

DHARMAKIRTI'S SCEPTICISM OF "NON-COGNITION OF IMPERCEPTIBLE OBJECTS" AND THE MEINONGIAN ACCOUNT OF THEM: A POSSIBLE CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL SOLUTION TO BUDDHIST DILEMMA

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***Abstract:** In this paper, I explore Dharmakirti's claim that when it comes to imperceptible objects, our cognition is unable to determine whether they exist or do not exist. Dharmakirti was arguably convinced that any attempt to account for nonexistent objects will inevitably introduce another set of valid cognition and this consequently leads to the fallacies of infinite regress and reification. Given his critique of his contemporaries' accounts of nonexistents, it is understandably clear that Dharmakirti declines offering ample explanations on the logical operations of nonexistents. Instead, he resorts to doctrinal authority to explicate the complexity that comes with the notions like rebirth and mind continua. Between the dilemma that arises from the tension between his commitments to both anti-realist Buddhist soteriology and realist epistemology, Dharmakirti chose the former. Alexius Meinong, on the other hand, develops a theory of objects that caters to a whole range of objects, including nonexistent and impossible objects, without committing to their ontological status. I argue in this paper that Dharmakirti's epistemology will be enriched by Meinongian frameworks in accounting for nonexistents. Through Meinongian accounts of nonexistent, the tension between dual commitments in Buddhist soteriology and epistemology can be solved. Likewise, Meinong will be obviously advantaged to take heed of Dharmakirti's critical reviews on the methodological limitations on account of nonexistents. In a nutshell, my comparative study of Dharmakirti's and Meinongian position on nonexistents helps us appreciate two vital philosophical perspectives that may enhance our understanding over the critical philosophical and epistemological issues facing them.*

Introduction

Dharmakirti (c. 660 AD) is recognized as one of the most abstruse philosophical thinkers of his time. His writings provide the guiding insights into Buddhist and Indian epistemology that influence the Indo-Tibetan studies of logic for many centuries. To date, Dharmakirti's works are still being pursued and form parts of the core curriculum in many Buddhist monasteries in India and the West. My study here will focus on Dharmakirti's view on non-cognition of imperceptible objects and his critical views over the accounts of nonexistents by his contemporaries. To provide some background, however, I firstly intend to shed light on how Dharmakirti makes sense of cognizable and non-cognizable objects and his theory of epistemology and its

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constraints in brief. Following that, I am going to go through one of the important issue in the interpretation of Dharmakirti's incoherent accounts. The subsequent part will address Dharmakirti's reasons for his skepticism over the accounts of nonexistents by his interlocutors. He was arguably convinced that any attempt to provide explanations to nonexistent objects will inevitably introduce another set of valid cognition and this consequently leads to the fallacies of infinite regress and reification. Dharmakirti's view, however, is not without implications. The research in this paper is most rewarding when the views of Dharmakirti's is compared to those of Meinong, an Austrian philosopher of early 20th century, whose *Theory of Objects* seems to be able to account for nonexistents without committing to ontology, a concern that both Dharmakirti and Meinong subscribe to. I attempt to apply some of the Meinongian solutions to Dharmakirti's non-accessible object and observe how far such application can be stretched, the outcome of which leads to promising research opportunities in the future, especially with possible discussions among Neo-Meinongians and Neo-Dharmakirtians. This paper research is wrapped up with a conclusion that outlines some of the salient points of comparison between the two approaches to nonexistents and some final note on their implications.

I. Dharmakirti and His Position within the Studies of Indian Logic

The Buddhist logic and epistemology created in India in the 6th and 7th century AD was often attributed to two great Buddhist philosophers, namely Dignaga (c. 480-540 AD) and his philosophical successor, Dharmakirti. The former was one of the first to organize the Buddhist theory of *pramana*, or means of cognition, into a systematic thought. Unlike his contemporaries from the Brahmanic traditions, Dignaga only accepts two means of valid cognition, that is, perception and inference. Perception is defined by Dignaga as the cognition "that is free from conceptual construction." Perception is inexpressible given it is free from mental fabrication, that is, free from "the association of name, genus, etc [with a thing perceived, which results in verbal designation of the thing]" (Yao, 2005:131). Dharmakirti agrees with this definition but also adds the criterion of "non-erroneous" in his later works. According to Yao (*Ibid.*), for both Dharmakirti and Dignaga, perception is classified into four types, i.e. sense perception, mental perception, the self-cognition of all mind and mental activities, and the yogic perception.¹

In regards to self-cognition, Dharmakirti remarks: "Just as light is thought to illuminate itself while it is illumining because that is its nature, so also does the mind know itself." (*Ibid.*, 20-21) Both Dignaga and Dharmakirti emphasize the primacy of the role of self-cognition with regards to functions of memory of mental or physical phenomena and perception of what have never been perceived a priori.

