

Conceptuality and Nonconceptuality in Buddhist Philosophy
Workshop Abstracts
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Dan Arnold

Perception and the Perceptible: How Dignāga's Idealism Shows up in His Eschewal of Ordinary Language

In his most sustained critique of the epistemological project of Dignāga, Candrakīrti argues that Dignāga's peculiarly technical usage of the word *pratyakṣa* cannot make sense of the ordinary usage, according to which the word is primarily an adjective; conventionally, that is, the word does not chiefly denote an epistemic faculty—rather, it describes ordinary things as perceptible. Among the upshots of this is that the ordinary usage of the word recommends (against Dignāga) the conclusion that perception is always already conceptual. That Dignāga's account cannot be made consistent with our ordinary epistemic practices is further clarified if we consider what is “perceptible” for Dignāga; whatever plausibility Dignāga's position has as a conventionally true account is undermined by the recognition that his view may finally make sense only as part of an idealist account. To that extent, Candrakīrti can take Dignāga's arguments as a *reductio ad absurdum* with regard to Dignāga's philosophical approach—a *reductio* that can be enlisted as part of a transcendental argument for the basicness of conceptual thought as that is tracked by ordinary linguistic usage.

Christian Coseru

Bare, but Not Empty: Consciousness and the Problem of Nonconceptual Content

Are there conscious mental states that can represent features of experience even though the bearer of those states lacks the concepts necessary for specifying their content? And if there are such mental states are they states of bare awareness or do they simply lay bare the structure of awareness with its distinctive content and character? These questions inform contemporary debates in phenomenology and philosophy of mind about the character of consciousness, the role of conceptual knowledge and narrative competence, and the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual content. Similar questions have been explored at length by Buddhist philosophers concerned with the epistemological implications of certain liminal states of mind associated with yogic and meditative practice. Specifically, notions such as ‘non-dual cognition’ (*advayajñāna*), ‘mere cognition’ (*viññaptimātra*), and ‘mere consciousness’ (*cittamātra*) point to states of mind that presumably lack not only intentional content but even minimal subjectivity: there is no sense that they occur for someone or that they are about something in particular (other than the mere act of cognizing) while they endure. Above all, such states are said to be the precursors for the attainment of a rarified state of mind akin to suspended animation known as the ‘equipoise of cessation’ (*nirodhasamāpatti*)—the presumed summum bonum of Buddhist practice.

Much of the debate in the Buddhist literature concerns the metaphysical, epistemological, and even moral implications of these liminal states, taking as point of departure the function and role of perception in ascertaining their epistemic import (on the assumption that these liminal states are perceptual in kind). Because Buddhist philosophers, specifically those who follow in the footsteps of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, take perception to be a ‘non-conceptual cognition’

(*nirvikalpa-jñāna*), the focus has been on whether an epistemology grounded in empirical and phenomenological analyses of mental content can establish anything beyond seeing things as they are (*yathā-bhūtam*). This paper first considers whether and in what ways theories of nonconceptual content can lay bare the structure of consciousness and its operations. It draws on theories of innate conceptual primitives (Carey 2009; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Wierzbicka 2015) to make the case for the innate basis for many of our phenomenal concepts, including such concepts as ‘agency’ and ‘intentionality’. Secondly, it differentiates between different kinds of nonconceptuality (e.g., state vs. content) in order to establish some nonconceptual ways of representing features of experience that are autonomous and self-reflexive (Crane 1992; Bermúdez 2003; Byrne 2003). Finally, it argues that states of minimal self-consciousness do not always require the possession of performative, indexical, or identity concepts. Such states may lack propositional, narrative or autobiographical content, but they do not lack a basic structure.

