ See a convincing argument from Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507) on this point in Dreyfus 1997: 384–385.

¹⁹ See an explanation of Dge lugs pa realism in this regard in Ibid: 322–326.

Concerning whether this presentation of the two epistemic instruments [as having particulars and universals as their respective objects] is from the perspective of only the Sautrantika or is compatible with Cittamātra, it cannot be the first. From the lower [school (Sautrantika) on up], the reality of the two Emptinesses [of persons and phenomena] are thoroughly settled. Thus, [both schools] have to explain how the enumeration of the two epistemic instruments is encompassed by nonconceptual yogic perception. Furthermore, this must be the case, since [Cittamātra] does not give any alternate explanation, and the Unchanging Absolute (*'gyur med yongs grub*) [...] is definitive on its own.²⁰

Again, Tsong kha pa recapitulates the issue of universals and particulars concerning yogic perception. The Cittamātra and Sautrantika schools share a similar hurdle. Both are committed to the exclusivity of perception's apprehension of particulars and inference's apprehension of universals. Therefore, both must also explain how a seeming universal is the object of yogic perception, such that the knowledge produced by these two epistemic instruments is encompassed (*ya gyal du bsdus pa*) by yogic perception's insight.

Tsong kha pa next signals that he is addressing the issue from the side of Cittamātra by mentioning the "Unchanging Absolute" (*'gyur med yongs grub*). This hails from the doctrine of the three natures (Skt. *trisvabhāva*, Tib. *mtshan nyid gsum*). The last of these, the Absolute (Skt. *pariniṣpanna*, Tib. *yongs grub*), describes Emptiness²¹ in this school. As the object of yogic perception, the Absolute further exacerbates the problem, given that it is unchanging (*'gyur med*), which is antithetical to being a causally effective particular. How, then, can it be the object of yogic perception? Tsong kha pa raises this objection and offers a clarification:

Someone might object that while from the perspective common to both schools, the Unchanging Absolute has no causal efficacy, the Cittamātrin does not concur that it is a universal, and this is unreasonable. However, the Vijñāptimātrin²² does not agree that if something is unable to perform a function that it is necessarily a

²⁰ *gal te tshad ma gnyis kyi grangs nges bsgrub pa'i rnam gzhas 'di dag mdo sde pa kho na'i dbang du byas sam/ sems tsam pa dang thun mong ba'i dbang du byas pa yin/ dang po mi rigs tel 'og nas gnyis stong gi de kho na nyid rgyas par gtan la 'bebs pas de mngon sum du rtogs pa'i rnal 'byor mngon sum dbye ba'i ya gyal du bsdus pa'i tshad ma gnyis kyi grangs nges 'chad dgos shing/ de'ang skabs 'di ma gtogs gzhan du ma bshad pa'i phyir dang [...]* *'gyur med yongs grub la'ang nges par tshang ba'i phyir ro/* (Tsong kha pa 1999a: 346).

²¹ Emptiness (*stong pa nyid*) and No-Self (*bdag med dpa*) are both objects of yogic perception and as negative properties similarly problematic.

²² Cittamātrin (*sems tsam pa*) and Vijñāptimātrin (*rnam rig pa*) are synonymous here.

universal, nor that if it can, it is necessarily a particular. While [in the Vijñāptimātrin system] the Unchanging Absolute [...] is truly established, here we are concerned with the perspective of Sautrantika alone, and not the uncommon perspective of Vijñāptimātra.²³

In other words, someone might assume that the Cittamātrin's position is untenable, since they deny that an unchanging entity, like Emptiness, is a universal, and thus argue that it is a proper object of perception. However, in that school, that the Absolute is unchanging and unable to perform a function does *not* necessitate that it is a universal. In other words, despite being unchanging, the Absolute can still be a particular and an appropriate object of yogic perception.²⁴

