

## RECOGNIZING REALITY

181.043  
D998

SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies  
Matthew Kapstein, editor

# RECOGNIZING REALITY

*Dharmakīrti's Philosophy  
and Its Tibetan Interpretations*

Georges B. J. Dreyfus

State University of New York Press

835887

Published by  
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 1997 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press  
State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246

Production by Dana Foote  
Marketing by Dana E. Yanulavich

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dreyfus, Georges.

Recognizing reality : Dharmakīrti's philosophy and its Tibetan interpretations / Georges B. J. Dreyfus.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in Buddhist studies)

ISBN 0-7914-3097-9 (hc : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-7914-3098-7 (pb : alk. paper)

1. Dharmakīrti, 7th cent. 2. Buddhist logic. 3. Buddhism—China—Tibet—Doctrines. I. Title. II. Series.

B133.D484D74 1997

181'.043—dc20

96-14258  
CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments	xi
Technical Notes	xv
Introduction I. A Few Methodological Considerations Purpose and Content • The Commentarial Style of Indian and Tibetan Philosophical Traditions • Scholarly Context • The Hermeneutical Significance of Comparison • The Structure of the Work	1
Introduction II. Dharmakīrti's Tradition in India and Tibet The Epistemological Turn in Indian Philosophy • The Place of Dharmakīrti in Indian Buddhism • Dharmakīrti's Tradition in Tibet • Foundation of the Sa-gya Scholastic Tradition • A Conflict of Interpretations • Sa-gya Commentators • The Rise of the Ge-luk Tradition • The Origin and Significance of Sectarian Divisions	15

### BOOK ONE. ONTOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

#### PART I. ONTOLOGY

CHAPTER 1 <b>Ontology and Categories</b> Indian Philosophy and the <i>Pramāṇa</i> Method • Epistemology and Ontological Commitments • Indian Schools of Philosophy • Nyāya Realism and the Importance of Categories • The Meanings of <i>Realism</i> • Nyāya Realism and the Status of Wholes • Dharmakīrti's Critique of Substance	47
CHAPTER 2 <b>Dharmakīrti's Ontology</b> Momentariness and the Structure of Dharmakīrti's System • Dharmakīrti on Momentariness • Causal Nature of Reality • Dharmakīrti's Ontology and Its Relation to the Problem of Universals • Uncommonness and Identity Conditions	60
CHAPTER 3 <b>The Ambiguities of the Concept of Existence</b> The Problems of Dharmakīrti's Concepts of Existence • Sa-pan's Controversial Views on Existence • Defenses and Interpretations of Sa-pan	73

CHAPTER 4		
<b>The Purview of the "Real"</b>	Atomic Theory • An Alternate Interpretation • No Extended Object Can Be Real • Some Extended Objects Are Real • Extension in Space and Time • All Extended Objects Are Real • Who Is Right? • Yogācāra in Dharmakīrti's System • Is Dharmakīrti Contradicting Himself?	83
CHAPTER 5		
<b>Ge-luk Thinkers on Specific Ontology</b>	Commonsense Objects and Universals • Ge-luk Realism and Commonsense Objects • Realism and Momentariness • Philosophy and the Validity of Conventions • Realist Explanations of the Nature of the Specifically Characterized • Nominal Existence and Existence • A Partial Reconciliation • Conclusion	106
<b>PART II. THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS</b>		
CHAPTER 6		
<b>Introducing Universals</b>	Three Dimensions in the Problem of Universals • Antirealism and Its Varieties: Conceptualism and Nominalism • Extreme and Moderate Realisms and Their Predicaments • Realism in India • Moderate Realism in Indian Traditions • Why Bother with Universals?	127
CHAPTER 7		
<b>Dharmakīrti on Universals</b>	Logic and Ontology • Dharmakīrti's Arguments Against Realism • The Roles of Universals • Universals and Similarities • An Assessment of Resemblance Theory	142
CHAPTER 8		
<b>Sa-gya Antirealism and the Problems of Predication</b>	Sa-pan's Refutation of Realism • Śākya Chok-den on Predication • Predication and the Validity of Thought • Are Distinguishers Parts of Reality? • The Conceptual Nature of Individuations	154
CHAPTER 9		
<b>Ge-luk Realism</b>	Universals in the Collected Topics • One and Many • Arguments for Moderate Realism • Subject and Predicate • Philosophy and Linguistic Ambiguities	171
CHAPTER 10		
<b>Realism in Buddhist Tradition</b>	Two Early Tibetan Realists • Moderate Realism in Tibet and Madhyamaka • Moderate Realism in India • The Role of Universals in Inference • Conclusion	189
<b>PART III. PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE</b>		
CHAPTER 11		
<b>Introduction to <i>Apoha</i></b>	The History of <i>Apoha</i> and its Reception • Grammar and Philosophy of Language in India • Dignāga on <i>Apoha</i> • Hindu Reactions: the Mīmāṃsā View	205

CHAPTER 12		
<b>Dharmakīrti on Concept Formation</b>	Thought and Language • Two Definitions of Thought • The Negative Nature of Conceptuality • Formation of Concept • The Mistaken Nature of Concepts • Conclusion: Dharmakīrti's Response to the Hindu Critique	217
CHAPTER 13		
<b>The Concept of Negation and the Evolution of the <i>Apoha</i> Theory</b>	Are Negation and Elimination Equivalent? • Objective Elimination • Śāntarakṣita on Representations • The Evolution of the <i>Apoha</i> Theory • Ge-luk Views of Negations • Sa-gya Views on Negations	233
CHAPTER 14		
<b>Object Universal and Concept Formation</b>	Importance of the Notion of Object • Universal in the Tibetan Tradition • Object Universal in the Ge-luk Tradition • Object Universal in the Sa-gya Tradition • Comparative Conclusion	250
CHAPTER 15		
<b>Philosophy of Language</b>	The Terminology of the Inquiry • Ineffability • Dharmakīrti on Name and Reference • Signifier and Signified: A Sa-gya View • Moderate Realism and Language	261
<b>BOOK TWO. EPISTEMOLOGY</b>		
<b>PART I. VALID COGNITION</b>		
CHAPTER 16		
<b>Dharmakīrti's Epistemology of Valid Cognition</b>	Mental Terminology and the Mind-Body Problem • Knowledge and <i>Pramāṇa</i> • Defining <i>Pramāṇa</i> • The Epistemological Role of Language • Epistemological Typology	285
CHAPTER 17		
<b>Was Dharmakīrti a Pragmatist?</b>	Valid Cognition and Its Object • An Intentional Interpretation • The Requirement of Novelty • A Pragmatist Explanation of Nondeceptiveness • A Pragmatic Theory of Truth? • Reductionism and Intentionality	299
CHAPTER 18		
<b>Can Inference Be Valid?</b>	Dharmakīrti on the Validity of Thought • A Major Difficulty in Dharmakīrti's System • A Realist Answer • Conclusion	316
<b>PART II. PERCEPTION</b>		
CHAPTER 19		
<b>Philosophy of Perception</b>	Representationalism and Its Problems • Representationalism and Realism in Indian Philosophy • Aspects and Reflexivity • The Foundational Significance of Aspects	331

CHAPTER 20		
<b>Dharmakīrti's Account of Perception</b>	The Nyāya Theory of Perception • Dharmakīrti's Definition of Perception • Dharmakīrti's Arguments	345
CHAPTER 21		
<b>A New Epistemology Begins: Dharmottara on Perception</b>	Dharmottara as a Commentator and an Innovator • The Validity of Perception • Bridging the Gap Between Perception and Conception • Does Perception Determine Its Object?	354
CHAPTER 22		
<b>Tibetan New Epistemology</b>	Cha-ba's Epistemology of Perception • Ge-luk Views of Perception • Implicit and Explicit • Epistemological Typologies	365
CHAPTER 23		
<b>Cha-ba's Philosophy of Mind</b>	Cha-ba's Typology of Objects • Śākya Chok-den's Polemical Use of History • Critical Appraisal	379
CHAPTER 24		
<b>Sa-pan's Critique of the New Epistemology</b>	Sa-pan's Rejection of Cha-ba's Typology • The Case of Inattentive Cognition • Ascertainment Is Conceptual • Explicit and Implicit • Dharmakīrti's Problem and Sa-pan's Solution	389
CHAPTER 25		
<b>Perception and Apperception</b>	Dharmakīrti on the Self-Presencing of Mental States • Does Self-Cognition Have an Object? • Go-ram-ba's Representationalism • A Ge-luk Understanding of Dharmakīrti's Aspects • Representationalism, Realism, and Causal Theories • The Soteriological Implications of Apperception	400
CHAPTER 26		
<b>Are External Objects Perceptible?</b>	Are Objects Hidden or "Hidden"? • An Unstable Compromise: Go-ram-ba's Representationalism • The Difficulties of Representationalism • Are External Objects Inferred? • How Hidden Can "Hidden" Be?	416
CHAPTER 27		
<b>Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Religion</b>	Yogācāra in Dharmakīrti's Thought • True or False Aspect? • Śākya Chok-den on Yogācāra • The Importance of Yogācāra in Dharmakīrti's Thought • Philosophy and Soteriology in Dharmakīrti • Conclusion	428

<b>Conclusion: Philosophy as an Education of the Mind</b>	Realism and Antirealism as Interpretations • Philosophy as an Education • Epistemology and the Madhyamaka Critique • Prāsaṅgika and Epistemology: Dzong-ka-ba's Realism • Go-ram-ba's Suspicion of Language • Buddhist Epistemology as an Education	443
Notes		463
Glossary: Tibetan - Sanskrit - English		563
Glossary: Sanskrit - Tibetan - English		575
Bibliography		581
Author Index		603
Subject Index		611



## Dharmakīrti's Ontology

### *Momentariness and the Structure of Dharmakīrti's System*

Despite much disagreement among Buddhist philosophers concerning questions of ontology, they all agree on their rejection of the Nyāya extreme realism we just examined. In particular, Buddhist thinkers disapprove of the Nyāya ideas of substance. Buddhist thinkers do not distinguish substances from characteristics, arguing that this distinction does not reflect a necessary articulation of reality but is relevant only to the ways in which we conceptualize the world. Hence, the distinction between substance and quality does not exist independent of our conceptual activities. Against the Nyāya ontology of substance, Buddhists adopt an ontology of evanescent phenomena-events in which material objects are made of infinitesimal temporal parts in constant transformation. A jar, for example, being an aggregate of evanescent atomic constituent-events is itself momentary (*kṣaṇika*, *skad cig ma*). Hence, it has no continuity as a real substratum. Similarly, consciousness is a succession of moments of awareness.

In asserting the primacy of change, Buddhism differs not only from the Nyāya but from most traditions, both in India and the West. Thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Uddyotakara, Kumārila, and Śāṅkarācārya all consider being as the central philosophical notion in relation to which fleeting elements must be explained. They also understand being to imply the existence of stable and unchanging entities such as substance, universal, form, essence, and substratum. Buddhism, by contrast, holds that change is more fundamental to reality than stability. Like Heraclitus,<sup>1</sup> Buddhists think that everything is in perpetual motion. For the Buddhists, this denial of stability is not necessarily a denial of being but an assertion that being must be understood first and foremost as change.

This denial of enduring stability is clear in the doctrine of selflessness, which is at the center of Buddhist soteriology.<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist denial of the existence of real substances is a direct consequence of this most basic tenet. The view that all phenomena are selfless (*anātma*, *bdag med*) does not just refuse the existence of a personal soul but also denies the existence of any unifying principle such as the substance or whole, as accepted by the Nyāya and the Mīmāṃsā, or uni-

versal substratum, as accepted by the Sāṃkhya. Thus, the Buddhist theory of selflessness is fundamentally a denial of Hindu orthodox philosophical theory. This has led to a protracted debate between the two sides that has greatly vitalized the Indian philosophical tradition. Whereas Buddhist thinkers consider the Hindu view as the expression of the reification that binds human mind, their Hindu opponents consider the denial of self to be tantamount to nihilism.

Selflessness also has implications for the status of universals, a topic that is central to this book. The denial of a reified self is based on an inquiry into the nature of the person that manifests a suspicion toward any synthesizing unity over and above causal regularity. When one looks for the person among his or her components, the aggregates (*skandha*, *phung po*), one fails to find any unifying element. Hume expresses very well this view when he says, "For my part, when I enter into *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any 'thing' but the perception . . . I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement."<sup>3</sup> The presupposition of this inquiry is that, if the self exists, it must be findable among the components of the personality. Underlying this reasoning is the assumption that whatever is real must be an individual thing. If the self exists, it must be findable like the other components. In short, it must be a thing.

According to this view, the world is not made of enduring substances with changing qualities. Rather, change itself is the essence of reality. Things that appear to endure unchanged are, in fact, a succession of moments that arise and disappear in quick succession. Reality is made only of events that flash in and out of existence. Every real happening in the universe is due to the arising and disappearing of countless events that cause it. Even the continuity of things is due to successive phenomena-events that closely resemble each other. Each thing-event in passing away causes, in conjunction with other simultaneous moments, something that resembles it. Change is provided for in that the new thing comes into existence not only through the causal power of its chief cause but also through the influence of the entire causal complex. Nothing has causal power in isolation. This is the doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*, *rtēn 'byung*), a venerable doctrine in the history of Buddhist thought.

There are disagreements among Buddhist thinkers about the exact meaning of the doctrine of momentariness.<sup>4</sup> Some thinkers, often described as proponents of the Vaibhāṣika view, hold that momentariness is not incompatible with duration. Things are produced, endure and disappear. Vasubandhu (as well as other Buddhist thinkers often described as proponents of the Sautrāntika view), however, disagrees with this rather commonsensical view of change. He holds that no conditioned entity can endure more than a single moment, after which it stops existing. This is its disintegration (*vyaya*). Duration arises from the sequence of successive moments and has no other basis in reality. It is an illusion created by the succession

of similar moments. For Vasubandhu, things are momentary by their very nature and hence require nothing other than their production to disintegrate: "Destruction of things is spontaneous. Things perish by themselves, because it is their nature to perish. Since they perish by themselves, they perish as they are produced. Since they perish by themselves, they are momentary."<sup>5</sup> This view of reality as being in flux is at the heart of Dharmakīrti's philosophy. His whole system is based on the idea of reality understood as implying change and causal relation. Real things are not stable entities like Nyāya substances but, rather, they are momentary material or mental events arising in dependence on a number of previous momentary factors.

Around this view of reality, which is widely accepted among Buddhist thinkers, Dharmakīrti organizes his ontology, which rests on a dichotomy between the real, understood as changing and causally efficient, and the constructed, understood as unchanging, causally ineffective, and hence less real. This dyadic structure, which runs throughout Dharmakīrti's whole system, can be expressed through a number of binary oppositions: impermanence (*anitya, mi rtag pa*)/permanence (*nitya, rtag pa*), thing (*bhāva* or *vastu, dngos po*)/nonthing (*abhāva, dngos med*), specifically characterized phenomena (*svalakṣaṇa, rang mtshan*)/generally characterized phenomena (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa, spyi mtshan*).<sup>6</sup> These oppositions yield several equivalencies, which are fundamental to Dharmakīrti's system: "thing," "impermanent," and "specifically characterized phenomenon" are equivalent terms. They designate real entities that are constantly changing, causally effective and individuated according to strict identity conditions. These entities are the ultimate elements of the universe. They are also, as we will see, the objects of perception. Similarly, "permanent," "nonthing," and "generally characterized phenomenon" are equivalent terms. They designate phenomena that are unchanging, ineffective, and lacking identity conditions. Since these phenomena lack the marks of reality, they are constructs, that is, pseudo-entities that have only conventional reality. They are the objects of inference. The reader will have to keep these equivalencies in mind, for they will be presupposed constantly in our analyses. For example, we will examine how Dharmakīrti argues that a phenomenon is a construct because it is a nonthing, or that a phenomenon is unreal because it is permanent (or vice versa). These conclusions, though far from being accepted by all philosophers, are basic to Dharmakīrti's system. They are true almost by definition.

