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Dharmakīrti's School, Epistemological Ontology and New Comparative Dimensions

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Abstract

This article examines the ontological implications inherent in the sharp distinction, established within Dīnnāga's school, between sensory perception and all mental constructions. Focusing on Dharmakīrti's equation (and that of his commentators) of being with causal efficacy (*arthakriyā*), both in the *Nyāyabindu* and *Pramāṇavārttika* (the 7th c. A.D.), the author reconstructs a more complete hierarchy of being within the Pramāṇa tradition of Buddhist philosophy, also basing himself on the most renowned commentaries, i.e., those of Vinītadeva, Dharmottara and Prajñākāragupta (the 7th–8th c. A.D). At the apex of this hierarchy stands the ultimately real being-as-causal efficacy, i.e., momentary perceptions; in the middle are all universals, including non-being (*abhāva*); at the bottom is the existence of illusory perceptual objects. While having been articulated by the commentators, this “ladder” already began its elaboration in Dharmakīrti's writings. The article concludes by opening a new comparative horizon—juxtaposing Buddhist attempts to define being as such with certain Western models of ontological definitions (those of Plato and his followers up to the 21st century) and ontological hierarchies.

Keywords: epistemology; ontology; theories of perception and inference; particulars; universals; non-being; percepts; mental constructions; definitions of being; comparative hierarchization of being

1. Introduction: The Heritage of Dīnnāga and the School of Dharmakīrti

Today, hardly anyone would agree with Fyodor I. Stcherbatsky—both the formal and de facto founder of the academic study of Dīnnāga's school—in including within the scope of the *Buddhist Logic* (the title of his seminal, systematic work in this area of Buddhist studies) the concept of reality, the theory of causality, and the problem of the existence of the external world (see: [Stcherbatsky 1932](#)). After all, logic is equal to itself and possesses its own subject matter regardless of whether it is ancient, Buddhist, or modern analytical. However, Stcherbatsky was entirely correct in his assertion that the ontological problematic of the entire Pramāṇa tradition (from which all Buddhist philosophical schools, both Indian and Central Asian, drew) grew out of the Buddhist reform of epistemology and logic initiated by Dīnnāga. This reform primarily concerned the doctrine of reliability and sufficiency of the main sources of true cognition (*pramāṇa*), which were reduced to perception (*pratyakṣa*) and two inferences, i.e., inference-for-oneself (*svārthānumāna*), and inference-for-others (*parārthānumāna*). This triad formed the basic composition of the main texts of the Pramāṇa tradition. This involved a clear separation of formal logic (primarily the refined theory of inferential reasoning) from informal logic (the art of gaining victory in debate), a distinction absent before Dīnnāga. It was precisely against the backdrop of



Academic Editor: Andrew Schumann

Received: 25 May 2026

Revised: 22 July 2026

Accepted: 29 July 2026

Published: 5 August 2026

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this sharp division (in comparison with Brahmanical schools) between “pure” sensory perception and any mental constructions that Dīnāga (the 5th–6th c. A.D.) and his successors posed and addressed the question of the ontological status of their objects.

Indeed, in what is likely his final treatise, the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (“Compendium of the Sources of Knowledge,” 5th–6th c.), Dīnāga separates sensory perception and inference by a veritable epistemological “chasm” (as Stcherbatsky might have added, reminiscent of Kant (Stcherbatsky 1932, pp. 177–78, 200)), for an “objective reason”: the radical difference between their respective objects. The objects of perception, or, more exactly, ideation (if one uses H.W. Schumann’s amplification, i.e., that the Buddhist idealists saw what we call perception as the production of objects by consciousness—(Schumann 1997, p. 215) are “particulars” (*sva-lakṣaṇa*)—one might be tempted to say “of things,” but for the Buddhists, they themselves *are* things, as the substances, attributes, and actions of the Indian realists are, for them, identical. The objects of inference are “universals” (*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*), which correspond to the categorization of those first objects, primarily within class systems (I.2). Furthermore, Dīnāga, having rejected the quite natural approach of the Indian realists (especially the Naiyāyikas and Vaiśeṣikas) to demarcate the subject and object of cognition (based on the universal Buddhist denial of a permanent subject), discerns in both the objects of sensory perception and inferential cognition an indivisible triunity of the cognitive function, the cognizable, and the result of cognition, which is the cognitive process itself, described through the concept of appearance (*ābhāsa*) (I.8–10) (see: Steinkellner 2005, p. 4).

Dīnāga, however, did undertake a comparison of the ontological status of the objects of these two sources of knowledge, nor did his direct disciple Śvarasena. The task of addressing this issue was undertaken by Śvarasena’s disciple, Dharmakīrti (first half of the 7th c.¹), and his followers.

The subsequent sections of this article are structured simply. First, I will examine the results of Dharmakīrti’s “ontological work” based on my translation of relevant fragments from the two already mentioned texts that are most authoritative for his school (and for Buddhist studies). Next, we shall turn to the interpretations of his most famous commentators, aiming to determine whether they advanced beyond him, and if so, in what way. Subsequently, we will attempt to situate our findings within a comparative context, guided by criteria different from those employed by Stcherbatsky, who devoted considerable attention to this endeavor and created a highly significant precedent in the history of philosophy. Finally, we will summarize the conclusions of this entire investigation.

2. The Nyāyabindu and Pramāṇavārttika

The sequence in presenting Dharmakīrti’s positions proposed in this section seems to require justification. Eli Franco is correct in stating that the elegant and fairly convincing scheme for the chronology of Dharmakīrti’s works, proposed half a century ago by Erich Frauwallner, while certainly not provable, had not as yet become subjected to criticism (Franco 2017, p. 58). According to this scheme, the first of these works was the *Pramāṇavārttika* (“Commentary in Verse on [Dīnāga’s Teaching on] the Sources of Knowledge”), which is a highly complex and not entirely consistent interpretation of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, and, moreover, is unfinished (its first chapter—the only one among them that the eminent philosopher commented on himself—most likely represents a separate, earlier treatise). Subsequently, more polished treatises began to appear, until the *Pramāṇaviniścaya* emerged as the final version of his entire epistemological doctrine, immediately preceded by the *Nyāyabindu* (“Drop of Reasoning/Methodology”) (Frauwallner 1954).

