



Dharmakīrti's Dualism: Critical Reflections on a Buddhist Proof of Rebirth

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Abstract

Dharmakīrti, elaborating one of the Buddhist tradition's most complete defenses of rebirth, advanced some of this tradition's most explicitly formulated arguments for mind-body dualism. At the same time, Dharmakīrti himself may turn out to be vulnerable to some of the same kinds of arguments pressed against physicalists. It is revealing, then, that in arguing against physicalism himself, Dharmakīrti does not have available to him what some would judge to be more promising arguments for dualism (arguments, in particular, following Kant's 2nd Critique) – and indeed, that these arguments actually cut against Dharmakīrti's own position. After elaborating and characterizing Dharmakīrti's case for rebirth, then, this article briefly considers an argument that Dharmakīrti cannot himself enlist for this purpose.

1. Introduction: How Reductionists Can be Dualists

'Eastern philosophies', one sometimes hears people say, 'are generally nondualist'. While it requires little effort to disabuse reasonable interlocutors of the idea that 'eastern philosophy' is a useful category – it usually suffices to note the tremendous internal complexity of both the Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions, not to mention the enormous differences between these two broad streams of thought – the 'nondualist' characterization nonetheless sticks persistently to Buddhism, in particular.

A passing acquaintance with Buddhist thought makes it easy to appreciate why this might be so; Buddhists, after all, are proponents chiefly of the 'without self' (*anātma*) doctrine, and surely nothing could be more anti-Cartesian than thus to hold (as Buddhists do in elaborating this idea) that every moment of experience can be shown to depend upon a host of causal factors, none of which is what we 'really' are. Buddhist philosophers, that is, can reasonably be thought characteristically to urge a broadly *reductionist* account of persons – one according to which, for example, we are not entitled to infer that our episodic cognitions and experiences must be the states of an underlying 'self'; rather, only the particular and momentary causes themselves are to be judged finally real. The remarkably

thoroughgoing anti-essentialism of Buddhist philosophers is surely part of what explains the characteristically modern preoccupation with Buddhist thought, which is increasingly represented as a possible contributor to the contemporary cognitive sciences – as (in one expression of this idea) itself a tradition of ‘mind science’.¹ Insofar as the prevailing trends in the contemporary stream thus taken to be comparable to Buddhism are themselves avowedly non-dualist, this helps cement the impression.

It is important to understand, however, that exemplars of the Buddhist philosophical tradition – and here I will have in view the Indian tradition of Buddhist scholastic thought, particularly as that developed in the course of the first millennium C.E. – in fact elaborated an eminently dualist account of the person. The Buddhist emphasis on the dynamic and relative character of subjectivity is not, then, incompatible with the view that among the causes of this are constitutively *mental* existents such as are irreducible to physical existents. What is denied by Buddhists, in other words, is only that ‘the mind’ denotes (as the definite article perhaps suggests to speakers of English) an enduring substance; to argue, as Buddhists do, that our experience is better explained by an *event*-based ontology than by a *substance*-based one is not by itself to say anything, then, about whether there could be essentially different *kinds* of events. Indian Buddhist philosophers could (and did), then, coherently maintain both that ‘persons’ consist simply in causally continuous series of events, *and* that the series of mental events, insofar as it continues after the death of the body, has indefinite temporal extension. It is, indeed, just the post-mortem continuity of any series of mental events that is called ‘rebirth’.

It is perhaps especially the significance of ‘rebirth’² for the Buddhist soteriological project that gave philosophers in this tradition a strong stake in refuting any version of physicalism. Indeed, the traditionally transmitted utterances of the Buddha include, in this regard, several passages to the effect that physicalism is finally a more pernicious error even than self-grasping (which is saying a lot, since the latter is thought by Buddhists to be the primary cause of our suffering). The reason for this, as Richard Hayes has succinctly put it, is that

if there is no rebirth, then the very goal of attaining nirvāṇa, understood as the cessation of rebirth, becomes almost perfectly meaningless. Or rather, nirvāṇa comes automatically to every being that dies, regardless of how that being has lived. (‘Dharmakīrti on Rebirth’ 128)³

Indian Buddhist thinkers thus held that physicalism was tantamount to ethical nihilism.

Perhaps insofar as physicalism was not a widely entertained option on the Indian philosophical scene, there are few sustained attempts by Buddhist thinkers to refute such a position. There is, though, one particularly revealing attempt to take on the challenge of physicalism. This is to be found, fittingly enough, in the work that most influentially advanced a trajectory

of thought that subsequent Indian philosophers took as practically co-extensive with the 'Buddhist' position in matters philosophical: the *Pramāṇavārttika* – the 'Commentary', we might reasonably translate, 'on Reliable Doxastic Practices' – of Dharmakīrti, who is generally taken to have lived c.600–660 C.E. One of the most remarkable chapters of this vast and complex text comprises a lengthy refutation of a physicalist interlocutor who denies the possibility of the Buddha's having cultivated his compassion over innumerable lifetimes; against the objections of this interlocutor, Dharmakīrti argues that mental events cannot be thought to depend on the body.

Dharmakīrti's text is usefully considered, then, for the unique extent to which it makes clear (contra many contemporary appreciators of Buddhism) that (and how) Indian Buddhists were dualists. In trying to characterize his arguments for such a position, though, it is perhaps just as interesting to reflect on the kinds of arguments that Dharmakīrti does *not* make against physicalism – and this because of some central commitments (centering, above all, on the primacy of *causal* explanation) that may finally make Dharmakīrti more like physicalists than unlike. In considering Dharmakīrti's 'proof of rebirth', then, I particularly want to draw attention to the fact that Dharmakīrti does not have available to him what seems to me the most promising line of argument for the irreducibility of the mental – and indeed, that the line of argument I have in mind actually cuts against Dharmakīrti's own position. Dharmakīrti himself, I will thus suggest in concluding, is vulnerable to an argument from the irreducibility of *reasoning* – a line of argument that can usefully be sketched with reference to Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. That this should be so can tell us some important things about Dharmakīrti's approach – about the possibility of being a dyed-in-the-wool dualist, while yet maintaining philosophical commitments that are central to contemporary iterations of physicalism. Let us first see, however, how sharply Dharmakīrti diverges from physicalism.