Notice that Dharmakīrti can sidestep this issue entirely. If the *mental image* of the Absolute cultivated in yogic perception leads to liberation, then this is sufficient. There is no need for that image to correspond with any *actual* Absolute *qua* universal or particular, and indeed, due to momentariness, mental images will invariably fail to correspond. Other schools similarly eschew the issue of reference per the Absolute, arguing that a theory of mental images entails that ultimately the mind cognizes itself and that this self-cognition constitutes yogic perception of the Absolute.²⁵ But Tsong kha pa forgoes this strategy.²⁶ He wants to demonstrate that the Absolute *itself*—not just its mental image—is a particular, seemingly so that yogic perception—which, as a type of perception, can only cognize particulars—corresponds with a robust object. In fact, later Dge lugs pa scholars understood mental images not as mental pictures that *represent* objects, but (in the case of cognizing real objects) as the direct cognition of external objects

²³ *gnyis ka'i thun mong ba'i dbang du byas na'ang 'gyur med yongs grub don byed mi nus pa yin yang spyi mtshan du sems tsam pa khas mi len zhing mi rigs pa'i phyir zhe nal rnam rig pas don byed mi nus pa la spyi mtshan gyis khab pa dang/ rang mtshan la don byed nus pas khyab pa khas mi len zhing [...] 'gyur med yongs grub la'ang grub pa bden yang skabs 'dir ni mdo sde pa kho na'i dbang du byas pa yin gyi rnam rig pa'i thun mong ma yin pa'i lugs ston pa'i dbang du ma byas te/* (Tsong kha pa 1999a: 346).

²⁴ I am grateful to Dge bshes Blo bzang tshul khriims at the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies who explained to me this unique feature in Tsong kha pa's understanding of the Cittamātra school (personal communication, December 12, 2019).

²⁵ Such a view is found among Sa skya and Bka' bryud thinkers. See Dreyfus 1997: 412–415.

²⁶ The Dge lugs pa rejection of self-cognition (*rang rig*) in Prasaṅgika seems, thus, to bleed into the discussion here. But there are parallels to this debate even within Yogācāra, specifically between those who consider mental images unreal (Skt. *alīkākaravāda*, Tib. *rnam rdzun pa*) and real (Skt. *satyākāravāda*, Tib. *rnam ldan pa*) respectively. Namely, the issue is whether mental images are objects of consciousness, which is thus not *just* self-cognizant, or not, meaning all duality between mind and its object is illusory. See Kajiyama 1965: 31.

themselves.²⁷ Based on a similar understanding that mental images are transparent to external objects, Tsong kha pa forecloses an appeal to mental images as nonreferential entities. Otherwise, if mental images were not transparent to non-mental objects, their status as mental entities and their role in perception would be sufficient to establish yogic perception as a type of self-cognition. Instead, in the same way, Tsong kha pa differentiates illusions from accurate cognitions by way of their correspondence with a veritable conceived object, so too does he feel compelled to demonstrate yogic perception's accurate correspondence with an actual Absolute in order to substantiate its validity.

What, then, about the Sautrāntika perspective? Tsong kha pa continues:

From that [Sautrāntika] perspective, yogic perception encounters the Selflessness of persons (*gang zag gi bdag med*) implicitly and explicitly apprehends the causally effective particular. Therefore, it says [in Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*] that "yogins see just the object, unmixed with the guru's instructions."²⁸ [...] The Unchanging Absolute realized by yogic perception, [by contrast], is an explicit realization and is *not* realized implicitly.²⁹

Here, the strategy is decisively different. Sautrāntika preserves the mutual entailment of causal efficacy and particular. Thus, the object of yogic perception must be a causally effective particular. Selflessness (*bdag med*), by contrast, is a negative entity, and so cannot be an object of perception. How, then, does yogic perception realize Selflessness? Tsong kha pa answers, "implicitly (*shugs rtogs*)."³⁰ Through apprehending the particular free of reification, the yogin subsequently realizes that there can be no Self. But No-Self is not the direct object of yogic perception. Yogic perception takes No-Self as an object implicitly, since the recognition of particulars as ultimately real precludes attributions of Self. This introduction of implicit cognition into Dharmakīrti's system is likely a Tibetan invention.³¹ But in Tsong

²⁷ Dreyfus 1997: 408.