For objects that can't be perceived directly without conceptual constraint and error, reliance on inference is called forth. Inference, however, involves mental processing to understand conceptually fabricated objects. Hence, as a mental operation, inferential activity is subject to errors. Despite this, it may be instrumental as an aid to uncover unknown truth and may lead to causal efficacy (successful effect

¹ See Yao 2005:130-132 for a discussion on the controversies over the divergent types of perception that Dignaga might have accepted. The sources from China may throw light on this disagreement among scholars. In essence, Yao points to the evidence from Chinese source that Dignaga accepted four types of perception in his early works.

of an action). For this reason, it is considered an epistemological warrant (Lysenko, 2007:20-21). Each of these instruments of valid cognition, perception and inference, has its respective subject matter or bearing. Perception, which attributes immediacy as its hall-mark, has bearing on "particulars," that is, something unique and inexpressible.² Inference, on the other hand, takes conceptualizations and products of conceptual fabrications as its objects. These later objects, under inferential activity, are labelled under "universals."³ The question arises then "what makes an instance of perception a piece of knowledge if sense-object contact is not cognitive and conceptualization is cognitive but not immediate? The answer to this question can be found in the role that self-cognition plays. Self-cognition or self-reflective awareness is "a sort of intuitive experience that accompanies all kinds of mental activity, being itself free from conceptualization" (Lysenko, 2007:20). It should be added that Dignaga and Dharmakirti maintain that their conception of self-cognition is not governed by additional cognition or else it will subject to the fallacy of infinite regress.

Following the epistemological system that marks the Sautrantika School, Dharmakirti also postulates the reality of mind; self-cognition, on a conventional and linguistic level, must be real in order to able to cognize and make sense, the implication of which Tillemans pointed out below.

II. Limitations in Dharmakirti's Epistemology

It is due to the above strands of realism in Dharmakirti that Tillemans charges him and his followers as advocates of a variation of "Buddhist metaphysical realism" and suggests the following summary and critical reconstructions of Dharmakirti *et al's* fundamental positions:

1. Mental and physical aggregates are real entities due to their distinct properties.
 2. The karmic operation of cause and effect occurs between entities of similar kinds due to the principle of "like must cause like";
 3. Due to (1) & (2), the brain and other physical aggregates cannot be the cause of the mental and likewise; things of distinct properties can only be auxiliary causes.⁴
- Tillemans finds Dharmakirti's thesis above as unduly problematic as it presupposes the existence of continuous minds or "mental states that spans past lives and will also (with some rare exceptions) extend to future lives." (Tillemans, 2016, 203) By implication of his tenets above, Dharmakirti runs into the difficulty of accounting for plausibility of rebirth, a cardinal theory of Buddhist philosophy in relation to cause and effect, and eventually has to resort to the doctrinal explanation. This attempt has

² See Gupta 2006:245-257 on discussion on how Chandrakirti took issue with Dignaga and Dharmakirti epistemological treatment of this notion.

³ There was some disagreement among scholars as to what constitute Dignaga's notion of perception. Lysenko differs from Yao by not including sense perception under perception. Her argument is that Buddhists, unlike other Indian philosophers, did not see "sense-object contact" as the main condition of sense perception. Hence, she reasons "immediacy of pratyaksa [perception] is not reduced to any sort of direct sense stimulation." See Lysenko 2007:21. Reading on material on Dharmakirti and the Tibetan sources by Paul Williams show Yao's interpretation was more preferred. See Williams 2005:119-182.

⁴ See Tillemans 2016:203 for a discussion on the weakness of Dharmakirti's view vis a vis contemporary eliminativist view.