2. 'Compassion is the Proof': Dharmakīrti's Critique of Physicalism

Despite its enormous influence on the subsequent course of the Indian and (to this day) Tibetan traditions of Buddhist scholasticism, Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika* is not a very accessible text. Not only does it deal with intrinsically complex and elusive philosophical topics, but there is no complete translation of the text into any western language, and even such basic text-critical questions as the correct order of chapters are still debated.⁴ Moreover, like nearly all classical Indian philosophical texts, Dharmakīrti's work consists of often highly elliptical, metrical verses, many of which are unintelligible without a commentary. Close study of his thought, then, requires reference to a vast corpus of Sanskrit literature (and to the Tibetan translations thereof that are sometimes all that survive).

As the title of the text tells us, Dharmakīrti is (typically of Indian philosophy) centrally concerned with the category of *pramāṇa*, which we might render as 'reliable warrant' or 'valid doxastic practice' – something, at any rate, that picks out its referent's being a *criterion* of knowledge. Most Indian philosophers were preoccupied with which doxastic practices (e.g., those involving perception, inference, testimony, comparison) should thus be reckoned as criteria (as *pramāṇas*), and with characterizing the criteria so identified. Dharmakīrti famously argued (what would commonly be held by Buddhists writing after him) that only perception and inference had this status; all other ways of arriving at knowledge, he argued, are reducible to one of these.

In what most modern interpreters reckon to be the second chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika*,⁵ Dharmakīrti deploys the logical and epistemological tools developed in the rest of the text to mount an unusually complete defense of many aspects of the Buddhist worldview. The context for his doing so is (to give the title of this chapter) *pramāṇasiddhi* – a 'proof', that is, 'of *pramāṇa*'. More precisely, what Dharmakīrti here sets out to provide (in the form of an elaboration of one of a philosophical predecessor's epithets for the Buddha)⁶ is a demonstration that the Buddha himself was the paradigm case of *pramāṇa* – that he was *pramāṇa*, incarnate. While there is some debate about what, precisely, it could mean thus to take the person of the Buddha to embody, as it were, the category of 'valid doxastic practice', it is clear enough that what is at stake is the authoritative status of the claim the Buddhist tradition should be thought to make on us; Dharmakīrti tries to show, that is, why we should have confidence in the truth of what the Buddha taught.

Interestingly, the principal basis for Dharmakīrti's case is the thought that the Buddha exemplified a fathomlessly profound degree of compassion; 'the proof (*sādhanam*)', Dharmakīrti thus says (in this chapter's 34th verse), 'is compassion'.⁷ In other words, the Buddha evinced such remarkable compassion that this should itself be taken as the basis for an inference to the Buddha's uniquely comprehensive insight.⁸ That this thought should occasion the elaboration, in the remainder of the chapter, of a comprehensive defense of a Buddhist world view nicely exemplifies, I think, what it is to do philosophy; for what Dharmakīrti effectively does, in the remainder of the chapter, is carefully consider *what else must be true* in order for this thought to make sense. To think philosophically about one's commitments, that is, just is to reflect carefully on *what else* one is committed to in virtue of believing whatever one does. This way of characterizing the philosophical task makes sense of the thought (associated with philosophers of hermeneutics) that there is in all meaningful statements a 'surplus of meaning'; for the purport of any thought is always vastly exceeded by the innumerable states of affairs that would be entailed by its truth.⁹

What else, then, must be the case in order for it to be true that the Buddha exemplified such an astonishing degree of compassion? It is striking

that for Dharmakīrti, the first point to be made here is that *thought (buddhi) cannot depend upon the body*. Thus, in the same verse in which he asserts that it is compassion that warrants the Buddha's authority, Dharmakīrti avers that this compassion is based on disciplined 'repetition' (*abhyāsa*) of spiritual practice – repetition, that is, over the course of innumerable lifetimes. This occasions the objection (anticipated in yet the same verse) that this supposition is unwarranted 'because of thought's dependence upon the body' – because, that is, of the fact that the death of the body terminates (insofar as the body is a necessary and sufficient condition of) the mental events that alone can be thought to motivate the alleged 'repetition'. Dharmakīrti completes this verse (and introduces the ensuing critique of physicalism) by saying that this objection to his demonstration of the Buddha's authority can be put aside 'based on a refutation of [thought's] dependence [on the body]'.¹⁰

While the ensuing refutation of physicalism is elaborated over the course of many tens of verses, most of what is significant about Dharmakīrti's characteristic position is actually stated in the subsequent verse-and-a-quarter. Here, Dharmakīrti says:

It is not the case that inhalation, exhalation, sensation, and thought arise, independently of [causes] of the same kind, from the body alone, since there are absurd consequences given the assumption of [such] arising. (35–36a; text in Shastri 20)¹¹

A great deal of the argument that follows consists in debate concerning the various unwanted consequences of taking (in effect) the phenomena of *sentience* – respiration, perception, cognition – to arise only in dependence upon the body. Most of what we need to know about Dharmakīrti's position, though, is expressed here in the reference to causes 'of the same kind' (*sajāti*). His main point, then, will be that sentient phenomena must have among their causes events that are themselves *sentient*; events, more generally, must have ontologically homogeneous causes. The claim is thus that the events that constitute the physical body are ontologically distinct from those that constitute respiration and the rest.