John Dunne

What is Nonconceptual for Dharmakīrti? The Case of Error

Focusing especially on the earliest layer of commentarial interpretation, this talk examines Dharmakīrti’s notion of nonconceptual awareness (*nirvikalpakajñāna*), especially through the lens of error (*bhrānti*). Building on Dignāga’s theory (*Pramāṇsamuccaya* 1.10), Dharmakīrti carefully distinguishes between conceptual and nonconceptual forms of error (*Pramāṇavārttika* 3.288-300), and the rubric of error thus proves useful for understanding his notion of the nonconceptual. Three issues emerge from examining nonconceptuality in this context. The first concerns the precise characteristics of conceptuality that constitute error, and the ways that these are absent in nonconceptual cognitions. Here, one key notion is that of *anvaya* (or its synonyms such as *asanuvṛtti* or *anuyāya*) that involve the conceptualization of “one in many” (e.g., *ekasyānekeṣv anuvṛtīḥ*). The second issue concerns Dharmakīrti’s clear rejection of the notion that the phenomenal content of nonconceptual cognition simply mirrors its object as its reflection or isomorphic representation. Key problems here include the causal conditioning involved in the process that generates nonconceptual content and the types of “cognitive penetration” that emerge from the teleological context of perceptual judgments. Finally, the third issue raised by nonconceptuality in the context of error concerns precisely Dharmakīrti’s claim that subject-object intentionality is itself a form of nonconceptual error (e.g., *Pramāṇavārttika* 3.353-362), such that the occurrence of dualistic cognitions does not depend on any conceptual process. This issue is especially crucial, in that Dharmakīrti’s notion of nonconceptuality may well be tailored precisely so as to substantiate that claim.

Jay Garfield

Thinking Beyond Thought: Tsongkhapa and Mipham on the Conceptualized Ultimate

I consider the distinction between *don dam rnam grangs ma yin pa* and *rnam grangs pa’i don dam* (*apāryayaparamārtha* and *pārayayaparamārtha*—the noncategorized and the categorized ultimate) as it is deployed by Tsongkhapa on the one hand and Mipham and Bötrül on the other in their respective attempts to explicate the distinction between nonconceptual ultimate and conceptual understanding of ultimate truth. Tsongkhapa argues that the distinction is grounded in

the subject, and Mipham and Bötrül that it is grounded in the object. I argue that Tsongkhapa gets this roughly right.

Sonam Kachru,

Who's Afraid of Non-Conceptual Content Rehabilitating Dignāga's Distinction Between Perception and Thought

This essay revisits Dignāga's epochal appeal to non-conceptual content as a criterion for what is perceptually evident, and provides a new interpretation of Dignāga's infamous distinction between the non-conceptual contents of perception and the conceptual contents of thought. I will here present reasons to eschew the admittedly tempting line of interpretation on which Dignāga was motivated to make the distinction based on the same sorts of considerations which led epistemologists in our own time to speak, whether in praise or blame, of something 'given'. Once we resist the temptation to rely on empiricist intuitions in our reconstructions, and keeping in mind Dignāga's novel characterization of what conceptuality involves, we might allow ourselves a fresh reconstruction of the motivations underlying Dignāga's contrast between conceptual and non-conceptual content. Along the way to such a reconstruction, this essay provides (a) an inferentialist re-description of Dignāga's historically novel account of what is involved in our possession and use of concepts, and (b) a characterization of Dignāga's non-conceptual contents as a criterion of phenomenal presence. So equipped, this essay concludes with a frankly speculative reconstruction of Dignāga's non-empiricist motivations for insisting on a distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual content, one which I shall characterize as a variety of therapeutic skepticism, a variety of skepticism not so much directed at our beliefs as much as our vocabulary for describing experience in epistemic terms.

Birgit Kellner

Can Philosophy Remove Conceptual Construction? On the Role of Philosophical Analysis in Kamalaśīla's Works

The mainstream of Indian Buddhist thought subscribed to a view of the path to liberation where a meditator-practitioner at some point obtains a nonconceptual state of awareness in which the true nature of reality is directly and immediately experienced. This state is continuous with, and dependent upon, preceding virtuous activity and philosophical analysis, in short, physical and mental activities that in themselves are embedded in conceptual construction.

The late eighth century scholar-philosopher Kamalaśīla is particularly well known for having advocated, articulated and defended such a gradual path to awakening, and to subscribe to what Tom Tillemans once felicitously called a "continuity thesis" of meditative practice and philosophical analysis. Tibetan historiographers depict Kamalaśīla as having successfully confronted the Chinese Ch'an master heshang Mo-hoyen in a debate held at the Tibetan monastery of Samyé. The disagreement between Kamalaśīla and Mohoyen turns, among others, precisely on the relationship between activities involving conceptual construction and nonconceptual awareness.