However, even if we agree with Frauwallner that the philosopher could freely revise his works, including some parts and excluding others (much like any normal author), we would hardly be correct in assuming that if text X appeared later than text Y, then every-

thing contained in Y must by definition be “older” than everything in X. Another argument could be that, despite its, I would say, coquettish title (it is by no means a mere “drop” of a logical–epistemological method), the *Nyāyabindu* presents Dharmakīrti’s doctrine in an expanded and systematic form (the teachings on perception, inference-for-oneself, and inference-for-others). This allows for a clearer view of how his ontological positions naturally grew out of the teaching of perception, more so than in the *Pramāṇavārttika*. In this connection, how should we regard Dharmakīrti’s own well-known complaints that the second of these works remained misunderstood and would long remain so despite numerous commentaries?² Here, too, we could follow Frauwallner and assume that the Buddhist philosopher decided to correct his obscurity (I think not only for his followers, but partly for himself (one can only remember how Fichte blamed everyone but himself for the failure to understand his purely “monological” *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*)). And now, in order to present the entire epistemological context of Dharmakīrti’s ontology in the initial section of his “Drop of Logic”, we are presenting his own texts.

Samyag-jñāna-pūrvikā sarva-puruṣārthasiddhir iti tad vyutpādyate (1)

The accomplishment of all human goals is preceded by correct cognition. Therefore, that [correct cognition] is here explained.

Dvividhaṃ samyag-jñānam. pratyakṣam anumānam ca (2)

Correct cognition is twofold: perception and inference.

Tatra kalpanāpodham abhrāntam pratyakṣam (3)

Of these, perception is free from conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) and non-erroneous (*abhrānta*)³.

Abhilāpa-saṃsarga-yogyā-pratibhāsa-pratītiḥ kalpanā. tayā rahitam (4)

Conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) is the cognition of [an object] through an appearance (*pratibhāsa*) that is capable of being associated with verbal expression (*abhilāpa*). [Perception] is devoid of that.

Timirāśubhramaṇa-nauyāna-saṃkṣobhādy-anāhita-vibhramaṇi jñānam pratyakṣam (5)

Perception is a cognition not producing an illusion caused by [factors such as] an eye disease, rapid movement, the rocking of a boat, internal disquiet, and the like.

Tac caturvidham (6)

It is of four kinds.

Indriyajñānam (7)

[The first is] cognition through the outward senses.

Svaviśayānantara-viśaya-sahakāriṇā indriyajñānena samanantara-pratyayena janitaṃ manovijñānam (8)

[The second kind is] mental cognition (*manovijñāna*), which is produced by the sense cognition (*indriyajñāna*) as its immediately preceding condition (*samanantara-pratyaya*), while being assisted by an object that is not different from the object of that [first sense, cognition]⁴.

Sarva-citta-caittānām ātmasaṃvedanam (9)

[The third kind is] self-awareness (*ātmasaṃvedana*), which belongs to all minds (*citta*) and mental factors (*caitta*)⁵.

Bhūtārtha-bhāvanā-prakarṣa-paryantaṇaṃ yogijñānam (10)

[The fourth kind is] the cognition of the yogins (*yogijñāna*), which is born from the culmination of the intense cultivation (*bhāvanā*) of things as they truly are (*bhūtārtha*).

Tasya viśayaḥ svalakṣaṇam (11)

[In any case,] the object of this [perception] is the particular (*svalakṣaṇa*)⁶.

Yasyārthasya sannidhānāsannidhānābhyāṃ jñāna-pratibhāsa-bhedaḥ tat svalakṣaṇam (12)

And a thing is [purely] particular if the appearance of its cognition varies according to its proximity or distance⁷.

Tad eva paramārthasat (13)

This very thing is what exists in the ultimate sense (*paramārthasat*)⁸.

Arthakriyā-sāmarthya-lakṣaṇatvād vastunaḥ (14)

Because the defining characteristic of a real entity (*vastu*) is the capacity to produce an effect (*arthakriyā*)⁹.

Anyat sāmānya-lakṣaṇam. Saḥ anumānasya viśayaḥ (15)

The other is the universal (*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*). It is the object of inference.

Tad eva ca pratyakṣaṃ jñānaṃ pramāṇaphalam artha-pratīti-rūpatvāt (16)

And that very perceptual cognition is the result of the valid cognition (*pramāṇaphala*), because it has the nature of the apprehension of the object.

Arthasārūpyam asya pramāṇam, tadvaśād arthapratīti-siddher iti (17)

The source of this cognition (*pramāṇa*) is characterized by the resemblance (*sārūpya*) to the [actual] thing, since it is by virtue of this that the direct apprehension [of it] is established¹⁰.

The corresponding main *kārikās* from Chapter 3 of the *Pramāṇavārttika* are as follows:

Mānaṃ dvividhaṃ viśayadvavidhyāt śaktyaśaktitah /

Arthakriyāyāṃ keśādirnārtho 'narthādhimokṣataḥ (1)¹¹

The sources of cognition are twofold due to the duality of their objects—as possessing or not possessing [causal] efficacy (*śakti*).

Hairs [seen in an optical illusion] and the like are incapable of producing [real] effects, because they are not determined as such (i.e., as real objects capable of causal function).

Sadṛśāsadrṣatvācca viśayāviśayatvataḥ /

Śabdasyānyanimittānāṃ bhāve dhīsadasattvataḥ (2)

The duality of objects is also explained by their similarity and dissimilarity, [and] by their property of being or not being objects [of verbal designation]—of a word—and because thought [about them] arises or does not arise in the presence of [other] auxiliary causes.