In play in Dharmakīrti's assertion here is a standard-issue Buddhist analysis of the causal conditions of any moment of awareness. The idea, commonly elaborated in the Buddhist tradition's earliest scholastic systematization of Buddhist commitments (the so-called 'Abhidharma' literature), is that among the causes of any cognition is an immediately preceding moment of awareness (called a *samanantarapratyaya*).¹² Visual awareness, for example, cannot suddenly emerge from factors that do not themselves possess the property of seeing – rather, any such moment must always have among its causes something that itself exemplifies the same properties now displayed. There is much to be said about the characteristically Buddhist commitments that motivate this idea, and about what there might be to recommend this view.¹³ It could reasonably be said, though, that what we

have here is most generally a critique of the idea of *emergent* properties – a critique, that is, of the idea that moments of awareness could be thought to supervene on things that are not themselves aware (or, still more generally, that wholes could have properties not possessed by any of their parts).

There is a significant cluster of Buddhist commitments behind such a view. These particularly center on the role of *karma* in the Buddhist worldview. For Buddhists, it is the *karma* (most appropriately translated as ‘action’) of sentient beings that finally explains everything about our situation – that explains, indeed, everything that a theist typically means to explain by invoking God as creator of the world. As one of the foundational texts of the Sanskritic Buddhist tradition puts this point, ‘the manifoldness of the world is produced by the *karma* of sentient beings’.¹⁴ The same text then immediately proceeds to say that *karma* essentially consists in *thought* (*cetanā*). This passage is explicitly invoked by Dharmakīrti’s commentators, who explain, early in his critique of physicalism, that ‘[i]t is only karma characterized as volitional consciousness (*cetanā*) which remains alone [to account for the diversity of life]’ (Franco 181).¹⁵

The intuitively plausible point here is that action, at least insofar as it is ethically significant, is *intentional* – what can be meaningfully cultivated by Buddhist practice, that is, is finally the *mental* dispositions that inform sentient activity. Insofar, then, as *karma* is thus enlisted to explain the constitution of our experience of the world (and indeed, that of *the world itself*),¹⁶ what is invoked is above all something mental. This emphasis gives the tradition a strong interest in the irreducibly mental character of its most significant explanatory terms; indeed, the basic impulse here represents a strong conceptual pressure in the direction of metaphysical idealism, which is arguably the view that Dharmakīrti himself finally holds. To the extent, then, that this trajectory of thought may indeed be finally ‘non-dualist’, that is not true in a way that gives any comfort to contemporary physicalism; for if it is right to say there is monism here, it is surely of a finally idealistic kind.

If, then, Dharmakīrti is at the end of the day willing to jettison any part of the picture he elaborates in the section now before us, it is in fact the *physical* world that he can do without. It may not, then, really be a problem for Dharmakīrti that (as we will see) his position entails problems regarding the interaction of physical and mental events; the presently unfolding case for dualism is really meant just to show the irreducibly *mental* character of mental events – whether or not one also admits the reality of the physical is really beside the point.¹⁷ Again, though, the ‘irreducibly’ mental character of events here is not incompatible with Buddhism’s basically *reductionist* account of persons; the reduction of the whole that is a ‘self’ to its basic parts consists, on this Buddhist view, in showing there to be a causally describable series of events (and not an enduring substance) – but that is compatible with thinking the ontologically basic events themselves to be *irreducibly* mental. Contrary to what is surely

a widely prevailing assumption, then, *reductionism* – here understood as the view that a final ontology should make no reference to temporally enduring macro-objects, but only to the ontological primitives that constitute them – is not necessarily co-extensive with physicalism.

What, in any case, could be thought to warrant Dharmakīrti's assertion that the causes of sentient phenomena could not be imagined 'independently of [causes] of the same kind' (together with the concomitant claim that physical states are not thus 'of the same kind')? Again invoking a standard-issue Buddhist account of the sense faculties, Dharmakīrti first argues that awareness of the physical sense faculties is dependent upon thought, and not the converse:

Even when there is damage of each of the sense faculties, there is not of mental cognition; but when there is destruction of the latter, destruction of the sense faculties is observed. Therefore, the basis of thought's continuity, founded only on thought, is the cause of the senses; the senses, therefore, depend on thought. (Verse 39, text in Shastri 22)¹⁸

Indian Buddhists, in this regard, shared with many other Indian philosophers the view that the sense faculties should actually be reckoned as *six*: the five familiar senses (often distinguished by Buddhists as the *rūpindriya*, the 'form-possessing' or *material* senses), plus the 'mental' (*manas*, an Indo-European cognate) faculty. The five familiar sense faculties, typically understood as based in material sense organs, have as their respective objects the same things we would expect: the ocular sense faculty apprehends color and shape, the auditory faculty apprehends sound, etc. The object of the 'mental' senses faculty then is *the outputs of each of the other five*. That is, the five sense faculties whose respective organs are physical are understood, on this model, as something like simple transducers; contact between any of these and its proper objects generates, that is, a 'signal' such as can be the direct object of awareness. But it is only when that signal is, as it were, received by the mental faculty that one can be said to have full-blown *awareness* of (say) something seen.¹⁹ Dharmakīrti's point here, then, is simply that one can have occurrent cognitions in the absence of any (or even all) of the five bodily sense faculties, but not in the absence of the mental sense faculty.²⁰ It is, in other words, intelligible that there be mental content without sensory input – but the 'unreceived' transmission of physical-sensory signals, in contrast, would not by itself constitute any awareness at all. It is, to that extent, the *mental* that is conceptually basic here.