inexorably made Dharmakīrti choose the fallibilist argument.⁵ While I may not fully agree with Tillemans that Dharmakīrti's view has implicitly caused a dualist account of mind-body causation, given the inconclusive stage of scientific research, I concur with Tillemans that Dharmakīrti has taken a rather hasty path to argue for doctrinal explanation and appeal to authority in Buddha (i.e., "Since the Buddha as 'a source of epistemological knowledge' said there is rebirth, then we should believe in rebirth") in respect to the notion like rebirth, and this is without reason, and this can also be seen when it comes to Dharmakīrti's treatment of nonexistents. As John Dunne remarks that given that Dharmakīrti stands in between two traditions as a Buddhist anti-realist and Epistemological Theorist, in which he needs to uphold that perception and inference as valid cognition, his commitments to both "are often in tension" (Dunne 2004:46).⁶ The basic assumptions of the two stances may not always be compatible and when there's disagreement, that is, inconclusive position to account for nonexistent objects like rebirth, it is understandably that Dharmakīrti would resort to appeal to authority in scripture. Secondly, even though Dignāga and Dharmakīrti carry out a distinctive view on non-cognition of perceptible objects (e.g., "There is no pot") in their epistemological theory, their discussions are more limited to negation of perceptible/empirical objects. But, when it comes to the negation of imperceptible things (e.g. "Ghosts do not exist"), according to Yao, "Dharmakīrti's admits that his theory of non- cognition is not able to deal with this type of negation." (Yao 2007:743). Indeed, Dharmakīrti clearly gives his reason skeptical position when it comes to the paradox of non-cognition of imperceptibles, which I am going to present in the section following next. However, let's briefly look at one of the important issue facing the interpretation of Dharmakīrti's classification of objects of cognition and the rationale that nonexistents are not incompatible with his theory, in other words, included in the domain of Dharmakīrti's object of cognition.

III. Issue in interpretations of Dharmakīrti's Classification of Nonexistents as Object of Cognition

Reading Dharmakīrti is not a straightforward task, as in interpreting any Buddhist theoretical doctrines or for that matter any piece of complex philosophical works. This seems more the case when it concerns Dharmakīrti, who apart from employing an allegedly difficult style in his original Sanskrit texts, did not give a complete explanation of his accounts on how non-entities could be objects of valid cognition. As such we often need to rely on commentarial traditions and modern interpretations to tie up the loose ends. One of the main issues in interpreting Dharmakīrti in relation to non-cognition of non-existents is: how can non-cognition be included as an object of valid cognition since non-existents themselves are absence of existence and seemingly unable to fulfil one of the three criteria of valid cognition?

⁵ The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines fallibilism as: "the epistemological thesis that no belief (theory, view, thesis, and so on) can ever be rationally supported or justified in a conclusive way. Always, there remains a possible doubt as to the truth of the belief." See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/fallibil/>. For Tillemans's argument on Dharmakīrti's fallibilist account, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dharmakīrti/#RelEth>

⁶ See Dunne 2004:39 for the disagreements between Buddhist anti realist position and the South Asian epistemologists in the discourse on distributed entities.

According to Hugon (2011), there are at least two readings regarding Dharmakirti's theory of valid cognition on nonexistents:

1. "Practicalist reading" in which valid cognition are "primarily oriented towards human activities and aims and hence bear on objects capable of bringing about the intended objective." Under such interpretation at conventional level, there is no place for "rabbit's horns" and "non-existents" as they are not apt to fulfil certain human goal or, in the parlance of Buddhist epistemology, they do not have the reliability for causal efficacy.

2. "Alternative reading" where the universal object of cognition includes not only the "impermanent" (real existing thing) but also "permanent entities that do not exist in reality." These objects of valid cognition would cover permanent space, ghost, horned rabbits and furred turtles. This approach takes its clues from the reading of Dharmakirti's argument in the third chapter of *Pramanavartikka*. In this alternative reading, the validity of cognition is not defined by reliability but considering "whether cognition presents the ontological status of its object, that is whether it is coherent in the sense of being or being challenged by valid cognition." (Hugon 2011:380-381)

In other words, once an object of non-cognition came to be determined as a "target of human interest" after fulfilling all the necessary conditions and without being falsified by inference from its indirect relation to reality.

The alternative reading of Dharmakirti's position on nonexistents appears counterintuitively evident in *Pramanaviniscaya* though in his other works, there seems to be lack of clarity and hence resulting into variations of reading. On the issue of compatibility of these interpretations, Hugon (2011) has dealt with extensively in his paper, which I am not going to through at length here.

However, there is no explicit account in Dharmakirti's works on how non-entities are only to be considered in relations to entities, with causal efficacy. Hugon suggested that the correspondence principle, substituting reliability based on causal efficacy, should involve no causal links when it is applicable to non-existents. This suggestion seems coherent with another account of Dharmakirti's definition of existent, whereby "to be causally efficacious, therefore, is *ipso facto* to be momentary and being so, on this account, is clearly the criterion of being existent." (Arnold, 2012:13) Hence, to be existent is to be causally effective and momentary and to be non-existent is otherwise, which seems to entail epistemological equality. However, according to Dharmakirti, there is no proof of nonexistence by reason of another existence even though non-cognition can be proved by direct perception.⁷ The question on how to relate the correspondence of non-existents and existents remains. This brings us to next section.