In the next pages I examine the three equivalent dichotomies that constitute his system. I start with his notion of impermanence understood as momentariness and analyze Dharmakīrti's arguments for this view. I move then to his explanation of the concept of thing explained in terms of ability to fulfill a function (*arthakriyāsamartha, don byed nus pa*) and describe the ambiguity of this concept. Finally, I describe Dharmakīrti's notion of the specifically characterized and show that his system revolves around the problem of universals. It is based on the opposition between real, concrete, and individual things and unreal, abstract, and general constructs. Dharmakīrti's entire system rests on the opposition between these two chains of equivalents.

### *Dharmakīrti on Momentariness*

Dharmakīrti's view of momentariness does not differ from the Sautrāntika view advocated by Vasubandhu. Dharmakīrti, together with Dignāga, is not original in his ontology but, rather, in the way in which he expresses it and articulates its epistemological consequences. Instead of using Buddhist terms such as "dependent arising" (*pratītyasamutpāda, rten 'byung*) and "compounded phenomenon" (*samskrta, 'dus byas*), he prefers terms such as "substance" or "universal," which have wide acceptance among Indian thinkers. Dharmakīrti's philosophy is also interesting for the arguments he offers to support traditional Buddhist ideas. Following Tibetan commentators' explanations, let us examine his defense of the doctrine of momentariness. In the process, we will also notice the evolution of Dharmakīrti's arguments, which is less remarked on by Tibetan traditional scholarship.

In his early works, Dharmakīrti proposes the argument from disintegration as a refutation of a substantialist ontology à la Nyāya.<sup>7</sup> According to this substantialist view, substances come into existence in dependence on causes and conditions, endure, and only later disintegrate. Their disintegration depends on special causes of destruction (*vināśahetu, 'jig rgyu*). Until they meet these causes, substances abide without change. Only more fleeting qualities change. In this way, the continuity assumed by commonsense is explained. Against this substantialist view, Dharmakīrti proposes the following dilemma: Is the disintegration (*vināśa, 'jig pa*) of a substance related to the thing itself or is it merely a fortuitous occurrence, like the change of color that a cloth undergoes? If it is merely fortuitous, then why do all things meet their end in due time? If it is not fortuitous, then there must be a relation between a thing and its disintegration. What kind of relation is it? Is disintegration a cause of things or is it an effect? It cannot be a cause since it comes after these things. The commonsense view of things would tell us that the disintegration of things is a result of things.

Then, asks Dharmakīrti, how can we infer the future disintegration from the thing, which is the cause of the disintegration? This inference is, however, illicit for Dharmakīrti because it is an inference from cause to effect. Since one can never exclude the possibility of an unforeseen obstacle, one can never be sure that the result will follow from the causes. Dharmakīrti says, "Since it arises after [the fact, impermanence] cannot be the cause of a thing. Even if it is the effect, how can it be conclusive?"<sup>8</sup> That we are invariably able to predict the disintegration of things indicates that disintegration is constitutive of the things themselves. A jar's disintegration does not arise after the jar has been produced but is inherent to the jar itself. The disintegration of the jar requires no other causes than those necessary to its production.<sup>9</sup> Dharmakīrti expresses this by saying that disintegration is uncaused: "Since it does not [require any] cause, disintegration is concomitant with the nature [of things]."<sup>10</sup> This formulation has given rise to some misunderstanding. Some scholars seem to think that Dharmakīrti's view is that disintegration is completely uncaused. This is not Dharmakīrti's idea, for in this case

disintegration would be permanent! Dharmakīrti's view is quite different; it is similar to Vasubandhu's idea that the disintegration of a thing requires no supplementary causes other than those required for its production. The misunderstanding comes from the intentional ambiguity of his formulation. His argument plays on the two possible meanings of the word "disintegration," as will be explained shortly.

In accordance with his process view of reality, Dharmakīrti holds that disintegration is the fact that the thing is produced in one instant and will not abide in the next moment. Understood in this way, disintegration is an aspect of the thing itself. Sa-pan explains Dharmakīrti's idea:

*Question:* What is disintegration?

*Answer:* [Disintegration] is not to be thought of as the state of disintegratedness [of something already] disintegrated, [for] this is a nothing. Rather, the mere [fact] that [something] does not remain from the second moment onward after having been produced for a single moment from its causes is called disintegration. There is no separate phenomenon called *disintegration*. Accordingly, [Dharmakīrti] says in his *Commentary*: "In order to know that the disintegration of things does not rely on anything else, it is said that [the disintegration] has no cause on the basis of mind superimposing a distinction [between the thing and its disintegration]." <sup>11</sup>

Since disintegration (understood in this unusual way) is not a separate entity but the nature of the thing itself, which exists only for a single instant, it does not have causes other than those of its production. To underline this, Dharmakīrti said that disintegration has no cause. One may wonder why he uses such a misleading description?

The answer is that Dharmakīrti attempts to present his concept of disintegration in ambiguous terms. In addition to his own understanding of disintegration as something being in the process of disappearing, Dharmakīrti wants to include in the word the more usual connotation of the concept, that is, that a thing has already ceased to be. This second and more usual understanding of the concept of disintegration is included to present the argument in the terms of his orthodox Hindu adversaries. They understand *disintegration* as describing the state of an already disintegrated thing. Sa-pan explains, "The word *disintegration* [can] also refer to that which is to disintegrate, a thing such as a jar or a tree. It [can] also refer to what does not exist [any more] after disintegration, which is a nothing. Dharmakīrti spoke [of] the absence of cause in reference to the thing which is to disintegrate. Since this very disintegration is a thing, [Dharmakīrti speaks thus] having in mind that no other cause is required for the production of such a thing. When disintegration names the nonexistence [of something] on [its] disintegration, the absence of cause [is spoken by Dharmakīrti], keeping in mind the complete absence of cause [of such a nothing. This is so] because such a disintegration is a nothing." <sup>12</sup> Thus, Dharmakīrti's formulation is intentionally ambiguous. It is meant to accommodate two contradictory meanings of *disintegration* to "trick" his

orthodox adversaries into assenting to his argument. The adversary will assent to the reason that the disintegration of things is uncaused believing Dharmakīrti to be talking about the state of something already disintegrated. In actuality, Dharmakīrti is referring to the process of disintegration. Despite the dubious nature of this dialectical trick, Dharmakīrti's position is clear and consistent: Disintegration is the process of disappearance of a thing. Hence, it is an expression of the processed nature of that thing and as such does not require any special cause to be produced. It is inherent to the thing it characterizes from the very incipience of that thing.

This understanding of impermanence is found in several works of Dharmakīrti, particularly his *Commentary*. In later works, Dharmakīrti adopts another presentation of momentariness, that of the inference from existence (*sattvānumāna*). Here, impermanence is argued not from the fact that disintegration does not require causes but from the fact that things exist. <sup>13</sup> For Dharmakīrti, things truly exist insofar as they are able to perform a function. To function is to be capable of producing an effect, a faculty possible only if the object is constantly changing. A static object is not acting on anything else nor is it being acted upon. Therefore, that something exists shows that it is momentary. In the *Science of Debate*, Dharmakīrti states this reasoning from existence: "Accordingly, all things that exist or are produced are impermanent, as for example jar, etc. Sound is also existing or produced." <sup>14</sup> This statement formulates two reasons for the impermanence of things: things are impermanent because (1) they are produced and (2) they exist. Sa-pan explains that these two reasons are equivalent. He states the reason for this: "Whatever exists disintegrates as [for example] a jar. Sound now exists. Thus [is] a reason of [identical] essence [stated]." <sup>15</sup> This reason is a reason of identical essence. <sup>16</sup> It is stated in regard to Hindu opponents, who do not accept that the words of the Vedas or that atoms are produced but who agree that they really exist. <sup>17</sup>

Steinkellner has argued that Dharmakīrti evolves from the early *Commentary*, which emphasizes the inference from disintegration (*vināśitvānumāna*), to later texts, which focus on the inference from existence. <sup>18</sup> In *Ascertainment* <sup>19</sup> and in *Drop of Logical Reason*, Dharmakīrti presents both reasonings, but in the later *Science of Debate*, <sup>20</sup> he uses only the inference from existence. Although Mimaki has demonstrated that this last reasoning becomes more influential in later authors such as Jñānaśrimitra and Ratnakīrti, <sup>21</sup> this evolution does not affect the concept of impermanence. Rather, the change occurs in the presentation of this concept and relates to a long-term dispute with the Nyāya school. Only the emphasis changes, since, as Mimaki remarks, <sup>22</sup> even in later texts the reasoning from disintegration remains present. <sup>23</sup>

### *The Causal Nature of Reality*

The doctrine of momentariness is crucial in Dharmakīrti's system, permitting him to determine his basic ontology in accordance with classical Abhidharmic



views. As explained earlier, Dharmakīrti equates reality with momentariness, for only momentary phenomena act as causes of other phenomena and thus make an observable difference. If permanent phenomena were to produce an effect, its production would have to be permanent also. As the effect would be changeless, it would either never be produced or endlessly repeat its production. The conclusion is that permanent phenomena cannot have any effect. Hence, they make no difference and are fictional, despite our notion that they exist.

In consequence, phenomena are real only inasmuch as they produce effects. A real thing is produced in dependence on a complicated network of causes and conditions. Once a thing is produced, it cannot stand outside this network. It in turn contributes to the production of further effects. This capacity to produce determines what is real according to classical Buddhist philosophy. Dharmakīrti adopts and systematizes this view to defend and explicate Dignāga's system, which lacked explicit criteria of reality.<sup>24</sup> Following traditional Buddhist ontology, Dharmakīrti defines thing (*vastu, dngos po*) as that which is able to perform a function (*arthakriyāsamārtha, don byed nus pa*; literally, "readiness to do something"). Masashi Nagatomi has explained the double meaning of *arthakriyā* in Dharmakīrti's thought:<sup>25</sup>

1. In its ontological sense, it means causal efficacy. In this sense, *arthakriyā* is a criterion of reality. Dharmakīrti says: "That which is able to perform a function exists ultimately."<sup>26</sup> Only objects able to participate causally in the production of other phenomena are real.

2. In its epistemological sense, *arthakriyā* means to fulfill a practical purpose. As Dharmakīrti says in *Drop of Reasoning*: "Since correct [that is, valid] cognition is a prerequisite for achieving all human purposes (*artha, don*), I shall explain it."<sup>27</sup> Valid cognitions correctly identify objects and provide a cognitive basis for our successful activities. Real objects are called *artha* because they are the aim of practical activities such as cooking and burning.<sup>28</sup> *Artha* are not objects of theoretical knowledge, but practical objects. They are to be known in terms of whether they affect us positively or negatively.

These two meanings of *arthakriyā* do not conflict but refer to the functionality of real objects in two ways: Ontologically, real objects are distinguished from nominal ones on the basis of their having *arthakriyā*; that is, a causal capacity that exists in the objects themselves. Quasi-phenomena make no real difference and, hence, have only conceptually constructed "existence."<sup>29</sup> This causal capacity is also understood as it affects sentient beings. Hence, epistemologically, valid cognitions are differentiated from nonvalid ones on the basis of their objects having *arthakriyā*; that is, the ability to perform a function that can serve some practical purpose for somebody. This second sense is derived from the first, for only on the basis of their causal capacity can objects fulfill such a function. It underlines the importance of practical concerns in Buddhist philosophy. Reality is not an abstract domain of possibilities but one of practical importance

to sentient beings. Things are real inasmuch as they potentially affect beings.

Nevertheless, an ambiguity and a tension remain in the term *arthakriyā* to be explored while investigating Dharmakīrti's epistemology. We will see how Dharmakīrti attempts to use this ambiguity to establish an epistemology that brings together the two halves of his system, the real-perceptual and the conceptual. This is one of the fundamental difficulties of Dharmakīrti's system. The ambiguity in *arthakriyā* is more than an accidental slip, it is a necessary consequence of Dharmakīrti's dualistic system.

### *Dharmakīrti's Ontology and Its Relation to the Problem of Universals*

Dharmakīrti describes the fundamental opposition between the real and the constructed by using two terms that clearly indicate the connection between his ontology and the problem of universals. He names real things *specifically characterized phenomena* (*svalakṣaṇa, rang mtshan*) and constructs *generally characterized phenomena* (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa, spyi mtshan*) to indicate that the latter are universals (*sāmānaya, spyi*) and the former individuals.

These two concepts are known to classical Buddhist thought, for they are found in texts of the Abhidharma corpus,<sup>30</sup> practically applied to the identification of objects in meditation. In the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti school, these older ideas are transformed into new technical notions reflecting the ontology of this school. Accordingly, the two concepts no longer refer to properties<sup>31</sup> but mark the two basic types of "phenomenon":<sup>32</sup> The first category is equated with real effective phenomena (*arthakriyāsamārtham, don byed nus pa*) and the second with fictional noneffective phenomena. Dharmakīrti says: "Those [phenomena] which are able to perform a function<sup>33</sup> are here [said to be] ultimately existent. Others are said to be conventionally existent. Those two [types of phenomena are] specifically and generally characterized."<sup>34</sup> The lines of Dharmakīrti's ontology are thus clearly drawn. Any phenomenon that is causally efficient is real and included among specifically characterized phenomena. Such a phenomenon is also called, somewhat misleadingly, a substance (*dravya, rdzas*). In the Buddhist context, the word "substance" does not have its usual meaning of something that exists independently and provides support for more fleeting qualities. Rather, the term "substance" refers to a momentary thing-event that is causally effective. Any phenomenon that is not causally active is conceptually constructed and included among generally characterized phenomena. Dharmakīrti says: "These [real things] are differentiated from other [things]. They are described as causes and effects. They are accepted as specifically characterized and generally characterized phenomena. Since these have as their fruits the adoption [of desirable objects] and the rejection [of undesirable ones], they are [the objects] to which all persons apply [themselves practically]."<sup>35</sup> The structure of Dharmakīrti's ontological system rests on the opposition between these two sets of categories, which constitutes a

radical dichotomy (nothing can be both specifically characterized and generally characterized and everything is included in either).

Dharmakīrti, however, also states that these two types of phenomenon can be thought as two aspects of reality. They do not exist separately, like cats and dogs, but are two sides of the same coin. The simile, however, should not be pushed too far, for the two sides are not equally real. Specifically characterized phenomena exist and are apprehended through their own entity (*svarūpa, rang gi ngo bo*). That is, they have real, individual essences. Generally characterized phenomena exist and are apprehended only as being something else (*para-rūpa, gzhān gyi ngo bo*); that is, as having conceptual identities.<sup>36</sup> For example, a particular stone is perceived as an individual object. It can also be conceptualized as being an instance of a larger category such as stoneness, as in a case of predication. Conceptually, these two ways of understanding relate to two sides of the same stone. In reality, however, stoneness is merely a construct and only the individual stone exists.

As we will see, this ontological dyadic structure is complemented by the epistemological dyad of two types of valid cognition; that is, perception and inference. The former apprehends specifically characterized phenomena and thus offers an undistorted but limited access to reality. The latter apprehends generally characterized phenomena and provides a richer but distorted cognitive content. Dharmakīrti's entire system rests on the relation between ontological and epistemological binary oppositions.