A few verses later, Dharmakīrti considers one of the problems that can be thought to arise for proponents of the foregoing picture: if the mental faculty is thus independent of the various faculties of the body, then why is cognition an invariably *embodied* phenomenon? How, that is, can it be denied that cognition depends on the body, and yet explained that we only see cognition exemplified in beings with bodies?²¹ This is well known to be an intractable problem for dualists; having insisted on there being

two irreducibly distinct *kinds* of things, it becomes difficult to explain how they can interact. Dharmakīrti's answer: 'These occur together because there is no difference in their cause' – in the same way, he explains, that the various sense faculties of a single person are independent of one another, respectively yielding knowledge of properties of objects (color, taste, etc.) that too are independent of one another (Verse 48b, text in Shastri 25).²² The cause these things all share, as one of Dharmakīrti's commentators tells us, is of course *karma*.²³ The intentional action of beings, that is, creates (their experience of)²⁴ a world in which thought interacts with bodies. But *karma*, we have seen, is itself finally mental – so this explanation again has the effect of making the mental logically primary.

Dharmakīrti also devotes considerable space to developing the absurd consequences that, on his reading, would follow from holding that thought *does* depend on the body. Most of these boil down to a problem that the commentators note right at the beginning, in regard to Dharmakīrti's opening contention that 'there are absurd consequences' given the assumption that thought arises from the body. With respect to the second passage we saw from Dharmakīrti,²⁵ then, the commentator Manorathanandin thus anticipates what is a recurrent line of thought:

If one assumes that respiration and so forth arise only from the material elements, then these [sentient phenomena] could arise from anything; hence, the whole world would consist of sentient beings. (Manorathanandin on 36a; text in Shastri 21)

If, in other words, it were held that material elements produce thought, then there would be no principled way to explain why only some arrangements of the elements do so; one would have to suppose that anything at all could give rise to awareness.

The same idea is in play in a lengthy discussion of states that seem manifestly to involve the interruption of awareness. Most compellingly, of course, there is the case of death – and chief among the unobserved entailments of supposing thought to depend on the body is (as Dharmakīrti notes at verse 51) that the death of the body would not result in the interruption of that body's consciousness; for the body is, after all, still available as a cause even when it is lifeless.²⁶ It cannot, then, be the body itself that produces awareness, since the material elements do not by themselves suffice to distinguish a live body from a dead one.

Among the things that do distinguish between live and dead bodies is the occurrence of respiration; hence, the foregoing point gives rise to the question of whether respiration, like the senses, depends on thought, or vice versa. Against an imagined interlocutor who notes that respiration continues during sleep (when, presumably, consciousness is not present), Dharmakīrti ventures the (not very promising) argument that respiration must result from conscious effort; otherwise, he suggests, awareness would wax and wane as the rate of respiration does.²⁷

But of course, this makes it necessary for Dharmakīrti to explain what causes respiration during the kind of deep sleep in which conscious effort is clearly not in play. While his answer is (again) not very promising as an account of the supposedly deliberate character of respiration, it usefully illustrates what are perhaps the most difficult problems for the whole approach that takes moments of cognition invariably to have *previous moments of cognition* among their causes. Here is how the commentator Prajñākaragupta puts the point:

neither the body nor inhaling, etc., are the cause of cognition [after dreamless sleep]. Only the cognition previous [to dreamless sleep] is the cause. And if that [previous cognition] has arisen from the body, then the inadmissible consequence would follow that [the cognition] would not cease [as long as the body lasts]. (Franco 271)²⁸

And again (expressing the same line of thought in commenting on a later verse):

The cognition [after awakening] that depends on a previous trace (*saṃskāra*) arises from a cognition although it is separated [in time] (*vyavahita*). And this [past cognition] is not cut off by [the subsequent] sleep. (Franco 291)²⁹

There is, then, here an appeal to something like remote causation: In order to salvage the idea that cognitions must always have previous cognitions among their causes, Dharmakīrti must thus hold that any cognition that is immediately preceded by an absence of consciousness is somehow caused by *the last cognition to precede the loss of consciousness*.³⁰ It could reasonably be thought, however, that this compromises precisely the intuition behind the Buddhist appeal (noted at the beginning of our survey of Dharmakīrti's arguments) to the 'immediately preceding moment of awareness' (*samanantarapratyaya*) – that this shows, in other words, how difficult it is to defend a reductionist account that (as Dharmakīrti arguably does) takes mental events to be explicable entirely in terms of efficient, local causation.³¹

These problems are not, however, incidental to Dharmakīrti's position here; indeed, the lengthy discussion of the case of deep sleep turns out to relate closely to the point Dharmakīrti initially set out to argue, which is that rebirth is possible. The commentator Prajñākaragupta explicitly makes the connection: 'At the beginning of life and when awakening [after dreamless sleep], cognition is perceived precisely as following a previous trace' (Franco 292).³² The arguments we have canvassed here are finally meant to show, then, that what we take to be the first moment of a newborn baby's awareness is really like the initial awareness one has upon waking from deep sleep; just as the cognitive emergence from sleep is caused by a preceding cognition (albeit, one that itself precedes an intervening period without consciousness), so, too, the 'first' awareness of a baby is really not primary at all – rather, it must, for the kinds of reasons considered here, have among its causes the last moment of awareness in

what is conventionally called a 'previous life'. This, then, is finally why it is reasonable to think the Buddha's compassion could have been cultivated over the course of innumerable lifetimes.

3. Conclusion: The Path Not Taken

It would, I think, be reasonable to characterize Dharmakīrti's arguments here as involving views significantly akin to *vitalism* – to the idea, that is, that sentience must finally be explained by the presence of some kind of *intrinsically* 'sentient' force or principle, which is irreducibly different in kind from physical things.³³ In an essay on the Buddhist Śāntarakṣita's (725–788 C.E.) critique of 'personalistic vitalism', Matthew Kapstein has made the point that vitalist trends are not necessarily antithetical to Buddhist reductionism. Noting an influential Chinese Buddhist text to this effect, Kapstein observes that

[c]onsciousness . . . comes to assume here precisely the functions of the [Brahmanical] *ātman*, the differences between them being with respect to the properties of permanence and pervasiveness, which are attributed to the *ātman* but not to consciousness. (107)³⁴

What Buddhist reductionists are committed to, then, is only the denial that an enduring and autonomous *substance* individuates the person – a view, again, that is not incompatible with thinking that mental events in a series exhibiting only *causal* continuity might nonetheless be irreducible to anything physical.