IV. What is Non-cognition to Dharmakirti ?

The theme of non-cognition seems to be one of the most central notions that Dharmakirti primarily works and develops throughout his career. From the account of Kamalasila (c. 740-795), however, we discover that the concept of non-cognition was not Dharmakirti's invention. Instead, it was "formulation" of his interlocutors, of

⁷ *Pramanaviniscaya* 4.15-23 in Wayman 1999:198-199.

which Dharmakīrti was said “to find no use” when it comes to applying non-cognition.”⁸

According to Dharmakīrti, there are two types of non-cognition, that is, non-cognition of perceptible objects, such as a pot, and non-cognition of an imperceptible object, such as the remote past or a future event or a ghost. It was the second type of non-perception that is of interest to us in this study.

Both of these objects share the feature in obscuring our understanding and regarding them as existents. However, it is only in regards to non-cognition of perceptible objects, its non-existence can be determined conclusively, without being subjected to the principle of causal efficacy, as it is argued above.

In regards to non-cognition of perceptible objects, Yao (2007) summarizes the studies of Kellner (2001, 2003) and Watanabe (2002) as follows:

1. Contrary to his contemporary interlocutors, Dharmakīrti neither agrees with the Naiyayikas’ accounts of propositional negation nor Isvarasena and Kumarila’s illocutionary negation. The first approach reifies absence and reduces “negation to perception” while the latter treats non-cognition as an independent epistemic knowledge. For Dharmakīrti, “negative judgment” is still a judgment and non-cognition is properly placed in the context of inference as it takes *ipso facto* inferential knowledge to judge;
2. However, Dharmakīrti makes a distinction between non-cognition of perceptible object and imperceptible object in establishing non-cognition as valid inference. The absence of perceptible object, e.g. absence of pot, is proved when all conditions for its imperceptibility are satisfied. On the other hand, the non-cognition of imperceptible objects, which are super-sensory or abstracts objects, is unable to conclusively lead one to determine its existence. The example often quoted is that of ghost, of which its non-cognition does not translate into its non-existence;
3. The inferential judgment of non-cognition of perceptible objects, in Dharmakīrti’s view, is built on affirmative perceptions. The inference of “there is no pottery on the table” is grounded on “an inferential judgment based on the normal perceptions of things other than pottery, e.g. the table etc.” (Yao, 2007,735-736)

In his comparative essay on Dharmakīrti’s and Husserl’s views on negative judgment, Yao (2005) only limits himself to the discussion of Dharmakīrti’s treatment of the former type of non-cognition, that is, of perceptible objects/empirical objects. Dharmakīrti, however, offers his refutations against the fallacy of infinite regress and reification as employed by his contemporary interlocutors and “effectively eliminate” them as methods to prove the non-existents (Kellner 2015:8).

Despite this, the topic of how to account for nonexistents from an epistemological point of view remains an unending business as it is one of the most imperative subjects needs to be addressed in Buddhist philosophy given Buddhism deals primarily with the abstract and non-sensory objects in its voluminous commentaries and exegesis.

⁸ *Nyayabindu*prvapakasamsipti (On NB-Sva 48) where Kamalasila was quoted as saying: “In the case of the inaccessible object (*viprakṛstavisaya*), Dharmakīrti shows that there is no use for a ‘non-apprehension,’ which is the opponent’s formulation.” In Wayman 1999:88.

V. Dharmakirti's Scepticism on His Contemporaries' Explanations of Non-cognition of Inaccessible Objects

In respect to ascertaining the inaccessible non-existent object Dharmakirti demonstrates that he is clearly skeptical as he thinks the two means of knowledge can't be used to prove the absence of its being. In *Nyayabindu*, he remarks:

The non-apprehension of an inaccessible object, having the character of suspending direct perception and inference, is a cause for doubt, because there is no proof of the absence of an entity when the two authorities (i.e. direct perception and inference) are suspended. (Wayman 1999:51)

Kamalasila, testifies that the main purpose of Dharmakirti's view of nonexistent objects is aimed at dealing with the sophistry of his Brahmanic interlocutors.⁹ This is understandable given the discourse of nonexistent objects was not unknown in Indian philosophy prior to Dharmakirti. The Mimamsakas, the Indian Materialists, for example, made the division of nonexistents into: prior non-existence, posterior non-existence, mutual non-existence and absolute non-existence (e.g., absence of horn in the head of the hare), of which the Sautrantika School, which Dharmakirti belonged to, has raised its objections and claims that they are untenable epistemologically (See Singh 2007:120-121).¹⁰