Expanding on Dignāga's ideas, Dharmakīrti presents his ontology in the form of a critique of the Nyāya reification of identity. He confronts their realism by sharply distinguishing individual objects from synthetic principles, the universals or generally characterized phenomena. These he holds to be mental creations. Following up on his idea that the definition of reality is the capacity to perform a function, Dharmakīrti asserts that only individual objects are real. They alone can perform functions. Since these objects possess their own individual essences, they are called *specifically characterized objects*. Phenomena that do not possess their own characteristics cannot perform any function. Hence, they do not appear to perception, which is an accurate reflection of reality. They depend for their existence on the conceptual synthesis of individuals. These constructed entities, generally characterized phenomena, are not part of the fabric of reality but superimposed by our conceptual schema.

For Dharmakīrti, only individuals are objects of perception. Speaking of perception, Dharmakīrti says: "Its object is only the specifically characterized. The specifically characterized is the [kind of object] whose nearness or remoteness [creates] a difference in the appearance to the cognition. That alone ultimately exists because it performs a function, the defining property of things."<sup>37</sup> Dharmottara comments on this passage:

*Question:* Why is the individuation the exclusive object of perception? Do we not know that we can see a fire that is the object of a conceptual thought?

*Answer:* [Dharmakīrti] says: "That alone exists ultimately." [This means that

it alone is] ultimate and unconstructed, that is to say, that it has a non-imputed (lit. not-superimposed) essence. Since it exists so, it exists ultimately. That object alone which produces the impression of vividness according to its remoteness or proximity, exists ultimately. Since it is also the object of perception, it is just this [thing which] is the specifically characterized.<sup>38</sup>

Perception experiences reality as it is. This experience is not the product of fabricated entities, such as wholes, substances, or universals. It is the result of encountering real individuals which make real differences in experience.

Dharmakīrti distinguishes the specifically characterized object through four criteria: (1) having the power to produce effects (*artha-kriyā-śakti, don byed nus pa*); (2) being specific, that is, individual (*asadṛśa, mi 'dra ba*); (3) not (directly) denotable by language (*śabdasyāviśaya, sgra'i yul ma yin*); and (4) apprehensible without reliance on other factors (*nimitta, rgyu mtshan*) such as language and conceptuality. Here, I will explain the first two of the four criteria stated by Dharmakīrti. I reserve the last two for my examination of the *apoha* theory.

### *Uncommonness and Identity Conditions*

Since things have their own specific essence, they are said to be dissimilar (i.e., specific) from other real and unreal phenomena. By contrast, constructs have no definite criteria of identity. They are said to be "similar" to, that is, common and concomitant with, other phenomena. This characterization of specifically characterized phenomena as being uncommon and dissimilar has given rise to several misinterpretations. We will not dwell upon these for the moment. Let us briefly note, however, that contrary to what the great Russian scholar Stcherbatsky and others have asserted, uncommonness and specificity do not mean transcendental uniqueness. Specifically characterized phenomena are not unique in the absolute sense of the word. They are not completely beyond the reach of empirical determination.<sup>39</sup> Rather, each real thing is uncommon inasmuch as it is an individual with a determinate position in space and time, as well as a determinate essence. This it does not share with any other phenomena. Dharmakīrti explains: "Because all things essentially abide in their own essence, they partake in the differentiation between [themselves and the other] similar and dissimilar things."<sup>40</sup> This passage is said by the commentarial tradition to explain the nature of things (*dnegos po'i gnas lugs*). Hence, it must be considered a particularly meaningful statement. An entity can be considered real if, and only if, it has its own distinctive essence. Moreover, such an essence must correspond to clear identity conditions. Tested in this way, individuals pass, but universals and abstract entities do not.

Dharmakīrti does not explicitly state what these identity conditions are. Passages in his work, however, point to such an explanation. Dharmakīrti implies three sets of identity conditions that directly answer the three ways in which the Nyāya reifies entities, as follows.<sup>41</sup>

1. Real things are spatially determinate (*deśaniyata*, *yul nges pa*);<sup>42</sup> that is, they occupy a definite spatial location (if they occupy any location at all).<sup>43</sup> The real fire I am seeing is either near or far, at my left or at my right. By contrast, the universal fireness, that is, the property of being a fire taken to be real by the Nyāya school, does not occupy a determinate position in space. The Nyāya view is that such a property is ubiquitous and can inhere in any particular that instantiates it. Dharmakīrti makes this ironical comment about the Nyāya position: "It is completely logical to say that [the universal], which was present elsewhere and did not move from its own place, exists in what has its origin in a place other than it!"<sup>44</sup> For Dharmakīrti, the impossibility of attributing a definite spatial location to fireness shows that it is not something that makes a real difference. Therefore, in accordance with the criterion of reality that something is real if, and only if, it can perform some function, such a universal is unreal from a spatial point of view. It is only a conceptual construct that we add onto experience for the sake of convenience.

2. Similarly, real objects are temporally determinate (*kālaniyata*, *dus nges pa* or *dus ma 'dres pa*). They come into and go out of existence at definite moments. This is not the case for universals, which are held by Naiyāyikas to exist regardless of whether particulars exist or not. This again shows for Dharmakīrti that such an abstract entity is unreal from a temporal point of view.<sup>45</sup>

3. Real things are determinate with respect to their entity (*ākāraṇiyata*, *ngo bo nges pa* or *ngo bo ma 'dres pa*), which is determined in causal terms. The entity of a thing is the result of a unique aggregation of causes (*hetusāmagrī*, *rgyu tshogs pa*) that have the ability to produce their own effects.<sup>46</sup> The entity is proper to the thing itself, it is not due to any property existing over and above the individual thing. For example, a white cow is a cow due to being produced by particular causes and having particular causal capacities.<sup>47</sup> It is not due to a "cowness" that it shares with black and brown cows, contrary to the Nyāya assertion. There is no real cowness over and above black, white, and brown cows. Dharmakīrti says: "[Words] do not refer to real things because all things abide in their own entities. The form of the multicolored [cow] does not exist in a brown [cow]. What is common to the two is the exclusion from [nonproduction of] an effect."<sup>48</sup> Dharmakīrti distinguishes between things that can be differentiated from the point of view of their spatio-temporal location and their entity and conceptual constructs that fail these identity conditions. Things have real identity because they can be clearly individuated from other things. Since conceptual pseudo-entities cannot be clearly distinguished, they cannot be real, as we will see when we analyze Dharmakīrti's arguments against the reality of universals.<sup>49</sup> This is as close as Dharmakīrti ever comes to providing a definition of the specifically characterized. If we put together the bits and pieces that Dharmakīrti and his commentators provide, however, we can define specifically characterized as that which "essentially abides in its own essence."<sup>50</sup>

Here again, there is here a striking parallel with Quine, for whom things can be said to exist only if they satisfy identity conditions. Entities are judged by clear criteria to assess their presence or absence in terms of spatio-temporal loca-

tion. Only once these conditions are taken into account, we can understand the identity of things. Descriptions that seem to refer to abstract entities are in fact convenient shorthand for more complicated but ontologically more transparent descriptions, in what Quine describes as the identification of indiscernibles. Quine explains, "Objects indistinguishable from one another within the terms of a given discourse should be construed as identical for that discourse. More accurately: the references to the original objects should be reconstrued for purposes of the discourse as referring to other and fewer objects, in such a way that indistinguishable originals give way to the same new object."<sup>51</sup> Like Dharmakīrti, Quine proposes a sparse ontology to avoid the multiplication of entities entailed by accepting abstract entities such as universals. These pseudo-entities are individuals grouped together for the sake of convenience.

Before concluding, let us visit some of the implications of these criteria of reality. For Dharmakīrti, reality is made up of individual objects that are produced by causes and conditions, that undergo constant transformation, and that are devoid of any selfhood. Generally characterized phenomena, by contrast, have no definite identity. They are abstract constructs that are intelligible only in reference to a conceptual framework. As such, these universals are not real in the full sense of the word.

Accepting these criteria of reality commits Dharmakīrti to a radical rejection of realism regarding universals, for these criteria imply that real entities must be spatially and temporally localized and, therefore, constantly changing. Static entities, including universals, exist in the same state in different places and times. Thus, Dharmakīrti's criteria clearly imply the philosophical position of antirealism and the commitment to an event ontology. In a later chapter<sup>52</sup> we will analyze further the nature of Dharmakīrti's antirealism, and we will interpret it as a form of conceptualism.

The criteria, however, leave important questions unresolved. For example, Dharmakīrti distinguishes between real things and conceptual constructs. The latter are less real without being completely nonexistent. This raises the obvious but difficult question of the status of such quasi-entities. Do they exist? If they do not, how can they be part of Dharmakīrti's system, which is built on the correspondence of ontological and epistemological binary oppositions. Generally characterized phenomena are needed as the objects of inference. Without these conceptual entities his system would collapse. If, on the other hand, these conceptual entities, are said to exist, what kind of existence are we talking about? What does it mean for unreal entities to exist? The next chapter considers this question and analyzes the conflicting answers of Tibetan thinkers.

A second related problem is that Dharmakīrti's system does not make clear what kind of entity can count as having a definite spatial location. Does an entity that satisfies the criterion of spatial location need to be partless or does it need to have just a definite position in space and time? In the first case, only particles or moments of consciousness will be real. In the second case, larger objects such as colors and shapes will be real as well. We will see that both traditional and modern

scholars have taken conflicting positions on this question, I believe in response to Dharmakīrti's own ambiguity.

Finally, a third problem left unresolved by Dharmakīrti is the metaphysical reality of the external world. Do Dharmakīrti's real things exist in the external world or are they moments of consciousness to which no external reality corresponds? Dharmakīrti's discussion of spatial position suggests that real things can be made of spatial parts. Nevertheless this requirement is not without ambiguity, as Dharmakīrti rarely commits himself to the existence of atoms, the building blocks of external objects. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate both problems in the light of the conflicting solutions provided by Tibetan epistemologists.

These problems are difficult points in Dharmakīrti's philosophy, and they have no easy solutions. It is, however, possible to clarify the issues by exploring the alternatives open to thinkers of his tradition. This is where the contributions of later Indian and Tibetan epistemologists become relevant. Here, as in other parts of my discussion, I will draw mostly upon Tibetan contributions. I will focus particularly on the debate between Sa-gya and Ge-luk thinkers during the fifteenth century, a time of great philosophical activity when the views of the Tibetan traditions crystallized.



## The Ambiguities of the Concept of Existence

### *The Problems of Dharmakīrti's Concepts of Existence*

Let us start our exploration of the difficulties in Dharmakīrti's ontological system by asking ourselves the question, What does it mean for an object to exist? An easy answer within the framework of Dharmakīrti's philosophy equates existence with reality, saying that to be means to be real and, therefore, effective. The existence of a thing lies in its having its own essence (*svabhāva*, *rang bzhin*), which is determined in terms of causal capacities.<sup>1</sup> For example, a fire exists because its essence is to be an object able to perform the function (*arthakriyā*, *don byed pa*) of burning. In Dharmakīrti's system, "existence" is used mostly in this sense, that is, as implying reality. This is illustrated by Dharmakīrti's discussion of the inference from existence (*sattvānumāna*) we have examined already. There, Dharmakīrti gives existence as a reason from which to infer the impermanence of sound. Therefore, in this sense of the word, to exist means to satisfy the three criteria of real identity.

This view of existence, however, is not sufficient to account for the complexities of Dharmakīrti's system. For his approach to work, it seems to require the view that among existents are included the conceptual constructs whose status we have begun to explore. His system requires that these constructed entities, that is, the universals that are the objects or contents of concepts, be given some status differentiating them from complete nonexistents (such as the famous horns of a rabbit). Accordingly, the concept of existence is ambiguous in Dharmakīrti's system. Most scholars have not been sufficiently attentive to this ambiguity in Dharmakīrti's thought and as a result have assumed that reality and existence are identical. We will see how to correct this oversight.

Although Dharmakīrti usually reserves the term "existence" (*sat*, *yod pa*) for designating real existence, he also accepts phenomena that are not real in the full sense of the term, yet not completely nonexistent. They can be said to exist in the secondary sense of the term, according to which existing is equivalent to being an object of comprehension (*prameya*, *gzhal bya*). For example, when discussing the nature of universals (*sāmānya*, *spyi*), Dharmakīrti says: "[Contrary to] effective

things which disappear, universals do not cease and do not perform any function. Therefore, they are not [real] objects despite [the fact that] they exist."<sup>2</sup> Since universals do not disintegrate, they cannot produce any effect and cannot perform any function. Therefore, they are not real. Nevertheless, they can be apprehended by inference. Since those are valid, their objects (*yul*, *viśaya*) must be more than figments of the imagination, otherwise they would have the same epistemological status as delusive states of mind. Therefore, universals must somehow exist, inasmuch as they are objects of epistemologically valid activities.

Dharmakīrti refers to this notion of existence in a refutation of some Materialists. According to them, there cannot be two types of valid cognition since only specifically characterized phenomena exist. To this objection, Dharmakīrti answers: "[If you say that] since a nonexistent [thing] is not an object of comprehension there is only one [namely, the specifically characterized, we Buddhists] also accept this."<sup>3</sup> Since [for you] nonexistence<sup>4</sup> is ascertained [as a reason establishing that universals are not objects of comprehension, then your reason 'nonexistent'] is indeed inconclusive with respect to 'not being an object of comprehension'.<sup>5</sup> Dharmakīrti agrees with his materialist adversaries that ultimately there is only one type of object of comprehension. Only effective phenomena are really objects of valid cognitions. Nevertheless, universals must also be admitted as objects of comprehension despite being only conceptual constructs. Dharmakīrti makes this point by drawing his adversaries into contradicting themselves. He asks on what grounds they exclude universals as objects of valid cognition. The answer is, "universals are not objects of comprehension because they do not really exist." If this argument is correct, the predicate (not being an object of comprehension) must be entailed by the reason (nonexistence). Or, to use the more technical language of Indian argumentation, there must be pervasion (*vyāpti*, *khyab pa*) of the reason by the predicate. Moreover, this relation must be understood by a valid cognition. But, then, the terms of the entailment, nonexistence and not being an object of comprehension, would have to be identified by a valid cognition and would then be an object of comprehension. Therefore, the adversaries are forced to acknowledge that there are nonexistents, namely, universals such as not being a real existent, which require a special type of valid cognition.

When applied to his own system, this argument forces Dharmakīrti to concede that the conceptually constructed entities necessitated by linguistic and conceptual activities exist in some sense. Their denial would involve Dharmakīrti in the same self-defeating paradox as the Materialists. To explain how nonthings are excluded from reality, a realm of conceptually constructed entities has to be accepted on some level. These entities are not real in the sense that they cannot perform any function. They exist, however, inasmuch as they are objects of epistemologically valid cognitive acts.

Thus, it is clear that there are two possible understandings of existence in Dharmakīrti's works.<sup>6</sup> In its primary sense, "existence" refers to the causal effectiveness of real things. In its secondary sense, it refers to the epistemic validity of

all phenomena (permanent as well as impermanent). In this second sense, existence includes mere nominal existence and is a nominally existent property. In both cases, existence is not an autonomous property characterizing entities. It either stands for the real causal nature of things or for their conceptually constructed nature of being an object of knowledge.

The presence of such an ambiguity is revealing of the difficulty, which we will encounter throughout this work, that Dharmakīrti's consistent antirealism has in explaining the nature of knowledge in a world without universals. As with other antirealists, Dharmakīrti finds it difficult to explain the role of thought in the cognitive process on the basis of his sparse ontology. From an antirealist standpoint, thought does not bear directly on a reality that consists of individual things. Thinking relates to abstract conceptual constructs without which a convincing epistemology cannot be delineated. The status of such constructs is, however, highly problematic in a system that holds that only things are real. Since constructs are not things, they are not real. Yet, they are required and thus must exist in a certain sense which we could call nominal.