While the Buddhist view from which both of these claims follow – that there is no enduring 'self', but that mental events cannot supervene upon physical events – is unmistakably dualist, it is not without consequence that the irreducibly mental events, on this view, are thus thought to constitute series only owing to their *causal* continuity. It is significant, that is, that the constitutively mental events, on Dharmakīrti's account, nevertheless consist in *causally describable particulars*. Indeed, by Dharmakīrti's lights, this is as it must be if mental events are to be reckoned 'real' at all; for Dharmakīrti, putting the point in terms of a characteristically Buddhist reference to levels of description ('two truths'), famously says that

whatever has the capacity for causal efficacy is said here to be ultimately existent; everything else is conventionally existent. These two [sets consist, respectively, in] unique particulars and abstractions. (*Pramāṇavārttika* 3.3, text in Shastri 100)

Surely there are good Buddhist reasons to think as much; the converse of the Buddhist doctrine of selflessness is that of 'dependent origination' (*pratītyasamutpāda*) – that is, the reason we do not have enduring 'selves' just is that every moment of experience can be seen to originate in dependence upon innumerable causes, none of which is an unchanging

self. Dharmakīrti's broadly empiricist epistemology – which privileges perception as uniquely in contact with really existent things just insofar as perceptual cognitions alone are *caused* by the objects thereof³⁵ – thus recommends the conclusion that only the fleeting sense data of episodic perceptions are finally real, without also warranting the (inferential) belief that these must be the states of an underlying self. This is the sense, then, in Dharmakīrti's minimizing the significance of those abstract objects (such as *propositions* and *states of affairs*) that figure in inferential cognitions; for the *self* is, for Buddhist thinkers, the originating example of the kind of 'whole' or abstraction whose reality they thus mean to refute.

Dharmakīrti's dualist account, then, is one that takes mental events to be exhaustively describable in efficient-causal terms. It is, finally, in this characteristic emphasis on causal explanation that we really see the reductionist tenor of Dharmakīrti's thought; to that extent, however, the account we have here considered begins to look (to invoke the kind of picture that is usually contrasted with vitalism) rather *mechanistic*. Indeed, Dharmakīrti's confidence that mental events can be explained in terms of efficient, local causation arguably makes his account more *like* the physicalist accounts he rejects than unlike. We can, I would like to conclude by suggesting, appreciate this by briefly considering a line of argument against physicalism that Dharmakīrti does *not* deploy – and by considering, indeed, that what I take to be a more promising line of argument actually cuts against Dharmakīrti's own position.

The line of argument I have in mind, which can be sketched with reference to Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, emphasizes the extent to which something integral to personhood will *not* obviously admit of efficient-causal description – specifically, the very fact of reasoning. The question to be pressed here is whether 'relations such as one thing's being warranted or correct in light of another' (McDowell, *Mind and World* xv) – the constitutively *normative* relations, that is, that characterize the content of discursive thought – can be reduced to (or otherwise explained in terms of) causal relations. Kant, I take it, thus took the same question as central to the second *Critique*:

The first question here, then, is whether pure reason of itself alone suffices to determine the will or whether it can be a determining ground of the will only as empirically conditioned. (12)

Kant's question here amounts to the question whether our conceptual capacities are to be understood in terms of our responsiveness to reasons *as such*, or whether, instead, the exercise of our conceptual capacities can be exhaustively explained in terms that do not finally make any reference to what we experience as our 'reasons' for acting or believing as we do. The point at issue, in other words, is whether reasons are efficacious *as reasons*, or whether it is only under some other description that they can finally be thought to figure in accounts of persons. An overriding concern

with the question of 'mental causation' – the question of how (or even whether) anyone's *having a reason* can be thought to figure in explanations of their behavior – has led many physicalist philosophers to suppose that it is only as alternatively described that reasons can be thought to have properly explanatory value. G. F. Schueler has aptly characterized the motivation behind this thought:

the truths (even assuming they are truths) that constitute the contents of ... mental states cannot by themselves explain anything. Truths ... are timeless, abstract entities. So, the reasoning goes, they cannot enter into explanations of actions 'by themselves', but only via the agent's awareness of them (or via some other propositional attitude the agent takes toward them). It must, therefore, be the *things* ('mental states') that *have* these true or false contents that do the explaining. (58)

In other words, abstract things like the conceptual contents of *reasons* or *beliefs* can only be thought to explain our behavior to the extent that they can be alternatively described as the *kinds* of things that can be thought to cause anything. On a physicalist version of this idea, the conceptual content that is represented as one's *reason* for acting some way is understood to have explanatory significance only insofar as it 'really' consists in something else – in particular neurophysiological states or events, for example.

In the second *Critique*, Kant framed the foregoing questions in terms of whether or not reason is 'practical', by which he meant to ask simply whether reason is 'concerned with the determining grounds of the will' (12) – whether, that is, any explanation of what we *do* must include some reference to our *reasons* for doing so (and conversely, whether our reasons for acting have some role in explaining how we act). Emphasizing that he thus means to ask about our responsiveness to reasons *as such*, Kant basically took his whole task in the second *Critique* as being 'merely to show that there is pure practical reason' (3) – merely to show, that is, that it cannot coherently be supposed that reasons have explanatory value only insofar as they are alternatively described or 'empirically conditioned'.