This underlying philosophical position has led Dharmakirti to formulate his critical views on nonexistents as follows: When there is nothing prove (asatta) due to the evidence (linga) of non-apprehension, to say that even though there is absence of apprehension, would be a non-ascertainment on account of "endless series" (anavasthana). Then, absence of an apprehensible would be devoid of non-apprehension; likewise, existence (of a thesis) would be absence; to wit, the non-apprehension by another apprehension is a non-apprehension proved by a direct perception. Likewise, is there non-existence by reason of another existence? (We respond,): it is not proved. When further, precisely, non-apprehension of such kind is the non-existence of non-existents, then even when the objects is proved, due to delusion of the subject whom [sic] not ascertaining the conventional language of words for the cognition of a non-existent, one is occupied with a symbol for pointing out the object.¹¹

The above translation of Dharmakirti's direct quote in *Pramanaviniscaya* may sound rather dry while its meaning appears cryptic. Nonetheless, it is one of the most important sources found available (in English) to understand Dharmakirti's view on nonexistents. There are at least three succinct yet salient points in regards to non-cognition of inexistent objects above, which I attempt to paraphrase and interpret below:

1. Let's evaluate the propositions as follows:

- (1) There is non-cognition of non-existents [D may not agree/doubt]
- (2) There are non-existents (e.g., there are ghosts) [Both D & I* may/may not agree]

⁹ *Nyayabindupurvapakasamsipti (On NB-Sva 13)* in Wayman 1999:88.

¹⁰ See Singh 2007: 110-124 for the Saunrantikas's refutations in the chapter of "Critique of Pseudo Methods of Truth."

¹¹ From *Pramanaviniscaya* 4.15-23 (Steinkellner, 11*, 16-29) as quoted by Wayman 1999:198-199.

- (3) There is no non-existents to prove given there is non-cognition of nonexistents (e.g., the existence of ghosts can't be proven given that we can't infer whether they are existents or not) [D & I* may agree]
- (4) However, there is absence of cognition (e.g., There is a cognition of non being of ghosts). [D does not agree]

Note : D = Dharmakirti, I = Dharmakirti's interlocutors*

According to Dharmakirti, premise (4) will lead to an “endless series” or *infinite regress*, when negation of absence turns out to be an affirmation of negative fact and this introduces a cognizer to affirm it. It is like saying, “There is no ghost but I see the absence of ghost” and this can lead endlessly into “Someone notices ‘I see the absence of ghost.’”

2. In the process of proving the non-apprehension of nothing to be proved, the paradox incurs as a non-existent object would have to be established by a valid cognition, via inferential knowledge, assumed to be *a priori*. Nonetheless, the non-existent, for example, rabbit's horn or ghosts have the quality of absence or non-existence. Consequently, there is nothing to be established. If attempts are made to cognize such apprehension, due to the fallacy of *ad infinitum*, the non-cognition itself will be meaningless as it is built on an untenable thesis.

3. For Dharmakirti, “one entity can comprehend (another) entity when there is a relation with (its) individual presence; [yet] for an entity unrelated to that (other) there is no assurance of not mistaking it [the correspondence/relation].”¹²

4. Moreover, conventional use of linguistic references is not ultimately real, it is only supposed to be real. Hence, a fictitious character is just fictitious and has no ontological status. If someone analyses the fictitious characters as if they have ontological nature, then they are liable to fallacy of reification and might instead referring only to the language/symbolic representation rather than the nonexistent objects themselves.

However, given his position of non-cognition of inaccessible objects (“non-existents”), Dharmakirti seems to admit that the existence of such beings like ghosts, horned rabbits, sky flower, etc,” which we do not have access through perception or beyond our ordinary experience, are indeterminate as they can neither be affirmed nor refuted either until they are challenged by a higher order of epistemological warrant. The question that can be put forward to Dharmakirti is how to reconcile the accounts for non-existents on conventional level with the references of their existence in Buddhist soteriology/exegesis? If we deny them by using the anti-realist approach, not only will we be falling into nihilist interpretation but also the whole descriptions of Buddhist accounts of rebirth, karmic laws and existences of other worlds that form the cradle of Buddhist soteriology would fall into incoherent pieces. I argue that the Meinongian theory of non-existents, even though it has its own constraints, would be able to supplement a powerful explanatory framework to account for non-existents that seems to be lacking in Dharmakirti for reasons explained above.

VI. Studies of Non-existent Objects in Contemporary Philosophy

While non-existents have been known and discussed critically, since the dawn of philosophy, with an attitude of either embrace or dismissal, one of the few contemporary philosophers in the West who started serious pioneering works on non-

¹² *Nyayabindu* in Wayman 1999:47.

existents was admittedly Alexius von Meinong (1853-1920). The Austrian's philosophical views were once wrongly misconstrued. That notwithstanding, Bertrand Russell, subsequently praised him and "insisted that his work deserved careful study" (see Perszyk 1993:1). The following generations of philosophers had found both rich and critical resources in his discourse of non-existent objects, even though with some modifications.