For Kamalaśīla, nonconceptual awareness is a state of "non-seeing" in which the practitioner has fully realized the insubstantiality and emptiness of all phenomena including the meditating mind; his version of nonconceptual awareness is, in short, that of a Madhyamaka. This state is described as an utterly clear, supramundane cognition, unshakeable like the light of

a candle placed in a windless spot, and devoid of the mesh of each and every conceptual construction. It does not mark the attainment of awakening, but ascent to the first of ten levels into which the path is commonly structured. In order to obtain this state, the bodhisattva-yogi has to go through a series of meditations in which various proofs that logically establish crucial philosophical principles have to be contemplated one by one. This process is necessary to bring about nonconceptual awareness, but that awareness at the same time removes the very foundations of these meditations by reasoning, like fire in the end fully consumes wooden sticks that were rubbed together for producing it. This paper will give an outline of Kamalaśīla's account of how nonconceptual awareness is to be produced, and analyze on how precisely philosophical analysis can in this model thought to be removing conceptual construction.

Ching Keng

Is Our World of Experience Conceptually Structured? Answers from the Yogācāra Discussion of Three Natures (Trisvabhāvanirdeśa)

It is puzzling that in the Yogācāra tradition of Buddhism, the supremacy of non-conceptual cognition is in most if not all cases simply assumed rather than explicitly justified. To explore why this is the case, this paper tries to turn the issue around: Instead of asking why non-conceptual cognition is more privileged than conceptual one, I investigate whether the world of experience itself is conceptually structured or not according to Yogācāra. I first identify two competing models about the world based on the discussion of three natures (*trisvabhāvanirdeśa*). Under the older model, the world (the dependent nature) is created by the permeation (*vāsanā*) of language (imagined nature) from previous lives. Thus, there is an innate affinity between the imagined nature and the dependent nature, and the world in its essence is conceptually structured. In contrast, under the newer model, realization relies upon dissociating the dependent nature from its mixture with the imagined nature, its epitome being Vasubandhu's famous formula that the perfected nature is the dependent nature minus the imagined nature (*"niṣpannas tasya pūrveṇa sadā rahitatā tu yā,"* *Triṃśikā* verse 21cd). This suggests an absence of affinity between the world and language, and the world in its reality is not conceptually structured.

Following this contrast, I then focus on the co-presence of and the tension between the two models in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha* and Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā*. Finally, a clear endorsement of the newer model is found in the *Cheng weishi lun* 成唯識論 compiled by Xuanzang (602-622). According to the CWSL, the world *qua* the dependent nature can be detached from language and concepts. For this reason, not only the Buddha but also an advanced practitioner can experience a totally non-conceptual world without creating any defilements.

Finally, by reviewing how the *Mahāyānasamgraha* describes the practice by means of which one enters non-conceptual cognition (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*), I argue that the latter model is preferred because of the deeply rooted belief that concepts and the world do not match each other. For this reason, non-conceptual mode of cognition is regarded by Yogācāra as the only valid means for accessing how the world truly is. It is this ontological view that determines the epistemological primacy of non-conceptual cognition or pure perception, but not the other way around.

Catherine Prueitt

Do Concepts Create Worlds? A Comparative Analysis of Dharmakīrti and Abhinavagupta's Arguments Concerning Concepts and Subject/Object Duality

Both Dharmakīrti (7th century) and Abhinavagupta (10th-11th century) grant concepts an extraordinary role in shaping human experience. For Dharmakīrti, any identification of an object, as well as any sense of oneself as an enduring subject, are the result of a process of exclusion (*apoha*) that creates concepts (*vikalpas*) that wrongly identify the current contents of one's perception with previous experiences. Since both individual goal-oriented action and intersubjective agreement are possible only with regard to entities that at least seem to persist, what concepts are constructed will define one's experienced world. However, at least at the conventional level of analysis, the world constructed through concepts is based on a deeper nonconceptual reality: the reality of unique, momentary particulars. The subject/object structure through which these particulars appear in any moment of perception arises through a beginningless nonconceptual error. This error is a prerequisite for any experience of a world; the process of exclusion for Dharmakīrti can only take place given the existence of momentary particulars appearing with subject/object structure. Abhinavagupta self-consciously agrees with much of this description, but with one crucial difference: for Abhinavagupta, the subject/object structure of a moment of awareness itself the result of exclusion, and therefore conceptual. This seemingly small difference turns out to have radical implications for each thinker's understanding of reality and the construction of human worlds. This paper will focus on evaluating the philosophical merits and implications of both positions. It will ask, in particular, if Dharmakīrti's contention that subject/object structure is nonconceptual is sustainable both on its own merits and given his final embrace of a Yogācāra ontology. It will also query whether or not Abhinavagupta's contrasting position successfully offers a coherent account of concepts, world creation, and the ontology on which they depend.