The crux of his argument to this effect is the thought that there is a performative contradiction involved in any attempt to argue otherwise. As he puts this point, 'if as pure reason it is really practical, it proves its reality and that of its concepts by what it does, and all subtle reasoning against the possibility of its being practical is futile' (3). Thus, if it is not the *contents* of our beliefs and reasons that figure in the explanation of our action, but simply (in Schueler's words) 'the *things* ("mental states") that *have* these true or false contents', then our beliefs and reasons really turn out to be epiphenomenal; if, in other words, it is only under a different description (say, *as instantiated in mental event X*) that a belief *does* anything, then its being a *belief* is finally beside the point. The Kantian argument is that this cannot coherently be maintained, since it is impossible, on such a view, to make sense of anyone's trying to persuade us of its truth. How,

in other words, can it be thought that the *content* of beliefs is finally irrelevant to their description, and at the same time held that the content of the physicalist's own belief *about beliefs* is itself true? The deceptively simple point here is that any attempt to argue that reason is actually *not* 'concerned with the determining grounds of the will' – that, for example, our 'reasons' for acting as we do really have explanatory significance *only insofar as they are really something else* (e.g., brain states) – will itself turn out just to *be* an instance of reason's 'determining grounds of the will'. That is, the fact that our reasoning has some role to play in our behavior is not something that can coherently be denied, since it is only by *reasoning* that one could do so; reason, we have seen Kant say, therefore 'proves its reality and that of its concepts by what it does' (3).

This is a line of argument that has recently been cogently elaborated in the influential work of Lynne Rudder Baker.³⁶ Whether or not it is finally judged promising, it is important for an understanding of his position to appreciate that Dharmakīrti does not have this kind of argument available to him; for this line of argument exploits a point (namely, the extent to which the exercise of our conceptual capacities resists causal explanation) that Dharmakīrti is particularly concerned to deny. Indeed, Dharmakīrti elsewhere aims to show precisely that our conceptual capacities (and concepts more generally) can be reduced to transactions between causally efficacious particulars; this is the point, more precisely, of his famously elusive but interesting *apoha* doctrine of linguistic meaning (and more generally, I think, of conceptual mental content). Thus, just as Dharmakīrti's account of mental events centrally involves the idea of *causal* continuity, so, too, Dharmakīrti's epistemology privileges the kind of causally describable perception that he takes to be constitutively non-conceptual – and the *apoha* doctrine that represents Dharmakīrti's strongly nominalist attempt to explain how conceptual content comes to be based on that is itself a fundamentally *causal* account, akin, in some ways, to contemporary projects in psycho-semanticity.³⁷ This all represents, it seems to me, part of what puts Dharmakīrti in the broadly empiricist stream of thought that would show how our use of concepts can be elaborated out of the resources available simply in sensory perception – but it is also comparable to the efforts of cognitive-scientific physicalists to show how the exercise of our conceptual capacities can be shown to consist finally in the causally describable workings of a brain.

Of course, if Dharmakīrti's attempt to provide a causal-reductionist account of reasoning were judged successful, that might undermine the cogency of the argument from practical reason sketched here. The fact that many contemporary philosophers aim to provide similarly reductive accounts of reason surely recommends care in proceeding – as does the fact that the full-blown account that is only partly advanced by Dharmakīrti's proof of rebirth is finally one according to which the cosmos consists entirely in events that are, somehow, at once *mental* and *impersonal*. The fact that we have a hard time imagining this (a hard time imagining, that

is, what a Buddha ultimately knows) may not count for much in a tradition which teaches that our predicament stems from the fact that we are massively mistaken about what we are really like.

Be that as it may, those of us who are still in *saṃsāra* are constrained to try to fathom such things using the tools of reason. From that point of view, I confess to being impressed by the Kantian argument suggested here – and, with other proponents of such an argument, to being baffled by the idea (to which, I think, Dharmakīrti and physicalists are alike committed) that we might use reasoning to persuade ourselves that reasoning does not finally have any explanatory role to play in our behavior. Wherever our inclinations lie, however, surely it tells us something interesting about the various positions in play that Dharmakīrti, though having set out to refute physicalism, turns out himself to be vulnerable to what some have judged a more promising refutation of physicalism.

Among other things, it may show that neither Dharmakīrti nor contemporary physicalists are really as ‘anti-Cartesian’ as conventional wisdom would have it. On the view I have in mind, the salient point of the Cartesian approach is the thought that ‘the inner life takes place in an autonomous realm, transparent to the introspective awareness of its subject’ (McDowell, ‘Singular Thought’ 236) – the thought, in other words, that mental content is intelligible with reference only to things internal to the subject. Whether one has in view a *soul* or a *brain* – or, with Dharmakīrti, causal series of constitutively reflexive mental events – is, then, finally less significant than the idea that this ‘inner space’ is intelligible independently of how things are in the world.³⁸ Among the salient points of the Kantian argument, on this view, is that it can be understood to point in the opposite direction; what characterizes the *reasoning* that this argument exploits is (among other things) its constitutively *social* character. While there is of course a much longer story to tell about this idea, perhaps this brief suggestion can help us appreciate that it may not, after all, be so surprising if Dharmakīrti’s vitalistic dualism has a whiff of Descartes; for while it is surely integral to understanding Dharmakīrti’s elaboration of Buddhist commitments that he be seen as a thoroughgoing reductionist, it is just as important to appreciate that such an approach looks very different when wedded to the view that what persons are reducible *to* is existents that are themselves irreducibly mental.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ For a useful collection of recent work in this area, see Wallace. See also Siderits, *Personal Identity* for a philosophically sophisticated development of Buddhist accounts of the person; and Siderits, 'Buddhism and Techno-Physicalism' for consideration of Buddhist thought particularly vis-à-vis what Siderits calls 'techno-physicalism'.

² The scare quotes are meant to emphasize the misleading character of this term; for the prefix 're-' suggests that there is, as in many Hindu versions of this idea, some one thing (a self!) that is again undergoing the process of birth. On the Buddhist version of this idea, the point is simply that the causally continuous series of mental events is not interrupted by the death of the physical body, and this mental continuum can become associated, in future 'lives', with all manner of different bodies.