Arthakriyāsamarthaṃ yat tadatra paramārthasat /

Anyat saṃvṛtisat proktaṃ te svasāmānyalakṣaṇe (3)

That which is capable of producing effects is [said to be] ultimately real (*paramārthasat*).

The other is considered to be conventionally real (*saṃvṛtisat*), and they are defined as, respectively, the particular (*sva-lakṣaṇa*) and the universal (*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*).

Śaktaṃ sarvamiti cet bījāder-anīkurādiṣu /

Dṛṣṭā śaktir-matā sā cet saṃvṛtyāstu yathā tathā (4)

If one objects that nothing possesses this capacity [for causal efficacy], one can cite the example of the seed and the sprout.

But if one objects that this capacity can be [attributed to objects only] from a conventional point of view (*saṃvṛtyā*), then let it be so¹².

Sāsti sarvatra ced buddhernānvayavyatirekayoḥ /
Sāmānyalakṣaṇe 'drṣṭeścaksūrūpādibuddhivat (5)

And if one objects, “Let this capacity be present in everything,” this is incorrect due to the absence of positive and negative concomitance (*anvaya-vyatireka*) in the case of universals, as is observed [to occur] in the case of cognition of the eye, form, etc.¹³

Etena samayābhogādyantaraṅgānurodhataḥ /
Ghaṭotkṣepaṇasāmānyasamkhyādiṣu dhiyo gatāḥ (6)

By this [reasoning] it is explained that cognitions of universals such as pot, lifting, number, etc., arise in dependence on conceptual conventions (*samaya*), mental effort (*ābhoga*), and other internal factors¹⁴.

Keśādayo na sāmānyam anarthābhiniveśitaḥ /
Jñeyatvena grahād doṣonābhāveṣu prasajyate (7)

Illusory hairs, etc., are not universals because they are not recognized to be real objects. And because non-beings are objects of knowledge as [something] apprehended [correctly], it would not be a mistake to include them in this class.

Eṣām api tathābhāve pratiśedhāt sphuṭābhataḥ /
Jñānarūpatayārthatvāt keśādīti matiḥ punaḥ (8)

If these [illusory hairs] are admitted to have the same nature as universals, this is not rejected by us, because their perceptions can be vivid.

They are conceived as such to also have the form of [objects of] cognition¹⁵.

Sāmānyaviṣayā keśapratibhāsam anarthakam /
Jñānarūpatayārthatve sāmānye cet prasajyate //
Tattheṣṭatvād adoṣo rtharūpatvena samānatā /
Sarvatra samārūpatvāt tadvyāvṛttisamāśrayāt (9–10)

But the appearance of illusory hairs, which are as universal as its object¹⁶, has no real object.

If [it is objected that] it has a real object by having the form of cognition, then the same [absurdity] would apply to universals.

There would not be difficulty [for our reasoning] for this is accepted [by us]; there is similarity in terms of having the form of an object.

Because of having a similar form everywhere, it is based on the exclusion of that [real object]¹⁷.

So, in the *Nyāyabindu*, a very consistent exposition of the place of sensory perception in Dharmakīrti's epistemological system is constructed. First, a justification of the teaching on the sources of valid cognition is given—through the fact that any rational practice must be based on it. Then, the existence of only two (no more) sources of cognition is asserted—perceptual and discursive. And the first pramāṇa is defined through the negation of the characteristics of the second, and the second one through connection with verbalization (primarily mental, such as “This is a pot,” i.e., an instance of a product of at least minimal discursive activity, which is completely absent in perception). Next, the phenomenological conditions for undistorted perception and its four varieties are

listed. And only after this does the philosopher turn to its object, which turns out to be only something purely particular (*svalakṣaṇa*), i.e., a non-verbalizable (through the construction of even elementary genus–species relations) representation of some *A* in some consciousness *B* (i.e., not “This is a pot,” but only “This”), which is identified solely through the degrees of clarity (vividness) of these representations. This is called existent in the absolute sense (*paramārthasat*), and the defining characteristic of this “absolute existence” is its causal potential—the capacity of *A* to produce some effect on *B*. This causal capacity is lacking in the objects of inferential cognition as discursive “construction,” any universals (*sāmānya*), and therefore—as is clearly implied in the *Nyāyabindu* (although not verbalized)—they cannot be beings in the absolute sense. The nature of this “absolutely existent” is the object of direct perceptual cognition, and this cognition itself is errorless through its correspondence to the object (*arthasārūpya*).

As for the *Nyāyavārttika*, one gets an impression that Dharmakīrti is already relying here on his achieved definition of existence through the capacity for causal action, which, for example, the objects of illusory (unhealthy) perception do not possess, and on the differentiation of the objects of sensory and inferential cognition through another capacity—that of being verbalizable. But here there is already something that was absent in the *Nyāyabindu*—the identification not only of the object of normal sensory perception as being in the absolute sense (*paramārthasat*) due to its potential causality, but also of the object of discursive cognition as being in the relative sense (*saṃvṛtisat*). Here, the teaching on the two levels of truth, developed in Mahāyāna, primarily in Nāgārjuna’s school, is obviously introduced into ontology. And further, Dharmakīrti, with dialectical elegance, partially distances himself from two extreme views: that which denies the causality of any object (it seems this is Mādhyamaka’s position) and that which admits it for all categories—substances, qualities, and motions (a completely clear allusion to the ontology of Vaiśeṣika)¹⁸. He thereby implies (although it is not made explicit) that universals might also lay claim to the same ontological status as individuals: this is not acceptable because they are merely products of mental construction. Dharmakīrti, however, is significantly closer to the Mādhyamikas than to the Vaiśeṣikas, since he accepts that causality is inherent in certain objects from the standpoint of conventional, but not ultimate, truth. Finally, the Buddhist philosopher creates for himself (in a monolog with himself, framed as a dialog) a problem concerning the ontological correlation of objects of illusory perception and non-being (absence), comparing them with universals. The former have nothing in common with them, whereas the latter do—as recognized objects of cognition. However, it is not so simple, I believe, for illusory perceptions to have this in common with real ones: they too can differ in degree of vividness. Nevertheless, Dharmakīrti’s overly complex thought can be understood in such a way that illusory hairs in the cognitive field of a person suffering from an eye disease do not correspond to real objects, whereas particulars and universals do correspond because they assume the form of these objects. The difference is that the latter do so through the exclusion from their object sphere of instances of another class, while the former, it seems, can be understood as doing so directly.