²⁸ See footnote 4.

²⁹ *de'i dbang du byas na gang zag gi bdag med 'jal ba'i rnal 'byor mngon sum gyis gang zag gi bdag med shugs rtogs dang/ dngos su dngos po rang mtshan gzung yul du byed pa yin te/ rnal 'byor rnam kyis bla mas bstan/ ma 'dres pa yi don tsam mthong/ zhes bshad pa dang [...]'gyur med yongs grub rtogs pa'i rnal 'byor mngon sum gyis ni dngos su rtogs pa yin gyi shugs la rtogs pa ma yin no/* (Tsong kha pa 1999a: 346).

³⁰ See Dreyfus 1997: 370–373 for a lucid explanation of how Dge lugs uses the notion of implicit cognition to explain how perception perceives conceptual entities.

³¹ Rong ston (1367–1449), following Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251), understands the notion of implicit cognition as a Tibetan invention. See Rong ston 2011: 202–207.

kha pa's formulation, it allows for yogic perception's not perceiving a universal, only the momentary particular.

However, even if this (somewhat dubiously) explains epistemologically how yogic perception can realize No-Self, an ontological question still remains. That is, even if yogic perception can implicitly realize a universal, in what sense does this universal exist? How is it that the cognition of universals—implicitly or otherwise—accurately represents reality? For this question, we turn to another of Tsong kha pa's works, his *Extensive Notes on Valid Cognition* (Tib. *Tshad ma'i brjed byang chen mo*). He first articulates the by-now-familiar problem with universals.

Firstly, though we regard universal and particular [...], positive and negative entities [...], etc., as mentally imputed [distinctions], if we thus similarly concede that if something is a universal it is necessarily imagined and permanent, then the common instrumental actions we necessarily engage in in order to achieve our aims and those very goals themselves on which our hearts are set—be it omniscience or whatever—would refer to nothing. If that were the case, then a host of problems occur [...]. Specifically, if we argue that the determinate objects of the conceptualization of a vase—[a negative entity]—and the determinate realization of all things in omniscience, etc.—[positive entities]—are both particulars, then, since those conceptualizations are no longer erring (*ma 'khrul pa*), all negative and positive entities would have to occur simultaneously [rather than in succession from perception to conceptualization]. If we deny that they are particulars, then it is difficult to explain how we engage with particulars at all.³²

Tsong kha pa rearticulates the problem of universals. That is, if they are actually real particulars, Dharmakīrti's system dissolves. It is integral to Dharmakīrti's epistemology that the inference of concepts occurs based on and thus after perception. This condition is even reflected in the etymologies of both the Sanskrit and Tibetan words for "inference"— *anumāna* and *rjes dpag*—where the prefix "*anu-*" and "*rjes*" both denote "after." If universals are particulars, they would be apprehended within and not after perception. On the other hand, if they are pure fictions, then they have no relationship with reality, e.g.,

³² *dang po ni/ spyi dang bye phrag dang [...] dgag pa dang/ sgrub pa [...] la sogs pa rnams rtogs pas sgras btas su bshad pa'ang mthong zhing/ spyi yin na sgro btas yin pas khyab pa dang de gzhiin du rtags sogs pa'ang khab nal/ 'bras bu don gnyer la nye bar mkho ba'i don byed nus pa phal pa rnams dang/ mngon por 'dod pa'i don gyi gtso bo kun mkhyen la sogs pa'i rnam gzhas bya sa med par 'gyur la/ de ltar na mi rung ba chen por 'gyur bas/ [...] khyed par du bum 'dzin rtog pa dang kun mkhyen nges pa'i rtogs pa la sogs pa'i nges yul rang mtshan du grub na rtog pa de dag ma 'khrul bar 'gyur bas dgag sgrub thams cad cig car bya dgos pa dang nges yul rang mtshan du grub pa bkag na rang mtshan de dag nges pa'i yul du 'jog tshul de dag shin tu dka' [...]* (Tsong kha pa 1975: 183–184).