This nominal existence is not unlike Meinong's concept of subsistence.<sup>7</sup> For Meinong, ideal objects such as propositions and numbers are objectives that do not exist like individual things but subsist (*bestehen*). For example, we see a cat on the mat and judge that "the cat is on the mat." The concrete object is the perceived cat, which is an individual existing in space and time. The object of my judgment is not, however, this individual but the proposition "the cat exists." Such an object is not real as an individual but exists as an object of true cognitive acts.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly in Dharmakīrti's epistemology, constructs are sometimes described as existents in the sense that they are objects of valid cognitions. The ontological status of these constructs is, however, problematic. Since they are not things, they are only quasi- or pseudo-entities. But what does this mean? To answer, Dharmakīrti, like Dignāga before him, uses the notion of *vikalpa* (or *kalpanā*, *rtog pa*),<sup>9</sup> our ability to think in dependence on language and thereby construct convenient fictions. Such constructs, whose nature we will have to investigate in the next two parts of this work, do not exist really, and yet, they have a kind of intersubjective validity that sets them apart from private fictions. Can we then say that they exist?

In Tibet, the tradition of antirealist thinkers who attempt to explain Dharmakīrti's system in a more literal fashion has wrestled with these issues in particular depth. This tradition must be differentiated from the more revisionist current that includes important Indian (Dharmottara) and Tibetan thinkers (Cha-ba and his followers including the whole Ge-luk tradition). In opposition to this latter, more interpretive trend, the former tradition attempts to solve the difficulties in Dharmakīrti's system while keeping to his overall antirealist commitment. One of the major challenges in this attempt is the notion of existence. Let us examine how this concept is articulated by Sa-pan, the leading proponent of the antirealist trend among Tibetan commentators.

### Sa-pan's Controversial Views on Existence

In the epistemological traditions of India and Tibet, the concept of existence is usually explained in relation to that of being an object of valid cognition (*prameya*, *gzhal bya*). All epistemological schools focus on the concept of valid cognition (or means of valid cognition, *pramāṇa*, *tshad ma*) as the main concern of their philosophy and define existence in relation to valid cognition. Things exist if, and only if, they are apprehended by valid cognition. One might think that according to this definition of *existence*, objects come to be through being perceived by the mind. This would be idealism.

This is not, however, the meaning of this definition, for otherwise that would make it incompatible with the Sautrāntika (i.e., nonidealist) aspects of Dharmakīrti's system. In this view, the perception of an object does not materially constitute that object. Rather, it is only the necessary and sufficient condition for our being able to determine that the object exists. When we say a jar is in the room, we are implying that this is so because we correctly perceive such a jar, regardless of whether our perception has created the object or not. Thus, the definition of *existence* in terms of being an object of valid cognition is not an idealist statement about how the world is constituted. Rather, it reflects an analysis of our ordinary usage of words such as "is" and "exists." Such a definition is accepted by Buddhist epistemologists as a way to relate ontological and epistemological inquiries, regardless of whether they are idealists.

However, as Shah remarks,<sup>10</sup> this definition is quite formal. It must be fleshed out by an explanation of what is allowable as an object of valid cognition. Can constructs be objects of valid cognitions, or is this the exclusive privilege of real things? This question has been the focus of an intense conflict of interpretation among Tibetan scholars. This discussion is partly exegetical, attempting to find "what Dharmakīrti really meant." It also has, however, philosophical significance. It reveals the ambiguity of the concept of existence in Dharmakīrti's system. As an antirealist, Dharmakīrti is committed to denying that universals really exist. As a conceptualist, however, he still wants to find a place for them in his system. This tension explains why he uses the concept of existence in two contradictory ways.

Tibetan commentators have noticed these difficulties and tried to sort them out. Their discussion has been dominated by Sa-pan's controversial comments to the effect that to "exist," that is, to "be an object of valid cognition" (*tshad ma'i gzhal bya*, *prameya*) means to be real. This controversial position has been the target of sustained criticism within the Tibetan tradition. Such criticism has prompted some commentators sympathetic to Sa-pan to find a more moderate interpretation that allows for the existence of conceptually fabricated entities. Not all Sa-gya commentators have accepted this "moderate" interpretation and its seemingly neat conciliation of these two understandings of existence. I will examine Lo Ken-chen's<sup>11</sup> analysis of existence in terms of reality, which radically separates the two possible understandings of existence.

Let us first briefly summarize the general lines of Sa-pan's ontology. Sa-pan starts his ontological investigation by relating ontology to epistemology: "[Whereas] nonconceptual [cognitions] apprehend specifically characterized phenomena, universals are apprehended by conceptual [cognition]. With respect to this, specifically characterized phenomena are things [and] universals are not established as things."<sup>12</sup> Whereas conception apprehends only general entities, which have an imputed essence, perception, which is for the Buddhists non-conceptual, apprehends real phenomena. Those can be characterized in several ways. Sa-pan says, "Since [those things that are called] 'specifically characterized phenomena (*rang gi mtshan*), individuals (*gsal ba*), things (*dngos po*, *vastu*), substances (*rdzas*, *dravya*), distinguished [phenomena] (*log pa*),<sup>13</sup> ultimates (*paramārtha*), etc.' are the effective [phenomena] which are mutually unmixed substances, established as causes and effects, [and] the objects of engagement of the [actions] of developing and rejecting [what is desirable and undesirable], they are equivalent<sup>14</sup> to the meaning of thing."<sup>15</sup> Despite their difference in emphasis, these terms all refer to what Buddhists hold to be real. Some of the terms are part of the common Indian philosophical vocabulary. For example, *substance* and *individual* are favored by Naiyāyikas, who assert the reality of the difference between substrata and their properties. Other terms such as *differentiated*, *specifically characterized phenomena*, and the like are more specifically Buddhist, for they imply the unreality of the distinction of substrata or properties. However, most of these terms are used freely, irrespective of their original connotation. For example, Buddhists use the term *substance*, which they redefine in terms of causal efficiency.

Sa-pan provides a parallel list for the conceptual domain of generally characterized phenomena: universal (*spyi*, *sāmānya*), elimination of others (*gzhan sel*, *anyāpoha*), distinguisher (*ldog pa*, *vyāvṛtti*), preclusion (*rmam gcod*, *vyavaccheda*), indeterminate (literally "mixed," *'dres pa*), relation (*'brel ba*, *sambandha*), relative (*kun rdzob*, *saṃvṛti*). These phenomena do not exist in reality (*don la mi gnas pa*) for they are superimposed (*sgro btags pa*) by thought. Most of these terms will be clarified in the following chapters, when studying the problem of universals and the *apoha* theory. Suffice to say that according to Sa-pan, all these terms refer to the imputed entities which are objects of thought. They are spatially and temporally indeterminate and are constructed as unreal general entities.

Sa-pan's view on existence has to be understood within this classically Dharmakīrtian framework, which emphasizes the opposition between real things and conceptual constructions. For Sa-pan as for other epistemologists, to exist means to be comprehended by a valid cognition. For Sa-pan, however, conceptual contents are only quasi-entities, which are not really comprehended. Whereas individual things can be really known, contents are only conceived to be so. Sa-pan says, "Only specifically characterized phenomena are objects of comprehension."<sup>16</sup> In another passage, he is even clearer: "Since nonthings do not have any entity they do not exist [and] since they are entityless, they are not knowable. Accordingly, they are merely imputed on the absence of things."<sup>17</sup> Since permanent phenomena



such as universals, which in Dharmakīrti's system are described as generally characterized phenomena, are without essence (*svabhāva*, *rang bzhin*), they are not knowable. They are conceptual contents we merely imagine to know. For example, I see a table and think "there is no elephant on this table." What is really known in this example is the real object, the table.<sup>18</sup> The absence of elephant is a conceptual overlay that I conceptually add on reality. Sa-pan summarizes his position: "That which is accepted as universal cannot be comprehended by valid cognition."<sup>19</sup> The conclusion to be drawn is that the objects of concepts do not exist at all. As one can imagine, such a view has fueled a great deal of controversy among Tibetan scholars, since it seems to involve Sa-pan in the self-defeating paradox explained previously. It is, however, not without support in Dharmakīrti's writings. In discussing valid cognition, Dharmakīrti asserts that nondeceptiveness (*avisamvādanam*, *mi slu ba*), the defining characteristic of valid cognition, consists of the capacity to perform a function in accordance with the way it is cognized by that cognition. Only causally effective phenomena (*vastu*, *dnegos po*) have such a capacity. So, valid cognitions are nondeceptive inasmuch as they relate appropriately to real things (*svalakṣaṇa*, *rang mtshan*.) Therefore, the conclusion that only real, that is, specifically characterized phenomena are objects of valid cognitions is hard to resist. Dharmakīrti says, "Only specifically characterized phenomena are objects of comprehension."<sup>20</sup> The conclusion that only real phenomena are objects of valid cognition, which seems a straightforward interpretation of this passage, is not without problem, for Dharmakīrti also asserts that there are two types of valid cognition, perception and inference. He further states that perceptions relate to real phenomena and inferences to constructs as their primary object. Therefore, the conclusion that constructs are objects of valid cognitions is hard to escape.

Accordingly Sa-pan's remarks, which strongly suggest that constructs (universals) are not objects of knowledge and that only real things can be counted among phenomena, have drawn criticism from many Tibetan thinkers. Bo-dong, for example, strongly criticizes Sa-pan's view<sup>21</sup> for denying that generally characterized phenomena exist. He shows that Sa-pan's view (as he understands it) leads to contradictions with well-established points of Dharmakīrti's system. Such a view is not able to escape the self-defeating paradox afflicting the Materialist view.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, Bo-dong clearly points out that generally characterized phenomena, constructs, must exist because they are objects. They are objects since they are cognized by a mental episode.<sup>23</sup> Bo-dong dramatically concludes: "Therefore, the acceptance of specifically characterized phenomena as the only objects leads to the [acceptance of absurdities such as] permanence being impermanent. Since correct contradictions become possible, [one is even led] to reject the reality of things, [as] I will extensively explain."<sup>24</sup> This indictment is an illustration of the strong rhetorical element that is an important ingredient in a lively debate. Exaggeration of this type is rather typical of polemics among Tibetans, who often tend to dramatically overstate their cases. An author who makes a slightly controversial move will be immediately accused of destroying Buddha's

teaching, shaming his tradition, and other niceties. Such a move does not attempt to present a fair description of Sa-pan's view, but to impute to it as many faults as possible by drawing unwanted consequences from his positions. Some of these logically derive from his view. Others are forced on him on the basis of Bo-dong's own premises.

Dzong-ka-ba's main disciple in the field of logic and epistemology, Gyel-tsap, is less outspoken in his criticism, but he also implicitly criticizes Sa-pan's view. He points out that those who hold that generally characterized phenomena cannot be objects of comprehension are no better than Materialists, who reduce knowledge to perception. He further demonstrates the self-defeating nature of such a view by asking, Is the thesis that generally characterized phenomena are not objects of comprehension validated by a valid cognition? If this thesis is not so validated, it is false and its contradictory is true; hence, constructs are objects of valid cognition. If this thesis is validated by a valid cognition, it has to be a real thing! Gyel-tsap concludes: "Whatever reason is given to establish that generally characterized phenomena are not objects of comprehension does not overcome this [self-defeating] fault. This is similar to Bodhisattva Kamalaśīla's saying that 'The assertion that a nonthing cannot be either a proof or a thesis is like the mistake of training oneself in the practice of a self-destructive weapon'."<sup>25</sup> Gyel-tsap's conclusion is hard to resist. Those who accept the framework of Buddhist logic, in which inference and reasoning are based on constructed entities, but refuse to grant existence to these entities, face this contradiction. Since they accept logical reasoning, they must provide some proof supporting their rejection of the existence of constructs. But in doing so, they must use the very entities they deny. Therefore, as long as they operate within the framework of Buddhist logic, their position is involved in a pragmatic paradox and is self-defeating.

### *Defenses and Interpretations of Sa-pan*

The presence of such obvious difficulties in a thinker of Sa-pan's quality makes us wonder whether these criticisms are true to Sa-pan's intentions or whether they focus on misleading comments. Sa-gya commentators have tried to explain Sa-pan's comments so as to avoid these difficulties but remain true to his thought. For example, the seventeenth century Sa-gya scholar Ngak-chö criticizes those<sup>26</sup> who take literally Sa-pan's comment that only specifically characterized phenomena are objects of comprehension. This, according to him, undermines Dharmakīrti's system correlating the two objects of comprehension, real and conceptual, with the two types of valid cognition, perception and inference.<sup>27</sup> How then should we understand Sa-pan's denial that conceptual constructs exist?

For Ngak-chö, Sa-pan's comments should be interpreted in this way: Only specifically characterized phenomena are *real* objects of comprehension (*don la gzhal bya yin*), since only they make a real causal difference in our lives. Conceptual constructs are not objects of comprehension *in their own right* but only in depen-

dence on conceptual activities. They only exist nominally. Ngak-chö bases his interpretation on passages from Sa-pan such as this: "[Dharmakīrti] did not speak [of valid cognition] as being of two [types] due to the fact that there are [in reality] two [types of] object of comprehension. He declared that there are two [types of] valid cognition in consideration of the [two] modes [in which cognitions] realize [their objects]; namely, that evident specifically characterized phenomena are realized through their own [essence] and that hidden specifically characterized phenomena are realized through a different [conceptually imputed] essence."<sup>28</sup> Here, Sa-pan seems to adopt the more moderate position that generally characterized phenomena are indeed objects of comprehension, albeit only in dependence on conceptual activities. Understood in this way, Sa-pan's comments, which might have seemed at first so different from Gyel-tsap's insistence that both things and nonthings be included in the category of existing phenomena, do not actually conflict with the this view. This shared view, then, presents a more radical expression of Dharmakīrti's assertion of the ontological primacy of specifically characterized phenomena but does not deny the conventional existence of conceptual entities.

This interpretation appears quite "neat" and does take care of some of the evidence. It seems to be accepted by several contemporary Sa-gya scholars. Nevertheless, there is cause to wonder if it is compatible with all the evidence available from Sa-pan's texts. Lo Ken-chen, for one, does not accept this interpretation. He rather asserts that constructs do not exist at all. They are merely added to reality through a negative conceptual process, which we will describe later.<sup>29</sup> This explains why we conceive them to be but that does not entail that they somehow exist.

This interpretation finds support in another passage of Sa-pan's text. Discussing the inference from existence, Sa-pan criticizes the view of most Tibetan scholars asserting that nonthings exist. According to them, existence is an indeterminate reason (*ma nges pa'i gtan tshigs*) with respect to impermanence, since it is present in both permanent and impermanent phenomena.<sup>30</sup> Sa-pan objects to this: "What is this existence of non-things? If [non-things have] the ability to perform a function, they are things! If they do not have [this] ability, they do not exist. Therefore, they are indeed non-existent, although they are called existent."<sup>31</sup> Lo Ken-chen explains this passage by distinguishing two ways in which the word *exist* is used: (1) The real usage of the word is reserved for real things; (2) the figurative usage applies to nonthings as well, but since nonthings have no causal capacity, "they are not established [according to the true] meaning [of existence and are], therefore, figuratively existent."<sup>32</sup> Lo Ken-chen supports his interpretation by showing that many classical texts use the word "existence" only in the sense of thing. For example, Lo Ken-chen quotes the *Science of Debate* as saying "The defining property of existence is the capacity to perform a function."<sup>33</sup>

Lo Ken-chen's assertions that existence refers only to real existence turn us back to Bo-dong's criticisms of Sa-pan. Can we reconcile Lo Ken-chen's interpretation with the view that nonthings exist in a certain sense of the word? Commenting on Sa-pan's words, Śākya Chok-den answers this question:

*Question:* Are we not to accept that the defining property of existence is that which is observed by valid cognition? If we do, it would absurdly follow that all knowables would be impermanent.