As a result, the philosopher, aiming to come to terms with both Mādhyamika and himself, admits three levels of existence: (1) the highest is attributed to pure particulars; (2) the middle to universals and non-being (absence); and (3) the lowest one to objects of illusory perception.

From the fact that authentic perception is defined through similarity (*sādrśya*) with the object represented by it, it would seem to follow that those Buddhologists who consider Dharmakīrti a realist akin to Sautrāntikas are right. Therefore, he can, in a “confessional sense,” be contrasted with Dīnāga, who, by his denial of the possibility of perceiving external objects—whether atoms or aggregates of atoms¹⁹—revealed an affinity with the

Yogācāra–Vijñānavādins. However, everything depends on what *sādrśya* meant for Dharmakīrti—whether it was merely similarity to an object, which would then be external to consciousness, or its non-separability from consciousness. In the second case, he could also be affiliated with the Buddhist idealists²⁰.

3. Main Commentaries

Both of Dharmakīrti's works, as already noted, were intensively commented upon. One of the earliest commentators on the *Pramāṇavārttika* was Devendrabuddhi, possibly a younger contemporary of Dharmakīrti. The text was also commented on by his student Śākyabuddhi, and, according to Theodore Stcherbatsky's hypothesis, also by Prabhābuddhi, whose work is lost (Stcherbatsky 1932, p. 40). But he most likely did not yet know about Prajñākaragupta, whom A. K. Warder, for some reason (without justification), placed at the end of the 7th century, calling his most detailed *Pramāṇavārttikālaṅkāra* ("Ornament of the *Pramāṇavārttika*"), comprising more than 16,200 Sanskrit ślokas, "discursive," whereas Franco, more plausibly, placed him in the 8th–9th centuries and defined him as the most original Buddhist philosopher after Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti (Warder 2000, p. 447; Franco 2004). The most facile commentary on the *Nyāyabindu* was, as is known, Vinītadeva's *Nyāyabindu-ṭīkā* (7th–8th centuries), a text intended most likely for the "students and graduate students" of the Pramāṇa school. Before we appreciate this work, let us reflect on his main points a little bit.

First, the object of perception is purely particular and what is universal can never come into its scope. The ultimate reality is being in the absolute sense (*paramārtha*). To the question "Why?" Vinītadeva answers that the defining characteristic of a real thing (*vastu*) is the production of an effect (*arthakriyā*). Here the commentator does not deviate from Dharmakīrti in any way. For example, he does not try to expand on Dharmakīrti's idea about existence in the absolute sense by clarifying that there are also some things which exist in the convenient sense.

Now, let us listen to Dharmottara, whose commentary is more eloquent and sophisticated²¹. The object of each kind of perception is the particular, and it bears its own uncommon characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*). But, he says, in contradiction to both Dharmakīrti and Vinītadeva, every real thing (*vastu*) not only has a particular essence but also a universal one (*sāmānyanī ca*). Nevertheless, perception is primal, as a continuum (*santāna*) about which a judgment is made through a determination arises from its force.

And so to the question about what is that object of cognition which is characterized by a particular Dharmottara responds: that it depends on proximity and distance (from an observer, i.e., the subject of perception). But that is not all. The production of an effect is interpreted as the pursuit of one thing and the avoidance of something else. Moreover, the production of effects proceeds only from objects of perception and not from those of mental construction, because of its incapability to do this.

Prajñākaragupta offered the whole hierarchy of relatively real things. His follower Jñānaśrīmitra was sure that "...from the point of view of lower relatively real things, higher relatively real things are absolutely real, but these absolutely real things are, in turn, only relatively real in relation to even higher relatively real things. Thus, *arthakriyā*—the highest of the relatively real—is the absolutely real" (Franco and Notake 2014, p. 41). What is interesting about him is that non-being (*abhāva*) also has an explicit access in real things and again through capacity to produce action. A jug on a table has an impact on those who sit around the table but its absence has its own efficacy.

From the cited musings, it is evident that Vinītadeva does not allow any intermediate stages between the absolutely real objects of perception and the unreal ones of discursive cognition. He is not troubled by the expression *paramārthasat*, which naturally suggests

that there might also be something real in a “non-absolute sense.” However, he cannot be reproached for this, since Dharmakīrti himself in the *Nyāyabindu* was also not yet consistent in this regard (see above). Vinītadeva also leaves no doubt that the objects of sensory perception perform purposeful activity (*arthakriyā*), which, in truth, contradicts the idea of them being unconscious and momentary, whereas Dharmakīrti’s text allows for the interpretation I have proposed—that it concerns only their capacity to produce effects, most likely to leave both strong and vivid impressions on some consciousness.

Dharmottara, without any ambiguity, ascribes to momentary objects of sensory perception a fully teleological, anthropomorphic orientation—the avoidance of one thing and the acquisition of another. However, he is not so orthodoxly consistent regarding the objects of discursive cognition. He directly acknowledges (and logically so) that a thing has two natures—both particular and universal—and does not assert that the second is illusory. It is true that he denies that the second possesses the primary characteristic of authentic existence—the capacity to produce actions—but his unconvincing response to the objection of an abstract opponent that it is a non-momentary, indeed continuous, flame that can be the object of perception (he himself confirms this) again testifies to his dialectical nature in comparison with Vinītadeva’s orthodoxy. However, for him too, there is nothing intermediate between what exists in the absolute sense and what is non-existent.