real particulars, and all conceptual reasoning is delusional. The question is then how to keep universals and particulars sufficiently distinct per Dharmakīrti's system yet sufficiently related so that the former is based on the truth of the latter. Tsong kha pa notes that if we have no ability to ascertain particulars via universals, then we could not reason about the ultimate nature of things. The absurdum would result that "because grasping at a Self would not be in error, we would have to conclude liberation is not possible."³³

Tsong kha pa offers a somewhat mind-bending solution. In essence, though universals *themselves* are fictions, they still cogently refer to particulars.

Though all of conventional reality is mere conceptual imputation, it is assuredly epistemically warranted. All functional entities, [on the other hand], are established as particulars. *To deny this formulation of the two truths is to grasp as contradictory the fact that although the object of conceptualization is not a particular, the particular is an object of conceptualization* [emphasis added]. [...] In this [Pramāṇavāda] system, although being conceptually imputed necessitates not being a functional entity, if you believe that it also necessitates that it is not established by valid cognition, then this would fundamentally reject any means of ascertainment. Thus, the division of the two truths is to be explained in this manner [...]³⁴

Tom Tillemans identifies that Tsong kha pa's position here builds off an older Gsang phu tradition, in which although conceptual universals themselves are reifications, *the things that are those universals* are not necessarily reifications—*spyi sgro btags pa yin, spyi yin na sgro btags yin pas ma khyab*.³⁵ By employing this innovation, Tsong kha pa solves the ontological disconnect between No-Self as a universal and the real world as only populated by particulars. In his system, it is not contradictory that particulars robustly—not merely as a mental fabrication—instantiate universals, despite the fact that conceptual thinking itself fails to perceive beyond that universal to the particular. We could think of this almost like a one-way mirror. The particular has a transparent relationship to the universal. But when we use inference

³³ *gang zag gi bdag 'dzin yang blo ma 'khrul bar 'gyur bas thar pa thob pa'ang mi srid pa babs blang dgos so/* (See Rong ston 2011: 188).

³⁴ *kun rdzob mtha' dag rtog btags tsam du rang lugs la tshad mas legs par grub pa dang dngos po thams cad rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub par 'jog shes pa'i bden gnyis kyi rnam dbye 'jog shes pa'i gegs ni rtog pa'i yul rang mtshan ma yin pa dang rang mtshan rtog pa'i yul yin pa gnyis 'gal bar 'dzin pa nyid yin no [...] rigs pa 'di'i lugs la rtog btags tsam la don byed mi nus pas khyab kyang tshad mas ma grub pas khyab par bzung na rigs pa 'di nges pa'i gegs kyi gts'o po yin pas bden gnyis kyi nam dbye la mkhas par bya ste [...]* (Ibid: 188–189).

³⁵ Tillemans 1999: 215–216.

to conceptualize the universal, it occludes the particular. Thus, Tsong kha pa solves both the perceptual and ontological problems of yogic perception. Namely, although perception is only implicitly related to universals epistemologically, universals themselves have a robust ontological relationship to the real particulars of the world.

However, this is not to say that Tsong kha pa relegates his discussion of yogic perception only to the cultivation of appearances that appropriately refer. He also recognizes benefit in the vivid appearance of purely fictional entities, like that of the falling hair. The next and final section explores how Tsong kha pa argues that even the cultivation of hallucinations can have soteriological value.