*Answer:* We do accept this as the defining property [of existence]. The explanation of distinguisher phenomena (*ldog chos*, that is, the phenomena that exist as distinguishers, i.e., as conceptually constructed universals) as observed by valid cognition is made in consideration of their being observed from the viewpoint of elimination. However, in general [this is] not sufficient to establish [something] as observed by valid cognition since [such phenomena] are not apprehended by an omniscient wisdom.

*Objection:* Does not Dharmakīrti explain that "Words do not refer to non-existents"?<sup>34</sup>

*Answer:* This statement is made in consideration of the fact that words relate to [phenomena] which are not nonexistent from the point of view of elimination.<sup>35</sup>

Śākya Chok-den's answer again takes up the idea that nonthings do not exist in reality. He introduces a further element by relating this to Buddha's vision. A Buddha would not see nonthings such as universals, space, and the like, since they do not exist in reality. Nevertheless, these phenomena exist from the viewpoint of elimination (*sel ngor*) which is the modus operandi of ordinary beings. Thus, nonthings do exist only from our ordinary viewpoint.<sup>36</sup>

For Śākya Chok-den, the use of the word "existence" in reference to nonthings is more than a metaphorical usage but, nevertheless, does not capture its essential meaning. Why then do Śākya Chok-den and other Sa-gya commentators (except Lo Ken-chen) insist on using the word "exist" in reference to nonthings? A remark quoted by Go-ram-ba might suggest a reason: "In this respect, the literal acceptance [by some scholars] of the pervasion of existence by impermanence is slightly uncomfortable given the [linguistic] conventions [currently used] in Tibet. [This is so for the following reason:] Existence and thing, which are stated as reasons establishing sound being impermanent, have the same Sanskrit equivalent, *bhāva*. Accordingly, this [term] is translated at times by 'existence' and at times by 'thing.' Nevertheless, the historical translators also have often used the convention of existence in reference to existence from the viewpoint of elimination. [For example, they have translated]: 'Universals have been declared to be existent . . .'"<sup>37</sup> For Go-ram-ba, the issue of whether constructs exist or not is merely semantic and does not involve substantive questions (as it does for other thinkers in the Sa-gya and Ge-luk traditions). The whole dispute can be solved by noticing the ambiguity in the Sanskrit original (*bhāva*). Historically, Tibetan translators have failed to distinguish between these two senses of the word. They have not reserved either *yod pa* (existent) or *ngos po* (thing) for either *sat* or *bhāva*.<sup>38</sup> And this is why Tibetan thinkers face this difficulty. All that one needs to do is decide on the appropriate vocabulary. Constructs do not exist really but as fictional objects of valid conceptual activities. If one wants to decide that this is what the word "exist" means, this is fine as long as one does not take such existence to have any real status.<sup>39</sup>



Let us notice, however, that the ambiguity is not only among Tibetan translators but in Dharmakīrti himself. He unsystematically uses both *bhāva* and *sat* to designate thing or existence (as applying to constructs).<sup>40</sup> The reason for this is that Dharmakīrti's concept of existence is ambiguous. Any attempt to make it more systematic remains artificial because of its ambiguity. This is not an accidental feature of Dharmakīrti's system but reflects a problem inherent to any antirealism, which must use the very pseudo-entities (the constructs) that it excludes. In privileging concrete things over abstract entities, antirealism makes it difficult to explain the ontological status of conceptual constructs that are necessary but without justification. What does it mean to say that constructs exist if they are not real? The answer that they exist because they are objects of valid cognitions will not do, for the question remains: Are the cognitions that validate concepts valid or not? If they are valid, then they must apprehend something that exists. If they are mistaken, how can they validate anything? It is the persistence of this kind of dilemma that explains the rise of revisionist interpretations of Dharmakīrti that attempt to get out of this quandary by reading his works in a more realistic way.

Before examining these attempts and the reactions that they provoked in Tibet, let us examine another problematic area of Dharmakīrti's system. A much disputed question considers the purview of "specifically characterized phenomenon" (the famous *svalakṣaṇa*, *rang mtshan*), to which I now turn.



## The Purview of the "Real"

### *Atomic Theory*

Earlier,<sup>1</sup> we delineated the criteria that separate the real from the conceptual. We noticed, however, that such criteria were far from unambiguous concerning the status of macroscopic objects. Let us now further inquire into Dharmakīrti's ontology by asking questions such as, What is to be considered part of the fabric of reality and what is to be excluded from this category? Are commonsense objects such as jars real? Or are they conceptual constructions? 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. Following Śākya Chok-den's insight, I distinguish four strands in Dharmakīrti's ontology: Three assume the existence of external objects while the fourth one rejects this presupposition. I show how these four standpoints are articulated within his overall system according to a scheme of ascending scales of analysis. This allows me to throw some light on the role of the fourth level in Dharmakīrti's thought, his Yogācāra view. I ask the readers to bear with this rather involved discussion, for it often plays on subtle differences that are nevertheless important, for they will lead us to a better understanding of Dharmakīrti's overall philosophical strategy. The less specialized reader may choose to skip the more technical discussions, focusing on the first and last two sections of this chapter.

The ontological status of commonsense objects is a key topic of the debates that oppose Dharmakīrti's tradition to its Hindu opponents. There the Nyāya assert the notion of whole (*anavayin*, *yan lag can*), a notion the Buddhists reject. The Nyāya rejoin that Buddhist philosophers cannot account for the differences that we perceive between our experiences of aggregates (a bundle of threads) and those of unitary objects (a cloth). How can Buddhist thinkers account for such differences without accepting the reification of entities involved in the Nyāya view? To explain a possible Buddhist answer to this qualm, we have to explore how the tradition views the macroscopic objects that we experience as unities. How are they made from atoms (*paramāṇu*, *rdul phran*)?

In some respects, Dharmakīrti does not seem to have very original views on questions such as these. He accepts most of the standard Buddhist doctrines found in the Abhidharma texts and reinterpreted according to the Sautrāntika viewpoint. These include impermanence and dependent arising. He uses these as the basis of his logico-epistemological system. It seems quite likely that concerning the reality of atoms, Dharmakīrti would again follow the Sautrāntika reinterpretation of the Abhidharma view as explained by Vasubandhu in his commentary on his own *Abhidharma-kośa*.

The Abhidharma views material reality in two different ways: Ontologically, material reality is made of the atoms of the four elements (*bhūta*, 'byung ba) of earth, water, fire, and wind.<sup>2</sup> This schema does not, however, specify the status of material phenomena other than the elements. These macroscopic phenomena are just described as arising from elements (*bhautika*, 'byung 'gyur). They are included in another classification which describes these phenomena from a phenomenological point view according to how they are perceived through the senses. These objects are the five types of sensible phenomena apprehended by the five sense organs: form, sound, odor, taste, and touch. Among these five, sound is considered apart; it is not required for a material object to exist. The other four are necessarily present in any material object including sound. Thus, in our ordinary world of desire,<sup>3</sup> all material objects other than sound have eight components (four elements and four types of sensible phenomena). Sound has nine (the former eight plus sound).<sup>4</sup>

The Vaibhāṣika<sup>5</sup> system combines these two Abhidharmic typologies to create a list of building blocks for material reality, the dharmas. Consequently, this school holds that the five types of sensibilia are substances as real as the four elements. This grouping of two distinct typologies is a consequence of the Vaibhāṣika view of reality. The Vaibhāṣika school asserts that only phenomena that resist material destruction or analysis are ultimate (*paramartha-satya*, *don dam bden pa*).<sup>6</sup> The Vaibhāṣika school lists seventy-five phenomena that resist physical destruction or reduction to other elements. These are considered real. Included in this list are the four elements and five types of sensibilia apprehended by the five senses. Other phenomena are only conventionally or relatively real (*samvṛti-sat*, *kun rdzob bden pa*). A jar, for example, ceases to exist when broken. Other sorts of objects such as water cease to exist when analyzed into their atomic components. Such cessations signify that these synthetic things are not fully real. On the contrary, taste and smell retain their identity when reduced to their components. Hence, they are real.

Accepting objects such as color, smell and taste as building blocks of reality creates a tension in the Vaibhāṣika system.<sup>7</sup> These objects are not just atomic components but empirically observable entities; that is, sensibilia. They are sense-objects and they are called *spheres* (*āyatana*, *skye mched*) in that they are elements of a given sense sphere. For the Vaibhāṣika, they are real, despite being composed of atomic elements. This is problematic, however, for if colors, shapes, and tastes are collections of atoms, how can they be said to be real? Can they not

be reduced to their atomic components? It would appear, then, that the Vaibhāṣika system is not coherent. It delineates reality according to contradictory criteria.

The Sautrāntika interpretation of Abhidharma presented by Vasubandhu seems to deal with this problem by reducing reality to simple elements. Vasubandhu refutes the Vaibhāṣika interpretation that large material objects are made up of eight substances. For him, this view is incorrect because it conflates two different senses of substance, ontological and phenomenological. Ontologically speaking, only the four elements are substances. From a phenomenological standpoint, by contrast, the four sense spheres can be called *substances*. This latter typology cannot, however, be assimilated to the former. Since we are here attempting to distinguish what really exists from what is merely conceptually added to reality, only the ontological meaning of substance must be taken into account. Vasubandhu thus eliminates the sensibilia (the spheres such as form) from the list of real phenomena. Among material objects, only the four elements are real. They are the building blocks out of which all macroscopic material objects are made. Consequently, they constitute these objects, which are not real in the full sense of the term. Our perceiving those objects is not due to their reality, but is the result of the causal efficiency of their constituent atoms. Hattori explains: "[Sautrāntikas] did not, like the Sarvāstivādins, consider as real what is seen by the organ of vision such as the blue color or the round shape; instead, by understanding as real that which has the efficacy to produce visual cognitions, they sought to resolve the difficulty inherent in the Sarvāstivādin atom theory."<sup>8</sup> According to this Sautrāntika explanation, only infinitesimal atoms and moments of consciousness are real. Everything else, such as a shape or a color, is real only inasmuch as it is taken as an object of conventional practice. This view is not unlike Wilfrid Sellars's claim that objects such as table, ice cubes, and colors do not really exist.<sup>9</sup> Our commonsense notions of such objects are false but cognitively useful. We will see that the parallel between Sellars and Dharmakīrti can be further extended to their theories of universals and perception.

This theory seems clear and unproblematic. And although Dharmakīrti never provides a detailed statement of his ontology, we could expect him to follow this Sautrāntika view. Several traditional and modern scholars have explained Dharmakīrti in this way, emphasizing that in his system reality is reducible to partless atoms interacting with moments of consciousness.<sup>10</sup> This causal relation explains our perceptions of extended objects. In reality, there is no extension but just the causal interaction of infinitesimal atoms with partless moments of consciousness. I call this interpretation of Dharmakīrti's ontology *the standard interpretation*.

Despite its strength, I believe that the standard interpretation does not account for some of Dharmakīrti's ideas concerning ontology. I am suggesting that Dharmakīrti's account is not unified. Conflicting elements in his view contradict the Sautrāntika account that he adopts in some parts of his work. These elements suggest an alternative view according to which spatially extended objects are to be included within the purview of the real. According to this view, material reality is

not reducible to its atomic components but also includes extended objects such as shapes and tangible objects. I am not arguing that this is Dharmakīrti's view, but, rather, that this view is present in his work. It represents a level of his analysis which is often not recognized by scholars who tend to present his view as being more unified than it is.

I believe that there is a tension within Dharmakīrti's ontology between an atomistic reductionism, which is in accordance with his overall ontological parsimony, and a less reductionistic delineation of reality, which allows for the reality of extended objects. This tension is due to the very close connection between ontology and epistemology in Dharmakīrti's system. On the one hand, Dharmakīrti's ontology emphasizes the particular over the general. Accordingly, spatial extension, which materially subsumes real individual elements, cannot but be seen as ontologically secondary, an artificial construct. Therefore, on purely ontological grounds, it seems quite reasonable to deny the reality of any kind of extension. On the other hand, however, Dharmakīrti also holds that perception offers an undistorted reflection of reality. Accordingly, what is perceived by perception must exist in reality. This creates a problem for Dharmakīrti's ontology, for we do seem to perceive extended objects. Since this perception is an undistorted reflection of reality, the extended object we perceive ought to exist.

Dharmakīrti seems to recognize this tension and handles the problem through what I described as a strategy of ascending scales of analysis. This explains one of the most puzzling elements in Dharmakīrti's system, the adoption of several contradictory ontologies. Through most of his works Dharmakīrti presents himself as a realist concerning the existence of the external world. He defends a so-called Sautrāntika position. Within this view, he also seems free to move between conflicting accounts. Sometimes he follows the view described previously, reducing reality to the interaction of partless particles and moments of awareness. At other times, however, he includes extended objects such as colors or taste or even commonsense objects. Finally, at other times he seems to leave behind this form of realism concerning the external world to move toward a more radical antirealism, a Yogācāra idealism. I believe that these moves are made by Dharmakīrti to solve the difficult problems raised by the ontological consequences of his epistemology.

The existence of such a diversity within Dharmakīrti's ontology explains the diversity of views on this subject entertained by his commentators, traditional and modern. Here I will examine some of the Tibetan contributions to this question, delineating the conflicting opinions existing in the Sa-gya tradition concerning the reality of extended objects before explaining Śākya Chok-den's way of reconciling them. These conflicting interpretations are not idiosyncratic accounts given by commentators but reflect conflicting ideas that are clearly present in Dharmakīrti. I first examine briefly two passages that suggest that extended phenomena such as sensibilia are to be included among real things.

To discuss the ontological status of extended objects, I would like to distinguish four sizes of material objects. First, there are substantial atoms (*dravya-*

*paramāṇu*, *rdzas kyi rdul phran*). These are partless particles out of which all material phenomena are made. These atoms aggregate to form the second size, larger molecules (*saṃghātaparamāṇu*, *'dus pa'i rdul phran*), which in turn form larger objects. When a sufficient number of molecules aggregate, they form the third type of material object, a collection (*samudāya*, *tshogs pa*). This collection is observable by perception. It is given to sense consciousness as sensibilia such as a patch of color, a shape, a taste, and the like. Such an object is markedly different from the fourth type of object, commonsense objects such as a jar. These objects, which are often described as coarse (*sthūla*, *rags pa*)<sup>11</sup> are synthetic objects constructed through the aggregation of the different sensibilia (colors, shapes, tastes, etc.). Although both collections and coarse objects are extended, they differ. Whereas the former is a mere aggregation of atoms of a similar kind, the latter is a synthesis of different kinds of sensibilia.<sup>12</sup>

### *An Alternative Interpretation*

According to the standard interpretation of Dharmakīrti's ontology, both collections and coarse objects are unreal. Some passages in Dharmakīrti, however, do not fit this interpretation. The first passage I examine is found in Dharmakīrti's explanation of sense perception (*indriya-pratyakṣa*, *dbang po'i mngon sum*).<sup>13</sup> Here he examines the status of objects of sense perception in the context of refuting a Nyāya objection. The Nyāya adversary claims to have found a contradiction between the Buddhist textual tradition and its rejection of universals. This adversary argues that, according to the Abhidharma texts,<sup>14</sup> what a sense consciousness takes as its object is an aggregate (*saṃcita*, *bsags pa* or *saṃghāta*, *'dus pa*). Such a collection (*samudāya*, *tshogs pa*), he argues, is nothing but a whole. It is determined as such by differentiating it from its parts. Such differentiation necessarily involves some conceptual determination based on universals. Dharmakīrti states the objection: "[Objection:] An aggregate (*saṃcita*, *bsags pa*) is an assemblage (*samudāya*, *tshogs pa*), [and] this is a universal. And there is a sense cognition of this [universal]. Now cognition of a universal must doubtlessly involve conceptualization."<sup>15</sup> For this Naiyāyika, Buddhists cannot maintain their assertion that perception is nonconceptual and ought to accept the existence of a determinate perception (*vikalpapakapratyakṣa*, *mngon sum rtog pa can*) and its support in reality, real universals.<sup>16</sup>

Dharmakīrti answers that sense perception does not take as its object a genuine synthetic entity but only an aggregate of atoms. Atoms in isolation are not noticeable, for they do not have the capacity to generate a perception in ordinary beings. To do so they must act in a group. The Abhidharma refers to just such a group when it describes the object of sense consciousness as a collection. Not being the product of a conceptual synthesis, a collection is not a bona fide universal. Nevertheless, it can be called such since it subsumes a multiplicity of elements. Dharmakīrti says: "When different atoms are produced in combination with

other elements, they are said to be aggregates. [And] indeed those [aggregates] are the causes for the arrival of [sense] cognitions. In the absence of other atoms, atoms have no special [noticeable] characteristics. Since cognition is not restricted to a single [atom], it is said to have a universal as its sphere of operation."<sup>17</sup> Since cognition cannot apprehend a single atom, it always perceives assembled atoms. This is why the Abhidharma describes cognition as having a universal as its object, although this object is not a real universal. For the Buddhist, as described by Dharmakīrti, sense perception depends for its object upon an assemblage of parts that collectively generate the awareness of an external object. These passages seem to suggest that the collection of parts must be included among the objects of perception. Hence, material reality is not reducible to atomic components.