Finally, Prajñākaragupta took upon himself the responsibility to bring the concept of “that which exists in the absolute sense” to its logical conclusion. It turns out that there can also be existence in a mediated sense—such as not only universals, but even non-being (*abhāva*), to which even pragmatic efficacy is ascribed. One could plausibly speculate on this topic, for instance, in the sense that the absence of a vessel with an intoxicating beverage on the table might have a calming effect on those sitting at that table, whereas its presence would have the opposite effect; and only chimerical perceptions bear the signs of complete non-existence due to their inability to affect anything. Eli Franco ponders whether Dharmakīrti himself would have approved of the introduction of non-being into relative existence (Franco and Notake 2014, p. 6), but this does not seem essential to me, as it attests to the development of ontological ideas.

The only reproach Prajñākaragupta could have gotten from his philosophical associates could only be for the more-than-probable inspiration of this idea by the most consistent anti-Buddhist system of Mīmāṃsā, which even “granted” to non-being a separate source of knowledge called non-perception (*anupalabdhi*), or indeed simply non-being (*abhāva*). But we know well that the mode of mutual borrowings in Indian philosophy was the reverse side of its obverse—the polemics of all against all.

4. In the Light of Philosophical Comparativistics

Since the time of Stcherbatsky, the study of Dharmakīrti’s literary heritage (as well as that of Diñnāga) has made gigantic strides forward. This applies primarily to discovery of the new commentaries—both Tibetan and Indian—and to the clarification of their genetic interrelationships to the translations of individual sections of the *Pramāṇavārttika* and the text of the *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, but also to the textual study of specific terminology and topoi (from clarifying the varieties of inference and the theory of *apohavāda* to the doctrine of *saṃsāra* and compassion). Significantly less has been done in what Stcherbatsky, very persistently and for a good reason, considered to be another crucial task—the introduction of Diñnāga and Dharmakīrti into the global philosophical context—in the field of comparative philosophy²². It is well known that each section of his *Buddhist Logic* invariably concluded with European parallels, and the entire monograph with a polyphonic discussion of the most important doctrines of representatives of both the great philosophical traditions (the “Indo-European Symposium on the Reality of the External World”), in which the final word

once again belonged to Dharmakīrti, who defended Hegel's dialectical method against Eduard von Hartmann's attacks, while nevertheless pointing out to the latter how he should have improved it (Stcherbatsky 1932, pp. 544–45).

These days, comparative studies survive the shift right against Stcherbatsky's lines. I mean that in the 1960–1970s, one could observe a very salient growth in enthusiasm for Eastern–Western parallels (a special periodical, “Philosophy East and West”, published by University of Hawai'i Press, was established wherein intercultural philosophical similarities without reasonable reservations were often promoted, but now even those parallels which are doubtless are reconsidered because of the incommensurability of different languages and cultures²³). Given such a trend, it is not surprising that only single comparative papers on Dharmakīrti have been published (one only has to look at the references at the end of (Tillemans 2020)).

Here, I consider it fruitful to continue the comparativist work of the Russian Buddhologist while correcting his aberrations. The first consisted in the fact that he proceeded not from texts to ideas, but from ideas to texts, offering in advance an interpretation of basic Indo-Buddhist concepts that would very easily fit into European interpretations that have long since been elaborated on by historians of philosophy without sufficiently scrutinizing these parallels in the context of the original texts of both traditions. Stcherbatsky's second peculiarity consisted in his captivation with certain Buddhist concepts, which actually have more external than internal similarities with their European correlates. The most striking example is the concept of *svakṣaṇa*, which reminded him of both the Aristotelian category of substance, Leibniz's monads, and, most of all, Kant's thing-in-itself—to such an extent that even in his translations he almost unconditionally, repeatedly, and consistently rendered the Buddhist term directly as “thing-in-itself” (believing, quite seriously, that besides literal translation, a philosophical one could also operate).

In all the listed cases, what was presented as a philosophical synonym was fairly distant from it. For the Buddhists, what is essential is not so much the opposition of the category of substance/substrate to the categories of quality, quantity, and others, but rather the direct negation of the system of Aristoitelean categories (and above all of substance), which they demonstrated through their constant critique of the Vaiśeṣika categorical system that actually has much in common with the Aristotelian one. As for Leibniz's monads, those “substantial agents” also contain features absolutely incompatible with Buddhism—the existence of substantial spiritual subjects, each constituting a separate world presided over by a God–Creator, who was also unequivocally denied by all schools of Buddhism. Finally, parallels with Kant are not so far-fetched inasmuch as the latter strictly distinguished between perception and inference (here Stcherbatsky was absolutely right). But Kant's things-in-themselves were not conceived by the great German philosopher as objects of direct perception, but only as ontological guarantees that these perceptions are for the most part true; nor do they have anything in common with the momentariness of Buddhist particulars. This characteristic is in no way part of their description—as purely apophatic principles—whereas Buddhist particulars are by no means apophatic, and the texts cited in this article testify that a great deal was said about them by both Dharmakīrti and his followers.

Introducing into the context of general philosophy that very definition of existence by Dharmakīrti and his followers, to which we have devoted such considerable attention, appears more promising. Firstly, we are dealing with a meta-category of philosophy, which is neither a genus nor a species of anything more general, but in relation to which all other universals are particulars. Secondly, in Dharmakīrti, we probably have the first explicit definition of existence not only in Buddhist philosophy but in the whole of Indian philosophy. The definition of existence as efficacy is also extremely rare in the European

philosophical tradition, though not to the same degree as in the Indian. In Plato's *Sophist*, the Stranger, leading Theaetetus to an understanding of what existence is, first divides all things into corporeal and incorporeal, and then, in response to the direct question of what being is, gives a direct answer: "I say now that whatever possesses by its nature the capacity either to act upon something else or to be acted upon, even to the slightest degree... all this truly exists. I offer this definition of that which exists: it is nothing other than capacity" (247 d–e).