³ Hayes is emphatic on the point; there is, he says, 'no other philosophical view that is more radically opposed to the tenets of Buddhism than materialism'. ('Dharmakīrti on Rebirth' 128) The extent to which the guiding concerns here are *ethical* comes through clearly in a well-known passage from the Pali *Dīgha Nikāya*, in which a proponent of materialism is thus represented as characterizing his view: 'there is nothing given, bestowed, offered in sacrifice, there is no fruit or result of good or bad deeds, there is not this world or the next, there is no mother or father, there are no spontaneously arisen beings, there are in the world no ascetics or Brahmins who have attained, who have perfectly practised, who proclaim this world and the next, having realised them by their own super-knowledge. This human being is composed of the four great elements, and when one dies the earth part reverts to earth, the water part to water, the fire part to fire, the air part to air, and the faculties pass away into space. They accompany the dead man with four bearers and the bier as fifth, their footsteps are heard as far as the cremation-ground. There the bones whiten, the sacrifice ends in ashes. It is the idea of a fool to give this gift: the talk of those who preach a doctrine of survival is vain and false. Fools and wise, at the breaking-up of the body, are destroyed and perish, they do not exist after death' (Walshe 95–6).

⁴ This point is worth noting since the studies and translations to which I will have occasion to refer (Hayes, 'Dharmakīrti on Rebirth'; 'On the Buddha's Authority'; Franco) have slightly different verse numbers. This is because the edition of Dharmakīrti's work that Hayes follows takes the chapter we will focus on (the chapter entitled '*Pramāṇasiddhi*') to be the first, and thus puts Dharmakīrti's two opening verses of homage at the beginning of it – while Franco follows an edition that takes our chapter to be the second, and therefore to begin with what Hayes reckons to be the third verse. (Despite my having used an edition that itself does not do so, I follow the conventions observed by Franco; thus, a reference here to, e.g., verse 34 in Dharmakīrti's text will correspond exactly to Franco's verse numbers, but will correspond to Hayes's verse 36. I take the chapter of Dharmakīrti's major work that comprises these verses to be the second, though references here will be simply to verse numbers.) The inaccessibility of Dharmakīrti's text is said to have been recognized by Dharmakīrti himself, who is traditionally represented as having despaired of the possibility of anyone's rightly understanding it. Dunne and Dreyfus provide authoritative and philosophically sensitive overviews of the thought of Dharmakīrti.

⁵ See note 4 above.

⁶ The philosophical predecessor here is Dignāga (c. 480–540 C.E.), on whom see especially Hayes, *Dignāga on the Interpretation of Signs*. Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika* is ostensibly framed as a commentary on the major work of Dignāga; on the ways in which Dharmakīrti's second chapter is particularly structured according to the epithets with which Dignāga's opening verse glorifies the Buddha, see Franco 15–43.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Dharmakīrti are my own, from the edition of Shastri, which comprises the commentary by Manorathanandin; with the above-noted caveat about verse numbers, reference can be made as well to the translations of Franco (159ff), Hayes ('On the Buddha's Authority'), and Jackson (221ff; this considers Dharmakīrti's text as it is embedded in a much later Tibetan commentary). For a more general consideration of Dharmakīrti's arguments specifically for rebirth, see Hayes, 'Dharmakīrti on Rebirth'; Taber.

⁸ Dharmakīrti's argument here is significant since, insofar as he proposes that only perception and inference have the status of '*pramāṇas*', he wants precisely to avoid allowing that, e.g., Buddhist scriptures are authoritative in and of themselves; for that would be to allow (as some other Indian schools of thought held) that the testimony of a tradition could be intrinsically authoritative.

⁹ So, for example, Robert Brandom: 'we can talk about what still remains implicit in an explicit claim, namely, its inferential consequences. For in the context of a constellation of inferential practices, endorsing or committing oneself to one proposition ... is implicitly endorsing or committing oneself to others which follow from it' (18).

¹⁰ This verse is a very fine example of the characteristic concision of Dharmakīrti's verses (and of the consequent need for reference to commentaries); for in four quarter-verses of eight syllables each, Dharmakīrti thus encapsulates a rich dialectical progression: 'The proof is compassion. This is based on repetition. If it's objected that repetition is unestablished because of thought's dependence upon the body, we deny it based on a refutation of this dependence'.

¹¹ Cf. Franco 166ff; Hayes, 'On the Buddha's Authority' 39.

¹² On a standard list of the conditions of any moment of awareness, this 'immediately preceding moment' of the same kind is one among four. On this elaboration of the idea, the causes of (say) a moment of ocular awareness include (1) a properly functioning visual sense faculty; (2) the object seen, reckoned as itself a *cause* of the awareness; (3) an immediately preceding moment of the same kind of awareness; and (4) the '*hetu*pratyaya', which is something of a catch-all category, comprising a collection of other relevant causes. For a useful digest of traditional accounts of the causal conditions here in play, see Nyāyatiloka 118–19. (The discussion of the *samanantarapratyaya* is at pp. 119–20, under the Pali heading '*Anantara-paccaya*').

¹³ Suffice it to say that this is surely among the categories introduced by Buddhists to try to account for *continuity* in the context of what is basically a causal-reductionist project. On this idea (and, more generally, on a host of philosophical problems having to do with Buddhist attempts thus to explain continuity), see Griffiths *passim*.

¹⁴ This is my translation of the text of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, 4.1a; see Pruden for a complete English translation (from an early twentieth-century French translation, made from the Tibetan and Chinese translations) of this text.

¹⁵ Franco is translating from the commentary of Prajñākaragupta.

¹⁶ I mean by this parenthetical insertion to draw attention to the shift that makes a characteristically Buddhist move towards idealism seem natural. Thus, the intuitively plausible soteriological intuition here is that *how we think* shapes *what we experience*; when that intuition is made the basis of a complete world view, it becomes, as well, an explanation of (what is conceivably a different matter) *what there is*.