A second passage suggests a similar conclusion. This passage answers a Nyāya objector, who argues that without unitary wholes we cannot account for the sense of unitary objects that we derive from experience. Dharmakīrti responds that large objects do not have to be wholes to be perceived: "If several [elements] are not apprehended simultaneously despite their [belonging] to a single sphere [of activity of a sense], how is it that many sesame seeds can appear to be apprehended simultaneously?"<sup>18</sup>

Dharmakīrti argues that a collection of atoms is the objective *relata* (the object condition, *ālambana-pratyaya*, *dmigs rkyen*) of sense perception. A heap of sesame seeds, for instance, can be apprehended by perception even though no synthetic entity pulls together the separate elements.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, since these elements are apprehended together, they must be real not just on an individual basis but also as a collection. So, Dharmakīrti accepts that extended objects such as a heap of sesame seeds are perceived.<sup>20</sup> He also accepts that this perception corresponds to some element in reality. It is the cluster of atoms that corresponds to the extended objects we perceive. Commenting on a passage of Duvēka Miśra's commentary on Dharmottara's *Commentary*, C. M. Keyt explains, "In conclusion, these last comments of Duvēka Miśra leave no doubt that the sensory object is an aggregate of atoms (*paramāṇu*). The cognition of an aggregate is free from both error and *kalpanā* or the mental operation in perception and is hence a sensory cognition. The atoms remain many and do not, simply because they are immediately juxtaposed, converge into some single, solidly extended thing. The singular solidarity of the sensum recording them is not a misrepresentation of them because this is the correct way for atoms immediately juxtaposed to be represented."<sup>21</sup> According to Keyt's interpretation, Dharmakīrti considers clusters of atoms to be effective and, therefore, specifically characterized phenomena. This is so because perception of extended objects is an undistorted reflection of reality. Certain macroscopic objects are effective inasmuch as they produce the perceptions that apprehend and validate them.

This conclusion is further supported by Dharmottara's comments on Dharmakīrti's *Drop*. Dharmottara differentiates, as we have seen, between individual real fires and the concept of fire.<sup>22</sup> His remarks indicate that the real fires to which he refers are not just atoms but extended objects that can be observed

empirically. Thus Dharmottara appears to imply that reality is not limited to infinitesimal objects, but includes spatially extended objects as well. Reality consists of empirically available objects and, hence, is not reducible to atomic reality.

This conclusion is certainly surprising, for it goes against Dharmakīrti's tendency toward a maximal ontological sparsity. It also contradicts other passages, where Dharmakīrti seems to imply that material reality is reducible to atomic components. This latter view is Vasubandhu's account and seems more consistent. And yet, it is hard to ignore the existence of passages that clearly suggest a different account within Dharmakīrti's works. This apparent inconsistency is due, as I argued earlier, to a tension within Dharmakīrti's thought arising out of the double perspective that orients his thought: the ontological and the epistemological. Ontologically, Dharmakīrti tends toward an antirealist reduction of reality to simple elements. From this perspective, extension is reduced to infinitesimal particles. Epistemologically, however, such a reduction is harder to sustain. According to his fundamental thesis that perception accurately reflects reality, extension would seem to exist. Extension appears, after all, to perception. This seems to lead Dharmakīrti to accept at some level a minimal notion of extension.

This does not imply, however, that at this level of analysis commonsense objects such as a jar are real. These coarse, that is, commonsense, objects, which we usually take as being real individuals, are synthetic and thus unreal, since they are made by the aggregation of atoms that do not belong to the same sense sphere (*āyatana*, *skye mched*)<sup>23</sup> such as color, taste, and so forth. Hence, the reasoning that demonstrates the reality of collections (through the capacity of the atoms to collectively produce a perception) does not apply to these coarse objects. At this level, Dharmakīrti's acceptance of the reality of extended objects applies exclusively to objects such as color patches, which are made of similar elements. It does not include commonsense objects.

These commonsense objects are presupposed, however, to be real at other times. For example, while discussing the way in which causal relations are understood, Dharmakīrti shows how we understand the relation between fire and smoke by observing how smoke follows the presence of fire.<sup>24</sup> In this discussion, causal relations are described as involving commonsense objects such as smoke that are thus assumed at this level of analysis to be real. Hence, there seems to be a confusing diversity in Dharmakīrti's ontology. To gain some perspective, it will be useful to examine the opinions of Tibetan scholars. Our discussion focuses on the Sa-gya tradition, where revealing debates have taken place about whether extended objects are real in Dharmakīrti's system.

In the debates concerning the status of extended objects, all participants hold that partless particles and moments of consciousness are real. The disagreement concerns the reality, or lack thereof, of extended objects. The discussion has often been complex and arcane. For the sake of simplicity I will distinguish three positions: (1) Some Sa-gya scholars, such as Dak-*tsang* and in part Śākya Chok-den, hold the view that I have described as the standard interpretation. In it, only infinitesimal atoms or moments of consciousness are real. No extended object

can ever be a specifically characterized phenomenon. (2) Other Sa-gya scholars such as Lo Ken-chen hold the view that I call the *collection view*. For them reality includes some extended objects (the sensibilia given to perception, such as, the collections of particles belonging to the same kind of physical object). They exclude from the purview of reality, however, commonsense objects such as houses and trees. These they describe as coarse.<sup>25</sup> (3) Finally, others such as Ngak-chö assert that reality includes even these commonsense objects. This view is defended by the Ge-luk traditions as well. In this chapter, I analyze these three views as they appear in the Sa-gya tradition as well as the way in which Śākya Chok-den reconciles them. I examine the Ge-luk argument in the next chapter. I conclude that all the three views are present within Dharmakīrti, but they do not function at the same level. They can be ordered according to an ascending scale of analysis.

### *No Extended Object Can Be Real*

Śākya Chok-den defines the specifically characterized as that phenomenon which is ultimately able to perform a function. He defines generally characterized phenomenon as that which cannot do so.<sup>26</sup> Śākya Chok-den gives partless atoms and moments of consciousness as illustrations (*mtshan gzhi*) of the specifically characterized. Such specific existence also implies substantial existence (literally, substantial establishment, *rdzas grub*), and true existence (literally, true establishment, *bden par grub pa*).

In some parts of his works, Śākya Chok-den argues that no extended object can ever be real. Such an object always involves a synthesis of discrete elements. Dharmakīrti's arguments against the Nyāya wholes, which have been briefly examined earlier,<sup>27</sup> accordingly apply to any kind of extended object, even the mere collection of atoms. For if such a putative extended object existed, it would have spatial parts. It would have to be either substantially identical (*rdzas gcig*) with those parts or different. It cannot be either, however. If an extended object were substantially identical with its parts, in reality (*don la gcig*) it would be one with those parts. In that case, either it would become manifold or its parts would become one.<sup>28</sup> Since neither is possible, for such an extended object to really exist it would have to be substantially different from its parts. It would then exist apart from its parts like the Nyāya wholes. Therefore, Śākya Chok-den concludes:

It is certainly not [possible] to accept that the special collection of the many substances that are its components and the continuum of moments grouped [together] are one substance [with their parts]. A description of them as existing substantially does not even exist in the texts of the author of the Seven Treatises [i.e., Dharmakīrti].

*Question:* Can we accept in our system that everything that has parts must not be one substance?

*Answer:* We should differentiate. We can accept that an object with substantial parts (*rdzas kyi cha*) must be so [not one substance], but we cannot accept this for objects with many distinguishers.<sup>29</sup>

All objects extended in space and time, even special collections of atoms and continua, are not real. They are made of different substances put together and are, therefore, reducible to such. Real objects are not associated with more than one point in space and time. Hence, they do not have real parts. Still, we may apply conceptual distinctions to them, such as being impermanent and being produced.

For Śākya Chok-den, all material objects exist only atomically (*rdul phran du gnas*) although we conceive (*rlom pa*) them as extended in time and space. Material reality is made of the atoms of the four elements (earth, water, fire, and wind). All material phenomena other than these elements are constructed from these basic building blocks and, therefore, are not fully real. In particular, the phenomena arising from elements (*bhautika*, 'byung 'gyur) are not real. They are extended, so they are reducible to their ultimate components, the four kinds of atoms. They are not real substances but exist nominally (*btags yod*).<sup>30</sup>

Up to this point Śākya Chok-den's position is similar to the standard interpretation of Dharmakīrti's ontology among modern Western scholars. The problem with this interpretation is that it makes it difficult to account for the status of extended objects. Once we grant that they are unreal, we have to admit that they are permanent and ineffective (since being a nonthing, permanent, a construct, and ineffective are equivalent almost by definition). While it is relatively easy to imagine a universal such as existence as permanent, it is more difficult to grant that colors and shapes are permanent as well! Most modern interpreters seem to have been unperturbed by this prospect, even though it seems to completely contradict our practical experience. They are ready to assert that for Dharmakīrti colors, tastes, and smells are not causally produced and perform no function. Rather they are conceptual overlays and as such they are changeless! Few Tibetan scholars find this prospect appealing. Strongly influenced by commonsense realism, they resist supporting a view that so directly contradicts our experiences of physical objects.

To solve this problem, Śākya Chok-den offers the following solution in some parts of his works, where he adopts Dak-tsang's view,<sup>31</sup> breaking down the dyadic structure of Dharmakīrti's system through the creation of an intermediary category. In addition to real things (specifically characterized phenomena) and ineffective conceptual constructions, is a third category, conventional things (*kun rdzob pa'i dngos po*). This category includes sensibilia such as color, taste, and tangible objects as well as commonsense objects such as jars and trees. These objects are generally characterized phenomena but are impermanent. They perform a function but only conventionally. All phenomena that have extension in space and time belong to this intermediary category. They are not really effective, for the performance of their function boils down to the functions performed by their constituent atoms.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, they are things but not specifically characterized phenomena. They are classified as nonassociated compositional factors.<sup>33</sup>

Śākya Chok-den's view has drawn criticism from other Sa-gya commentators. They have not failed to use this opportunity to distance themselves from such a controversial figure. Go-ram-ba, for example, argues against his rival that the binary distinction between the real and the conceptual at both the ontological and epistemological levels constitutes the basic structure of Dharmakīrti's sys-

tem. Introducing a triadic structure changes this system. To put it in modern terms, Go-ram-ba argues that Śākya Chok-den's interpretation contradicts the hermeneutical maxim that a genuine interpretation must attempt to retain the basic structure of the system while confronting any tension therein. The dichotomous nature of Dharmakīrti's system creates several problems (such as the status of macroscopic objects or the existence of nonassociated compositional factors),<sup>34</sup> so the temptation is strong to establish an intermediary category. Nevertheless, a good interpreter, Go-ram-ba asserts, must resist the temptation to change the system even to solve its conceptual difficulties. Moreover, as Go-ram-ba gleefully observes, Śākya Chok-den's views conflict with Sa-pan's views, the highest authority in the Sa-gya tradition. The idea of conventionally effective things contradicts Sa-pan's emphasis on Dharmakīrti's dyadic system.<sup>35</sup>

I think that Go-ram-ba is quite right in his criticism. I find it even puzzling that Śākya Chok-den would advance this view, which contradicts his global view of Dharmakīrti's system as consisting of a variety of views arranged according to an ascending scale. For, if the acceptance of commonsense objects as real is a lower standpoint, as we will see shortly, what is the need of introducing this triadic structure? It is as if Śākya Chok-den sometimes is carried away by his investigation of a topic and loses sight of his own overall system. Although this fearless spirit of investigation makes his works particularly attractive, it sometimes makes a rendering of his views difficult. In this case, it is hard to know what to do with his triadic analysis. Although it is introduced at this point, it does not reappear later. This view also seems to be quite different from Sa-pan's ideas, which express the middle position that only some extended objects are real. Let us examine this position.

### *Some Extended Objects Are Real*

Sa-pan seems to support what I have called the *alternative interpretation* or *collection* view. While refuting the Nyāya presentation of six types of relation, Sa-pan depicts a collection as the result of a gathering of elements:

from the gathering of the separate components of a collection, a lump which is a collection is produced. [This is a case of] causes affecting an effect, as, for example, a mountain [is produced] from the gathering of atoms and a heap from the gathering of seeds . . . [Dharmakīrti says] in [his] *Ascertainment*:

Since the cause that establishes the collection  
Is a component of the collection . . .<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Sa-pan seems to consider collections of atoms of the same kind (also referred to as *special collections*, *tshogs pa khyad par can*), as parts of causal reality. They are lumpy objects produced by the accumulation of parts. The parts act as the causes bringing objects into existence. Thus, for Sa-pan reality is not only made of partless entities. The reality of extended objects made by the aggre-

gation of atoms is undeniable: "Atoms of objects and sense powers [form] collections whose every moment produces a consciousness which experiences [an object]. [Such] are the perceptions of ordinary beings."<sup>37</sup> Extended objects are performing the function of producing consciousness. As such they meet the criteria for reality.

Sa-pan's teacher Śākya Śrībhadrā had already stated a similar position on his first meeting with Sa-pan. When asked what he thought about the idea that there is such a thing as mere blue (*sngo tsam*), Śākya Śrībhadrā said: "Sometimes I do not know very much, but blue exists in reality."<sup>38</sup> He further adds that these comments contain the essence of the *apoha* theory.<sup>39</sup> The meaning and implications of these cryptic comments will have to be explained gradually. For now, suffice it to say that Śākya Śrībhadrā seems to be committed to the idea that colors are real. This seems to imply that reality must include some extended entities.