Twenty-three centuries later, Arthur Schopenhauer, who had a keen sensitivity to the spirit of Indian philosophy but had not even an inkling of the future discovery of the Dīnnāga school, asserted in the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) that "the being of perceptual objects is precisely their action, and it is in this that the actuality of a thing consists; the demand that the existence of an object outside the subject's representation and the being of an actual thing be separate from its action is utterly meaningless and a contradiction" (Schopenhauer 1911, p. 17).

About eighty years later, Charles Peirce, whose philosophy had virtually nothing in common with Schopenhauer's, while undertaking a descriptive characterization of existence and calling it "brute," nevertheless asserted that the concepts closest to the notion of existence are those of effort and resistance of one thing in relation to another (Peirce 1931, p. 24). Peter Geach, one of the most prominent analytic philosophers of the mid-20th century, in almost the same terms as those proposed above, distinguished between "formal existence" (which Frege dealt with) and "material existence," and defined the latter (actuality) as "x exists if and only if it either acts or undergoes change, or both." He clarifies that, by action, he understands both internal mental activity, such as thinking and planning, and the initiation of change in things, noting that this working definition of his coincides excellently with the one given in the *Sophist* (Geach 1969, pp. 65–66). Even more recently, David Bentley Hart, who opposes analytic philosophy and does not refer to Plato in this regard, stated that "the concept of being is one of power: the power of actuality, the capacity to affect or to be affected. To be is to act. This definition already implies that, in its fullness, being must also be consciousness, because the highest power to act—and hence the most unconditioned and unconstrained reality of being—is rational mind" (Hart 2013, pp. 235–36).

Now, as for the hierarchization of being, which had numerous precedents even before Dharmakīrti—primarily in the idealistic Yogācāra scheme of *trisvabhāva*, where *svabhāvas* were understood not as "own-natures" but, on the contrary, as the intercorrelation of three modes of consciousness—this scheme, finally systematized by Vasubandhu the Yogācārin (4th–5th century), is encountered for the first time in the *Samādhinirmocana Sūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (3rd–4th centuries AD)²⁴. In the West, an implicit gradation of objects, closest to that developed by Dharmakīrti's commentators—and like theirs, although not idealistic in the full sense, transcendental (in the genuine Kantian sense relating to cognitive experience, though not dissolved in it)—appears in the concept of *ens diminutum* ("diminished being") from the 13th–14th centuries onwards (first appearing in Siger of Brabant, Godfrey of Fontaines, and Henry of Ghent²⁵). Here, *ens diminutum* is equated with mental being (*ens rationis*), including universals, and is opposed to empirical, real being (*ens realis*), which encompasses the realm of extra-mental objects but is enormously lower from an ontological point of view than the Uncreated Creator.

These parallels with the Dharmakīrti school seem obvious—as do the differences, conditioned by the premises of a general worldviews.

5. Preliminary Conclusions

The ever-expanding field of research into the heritage of Dharmakīrti and his commentators covers predominantly the rich stratum of epistemology and philosophical logic, whereas the ontological innovations they introduced into the Pramāṇa tradition occupy a relatively marginal place in these investigations. Yet it was precisely “Dharmakīrti’s school” that made the most significant contribution to the development of the “ontological consequences” of Dīnāga’s teaching on the sources of knowledge. And it was Dharmakīrti who, independently raising the question of the objects of sensory perception and rational discourse, ventured for the first time in the history of Buddhist philosophy, and in fact all Indian philosophy, to define being as such and defined it through a capacity for efficacy and for the production of effects.²⁶ Moreover, he did not stop there; he also outlined a scheme of division of existence into the strata (through the concept of being in the absolute sense, which also implies subordinate places for “lesser beings,” to use the language of Western scholasticism—see above). It is true that such a division was developed earlier in the Yogācāra school, but the Pramāṇa tradition has created a logico-metaphysical scheme where its predecessors offered only a mind and imagination game (see above). This train of thought was realized by some of his leading commentators—Dharmottara and, to a much greater extent, Prajñākaragupta. Proceeding from Dharmakīrti’s criterion of being as efficacy, he managed to construct a three-level vertical hierarchy of existence, wherein the highest place was occupied by (1) particulars as the unique and momentary objects of perception in normal perceptual experience; the intermediary by (2) universals, including (with certain reservations) “non-beings”; and the lowest level by (3) objects of perception in illusory experience.

When speaking of objects of perception and perception itself, their non-separability in Buddhist philosophy as a whole should be emphasized, but the sources touched upon above do not allow us to decisively judge whether the “Dharmakīrti school” regarded objects as merely inseparable from the activity of consciousness yet existing extramentally, or as only objectified products of this very activity. My view is that the relationship of objects of consciousness to consciousness itself was conceived more in a mode of non-separability, and therefore those researchers who connected the “Dharmakīrti school” more with Sautrāntika than with Yogācāra were right, although some signs of the presence of the latter are not very difficult to detect as well (see above). This is entirely consistent with the objective fact that Buddhist schools, starting from the 7th century, readily inclined toward synthesis—partly in the face of the “Hindu Reconquista”, which actively begins in the same era.

The comparativist parallels cited above testify to a very significant contribution of Dharmakīrti and his followers to world philosophy. This does not mean, however, that no criticism can be leveled against them. The Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas rightly doubted that a momentary entity could possess the efficacy attributed to it by the Buddhists, since this would require at least three “moments”: coming into existence, abiding “there,” and the possibility of then acting upon something; for a spark to ignite grass it requires a whole set of conditions. The impact, for example, of the perception of a momentary color blue (whether more or less vivid) on the consciousness of a Buddhist is hardly comparable to the impact upon him of a continuous sacred text, a symbolic religious image, or the injunctions of religious law; indeed, the situation is likely the opposite. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that the momentary prints of sensation occupy a greater place in the existence of a pseudo-individual (to speak once again in the language of Buddhist philosophy) than textual or artistic “interventions”. Furthermore, the place allocated in the hierarchy of being to non-being principles leaves a clear impression of ambiguity: that I do not see a pot on the table clearly does not relate to the same level of efficacy.