In the following pages, I am going to briefly review Meinong's theory, its critique and application in contemporary philosophical studies on the subject. In this paper, I am going to limit myself to the Meinongian view rather than to include the Neo-Meinongian diverse views. Next, I will summarize Dharmakirti's and Meinong's treatments on non-existents. I will suggest how Dharmakirti's suspicion of the methodology of deriving non-existents, not without good reason, and lack of theoretical discussions on the subject would have been adequately enriched by Meinong's theoretical framework on non-existent objects and solves the paradox he initially foresees but stops short of addressing. On the other hand, it would be to Meinongians' advantage to heed Dharmakirti's counsel on the limitations of non-cognition qua linguistic and epistemological treatment of non-existents. Dharmakirti's position is quite expected given that his views are partially grounded in Buddhist anti-realism.

Meinong fundamentally postulates that there exist "objects which do not have being of any kind despite having properties," labelled as "beingless objects." These beingless objects are found beside the existent objects, like chairs, tables or objects that subsist like numbers, geometrical objects. The familiar examples of beingless objects are the golden mountain and the round square, which can be both possible and impossible.¹³ In Meinong's analysis, people often have problem with imagining, fantasizing or even fearing objects that do have existence. This is due to the mental phenomena which he names as "principle of intentionality," human's perpetual intentional directedness towards an object, perhaps an obsession with an ontological being. As such, Meinong's position is that there exists an object corresponding to each of our mental condition, whether this object is existent or nonexistent.¹⁴

However, Meinong's main problem that other philosopher takes issue with is his apparently paradoxical claim that "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects." This definition makes his notion of non-existent not only unintelligible but also self-contradictory. Not only Meinong's definition contradicts what Parmenides' view who claims that it is impossible for us to think an entity that is absolute nothing but also to think is to think something. Hence, Meinong's theory of object is not a study of ontology, that is the examination based on "what has being." (Perszyk, 1999, 10) That leads to question whether "the claim of that there are non-existent objects intended to be a metaphysical or ontological claim."

In some of its basic form, the Meinongian accepts statements like "Pegasus is a flying horse" and "Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker St" as "true in some other world (genuine or fictional/ersatz)." Routley (1980) argues that "all of Meinong's objects are in the object-domain of the actual world, and true unmodalised statements can be made about all of them" Perszyk also notices that Meinongian account of

¹³ Perszyk, 1993:1 for an introduction of Meinongian notion of "Nonexistent Objects" and a historical development of Meinong's philosophy.

¹⁴ See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* in <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonexistent-objects/SEP>.

truth-in-fiction should be distinct from truth *simpliciter* (in other words, the logical account of consequence) as evidenced from many fictions that their contents are not true *simpliciter* (Perszyk 1993:48-49). Perszyk (1993) also emphasizes that Meinong also makes the clear distinction between complete and incomplete objects, redolent of knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, “nuclear” and “extra nuclear” properties, a discussion I will not venture here due to the economy of space and focus.

However, for illustration of how Meinongian nonexistents, can be applied to Dharmakirti inaccessible objects, we start with the basic “principle of property and object abstraction” in Zalta (1988), where it can be said that “although flying horse does not exist, there is certainly some property that is identical with flying horse.”

In the following we are going to examine how the Meinongian is going to approach the problem of fictional discourse. The nonexistent object in Meinong is somewhat very close to its Indian equivalent in Dharmakirti or Indian philosophy.

Fictional discourse concerns with “fictitious objects” or “nonexistent object.” The fictitious objects, which are one of the classes of nonexistent objects, are so called as they appear in fictional works, myths or fairy tales, etc. One of the commonly known fictitious objects in the Western world is Pegasus besides Hamlet, Harry Potter, Hello Kitty, etc. These fictitious objects corresponds to the Indian and Buddhist analogies of “horned rabbits, son of a barren woman, sky flower or ghosts” also called “inaccessible objects,” which are often quoted for illustrations in philosophical discourse.

An examination of the truth value of Pegasus can be carried out as follows:

(1) Pegasus is a flying horse.

b (Subject) F (predicate expression)

Note: b represents “Subject” while F is the notation for “predicate expression.”