¹⁷ Here, it is useful to keep in mind an idea proposed by some modern interpreters of Dharmakīrti, who would have us remain sensitive to the shifting perspectives from which he argues; see, e.g., Dunne 53ff. I have developed my own thoughts about Dharmakīrti's supposed 'sliding scale of analysis' in Arnold, 'Buddhist Idealism, Epistemic and Otherwise'.

¹⁸ Cf. Hayes, 'On the Buddha's Authority' 41; Franco 186.

¹⁹ The details of this picture are, I think, somewhat obscured by the fact that the 'signals' produced by each of the five bodily senses are themselves called *vijñāna*, 'awareness' or 'cognition'. The point, though, seems to be simply that what each of these material sense faculties generates is something ontologically of the kind that could itself be the *content* that is internally related to (the 'direct object' of) cognition, and it is really only when there is further produced an instance of *manovijñāna* ('mental awareness') that a 'cognition' worth the name can be said to have occurred. (A picture of the cognitive processes here outlined can be gleaned from the first chapter of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*; see Pruden vol. 1.) The role of the mental as a discrete faculty that thus synthesizes the outputs of the senses already stands in contrast to the views of contemporary physicalists; the 'mental sense faculty' here envisioned seems, for example, rather like the idea that Daniel Dennett has disparaged as that of a 'Cartesian theater' (see Dennett) – the idea, that is, of a central place where a single spectator takes in all of the various goings-on that underlie consciousness (and that only when this happens is there any *consciousness*).

²⁰ Note, though, that Dharmakīrti, like other pre-modern thinkers, did not have available to him the idea that something physical other than the apparatus of the five senses (namely, the *brain*) might be invariably concomitant with awareness.

²¹ Of course, this is not a problem to the extent that Dharmakīrti is finally willing to declare for idealism; but he typically argues in ways that are meant to carry conviction more broadly, even if much of what he says in a supposedly 'realist' way turns out to be compatible, as well, with the idealist commitments he finally holds; see note 17, above.

²² See especially Franco 217 for an unpacking of this.

²³ So Manorathanandin, commenting on the same verse: 'But if the body is not the basis [of thought], how is it they occur together? Dharmakīrti says, "Because of the non-difference of their cause", which [cause] is known as *karma*' (Shastri 25).

²⁴ See note 16 above.

²⁵ See note 11 above.

²⁶ So Dharmakīrti: 'There is the unwanted consequence of thought's non-cessation while the body, [even though dead, yet] abides' (Shastri 26; cf. Franco 234ff; Hayes, 'On the Buddha's Authority' 50).

²⁷ Verse 52: 'How could there be exhalation and inhalation of air without effort? There would obtain a decrease and increase [of cognition] because of the decrease and increase of these two' (Shastri 27; cf. Franco 237ff; Hayes, 'On the Buddha's Authority' 51).

²⁸ This is Franco's translation of a passage from Prajñākaragupta's lengthy commentary on verses 56–7. The latter point (that there would again follow the consequence of cognition's not ceasing as long as the body lasts) is the same one made earlier with respect to dead bodies.

²⁹ Franco is translating from Prajñākaragupta's commentary on verse 62.

³⁰ Griffiths offers an insightful study of the philosophical problems raised by this issue. These are particularly acutely raised, for Buddhists, by their commitment to the idea that meditative practice can produce states in which the continuum of consciousness is suspended – a commitment which, taken together with the characteristic commitments regarding causation, makes it difficult to explain how consciousness can be caused to resume after this meditative state subsides. Griffiths suggests that such Buddhist ideas as the *ālayavijñāna* (the non-intentional 'storehouse consciousness' that is posited as the locus of latent dispositions) were developed to address precisely such problems.

³¹ I have considered the centrality of this view of causation for Dharmakīrti as motivating some commitments that make his position finally analogous to the view that contemporary physicalist Jerry Fodor has commended as 'methodological solipsism'; see Arnold, 'Svasaṃvitti as Methodological Solipsism'. Fodor's characteristically cognitive-scientific on causal *localism* is emphasized by Garfield, 'Epochē and Sūnyatā' 14–20.

³² Franco's translation from Prajñākaragupta's commentary on verse 62; I have slightly modified the translation.

³³ This is the case, at least, insofar as Dharmakīrti is taken to argue from a standpoint that allows for the reality of the physical body; this characterization is less apt when Dharmakīrti finally lays his idealist cards on the table.

³⁴ The word 'personalistic' is, then, a significant qualification of the kind of vitalism targeted by the Buddhists whose arguments Kapstein considers; what Śāntaraṅgita refutes is particularly those versions of vitalism that take the vital principle (however conceived) to individuate 'persons' or 'selves'. Kapstein is right to note, though, that Śāntaraṅgita's 'view of consciousness, which is elaborated elsewhere, does not permit us to conclude that he was a thoroughgoing mechanist' (173), however much his critique of *personalistic* vitalism may suggest so.

³⁵ I have developed this point (as well as some commentarial attempts to address the problems with it) in Arnold, 'Dharmakīrti and Dharmottara on the Intentionality of Perception'.

³⁶ See especially Baker 113–74; see, as well, Garfield, *Belief in Psychology* 109–27, for a strikingly similar argument.

³⁷ I have elaborated something of this account (in conversation with contemporary physicalist Jerry Fodor) in Arnold, 'On Semantics and *Samketā*'.

³⁸ See McDowell, 'Singular Thought' esp. 236–52. I have developed a critique (informed by McDowell) particularly of Dharmakīrti's doctrine regarding the foundational status of *svasaṃvitti* ('self-awareness') in Arnold, 'Buddhist Idealism, Epistemic and Otherwise'.

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