If this is so, the next question is this: Are then commonsense objects (such as a jar) also included among the real? That is to say, is Dharmakīrti (according to this interpretation) a realist concerning commonsense objects? Lo Ken-chen gives an extremely lucid discussion of this question. Having criticized Śākya Chok-den's concept of conventional things, Lo Ken-chen discusses whether or not extended objects exist in reality. He distinguishes two types of extended objects:<sup>40</sup> those renowned to the world (*'jig rten la grags pa*) and those renowned to [philosophical] treatises (*bstan bcos la grags pa*).<sup>41</sup>

From the point of view of the world, substantial identity (*rdzas gcig*) concerns everyday objects such as jars and trees. They are substances. But when substances are analyzed from the point of view of their mode of apprehension, they are understood in terms of the spheres (*rdzas kyi skye mched*) apprehended by the senses as delineated by the Abhidharma texts.<sup>42</sup> Then the sense spheres are referred to as "substance," not the commonsense objects reducible to those spheres. Thus extended objects such as patches of color or tangible objects belonging to sense spheres are real but commonsense objects are not. Lo Ken-chen said:

When engaged [in practical activities], one applies terms such as substance, thing, etc., [to objects such as pot]. Nevertheless, when they are explained in the treatises by differentiating specific [and] general [characteristics], they are not established as things for the following reason: since the eight sense spheres belonging to a jar, etc., exist independently, nonconceptual perceptions are produced individually. Accordingly, there is no single perception corresponding to the term "jar." [Moreover] while explaining Dignāga and others' thesis in [his] *Commentary on the Four Hundred*, [Candrakīrti] says: "Here, the logicians state: [an object such as] jar definitively does not exist [as an object of] perception. The specific characteristic of [its] form and so forth is not showable. It is called [object of] perception because it is the object of a visual consciousness, etc. Since a jar is merely named by the mind, it does not exist as a specifically characterized phenomenon. With respect to something which does not exist as a specifically characterized object, not only is there no real perception possible but even metaphorically perception is not feasible in such a case."<sup>43</sup>



We use convenient terms to designate objects we deal with in our daily life as if those objects were real and perceived as they are. These names are not given arbitrarily, but neither do they directly correspond to what exists. When we use the term *jar*, for example, we in fact refer to a component of the jar such as its shape or tangible aspect. We perceive such components, but not the jar itself which is a synthetic object constructed from eight components (four elements [wind, fire, water, and air] and four spheres of sensory objects [form, taste, smell, and tangible aspect]). Each of these exists on its own. Together they form what we commonly call *material objects*. These components are apprehended by different types of perception. For example, form (i.e., color and shape) is apprehended by visual consciousness, tangible objects by body consciousness, and so forth.

When we perceive the shape of a jar, we do not fully perceive that jar, which is constructed out of eight components. We perceive only some of these components, such as its form. This is because there is no overlap among the senses. The special capacities of the organs on which the senses rely are mutually distinct. Therefore, our vision of a jar is only the experience of color and shape and not that of the jar itself, conceptually constructed from the eight components. Similarly, when we touch the same jar, we experience only one aspect of that object, its tangible aspect. The label *jar* that we give to that object does not correspond to what we actually perceive. We refer to the jar as the sum total of its parts, but this totality is an abstraction unavailable to empirical experience. It is a label that we give for the sake of convenience.

Lo Ken-chen's exegesis explains how a jar as the sum total of its parts does not exist in reality, since it is not available in its entirety to any perception. Objects such as jars are conventional descriptions that we give to components such as color, taste, and the like, for the sake of coordinating our perceptions. This is a convincing account of what Vasubandhu means when he says: "In common usage, what is called 'earth' is the color and the shape."<sup>44</sup> The word *earth* is given commonly on the basis of what is in reality earth's color. Similarly, what we call *jar* is in reality a shape. These are convenient ways of speaking but do not reflect reality.

### *Extension in Space and Time*

We are moving toward the examination of the third group of commentators. They hold a more realist position than Lo Ken-chen concerning commonsense objects. Let us pause to examine a question raised by Lo Ken-chen's claim that the collection of atomic elements is real. Does this real status apply to objects extended in time; that is, to continua (*rgyun*, *santāna*), which are collections of temporal parts, as argued by Gyel-tsap and Kay-drup? Among all groups of Sa-gya scholars the answer is unambiguously negative. Go-ram-ba explains: "Continua are also not [real] for the following reason: each part among the many parts [of the object] produces a single individual cognition as its effect. It is impossible that all the parts put together produce a single cognition as their effect."<sup>45</sup> According to Sa-gya

thinkers, the temporal parts of an object cannot be treated in the same way as its spatial parts. Each type of part produces its effects in a different way. Spatial parts coexist and, therefore, are able to contribute to the production of a common effect. Since their effectivity is not reducible to that of their components, they have a reality as a collection. This is not the case with temporal parts. They do not exist at the same time and, therefore, cannot produce a common effect. The different moments that we string together to make a continuum have no effectivity as a collective body. Therefore, continua as such are necessarily unreal.

Moreover, as both Go-ram-ba and Śākya Chok-den remark, the arguments directed by Dharmakīrti against the Sāṃkhya and used by Sa-paṅ against Tibetan realists also refute the reality of continua.<sup>46</sup> If continua were real, they would have to be either one with their parts or different. In the first case, when the first moment disintegrates the continuum would disintegrate and hence would not be a continuum. Or it would remain for a second moment and, therefore, be permanent. Since neither is feasible and a continuum cannot be substantially different from its parts (for that would be a Nyāya whole), it must be unreal.

This argument is based on Dharmakīrti's refutation of a Sāṃkhya view. That view holds individuals to be one with their universal, Nature (*prakṛti*, *spyi gtso bo*, or *rang bzhin*), the all-inclusive substratum.<sup>47</sup> Dharmakīrti argues that individuals and Nature cannot be one entity since individuals keep coming into and going out of existence but Nature does not: "If they are not distinct, they would be produced and disintegrate together."<sup>48</sup> If Nature and individuals were one, that Nature would disappear when individuals do. However, this is not possible, for then it would not be the all-inclusive substratum imagined by the Sāṃkhya. If Nature remains when individuals disappear, it is of a different essence from those.

This argument, as well as Sa-paṅ's, relies on the explicitly stated premise that two phenomena cannot be substantially identical if they have different causes:

It is contradictory for [two phenomena being] one substance to have different production and disintegration or different aspects. [Dharmakīrti says] in his *Ascertainment*: "It is not proper, when something is established, [for another thing which] is not established or [has] distinct causes to be [its] essence. The reality of things is to be distinct or [to have] different causes, [for] phenomena exclude [each other] or [have] distinct causes. If even that did not establish them as distinct, nothing would be distinct and everything would be one single block substance."<sup>49</sup>

Two phenomena are one substance if they are produced by the same aggregate of causes. This is so because the substance, that is, the essence (*rang bzhin*, *svabhāva*), of things is determined by the causal aggregate that produces them (*rgyu tshogs pa*, *hetusāmagrī*). Therefore, their essential identity or difference is also determined by their causes. Since two phenomena that are substantially identical must be produced by the same direct causes (*dnegos rgyu tshogs pa gcig*), they must abide and disappear at the same time. Therefore, a continuum cannot be one substance with its parts. Since it cannot be different either, it cannot be real.<sup>50</sup>

Sa-pan reaches a similar conclusion by considering the temporal nature of continua, which are created by putting together past, present, and future moments. Only the present moment, however, is real. A continuum depending for its existence on unreal moments can be only unreal. It is like putting a jar between the two horns of a rabbit.<sup>51</sup> Such a synthesis cannot produce anything real!

Sa-pan does not indicate a source for his analysis of how continua lack reality. A text of Dignāga extant only in Chinese, however, has a similar view: "If a continuant were identical with [each of its successive members], a person—who is an example of a continuant—would have lost his whole being and existence when he left his babyhood behind and, after gradual growth, achieved boyhood; [therefore], a continuant cannot be identical with [its successive members]."<sup>52</sup> Dignāga expresses the same type of argument as Sa-pan against the view that continua are one substance with their parts. He also compares continua to wholes: Both are equally unreal since both are the products of synthesis.

Sa-pan's arguments rest on his refusal to accept a distinction made by Tibetan realists between oneness and substantial oneness. Sa-pan holds, for instance, that impermanence and thing are one in reality because they are substantially identical. Sa-pan does acknowledge four types of difference, but the realist distinction is not among them. They are (1) real things such as shapes and tangible objects are distinct (*tha dad*); (2) unreal phenomena such as nothing and thing are merely not one (*gcig pa bkag pa*);<sup>53</sup> (3) impermanence and thing are distinct distinguishers within the same entity (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*), that is, they are conceptually distinct but in reality one; (4) moon and the Cooling Light<sup>54</sup> are equivalents whose names are synonymous (*don gcig la ming gi rnam grangs*).

Among these four, only the first distinction amounts to a real difference. Since the second distinction concerns quasi-entities, it is a quasi-distinction.<sup>55</sup> Nothing is no different from thing, it is just not one with it. Sa-pan furthermore rejects the idea of Tibetan realists that these two phenomena are distinct within the same entity (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*), because they are not entities at all. Consequently, Sa-pan also refuses the idea that the moments of a continuum are one entity with the continuum. If they were, these moments would all become one thing.

### *All Extended Objects Are Real*

Finally, the third group of Sa-pan's followers holds that all spatially extended objects (i.e., both the special collections of atoms of similar kind and the commonsense objects, but not continua) are real. This view is not, as we noticed earlier, without support in Dharmakīrti's works. There, he often uses commonsense objects such as jars, fire and smoke as examples of real things. Moreover, this is supported by commonsense as well, for after all, we believe that we see objects such as jars, tables, and trees. Tibetan thinkers find it more difficult to

resist this appeal to commonsense than their Indian predecessors. As we will see, this realism concerning commonsense objects is precisely the position of Ge-luk thinkers.

Within the Sa-gya tradition, Ngak-chö, for example, expresses a view of this sort: "Obviously, jar and so forth exist substantially since they are specifically characterized phenomena."<sup>56</sup> For Ngak-chö, there seems to be little doubt that commonsense objects are real. Commenting on Go-ram-ba's passage, Ngak-chö states that a jar must exist substantially since it is a specifically characterized phenomenon. His position seems to be accepted by many contemporary scholars. They, like many other Tibetan thinkers, seem to feel the strong pull of commonsense. Even Go-ram-ba seems to feel this pull, although his position does not seem to be consistent. While commenting on Dharmakīrti's explanation on the identity conditions of real things, he takes jar as his illustration, thereby implying its reality.<sup>57</sup> In other passages, however, Go-ram-ba seems to express a contradictory view. While refuting the reality of universals, he lists a number of unreal phenomena. He includes in this list commonsense objects such as jar, which we just saw him include among the real!<sup>58</sup> I believe that this last view is closer to what Go-ram-ba has in mind. This would make his position an instance of the middle view, holding only some extended objects to be real. His reference to an object such as jar is probably a convenient description of the different sensibilia made from components of a similar kind (*rigs mthun, sajāṭīya*).

Whatever the interpretation of his position, its internal contradictions are significant. They point to a general tendency among Tibetan thinkers toward a realism concerning commonsense objects. This insistence on commonsense objects as real does not correspond to what is found in most Indian texts. Śākya Chok-den, who does not accept this dominant tendency in Tibetan epistemological thinking, remarks that no Indian proponent of either the Sautrāntika or Vaibhāṣika view has accepted the reality of such objects on the ontological level. Only at the most common level of analysis can such objects be accepted, as when examples are given or the objects of cognitions are described. These objects cannot be accepted, however, within any slightly systematic ontological analysis.<sup>59</sup>

From an Indian point of view, the exclusion of commonsense objects from the domain of the real is not surprising. It is not unique to Dharmakīrti's school, but is a premise accepted by most Indian Buddhist philosophers, who hold onto the reality of external objects. This premise derives from the epistemological atomism of the Abhidharmic tradition, where material objects are described as formed by the aggregation of sensibilia. In this view, reality consists of partless components but is not reducible entirely to them. Extended objects such as shape and tangible objects (sensibilia) exist. They are apprehended by perceptions which offer a true picture of reality. We usually fail to pay attention to these experiences, instead remaining prisoners of conceptuality.

Stcherbatsky interprets this exclusion of commonsense objects from reality as indicating that Dharmakīrti views specifically characterized phenomena (*svalakṣaṇa, rang mtshan*) as some kind of transcendental a priori or unique



instants. This is not the case. Rather, excluding commonsense objects from reality is the consequence of the epistemological atomism that runs through the Abhidharmic tradition. Lo Ken-chen quotes the Abhidharmic commentator Sthiramati as saying: "[Expressions] such as 'exist substantially, exists as [having its] own essence, exists ultimately' are equivalent. 'Persons' are [just] imputed, [they are] mere names [and] only exist conventionally. They do not exist substantially or as [having their] own essence."<sup>60</sup> This epistemological atomism is basic to Buddhist liberative strategy. Buddhism teaches that human beings can liberate themselves from suffering through a correct understanding of reality. We usually understand reality through perception and form wrong views, such as the substantial existence of persons, on the basis of these experiences. So the first step in a Buddhist liberative strategy is to gain a clear understanding of experience. This is achieved by developing mindfulness toward the four kinds of objects: body, feeling, consciousness, and mental factors.

Analyzing experience into different elements is essential to developing this practice. It permits us to disengage from our tendency to reify diverse elements into unities. To cure us of our constant reification the Abhidharma differentiates objects into spheres (*āyatana*, *skye mched*) and elements (*dhātu*, *khams*). In applying this teaching to experience, commonsense objects are found to consist of an aggregation of elements. These elements come apart through the power of mindfulness. The objects in which we have such strong confidence are found under analysis to be reducible to their components. Being real only to the commonsense world, they exist only at a superficial level. They are to be displaced by the practice of the path.

### Who Is Right?

Our analysis reveals a surprising diversity among Dharmakīrti's Sa-gya commentators. Some, such as Dak-tsang, hold that only infinitesimal parts exist. Others, such as Sa-paṅ, seem to argue that sensibilia are also real, although not commonsense objects. Finally, a third group argues that even these objects are real. Who is right?

This diversity, I would argue, is less due to mistaken interpretations than to a multiplicity of views within Dharmakīrti's own work. Hence, in a certain way all three interpretations are partly right, although they are wrong to claim to represent Dharmakīrti's exclusive view. This seems to be Śākya Chok-den's approach in some parts of his work.<sup>61</sup> Such a view is quite helpful here. Contrary to other Sa-gya scholars and most modern commentators, he refuses to describe Dharmakīrti as opting exclusively for one or the other of the views we described here. Instead, he shows that Dharmakīrti's analysis of external objects is articulated around three levels of analysis: (1) At a commonsense level, objects such as jars and so on are said to exist. (2) At a deeper level, however, these preanalytical ideas cannot stand. When examined in relation to sense spheres (*āyatana*, *skye mched*), objects

of commonsense disappear and the color of the fire is distinguished from the fire. This is the level of analysis corresponding to what I describe as the *alternate interpretation*. In the Buddhist tradition, this level is reflected in the Abhidharma, where commonsense objects are reduced to phenomenologically available entities. The ontological analysis, however, cannot stop there, for even entities such as color are not real. Therefore (3) at the deepest level, only their infinitesimal components are real. This third level corresponds to what I have described as the *standard interpretation*.

The important contribution to our inquiry is Śākya Chok-den's insight that Dharmakīrti does not choose between these different levels but uses them in dependence on the context of his inquiry. Thus, rather than following a logic of either/or concerning these views, Dharmakīrti pragmatically uses them according to his needs. This may sound at first surprising, to say the least, for these views contradict each other and Dharmakīrti knows it. How can a systematic thinker use views that undermine each other? Nevertheless, this is precisely what Dharmakīrti does. Throughout this work, we will encounter a similar strategy, which is basic to Dharmakīrti's way of doing philosophy. For example, Dharmakīrti discusses epistemological questions mostly on the ontological basis we are sketching here. This is the level described by Tibetan doxographers as the Sautrāntika view, which asserts that external objects exist. As we will see shortly, Dharmakīrti does not feel bound to always follow this view and sometimes introduces a conflicting Yogācāra view, which denies that external objects exist.