In general, a sentence must fulfil the following principles to make logical sense:

1. Existential Generalization (EG), i.e. “If *b* is *F*, then there is something that is *F*.”

Hence, in the above sentence, it can be read as: “If Pegasus is a flying horse, there must be something that is flying,”

2. Predication Principle (PP), i.e. “(PPa) If *b* is *F*, then there is something that is identical with *b* or (PPb) If *b* is *F*, then *b* exists. Of which, it can be read as: “If Pegasus is a flying horse, there must be something that is identical with Pegasus” (PPa) or “If flying horse applies to Pegasus, then Pegasus has to exist” (PPb).

3. Commonly and reasonably accepted to be true in order to make logical sense.

The problem comes when the two principles are applied to fictitious objects, in this case Pegasus, which is contradictory to empirical facts and ontological status of the nonexistent objects, as we shall see, with EG, the sentence above (1) implies “There are flying horses” (2) and with PP, it (1) implies “Pegasus exists” (3). Yet, Pegasus is a nonexistent fictitious object and can’t exist.

Meinong’s claim that there are nonexistent/impossible objects could therefore countenance the statement that fictitious objects *do not exist* but concurrently addresses that *there are* fictitious objects. To illustrate how a Meinongian solution can be applied to avoid contradiction, we can consider the following premises:

- (1) Pegasus is a flying horse.
- (2) There are flying horses. (1, EG)
- (3) There are no flying horses

Meinong would reject premise (3) as false as his theory accepts that "flying horses do not exist" but there are flying horses as nonexistent objects, of which Pegasus is included. The contradiction in the above will be solved when the sentence in (3) is replaced with "Flying horses do not exist" which does not contradict (2).¹⁵

We can apply the above Meinongian scheme to Dharmakirti's imperceptible objects of "ghosts" by considering the followings:

- (1) Ghosts are spirit of a dead person/animal¹⁶
- (2) Ghosts exist. (1, PP)
- (3) Ghosts are fictitious object.
- (4) Fictitious objects do not exist.
- (5) Ghosts don't exist. (3, 4)

In this case, the Meinongian solution will consist in rejecting premise (2), which cannot be accepted, as it is supposed to be a *nonexistent* object.

The (1, PP), however, does not necessarily have to be rejected as it can be read in 2 ways, either:

- (PPa) If *b* is *F*, then there is something that is identical with *b*.
- (PPb) If *b* is *F*, then *b* exists.

Given that Meinongian only maintains there is something identical with Ghosts (the weaker version of PP), although Ghosts do not exist, (PPa) can still be accepted while (PPb) rejected. As such the inference from premise 1 that "Ghosts are spirits of a dead person/animal" to "Ghosts exist" is blocked. Since the Meinongian accepts only the weaker version (PPa) of the predication principle, the inference from premise 1 ("Pegasus is a flying horse") to "Pegasus exists" is blocked. All that can be derived from premise 1 is the weaker claim "If *Ghost* is *spirit of a dead person/animal*, then there is something that is *identical* with *ghost*."

With Meinongian's framework above, we can come up with is that a logical theory to describe the non-cognition of nonexistent objects without committing to its ontological status.

Problems with Meinongian Nonexistent Objects.

Russell's main objection of Meinong's theory was based on the following:

- (1) The proposition behind Meinong's impossible objects (e.g., The round square is round and not round) violates the rule of logic and is contradictory.
- (2) Despite Meinong's proposition that impossible objects do not exist as Meinong claims, the conclusion is still they do not exist. Russell pointed out that Meinong's use of "The so-and-so" references fail to capture the distinction and non-correspondence between grammatical structure and logical form.

In reply to Russell, Meinong offered the following defense:

- (1) Beingless objects, unlike actual and possible objects, do not follow the law of noncontradiction. Based on his principle of characterization, Meinong asserts that

¹⁵ I owe the above explanations and examples to the entry of "Nonexistent Objects" in <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonexistent-objects/>.

¹⁶ Definition as given by Wikipedia's entry of "ghost" in <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost>.

the proposition behind the impossible object of “the round square is round and not-round” does not mean: “the round square is round” and “It’s not the case the round square is round.” In other words, the negation of “A is non-B” is equivalent to “Not (A is B)”.

(2) In Meinong’s theory, “being existing” is distinct from “existence.” The former is a determination of so-being while the latter is a determination of being. “Being so,” found in impossible objects, precludes their having possible “being.” The “being so” is also not equivalent to “being” in possible world. Russell apparently dismisses such a distinction.