3. *Tsong kha pa: Tantric Concepts*

Tsong kha pa does not reserve yogic perception purely for those perceptions that correctly refer, nor does he completely jettison the soteriological value of the cultivation of false appearances. In particular, he seems to afford them a role in his formulation of the tantric Creation Stage (Skt. *utpatti-krama*, Tib. *bskyed rim*). In his *Great Treatise on the Tantric Stages* (Tib. *Sngags rim chen mo*), Tsong kha pa heavily relies on the *Pramāṇavarttika* in his chapter on that topic and the utilization of yogic perception therein, specifically citing the same verses 3.284–285 we explored earlier. Commenting on the first verse, he writes:

Although the Sugatas say this in scripture, some heretics, who assert that renunciation and freedom are impossible, disavow any instance that demonstrates the feasibility of yogic perception. Since this objection is pervasive, there is also—for the sake of the opponent—an analysis of the fundamental proposition that people like *aryas*, etc., exist. Thus, [Dharmakīrti] intends the pursuit of mere habituation [when he says] that meditation on an object, whether veritable or false, will result in its clear appearance.³⁶

The “heretics” in this passage are most likely a reference to the *Mīmāṃsakas*, who (at least in the earliest strata) reject the possibility of meditative insight or liberation. Because they argue no authentic

³⁶ *zhes gsung rab las 'byung bar bshad pa'i bde bar gshegs pa'i gsung yang spangs par 'gyur zhing/ thar pa mi srid par 'dod pa'i phyi rol pa la rnal 'byor mngon sum 'byung rung du sgrub pa'i rtags kyi khab pa nges pa'i gzhir gyur pa'i dpe phyi rol pas kyang mi bsnyon pa la bsnyon bting bas gzhan sde la 'phags pa'i gang zag sogs yod par sgrub pa'i sgrub byed kyi rtsa ba bcad pa yang yin no/ des na goms yul la gsal snang 'ong ba la ni yang dag pa dang log pa'i don gang goms kyang 'dra ste goms pa tsam gyi rjes su byed pa la dgongs nas [...]* (Tsong kha pa 1999b: 548).

yogins exist—that only the *Vedas* and not any human can be an authoritative source of spiritual knowledge—the proof for yogic perception is purely hypothetical without an actual example, and thereby invalid. Tsong kha pa therefore subsequently offers a proof for yogins and their perceptions by extrapolating from verse 3.285 of the *Pramāṇavarttika*, explaining that the vivid appearance of an object can arise from its repeated conceptual mediation.

While Tsong kha pa's proof of yogins is fascinating in its own right, what concerns us here is how Tsong kha pa envisions the role of yogic perception in Creation Stage practice. Tsong kha pa makes its employment clear a little further on in the text, where he again quotes verse 3.285 of the *Pramāṇavarttika*, further elaborating:

I have already explained [...] that the mind will take on the mental image of whatever object to which it habituates. First, the beginner withdraws [the senses], and then, having amassed some familiarization, she grabs hold of [the meditative object: the deity]. While meditating to reinforce [this object], she visualizes each and every aspect in detail. [Then], outside of solely imagining that mental image [of the deity], she is to cultivate a powerful mental certainty [of being that deity], since both the clear mental image and divine pride are necessary.³⁷

Tsong kha pa therefore understands yogic perception as the means by which one accomplishes the Creation Stage. It is a meditative practice that culminates in the deity's appearing clearly, as if real. This is associated with the conviction that the meditator herself is also the deity, which is described as "divine pride" (*lha'i nga rgyal*).

However, while Tsong kha pa argued that yogic perception of the Unchanging Absolute constituted perception of a real object—i.e., that it was not *merely* a mental image—Tsong kha pa makes no such concession here. He first explains that the mental appearance of the deity in meditation is not the same as an actual sensorial one.

When one has steady Deity Yoga thorough intense habituation [and there is a clear appearance of the deity], there is no other appearance to visual consciousness, or to the rest [of the sense consciousnesses]. Because the mental consciousness needs to be fully engaged with its object, the power of the conditions [for meditation] is diminished as soon as the visual or other consciousnesses arise. Therefore, no other appearance, such as that of colors, etc., comes to mind [other than that