Robert Sharf

Conceptual Construction, the Quantum Measurement Problem, and Zen

One strand of classical Buddhist thought, which has representatives in the Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra traditions, holds that the phenomenal world is the product of conceptual construction (*vikalpa, kalpanā*), i.e., that perceptual experience always requires an object (*viśaya, ālambana*), and the conscious apperception of said object entails the application of generic categories. This position led to a certain puzzlement over what, if anything, lies *behind* the phenomenally manifest world. If the world comes into being through the application of mental concepts and categories, to what, if anything, are these concepts and categories applied?

Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra exegetes have given multiple responses to this conundrum. Some hold that the notion of an unmanifest reality that logically or temporally antecedes the conceptually constructed world is unintelligible or incoherent. Others disagree, insisting that an adequate account of the phenomenal domain is impossible without recourse to some underlying reality, such as the *ālayavijñāna*, that accounts for the appearance of temporal and intersubjective coherence. In this paper my interest is not in the particulars of these debates so much as in their underlying structure. To help elucidate this structure, I will consider parallels with the "measurement problem" in contemporary quantum mechanics. Here too there

is a lively debate concerning what, if anything, might be said about the natural world beyond what we can observe of it. The so-called measurement problem has given rise to a host of competing theories—Copenhagen interpretation, hidden variables, multiple worlds, decoherence theories, etc.—which reproduce, in many ways, philosophical positions found in medieval Buddhist texts.

The notion that the world comes into being as we engage it conceptually is, I will argue, deeply paradoxical, and Indo-Tibetan scholastics, like many quantum theorists, are reluctant to accede to paradox. (This accounts, I believe, for the current enthusiasm for the implausible multiple-worlds theories, whose single selling point is that they avoid postulating “collapse” and thus avoid paradox.) The medieval Chinese Chan tradition may have been the only school that explicitly recognized and affirmed the dialethic relationship of the appearance/reality (or mind/nature, conceptual/nonconceptual) antinomy, but it has been largely ignored or misconstrued for precisely this reason.

Mark Siderits

Conceptuality/Nonconceptuality Abstract

When you think you might be barking up the wrong tree, it is sometimes useful to sniff around the roots. I propose to look at some early discussions (in the *Nikāyas* as well as in Abhidharma) related to the notion of *vikalpa* in order to see if these are any help in resolving our disagreements about later uses of the notion. Topics to be investigated include the role that conceptualization is thought to play in the development of *prapañca*; the role of *vikalpa* in perceptual identifications (*saṃjñā*); and how *vikalpa*-mediated judgments can be transformed into direct (and thus presumably *nirvikalpa*) perception through habituation (*abhyāsa*). The hope is that such investigations will help us avoid reading more recent understandings of the concept into classical Buddhist discussions, and perhaps to also nudge our understanding of *vikalpa* in the direction of some recent, empirically based theorizings of cognition.

Evan Thompson

What's In a Concept? Conceptualizing the (Non)Conceptual in Buddhist Philosophy and Cognitive Science

A recurrent problem in the philosophical debates over whether there is or can be nonconceptual experience or whether all experience is conceptually structured or mediated is the lack of a generally accepted account of what concepts are. Without a precise specification of what a concept is, the notion of nonconceptuality is equally ill defined. This problem cuts across contemporary philosophy and cognitive science as well as classical Indian philosophy, and it affects how we go about philosophically “engaging Buddhism” in particular. Buddhist philosophers generally argue that our everyday experience of the world is conceptually constructed, whereas “nonconceptual cognition” (*nirvikalpa jñāna*) marks the limits of conceptuality. But what precisely do “conceptual” and “nonconceptual” mean? Consider that “concept” is routinely used to translate the Sanskrit term *vikalpa*; *nirvikalpa* is accordingly rendered as “nonconceptual.” But *vikalpa* has also been rendered as “imagination,” “discriminative construction,” “discursive thought,” and “discrimination.” Related terms, such as *kalpanā* (conceptualization/mental construction) and *kalpanāpoḍha* (devoid of