Nevertheless, it is very significant that Dharmakīrti arrived at the conception of existence-as-activity from the opposite direction to Plato and his followers, inasmuch as they accentuated the permanent (in some cases eternal) nature of the sort of source of efficacy. And it requires reflection that in the issue of understanding existence, Buddhist philosophy (and Indian philosophy on the whole) was preceded by European thinkers in by approximately seven centuries, while in the division of existent things into strata it had outpaced it by approximately the same amount of time. And it is precisely contemporary philosophy's search for the most potent Eastern "philosophical provocations" that should determine the important vector of comparativist studies, and it may be nearly as significant as the translation of Eastern concepts into Western ones at earlier stages of comparative philosophy, which has certainly not lost its relevance today.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ That Dharmakīrti lived in the 7th century was already stated in the 19th century by the Russian Buddhologist Wassili Wassiljew Wassiliev. The date just cited became canonized after the famous "History of Indian Logic" by S. Vidyabhushana, who placed the Buddhist philosopher's *akme* in the interval of 635–650 AD (Vidyabhushana 1921, pp. 303–4) and was supported by E. Frauwallner. Recently, Helmut Krasser decided to shift it closer to 550 AD, but according to Eli Franco, this redating creates more problems than it solves. Quite often, classical Indian authors are dated on the grounds that some better-dated authors do not cite them (which provides a basis for a *terminus ante quem*), but in my opinion, someone, even a famous person, might not be cited for reasons other than their non-existence at that time. From this perspective, evidence of citations is much more reliable, so the first reference to Dharmakīrti in all the Jain literature, found in Akalaṅka (8th century), is a relatively weighty argument supporting the views of Wassiljew and Vidyabhushana. Giovanni Verardi, one of the most diligent historians on the decline of Buddhism in India, also approves the traditional dates 600–660 A.D. (Verardi 2018, p. 272).
- ² It is a well-known fact testified in his own scriptures. New evidence on it is presented in (Tillemans 2020).
- ³ This definition of sensory perception has become canonical in Buddhist philosophy. I join here the authoritative historian of Indian epistemology and logic, Brendan S. Gillon, who interprets the polysemous term *kalpanā* as "conceptual construction" (Gillon 2017, p. 468). This interpretation is quite valid, as sensory perception in the proper sense is conceived by the Buddhists as simply "This," whereas the judgment "This is a table," which appears perceptual, already belongs to the mental activity of including an object in a class, both as similar to and as distinct from other classes. The translation we propose here seems to legitimately include all mental operations in *kalpanā*, beginning with the establishment of concepts and the demonstration of judgments.
- ⁴ In fact, these "sūtras" contain two definitions of mental perception—a "genetic" and a clarifying one. Dharmakīrti probably wanted to emphasize the twofold dependence of this perception on the first one—both in terms of its origin and the unity of the object, to which only the mental operations leading to the verbalization of what is perceived are "added." This refined definition, however, raises a legitimate question, which one of the later, likely commentators on the *Nyāyabindu* attributes, as M. Gangopadhyaya very aptly notes, to the Mīmāṃsakas, or even directly to Kumāṛila Bhaṭṭa: what "epistemic right" do we have to separate this perception from external perception at all, if their objects coincide? See (Gangopadhyaya 1971, p. 140). But in my opinion, one could apply "Occam's razor" here and, having further asked the question, consider whether, based on the proposed definition, mental perception is not simply a particular case of sensory perception.
- ⁵ I construe here *ātmasaṃvśaṃvedanam* as self-sensation, auto-perception, and not the already rather complex kind of reflection that self-awareness constitutes. Moreover, this section deals precisely with varieties of perception, not reflection. Another thing is a deep-seated contradiction within Buddhism, which in this case compels Dharmakīrti to attribute self-perception to subjectless phenomena, due to adherence to the fundamental universal Buddhist dogma of *anātman* (no-self).
- ⁶ In the interpretation of this crucial term for Buddhist philosophy, *svalakṣaṇa*, everyone follows Th. Stcherbatsky, who first proposed interpreting it as "(extreme) particular" (Stcherbatsky 1930, p. 33). This translation is rightful, but his identification of

sva-lakṣaṇa = *Ding an sich* (thing-in-itself) is, of course, a deliberate Kantianization of Buddhist philosophy without a “sanction” from the sources—inasmuch as one cannot even say of the thing-in-itself that it is particular. But the fact that *sva-lakṣaṇa* implies a prohibition on further definitions through genus–species relations and only “A is A” is entirely consistent with these texts.

This definition of particularity seems to correspond in no way to the ontological depth that was embedded in this concept and could be regarded as a “dodge” on the part of Dharmakīrti, who for some reason did not wish to delve into the essence of this key notion.

This is usually interpreted as the “supreme being,” but it seems that the task here was not to define the ultimate essence of the universe, which was terminologically codified as *tathatā* (suchness), *buddhatva* (buddhahood), *tathāgatagarbha* (womb of the thus-gone one), etc.

This crucial ontological definition was rendered, absolutely correctly, by Th. Stcherbatsky as: “Because the essence of reality is just efficiency” (Stcherbatsky 1930, p. 36). However, this rendering is not literal, as it does not specify what *arthakriyā-sāmarthya* is. This gap is filled by M. Gangopadhyaya’s translation: “Because a real thing is that which is characterised by the capability of producing an action in respect of an object” (Gangopadhyaya 1971, p. 111). B. Gillon offers: “. . . inasmuch as a real thing has the capacity to help bring about ends” (Gillon 2017, p. 468). However, here we see a direct anthropomorphization (teleologization) of what are essentially “mechanical” processes—quite in line with the interpretations of both Dharmottara and Vinītadeva, who proposed the equation *artha* = *prayojana* (see below). I propose a less “anthropomorphic” translation, relying on another interpretation by Dharmottara. He elucidates the “capacity” indicated by Dharmakīrti as a “power” (*śakti*) to produce, in Stcherbatsky’s apt phrasing once again, “impressions” after the cognitive act (Stcherbatsky 1930, p. 37). This is undoubtedly conceived as the result of the operation of specific causes, especially in view of the consistently causal principle of Buddhist philosophy as a whole. For a detailed discussion of the commentarial developments of Dharmakīrti’s ontology, see the next section of this article.