³⁷ [...] *yid dngos po gang dang gang la sbyar ba de dang de'i rnam par 'gyur ba* [...] *gsungs te sngar drangs zin to/ de la las dang po pas ni sbyor ba tshogs bsag nas bzung ste nye bar bsdu ba'i bar rnam sgom pa na re re nas zhib tu gsal btob nas sgom pa dang rnam pa shar ba tsam min par blo'i nges pa'i 'dzin stangs shugs can bskyed nas bya ste/ rnam pa gsal ba dang nga rgyal 'dzin pa gnyis ka dgos pa'i phyir rol/ (Tsong kha pa 1999b: 582–583).*

of the deity], since those [sense consciousnesses] are not operative at that time. However, this does not mean that the Creation Stage negates [those sensory] appearances.³⁸

In other words, cognition of sensory appearances hinders meditation, and so they cannot operate in tandem; mental consciousness alone apprehends the meditative object. Again, Tsong kha pa makes use of Dharmakīrti in making this point, citing *Pramāṇavarttika* verse 2.112cd: “Attached to another object, the mind has no power, because it can grasp nothing else.”³⁹ This is not just a minor point over which mental apparatus grasps a meditative object. Tsong kha pa notes that the fact that one cannot be aware of sensory appearances during meditation does not mean the Creation Stage negates the sensory world itself, which would be solipsistic indeed. As a corollary, he argues that because this meditative object is purely the domain of mental consciousness, and not of the sense consciousnesses, its actuality is precluded. He thus follows with:

Therefore, when one achieves the power to stop ordinary appearances at the level of mental consciousness through the exceptional appearances [of the deity], one gains what is necessary. *Although one will not have reached the deity in reality* [emphasis added], even when the uncontrived pride of the deity arises, one gains what is necessary thereby.⁴⁰

Tsong kha pa is therefore careful to distinguish the clear appearance of the deity to mental consciousness from having “reached the deity in reality.” The appearance of the deity is thus like the falling hair. It is real as an appearance and mental image to mental consciousness, but false in terms of its referent: an actual falling hair or actual deity, as corroborated by the sense consciousnesses. Although the appearance of the deity to mental consciousness is soteriologically effective toward eliminating ordinary appearances, it fails to represent reality, a reality that Tsong kha pa argues remains a fact of the matter despite

³⁸ *goms pa che bas lha'i rnal 'byor la mnyam par bzhag pa na mig gi shes pa la sogs pa'i snang ba gzhan mi 'char ba ni/ yid kyi shes pa don de la rjes su zhugs dgos pas mig la sogs pa'i shes pa skye ba'i de ma thag rkyen gyi nus pa nyams pas de dag re zhig ma skyes pas kha dog la sogs pa'i snang ba gzhan ma shar ba yin gyi snang ba de dag bskyed rim gyis bkag pa min tel* (Tsong kha pa 1999b: 574–575).

³⁹ *[rnam shes don gzhan chags pa yis/ nus med don gzhan mi 'dzin phyir/* (Dharmakīrti n.d.: 111b).

⁴⁰ *des na khyad par can gyi snang bas yid shes kyi ngor tha mal pa'i snang ba 'gog pa'i nus pa thob na des dgos pa 'grub la dngos po la lhar ma song yang lha'i bcos min gyi nga rgyal skyes na'ang des dgos pa 'grub bo/* (Tsong kha pa 1999b: 575).

appearances.⁴¹

4. Back to Dharmakīrti: Dualistic Concepts

Tsong kha pa thus seems to afford two distinct roles for yogic perception: the first is to generate a clear and vivid appearance of meditational objects that actually exist—such as the Unchanging Absolute—and the second to cultivate other appearances that do not—like of oneself as a deity—both of which are soteriologically advantageous. Dharmakīrti himself, it seems, would be suspect of this distinction. The disparity between him and Tsong kha pa here is put all the more in relief by a glaring difference between the Tibetan and Sanskrit editions of the *Pramāṇavarttika*. While Tsong kha pa's citation of verse 2.112cd from the Tibetan is correctly attested in the Sde dge Bstan 'gyur and translated above—"Attached to another object, the mind has no power, because it can grasp nothing else"—the Sanskrit edition puts this hemistich closer to: "When consciousness is defiled with attachment to another object, it is because it grasps no other object [but itself]."⁴² Prajñākaragupta's (750–810) commentary confirms the reading:

By no means does seeing [the illusion of] a subject influenced by an object arise through some interceding, sudden [effect] other than conceptualizations, which are the mental impressions of an obstructed

⁴¹ Elsewhere, however, Tsong kha pa does argue that these exceptional appearances are definitively valid epistemic warrants (*tshad ma*) because they undo Self-grasping. See Tsong kha pa 1999b: 609–610. On the other hand, because they are valid with respect to hindering Self-grasping, it is not necessarily the case that they are also valid with respect to reference. In other words, as an inversion of conventional appearances, they may be correct per *how* things exist but not per *what* exists. Again, the representational content of appearances and their representation of that content's existence are distinct questions for Tsong kha pa.

⁴² *anya-artha-āsakti-vigūṇe jñāne anartha-antara-grahāt* || (Dharmakīrti 1972: verse 2.112). Also consulted Prajñākaragupta 1998: verse 2.113. The discrepancy with the Tibetan (see note 39) is somewhat bewildering. "Āsakti" may have been misrendered "aśakti" in the Tibetan *nus med*, but does seem correctly translated as *chags pa*. If so, then *nus med* may be *vigūṇa*, which is a slightly strange translation choice, since *yon tan med pa* or some variant would be more standard. The Tibetan phrase *don gzhan mi 'dzin phyir* would be more appropriately *artha-antara-agrahāt* in Sanskrit, as in, "it does not grasp another object," but *anartha-antara-grahāt* more felicitously means "it grasps something which is not another object." Finally, the Tibetan trades the locative *jñāne*, which denotes a conditional, for an instrumental, also significantly changing the meaning.

consciousness. Thus, [subject and object] come from consciousness alone.⁴³

In other words, Dharmakīrti does not simply mean that mental and sensory appearances cannot be simultaneous, but that the very notion that some appearances represent external sensory objects is false. The disparity between the Sanskrit and Tibetan here serendipitously traces Tsong kha pa's deviation from Dharmakīrti's thought. Tsong kha pa understands this verse to mean that sensory and mental appearances are mutually exclusive only with respect to consciousness; it is not the case that "that the Creation Stage negates appearances" in the world writ large. Their mutual exclusivity is epistemological, not ontological. This is consistent with Tsong kha pa's larger framework that differentiates appearances and their referents. The cessation of certain appearances' presence in consciousness does not necessitate the elimination of their referents, no more than the appearance of oneself as a deity necessitates actually being a deity.

The Sanskrit reflects Dharmakīrti's rejection of representationalism. That is, the notion that there is some referent to appearances is a confusion, since the mind is actually grasping itself when it thinks it apprehends an external object. On this understanding, the question of what appearances accurately refer is simply ill-formed. As long as they are tainted with conceptualization, appearances *never* accurately represent the world. Appearances thus categorically fail as an ontology, and the distinction between valid and invalid appearances based on reference is vacuous. One wonders what Dharmakīrti would have to say about Creation Stage practice in general.

The issue of appearances and the degree to which there is a distinct reality that they represent accords with the larger theme of this paper: universals and the degree to which they correspond with the world. Dharmakīrti argues that conceptual universals and even their attendant mental image particulars are not accurate representations. Nonetheless, the appearance of certain mental images in yogic perception can have a powerful soteriological effect. Tsong kha pa, on the other hand, wants a more robustly true object for yogic perception. Universals, including Buddhist truths, are thus part and parcel of reality. There is no need for pragmatist apologetics to justify their being objects of yogic perception.

⁴³ *na khalu vyavahita-vijñāna-vāsanā-vikalpānām anyena avāntara-upanipātīnā śakti-
viśaya-viśayena* udayas drśyate | tatas vijñānāt ekakam vā [...]* (Prajñākaragupta 1998:
verse 2.113). *The edition gives the genitive *viśayiṇaḥ* as another reading, which
seems more accurate here.

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