Controversy between Dharmottara and Prajñākaragupta
Regarding Pravartaka

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1. Introduction

In the beginning of the Pramāṇasiddhi-chapter of the Pramāṇavārttika (PV II), Dharmaśekhara gives the so-called first definition of pramāṇa (valid cognition/means of valid cognition), which states that pramāṇa is cognition that does not deceive (pramāṇam avisamvādi jñānam). Following this, he shows two reasons why pramāṇa is cognition: the first one is that cognition is the main cause (pradhāna) for a person's action (pravṛtti) toward the object to be obtained or avoided (see PV II 3cd). Accordingly, Dharmakīrti’s successors have the idea in common, pramāṇa as cognition is pravartika, that is to say, what prompts the cognizing person to act toward the object the pramāṇa indicates. However, their opinions are divided on the interpretation of how pravartika works.

In this paper, I will especially focus on the question of how direct perception or pratyakṣa, which is one of the two kinds of pramāṇa and defined as non-conceptual cognition, prompts a person to act. Let us consider Dharmakīrti’s view first, and then compare the interpretation of Dharmottara (ca. 740–810) with that of Prajñākaragupta (ca. 750–810). The main point of the controversy is how they deal with the conceptual process that might intervene between pratyakṣa and pravṛtti.

2. Dharmakīrti’s View

Dharmakīrti discusses the problem in his Pramāṇaviniścaya, Pratyakṣa-chapter (PVin I) v. 18, where the opponents put the question why people’s mundane activity (vyavahāra, i.e., pravṛtti) could arise from a direct perception that is free from conceptual construction and that does not have the nature of ascertaining (niścaya), for a person acts toward the object only when he ascertains it: “this brings me pleasure” or “this brings me displeasure.” Dharmakīrti replies as follows:
Although direct perception is a mere awareness of the object (arthālocaṇa), on the basis of the recollection (samarāṇa) that arises by the force of the direct experience (anubhava) [both past and present] and that connects [the present object] with the object that is experienced in the past, just when [the cognizing person] perceives (drṣṭi) the [same kind of object as he experienced in the past] along with the desire (abhilāṣa) or the opposite (i.e., hate) for what were perceived [in the past], [he undertakes] the activity. To explain: it is the nature of things (vastudharma) that a very clear (paṭīyas) experience sets seeds of the recollection [in the cognizer’s mind]. The [seeds of the recollection] awake by perceiving the same kind [of object as experienced in the past], [and then] subconscious impression (vāsanā) of the desire becomes apparent (vivṛtti); accordingly, [he] acts (PV in I 18, 10–19, 2).

Direct perception itself is a mere awareness of the object without any conceptual construction, but it can prompt the cognizing person to act through the process as follows:

clear experience in the past ⇒ direct perception at present (this awakens the seeds of recollection) ⇒ recollection (this makes the desire apparent) ⇒ desire ⇒ action

Dharmakīrti suggests here that direct perception can cause the action, which cooperates with the preceding clear experience of the same kind of object through the recollection and desire that depend on the experiences both past and present. Therefore, Dharmakīrti seems to regard direct perception as an essential condition of action, but not the sufficient condition. This might raise doubt if only an essential condition of action is suitable for pravartaka.

3. Dharmottara’s Interpretation

Some studies have been made on Dharmottara’s view of pravartaka, so I summarize the essential points here.

In some contexts, he explains the general process from valid cognition to the cognizer’s action toward the object and its attainment, following Dharmakīrti’s way mentioned above.

valid cognition (incl. direct perception) ⇒ recollection ⇒ desire ⇒ action ⇒ attainment

On the other hand, he also shows his own interpretation on pravartaka. He equates pramāṇa’s function of causing the cognizer to act toward the object indicated by itself (pradarśīte ‘the pravartakatvam) with its function of indicating the object of the action (pravṛttiviṣayapradarśakatvam). In this case, moreover, pramāṇa’s function of indicating
the object is accomplished precisely when the object is cognized (arthādhi-gati, -adhi-gama, -pratīti). At the point of cognition of the object, therefore, the person’s action is considered to have already been undertaken, and the object is attained as a possibility (yogyatā) whether it becomes a reality in the future or not.

According to this interpretation, he seems to designate the cognition of an object, which is direct perception itself as the sufficient condition of action. However, we cannot overlook Dharmottara’s argument that cognition of an object becomes effective only with the help of conceptual cognition (vikalpa-pratyaya) or ascertaining cognition (niścaya-pratyaya), which arises by the force of the preceding direct perception and ascertains the content of the perception: “I perceive blue,” for example. Consequently, he does not necessarily state that the action as a possibility is completed only with the direct perception that is non-conceptual.