It is suitable to clarify two points in this literal translation. *Sārūpyam* in this case is not a simple “dictionary” similarity, but a resemblance involving elements of identity. Furthermore, *pratīti* is not identical to *pratyakṣa*; rather, it expresses that specific feature of perceptual cognition which distinguishes it from rational cognition.

The translation is based on the edition (Nyaupane 2022, pp. 217–26) where the corresponding verses are included in the second chapter instead of the third one (this edition, in total, contains five chapters instead of four—and it is not the only disagreement between different editions of the text, due at least partially to Dharmakīrti’s complicated relations with his own fundamental work (see above)).

Here an opponent of Dharmakīrti offers features of Madhyamika’s reasons.

Here Dharmakīrti opposes the Vaiśeṣika categorial system.

Dharmakīrti insists that the categories of the Vaiśeṣikas are merely functions of mental activity.

Eli Franco interprets this quite plausibly, suggesting that when an external observer assesses from the outside the illusory hairs that cloud the vision of a person suffering from an eye disease and determines their existence, he, as it were, objectifies them as a non-existent thing, and therefore as falling under the universal of non-existence (Franco and Notake 2014, p. 49).

It seems to refer to *real* hairs, which can fall under a universal.

This is very sophisticated dialectical reasoning, intended to demonstrate the relativity of ontological boundaries between particulars and universals (partly in the spirit of the Madhyamaka’s negative dialectics) that were already clearly demarcated from each other. It may also refer to the famous concept of *apohavāda*, where a thing is defined not by what it is, but by what it is not. The very complex logical calculations for understanding verses 9–10 can be found in the commentary in (Franco and Notake 2014, pp. 49–51).

The list and arrangement of the: Vaiśeṣika categorial system (substances. qualities. movements. universals. particulars, inherence) was for the first time presented in the Vaiśeṣika-sūtras I.1.4–8 (see Sinha 1911, pp. 8–21).

This is the subject of a very brief treatise, the *Ālambanaparīkṣā* (“Examination of the Object of Cognition”). However, Dinnāga himself relied on the refutation of the existence of extra-mental objects offered by Vasubandhu the Vijñānavādin (it would be improper to discuss here the issue of “two Vasubandhus”), which is presented in its most concentrated and highly authoritative form for Buddhist idealists in his *Viṃśatikā* (“Twenty Verses”). This work was actively polemicized by Brahmanical realists. A scholarly annotated edition and translation of the *Viṃśatikā* (in fact, there were 22 verses) was presented by Sharma (1993).

The discussion about Dharmakīrti’s school affiliation has long been debated, with the currently prevailing position being that he combined different worldviews at different levels of his philosophical construction. Thus, John Dunne distinguished in his views: the common-sense position, the Abhidharmic critique of this common sense (as presented by the Vaiśeṣikas and Naiyāyikas), the doctrine of the existence of extra-mental objects, and finally the existence of only mental phenomena as held by the Yogācāras (Dunne 2004, pp. 56–63). This schema has been criticized, one of the arguments being the opinions of Dharmakīrti’s commentators themselves, who held that his work displays features of both the Sautrāntikas and the Vijñānavādins. Eli Franco also proposed dividing Dharmakīrti’s positions into four layers, but differently: everyday practice, atomic realism, Vijñānavāda idealism, and the doctrine of ultimate reality (*buddhatā*, *tathatā*) (Franco 2017, pp. 124–25).

- ²¹ One of the earliest edition of the the text was presented in (Stcherbatsky 1918).
- ²² Publications on this topic are few and far between. In particular, it has become fashionable to draw parallels between Dharmakīrti's equation "to exist = to have causal efficacy" (*arthakriyā*) and the worldview of American pragmatists. In reality, as we shall see very soon, the pragmatists were far from being the first here. However, the commentators of the *Nyāyabindu* contributed, for their part, to this aberration by interpreting the causal potency of momentary, unconscious object-percepts in an anthropomorphic and teleological framework that is fundamentally alien to Buddhist ontology.
- ²³ A good example of such an approach is provided by Alasdair MacIntyre's paper on the incommensurability of Confucian and European teachings of virtues, which almost characterizes them as only "homonyms" (MacIntyre 1991). But I believe that one has to go all the way in this direction by rejecting the very idea of translations of Eastern text into Western languages, consigning all existing translations to the trash heap.
- ²⁴ They are: parikalpita-, paratantra- and pariniṣpanna-svabhāva corresponding to (1) belief in the existence of objects independent of consciousness, (2) persuasion that the present state of a subject depends on causes and conditions of its past existences in saṃsāra, (3) assurance that no objects independent of consciousness and no causal mechanisms of saṃsāra are ultimately real. Later this scheme began to intermingle with Madhyamaka's differing of the levels of the truth. To acquaint oneself with the earliest version of the scheme, one could be suggested to study (Suzuki [1932] 1999).
- ²⁵ For the first time, attention to this term—which at first glance appears to be an oxymoron, but in reality is a very revealing terminological window into the world of transcendental ontology (the examination of beings not in themselves, but in relation to the cognizing subject)—was drawn by the medievalist Armand Maurer. He convincingly suggested that "diminished being" (*ens diminutum*) arose from an incorrect Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and then firmly entered the repertoire of Latin scholasticism. I believe that, in this case, the Hegelian scheme of the "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*) was at work. See (Maurer 1950).
- ²⁶ It is true that in the Vaiśeṣika-sūtras I.2.8–14 besides six ontological categories, i.e., substance etc. is mentioned also sattā. "existence" but it is defined in purely formal dimension—as something which inheres in the categories and cannot be divided into genus and species.

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