conceptualization/mental construction), have also been rendered in various ways. Besides the question of how to translate these terms in any given Buddhist philosophical text, how should we relate them to current philosophical or cognitive scientific uses of the term “concept”? More generally, given that the relationship between the conceptual and the nonconceptual has been one of the central and recurring issues for the Buddhist philosophical tradition altogether, can Buddhist philosophy bring fresh insights to our contemporary debates about whether experience has nonconceptual content? And can contemporary philosophy and cognitive science help to illuminate or even resolve some older Buddhist philosophical controversies? A comprehensive treatment of these questions across the full range of Buddhist philosophy and contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science would be impossible. I will restrict my focus to certain core ideas from Abhidharma, Dharmakīrti’s *apoha* theory, and Yogācāra, as refracted through current philosophical and cognitive science views of concepts. I argue for the following five general theses. First, cognitive science can help us to clarify Abhidharma issues about the relation between nonconceptual sense perception and conceptual cognition. Second, we can resolve these Abhidharma issues using a model of concept formation based on reading Dharmakīrti through cognitive science glasses. Third, this model of concept formation offers a new perspective on the contemporary conceptualist versus nonconceptualist debate. Fourth, Yogācāra offers a conception of nonconceptual experience absent from this debate. In many Yogācāra texts, awareness that is said to be free from the duality of “grasper” (*grāhaka*) and “grasped” (*grāhya*) is nonconceptual. None of the contemporary philosophical arguments for nonconceptualism is adequate or suitable for explicating this unique kind of nonconceptuality. Thus, Yogācāra is relevant to what has been called the problem of the “scope of the conceptual,” that is, how the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction should be drawn. For this reason, among others, Yogācāra has something to offer philosophy of mind. Moreover, using cognitive science, we may be able to render some of the Yogācāra ideas in a new way, while in turn recasting ideas from cognitive science. Fifth, in pursuing these aims, I hope to show the value of thinking about the mind from a cross-cultural philosophical perspective.

Roy Tzohar

Conceptual, Non-conceptual, Post Non-Conceptual

In this paper I wish to further develop the arguments I have presented in the “Conceptuality/Nonconceptuality” Conference (Berkeley, November 2016), which dealt with the Indian early Yogācāra understanding of the relations between “non-conceptual awareness” (*nirvikalpajñā*) and the “awareness obtained subsequent to it” (*tatprṣṭhalabdhajñāna*).

In brief, there I have argued that Yogācāra thinkers identify the subsequent-awareness with ultimate knowledge of causality, and that in contrast to the understanding of non-conceptual content as a primitive experiential level into which second-order conceptual content is later integrated (an assumption shared by several contemporary non-conceptualist stances) the Yogācāra seem to understand these under a tripartite model that consists of: 1) ordinary conceptual experience; 2) non-conceptual experience as a distinct and independent experiential mode that *cannot* come into contact with or function as the foundation of second-order conceptual experiences; and 3) a state in which non-conceptual and conceptual content are integrated under subsequent awareness. The latter, however, is distinct from ordinary conceptual experience (insofar as non-conceptual experience is seen to affect and transform conceptual experience). I have attempted to show how contemporary non-conceptualist theories, foremost

Cussins' (1990; 2003), may help us to make sense of the Yogācāra view of subsequent awareness, by seeing the bodhisattva as operating under an ability-based rather than a truth-governed understanding of experience, so that knowledge of causality rather than a notion of objectivity guides her actions and serves as the final measure of their success. This allows us to understand the Yogācāra claim that under the subsequent awareness propositional attitudes can be maintained without assuming that they involve conceptual-construction (*vikalpa*).

In the current paper I wish to further unpack this scheme, focusing mostly on its phenomenological aspects, and drawing for this purpose both on C.S Peirce's trichotomy of "Firstness," "Secondness," and "Thirdness," as well as on the way in which some Mahāyāna sūtras attempt to express this outlook via literary means. (Cf. D'Amato's (2003) use of this scheme to present a "Buddhist doctrine of signs" in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*. However, my interest here, as mentioned, is mostly in the phenomenological implications of this triad.) Finally, I will examine the way in which this scheme informs the Yogācāra conception of ordinary language (as disengaged from its allegedly objective referential ground, and understood as a causally efficacious *activity*, success- rather than truth-governed), and its ramifications on the school's hermeneutical approach.