This mode of inquiry is not, as one may be tempted to think, an example of confusion or a deviant logic, for Dharmakīrti sees these positions as logically contradictory, but he also sees them as complementary or at least pragmatically compatible. The different levels (1), (2), and (3) function at different levels of analysis. When discussing epistemology, the first level is usually preferred for it is the closest to the way we conceive of things. At this level, we conceive of ourselves as perceiving objects such as jars. Such a description is not sustainable, however, for commonsense objects are not findable under analysis. Hence, we need to move to a higher level, at which our epistemic practices are redescribed as involving only phenomenologically available entities such as colors. But further analysis reveals that even these entities, which we usually think we perceive, are fictional. Hence, we need to move to a yet higher view, according to which only momentary particles are real (the standard interpretation) following a strategy of ascending scales. It is important to realize that Dharmakīrti does not believe that these levels are equally valid. Rather, for him, each level has its own limited validity within its own proper context of use. Ultimately, none of these three levels is valid, for they all assume the existence of external objects, a presupposition that Dharmakīrti ultimately rejects, as we will see shortly. However, Dharmakīrti does not refer to this ultimate but counterintuitive level very often. He prefers to move at a level more attuned to ordinary epistemic practices in accordance with his goal, the defense of the Buddhist logico-epistemological system first propounded by Dignāga.

### *Yogācāra in Dharmakīrti's System*

So far this chapter has explored possible interpretations of Dharmakīrti's ontology. It has noticed a bewildering variety of views, suggesting that, on a certain level, Dharmakīrti's system might accommodate real extended objects. Accepting such objects would partly account for our spontaneous intuitions of perceiving unitary extended objects by showing that our notion of extension rests on some objective basis (the *sensibilia*). Nevertheless, this would only partly respond to the Nyāya objection that we cannot account for such intuitions without positing substantial wholes, since the collections we perceive (the *sensibilia*) are not unitary objects but mere clusters. Where does our sense of unity come from?

For Dharmakīrti, ultimately, the answer to this question concerns reality itself less than our perception of it. Therefore, his answer moves toward an epistemological analysis of our subjective impressions of unitary objects. From this perspective, the relevant question is not about the objective support for our experiences of unitary objects. It is about the way in which these experiences arise. As we will see in our investigation of Dharmakīrti's theory of perception, we do not perceive objects directly but only through the intermediary of aspects (*ākāra*, *rnam pa*) that represent them. External objects provide the cause for such representations to arise in our minds. Thus, perception is really to be explained in causal terms.

Still, the question remains: What is the relation between our perception of objects as extended solid blocks of matter and their reality as aggregations of separate particles? How is the perception of extension generated? Does each atom contribute separately to the generation of such a perception or do they contribute collectively? Opinions among Indian Buddhist thinkers fall into two general categories. Some hold that atoms are merely parts of a collection (*saṃghāta*, '*dus pa*') and that each atom contributes to a perception of unity without sharing in it. The other view holds that atoms form an aggregate (*saṃcita*, *bsags pa*) in which they acquire a dual aspect: On the one hand they keep their subtle aspect, while on the other hand, they collectively acquire a coarse aspect.

These two views are described respectively as the collection view and the aggregate view (or coalescence view). There is some confusion as to which schools entertain which view. Kalupahana seems to think that the Vaibhāṣikas accept the second while the Sautrāntikas hold the first.<sup>62</sup> However, Hattori and Keyt hold a contrary view.<sup>63</sup> Relying on the presentation of K'uei Chi, a disciple of the famous Chinese translator and pilgrim Hsüan Tsang, they assert that the Vaibhāṣikas hold the aggregate view and the Sautrāntikas the collection view. In any case, a presentation of these views in purely doxographic terms is probably too simplistic. It is likely to mask the complexity of the opinions held by individual thinkers.

Although both views differ in their explanations of extension, they rest on a similar metaphysical realism: Objects exist according to the way we perceive them. We have the gut feeling that we perceive objects that exist outside of our

awareness, as if they were facing us. Metaphysical realism attempts to systematize this intuition by providing an account of external objects and their perception. This account is problematic, however, for our intuition concerning the perception of external objects conflict with other intuitions. We assume that our perception provides a true reflection of how external objects exist. We also assume, however, that external objects are made by aggregation. These two intuitions pull apart and lead to contradictions when systematized within a philosophical system. For if perceptions are unmistaken (*abhrānta*, *ma 'khrul ba*) reflections of reality, then the objects that they perceive should exist as they are perceived; that is, as unitary wholes. This unity is not confirmed, however, by an analysis of the way in which objects exist. When we analyze them, we discover that objects are not unitary but made of smaller particles. The collection view explains the nature of objects as being a mere collection of particles, whereas the aggregate view explains them as having a slightly greater degree of unity. Objects are aggregates of particles, which contribute together to the production of our impression of extension in a way that cannot be reduced to the contribution of individual particles. Both views attempt to explain how nonunitary objects made by collection or aggregation can give rise to perception of extension and unity. Both views face the same problem: If our perceptions are accurate reflections of the reality of external objects, how can these objects be made of atoms, which we do not perceive?

This tension is highlighted by Dignāga in his *Investigation of the Object*.<sup>64</sup> There, he proposes the following argument against realism concerning external objects, both in its collection and aggregate versions: Metaphysical realism is based on the intuition that our perception of external objects is accurate. External objects would exist then according to the way we perceive them; that is, as having extension and unity. This is not possible, however, since the individual particles, which compose the objects, cannot create individually the impression of extension. Since no individual atom has such an aspect, there is nothing in reality that corresponds to our impression of extension.

One might object that, although particles cannot produce individually perceptions of extended objects, they can collectively create the impression of extension. Against this, Dignāga proposes two possibilities: Either atoms form a mere collection (*saṃghāta*, '*dus pa*'), like a forest or an army, or they are aggregates (*saṃcita*, *bsags pa*), possessing their own collective structure. The collection cannot be, however, the external support of perception since it is not real. Like a forest, which is a mere name given to a bunch of trees without overall unity, it is a mere conceptual overlay on the individual atoms and, as such, does not exist substantially (*dravya-sat*, *rdzas yod*).<sup>65</sup> Since it is unreal, it cannot cause a consciousness to perceive extension. Similarly, the aggregate, the second alternative, cannot be the external support, for it is attributable to the cognition, not to the object. No collective structure in the object itself exists over and above its individual parts. Otherwise, we would have Nyāya wholes existing over and above their parts. Therefore, concludes Dignāga, both collection and aggregate accounts fail to vindicate the intuition that we have concerning external objects. Such intuition does

not hold to analysis, despite its attraction. It is inconsistent to assume that external objects exist and that we perceive them correctly.

Dharmakīrti's thinking concerning external objects follows the same line as Dignāga's. He does not seem to distinguish an aggregate from a collection. For him, atoms remain what they are whether they are aggregated or not. How then does Dharmakīrti account for our impression of extension in external objects? Like Dignāga, he does so by maintaining that this impression does not reflect the way things exist but the way we perceive them. A material object is perceived through the intermediary of its representation or aspect (*ākāra, rnam pa*). Each of its atoms causes a perception that has such representation to arise so that we see such an extended object. Thus, the impression of extension is a result of the aspected perception, not a reflection of the way atoms exist.

This answer does not close the debate. If extension does not exist in the object, how can the perception to which the object appears as extended be unmis-taken and completely objective? To solve this problem, Dharmakīrti makes a radically new move, introducing a Yogācāra view that constitutes a fourth level in his ontology.<sup>66</sup> Like Dignāga, he questions the assumption that external objects exist just the way we perceive them by denying the reality of the external world. In this way, he eliminates the source of the difficulty of knowing whether extended objects are real or not: "Therefore, the impression of coarseness (*sthūlabhāsa, rags snang*) does not exist in the cognition or in the object [because this coarse] essence is repudiated as existing in one [atom] and it does not exist either in many [atoms]."<sup>67</sup> The reasoning proposed by Dharmakīrti hinges on a simple assumption: If extended objects exist externally, they must be either identical with each of their parts or different from them. Extended objects cannot be identical with their atomic parts, since they are extended (assuming they exist) and atoms are infinitesimally small. They cannot be different either, for in this case they would exist apart from these atoms. Since no such object has ever been observed, we have to accept that extended objects are not different from their atomic parts. Since they are not one either, we have to conclude that extended objects do not exist externally. Why, then, are we perceiving extended objects if they do not exist? Dharmakīrti answers: "The appearance of a cognition, which is not distinct [from its object], as being so is indeed a distortion."<sup>68</sup> Our perception of extended objects is without support in the external world and therefore mistaken. Extended objects appear to exist separate from our consciousness, but in reality they do not exist externally. We perceive them as such, however, because our perceptions are distorted. This distortion does not concern just that we see extended objects but goes deeper to the root of the problem of distortion, the duality between subject and object. Dharmakīrti explains: "This [duality of objects existing independently of consciousness] is distorted [because] the dual [appearance] is also distorted. [The reason is conclusive because] the existence of objects different [from consciousness] depends on their appearance as distinct."<sup>69</sup>

Here Dharmakīrti confronts the objection that the reasoning he stated earlier (*Commentary*, III:211) shows that external objects do not exist the way we per-

ceive them but does not establish that they do not exist. His answer is that the view that external objects exist depends on the realist assumption that they exist as they appear to our mind. On this basis of objects appearing to our mind as existing independent from consciousness, we decide that there are objects external to consciousness. Once this basis is questioned, the view that there are external objects is deprived of main support. We then understand the plausibility of the Yogācāra view that consciousness does not need any external support to perceive objects, not even that of infinitesimal atoms. The impression of extended external objects is not produced from external conditions but arises from innate propensities (*vāsanā, bag chags*) we have had since beginningless time. Under the power of these internal conditions, we constantly but mistakenly project the false impression that there are external objects existing independent of consciousness.

This denial of the reality of external objects is where Dharmakīrti finds a solution to the dilemma created by an impression of a solid extended object produced by atoms, which do not have any extension by themselves. The problem is solved by rooting out its source, the assumption that objects exist external to consciousness as a result of atomic aggregation. The Yogācāra view that objects exist only as reflections of consciousness is Dharmakīrti's answer to the problem created by extended objects.

### *Is Dharmakīrti Contradicting Himself?*

This idealist solution differs from the so-called Sautrāntika view found throughout most of Dharmakīrti's works. There, Dharmakīrti assumes that external objects are real. He repeatedly articulates this position. All of our discussion has assumed this view. Nevertheless, at the crucial juncture of explaining the ontological status of spatial extension, Dharmakīrti appeals to a radically different view. Extension does not exist because there is no external world in which such phenomena could take place. Thus, it appears that Dharmakīrti holds two contradictory metaphysical views. Are they really contradictory or is it just we who see them as such? And if they are, how can Dharmakīrti maintain them in the same work?

It is tempting to believe these two views are not contradictory, for it is difficult to accept that an author takes two contradictory stances within a single work! This is precisely, however, what Dharmakīrti does repeatedly; for example, in *Commentary*, III:209–22, he states in short succession several conflicting views regarding the nature of aspects. Responding to the Nyāya charge that, in the absence of substantial wholes, experiences of unitary objects cannot be accounted for, Dharmakīrti answers that such experiences are due to the presence of aspects. The question of the status of these aspects is then raised: Are they real or not? That is, does this experience of extension have at least subjective validity or not? Dharmakīrti offers both answers without indicating a clear preference for either. Therefore, we have to accept that Dharmakīrti does introduce conflicting views within a single work.<sup>70</sup>

This is supported by several Tibetan sources, which understand Dharmakīrti's texts to articulate two points of view: External objects are accepted provisionally (the so-called Sautrāntika view) and refuted at a deeper level (the Yogācāra stance). This interpretation corresponds to what I have described as a strategy of ascending scales. Lower positions are introduced according to needs, with the understanding that they will yield to higher standpoints when the analysis is pushed further. This is confirmed by Dharmakīrti when he says: "[Buddha's] enacting the shutting of the eyes of elephants [leave] aside the meaning of the [ultimate] reality. [Acting] in a spirit of strict [agreement with] the world they display external activities."<sup>71</sup> This stanza comes at the end of one of the few passages reflecting a Yogācāra view.<sup>72</sup> It is important in that it indicates that Dharmakīrti does not take this Yogācāra philosophy as just a convenient element but holds it to be a deeper view of reality. Hence, the different standpoints in Dharmakīrti's philosophy reflect a definite hierarchy. More commonsensical views are subsumed by more critical but more counterintuitive views.

Still, a question remains: Why does Dharmakīrti rarely mention this deeper Yogācāra view, which he favors, preferring more commonsensical approaches? I believe that the scarcity of passages reflecting this view is not due to Dharmakīrti's belief in external objects but to a conscious strategic choice. For Dharmakīrti, this choice parallels Buddha's decision not to reveal the deeper meaning of reality in most of his teachings, instead focusing on simpler and pragmatically more appropriate teachings that do not provide an accurate vision of reality.<sup>73</sup> Dharmakīrti's choice is dictated by the nature of his audience. Like Dignāga before him, Dharmakīrti is engaged in elaborating an epistemology based on Buddhist principles but addressed to the larger Indian philosophical community of his time. He is also responding to non-Buddhist thinkers who had severely criticized Dignāga's thought. Since he is engaged in a debate with a wide variety of philosophers, mostly non-Buddhists, he cannot refer to his typically Buddhist Yogācāra idealism, for such a view would be completely unacceptable to most of his audience.

As Dignāga did before him, Dharmakīrti provisionally adopts a view, which later doxographers will describe as Sautrāntika, according to which external objects exist, while maintaining the Yogācāra denial of external reality in final analysis. Although these two views contradict each other, they are pragmatically compatible. They contribute to Dharmakīrti's task, the articulation and defense of a systematic epistemology embodying Buddhist principles within a generally accepted philosophical vocabulary. For this, he relies on the lowest common denominator between competing Buddhist views and uses as much as possible terms that have broad acceptance outside of Buddhist circles. This presentation of a common system is accomplished on the basis of a provisional acceptance of external objects. This less radical and more realistic view is introduced to create a basis of discussion acceptable to both sides. The discussion, however, will not stop at this level and the audience will be led gradually to realize that a sound theory of perception is incompatible with a realist acceptance of external objects.

Thus, the contradiction between this view and the Yogācāra view does not invalidate Dharmakīrti's system because they operate at different levels. Whereas the former Sautrāntika view offers a provisional basis for discussion, the latter Yogācāra view describes reality.

This seems to me the best explanation for Dharmakīrti's presentation of one view accepting the existence of external objects in most of his works and another view that clearly indicates the suspicion he ultimately bears toward such objects. This interpretation raises, however, another question: Given that Dharmakīrti is a Yogācārin, how important is this philosophy for him? Does Dharmakīrti develop a system that primarily aims at leading its auditors to realize the ultimate, the absence of duality between subject and object? Or does he offer a Yogācāra answer as a way to resolve certain epistemological problems? I will leave these questions aside for the time being, for they raise difficult problems such as the importance of Dharmakīrti's soteriological intentions. I will examine these in later chapters.

Suffice to say that I take Dharmakīrti's essential preoccupation to be epistemology not metaphysics. His interest in defining the nature of reality is to ontologically ground his epistemology. Essential to this purpose is the distinction between real individuals and unreal universals, a distinction that parallels and supports the one between the two types of knowledge, perception and inference. The exact nature of real entities (whether, for example, they are ultimately mind dependent or not) is a lesser concern. Although Dharmakīrti has a definite view on this topic, the epistemological nature of his project confines the articulation of this view to a system in which ontological commitments are kept to a minimum.

The nature of Dharmakīrti's enterprise explains why he left so many questions unanswered. It also accounts for the fact that his commentators came up with widely diverging interpretations. This last point will become clearer in the next chapter, where I examine the revisionist explanations provided by Dzong-ka-ba and his disciples.