Having gone through Meinong’s and Russell’s view on nonexistents above, I outlines the following salient points as a conclusion between Dharmakirti’s and Meinong’s views on nonexistents:

- (1) Both Dharmakirti and Meinong would agree that our cognition covers a whole lot of objects, including non-existent objects,
- (2) Both agree that what can be known about objects, whether perceptible or imperceptible objects, are a priori.
- (3) Despite his skepticism about the methodology of deriving non-cognition of nonexistents, Dharmakirti does not deny or affirm the existence of imperceptible/nonexistent objects. His attitude is indeterminate given the methodological limitations that he outlines.
- (4) Dharmakirti, however, thinks that the cognition of non-cognition of nonexistents is to be carried out through inferential activity and since the knowledge of it is a priori, he does not need to postulate a separate means of knowledge to account for them and hence runs into the fallacy of *infinite regress*.
- (5) Meinong also acknowledges that his Theory of Object is based on a priori science, i.e., concerns all given phenomena and notices the tension of it with metaphysics which involves with investigation of empirical phenomena/ general reality.
- (6) Meinong asserts that “So-being” the determinant of “being existing” is distinct from “being” which is a “determinant of existence.” “So-being” (or “Being so”) is found in impossible objects that disqualifies their possibility of “being.” The “being so” is also not equivalent to “being” in possible world. I think Dharmakirti could possibly concur with this proposition of Meinong given that his mode of correct reasoning is based on the tenet that “existence only in the similar locus and exclusion everywhere in the dissimilar locus.”

Conclusion

Dharmakirti’s dismissal of non-cognition of imperceptible objects seems to have missed out a fair share of explanatory accounts on this group of objects although they form an essential part of Buddhist philosophical/soteriological discourse. Dharmakirti’s trivial attention to non-cognition of them is not without reason. For Dharmakirti, nonexistents are not determinable in regards to their existential status. The three reasons, he gave for considerations, which I have elaborated above, are based on his analysis that accounts of nonexistents qua non-cognition are liable for falling into the fallacies of infinite regress and reification. However, Dharmakirti faces a dilemma in between accounting for nonexistents without resorting to another means of valid cognition, which he was reluctant to do due to its obvious shortcomings and accounting them but through reliance on another means of valid cognition in doctrinal inference. By choosing the later strategy, Dharmakirti clearly

shows that given the tension between epistemology that he has devoted himself throughout his career and commitment to doctrinal truth, he would prefer to rely on the later when it comes to things neither cognizable to direct perception nor inference. This, however, has allegedly made him subscribe to the fallibilist argument. Meinong, on the other, affirms "that whatever can be experienced in some way, i.e. be the target of a mental act, called an object, are existent. Meinong's all-embracing theory of objects covers all kinds of non-existents, such as non-beings, impossible objects, paradoxical and defective objects. These include even self-referential thinking (e.g., the thought about itself), which plays a central role in Dharmakīrti's epistemology and often referred to self-cognition. Meinong's attempt is to offer rational accounts to the paradox of nonexistence.

As I have demonstrated above through the application of Meinongian to account for the Dharmakīrtian notion of "ghosts," a rational account can be possible without committing to its ontology. Even though such naïve account may be liable to the methodological constraint that Dharmakīrti cited, I think it is worthwhile attempting as any rational account will be benefitting the development of Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, such endeavors can be done within the context of Buddhist cardinal understanding of conventional/ultimate truth. Finally, my attempt in this paper is a first step in applying Meinongian theory to understand Buddhist epistemologist and logician's position on nonexistents. In the course of writing, it dawns on me that there are ample of research opportunities in this field of study which are open to whoever interested to pursue them.

One final word is that it is often forgotten that the ultimate concern for Dharmakīrti and followers is not philosophical elaboration per se in pursuing Buddhist logic. Rather, it is what it means to be human and how to go beyond this unsatisfactoriness-bound existence. It is a concern steeped in soteriological value that is grounded in humanist compassion to liberate all sentient beings. For Dharmakīrti, the answer is to be found in the self-cognition of ultimate reality or in other words, awareness of things beyond oneself, however imperceptible they at the moment.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Limitations of the study – acknowledge the limitations: I should firstly admit that in the course of my writing and interpretations of Dharmakīrti's works, I may subject to errors, either due to hermeneutics or to fallacy as my understanding is limited to a few translated treatises while Dharmakīrti are known to wear many hats as either Sautantrika, Yogacarin as well as Madhyamika, each of them might not agree with one another and his writings may reflect different perspectives at different stage. I might have misinterpreted him. Similar constraints of mine can be said of my grasps of the depth of the Meinongian philosophical strands. This, however, should not be a reason not to present and cherish the comparative works of Dharmakīrti and Meinong. If throughout the research in this paper, there is any misrepresentation, the fault is mine alone, for not delving thoroughly in understanding both Dharmakīrti's and Meinong's philosophical thoughts.

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