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\text{direct perception } \Rightarrow \text{ascertaining cognition ( = conceptual cognition)}
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\text{cognition of the object } = \text{action and attainment as a possibility}
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4. Prajñākaragupta’s Interpretation

In remarkable contrast to Dharmottara, Prajñākaragupta positively denies such an intervention by the ascertaining cognition. According to his interpretation, direct perception as a pramāṇa brings about the person’s action directly without depending on the ascertaining cognition, and, moreover, perfect repetition (atyaññābhyāsa) is prerequisite for the direct perception.

He maintains this opinion repeatedly in his Pramāṇavārttikālāmkāra (PVA), so I will show you an example in the following quotation.

To explain: direct perception is the pramāṇa when [the cognizing person] has [perfect] repetition (abhyāsa) [of the cognition of the relevant object], and then, [direct perception] prompts [him] to act (pravartana) only by means of the form (ākāra) [the direct perception takes] even without ascertaining (niścaya). On the other hand, inference (anumāṇa) is the pramāṇa when [the person] depends on the ascertainment [to act. It means that the ascertainment is attributed to the inference]. [However, he] also acts only by means of the form the [inference takes], so does not depend on anything other [than its form to act]. Accordingly, there is no means (karaṇa, i.e., pramāṇa) other than the form [of the direct perception or inference] (PVA 345,10–12 ad PV III
Here, cases of valid cognitions are divided into two categories: repeated and non-repeated, and direct perception (pratyakṣa) and inference (anumāṇa) work as pravartaka in both cases respectively. At the stage where the repetition is insufficient, only the inference that includes the function of ascertaining (niścaya) can prompt to the action. At the stage where the repetition has become perfect, meanwhile, the direct perception, or its form (ākāra) strictly speaking, directly prompts the person to act without ascertaining.

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\text{perfect repetition } \Rightarrow \text{ direct perception (or its form) } \Rightarrow \text{ action}
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In this way, Prajñākaragupta manages to designate direct perception as the sufficient condition of person’s action, qualifying the direct perception as pramāṇa with perfect repetition.

5. Conclusion

Dharmottara and Prajñākaragupta differ on interpretations of how non-conceptual direct perception functions as pravartaka, as we have seen. Dharmottara separates the succeeding process such as recollection and desire from the range of the discourse on pravartaka, adopting the concept of action as a possibility. However, he does not necessarily state that the action is completed only with the direct perception, because the succeeding conceptual cognition is necessary for the accomplishment of its function of cognizing the object. According to Prajñākaragupta, on the contrary, direct perception or its form prompts the person to act directly without such a conceptual cognition, but he restricts the direct perception as a pramāṇa to what has been repeated perfectly. In the final analysis, these differences come down to the question of what is the direct perception as pramāṇa, an issue that is fundamental to the theory of pratyakṣa.

1) On the confliction between Dharmottara and Prajñākaragupta and their dates, see Ono 1995.
4) Oki 1990, Oki 1993, Krasser 1995, Miyo 2013b, and so on.
6) See DhPr 19,11–13. The concept of “possibility” can be traced to Devendrabuddhi’s idea of prāpa-
Controversy between Dharmottara and Prajñākaragupta Regarding Pravartaka (M. Miyo) (227)

naśakti, seen in Inami 1993: 93 at least.


9) The concept of atyantābhyāsa is already used by Śākyabuddhi in the same context, as seen in Inami 1993: 96, and also related to yogākhyāsa.

10) For other examples, see PVAng 55,5–56,2 ad PV II 3b’cd, PVAng 218,6–8 ad PV III 56, and so on. For translation and Yamāri’s sub-commentary on the first, see Ono 1993: 110–111, to which I might add that sDe dge edition of Yamāri’s sub-commentary on this section is confusing: D260b12–262a7 (= P315b5–315b6) and D262a7–265a5 (= P314b5–315b5) should be reversed.

11) Yamāri regards the opponents here as Dharmottara. For further details, see Miyo 2013a: 100–102.

Abbreviations and Primary Sources


NBṬ Nyāyabinduṭīkā (Dharmottara). See DhPr.


Secondary Sources


Controversy between Dharmottara and Prajinākaragupta Regarding Pravartaka (M. Mryo)


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