

# Handout of Chapter 3

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In order to make the idea of this chapter clear, let us summarize the conclusion of previous chapter:

1. To sum up existent objects according to Dharmakirti, or more specifically, to Sautrantika school:

<b>Things</b>	<b>Nonthings</b>
Real	Unreal
Functioning	Nonfunctioning
Effective	Noneffective
Specifically characterized phenomena	Generally characterized phenomena
Objects of direct valid cognition	Objects of conceptual valid cognition
Nonlinguistic	Linguistic
Permanent	Impermanence
Ultimate truth	Conventional truth

## 2. **Linguistic, Conventional Truth**

Generally characterized phenomena

The conceptualization of specifically characterized phenomena

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(This is the line between Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth.)

## **Nonlinguistic, Ultimate Truth**

Specifically Characterized phenomena

3. The real specifically characterized phenomena can be determined by three criteria.

These are:

- a. Place-specific
- b. Time-specific
- c. Cause-specific

From above, we can briefly outline the problem in Dharmakirti's system. In this system, since the specifically characterized phenomena are real, there is no doubt about their existence. But how about generally characterized phenomena? For they are unreal, can they be existence or not? From ontological point of view, only real things can exist ultimately. From epistemological of view, both specifically characterized phenomena and generally characterized phenomena can be the objects of valid cognition. It seems that there is the inconsistency between the epistemology and

ontology in Dharmakirti's system. So the following is to discuss this difficulty and the possible explanation.

Do generally characterized phenomena exist or not? Intuitively, there are only two possible answers of this question: yes or no. Either generally characterized phenomena exist or generally characterized phenomena don't exist. But the solution may not be so simple. First of all, it is obviously that the generally characterized phenomena is different from complete nonexistent, such as the famous horns of a rabbit; since the former is valid but the later is invalid. If we simply assert that the generally characterized phenomena don't exist, then we will face the paradox generated by the assertion itself. This kind of contradiction can be illustrated by the argument from Dharmakirti to against the nonexistent of universal, as below:

*Suppose the claim "universals are not objects of comprehension because they do not really exist" is true, then it is a valid cognition. A valid cognition must be an object of comprehension, therefore, all terms in the valid cognition must be comprehensible.*

*But since terms as "universals", "do not really exist", and "objects of comprehension" are all Universals, then from the claim, they are not objects of comprehension.*

*Consequently, this leads to the contradiction; the claim must be invalid<sup>1</sup>.*

Therefore, universals must somehow exist, inasmuch as they are objects of epistemologically valid activities. But since the universals do not cease and do not perform any function, they are not real. Then the further question is to ask what the ontological status of universal is. Or more precisely, how can we explain the existence of universal? One possible explanation is that they are nothing but nominal existence. It is just like the Meinong's concept of subsistence<sup>2</sup>. In Dharmakirti's epistemology, he use the notion of *vikalpa*, our ability to think in dependence on language and construction, to explain the nominal existence of universal: they are made to be the convenient designations.

But the Tibetan commentator, Sa-pan, disagrees with this position. He claims that "to be an object of valid cognition" means to be real. He proposes that the universal, elimination of others, distinguisher, preclusion, indeterminate, and relation

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<sup>1</sup> This kind of rejection is similar to the rejection of Moral Relativism. Since they claim that "there is not definitely moral principle", and the rejection is to say what Moral Relativism claim has already been a definitely moral principle. In order to response this denial, the Moral Relativism can answer that the claim is in different hierarchical state than what it refer to. From this point of view, the materialist may answer in the same way. On the other hand, the rejection of Dharmakirti may lead a serious consequence: since the complete nonexistence are also the object of cognition (even not valid), it may exist in some way. (For example, we may claim "the horn of rabbit doesn't exist" is a valid cognition.)

<sup>2</sup> To be announced.

all refer to the generally characterized phenomena, which do not exist in reality for they are superimposed by thought. For Sa-pan, universals are only quasi-entities, which are not really comprehended. He says, “Only specifically characterized phenomena are objects of comprehension, moreover, they are merely imputed on the absence of things.<sup>3</sup>” This statement is, however, not without support in Dharmakirti’s writings. In discussing valid cognition, Dharmakirti asserts that only specifically characterized phenomena are objects of comprehension. But on the other hand, Dharmakirti also says that there are two types of valid cognition, perception and inference, which the former relates to real phenomena and the later relates to constructs as their primary objects. From this position, it seems that it is implausible to reject the constructs to be the object of valid cognition in Dharmakirti’s system. In order to deal with this quandary, Sa-pan strongly suggests that constructs are not objects of knowledge, however, this statement is no better than Materialists who reduce knowledge to perception.

Two Tibetan thinkers, Bo-dong and Gyel-tsap, both criticize Sa-pan’s remarks and show that such a view will lead to the self-defeating paradox as the Materialist. Furthermore, Bo-dong emphasizes that Sa-pan’s view will make the permanence to be impermanent. Here, I briefly illustrate the argument as below:

*From Sa-Pan’s point of view, only the specifically phenomena is object.*

*That is, all knowledge is from perception, which is impermanence.*

*But since it cannot be denied we have knowledge about universals, which are permanence; then from the premise, the knowledge of permanence must be impermanence, it leads to the contradiction.*

Therefore, we can conclude that if we operate within the framework of Buddhist logic, Sa-pan’s point must lead to the contradictory.

For the sake of dealing with the obvious difficulties, Sa-gya commentators have tried to explain Sa-pan’s comments in various ways. For example, Ngak-chö claims that Sa-pan’s comments should be interpreted in this way:

*Only specifically characterized phenomena are real objects of comprehension, since only they make a real causal difference in our lives. Conceptual constructs are not objects of comprehension in their own right, but only in dependence on conceptual activities. They only exist nominally. From this interpretation, there are no two types of objects to be recognized, but only two modes realize the objects.* Understood in this way, Sa-pan’s comments may not be conflict with the conventional existence of conceptual entities.

However, Lo Ken-chen does not accept this interpretation. He rather asserts that constructs do not exist at all; they are merely added to reality through a negative

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<sup>3</sup> The example is in p78.

conceptual process. From Lo Ken-chen's point of view, the word *exist* can be used in two ways, one is to be referred to the real things, the other is the figurative usage applied to nonthings as well. From this interpretation, it seems that Lo Ken-chen turns back to the Sa-pan's original interpretation. Then how can this interpretation solve the difficulty of self-defeating paradox? Sakya Chok-den answers this question: a Buddha would not see nothings such as universals, space and the like, since they do not exist in reality. Nevertheless, the universals are just the modus operandi of ordinary beings. Hence, they exist only from our ordinary viewpoint.

Finally, Go-ram-ba suggests that the whole dispute is nothing but the semantic problem. It is because of the ambiguity of Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word "bhāva", which at times can mean 'things' and at times can mean 'existence'. So the usage of things or existence in Tibetan translation may be misleading. This problem can be solved as long as one can decide the appropriate translation. From this point, it is plausible to conceive the universals do not exist really but as fictional objects of valid conceptual activities.

However, this ambiguity is not only among Tibetan translators but also in Dharmakirti himself. This is because his concept of existence is ambiguous. Since he is an antirealism<sup>4</sup>, it is inevitable for him to use the pseudo-entities which denied by himself. What does it mean to say constructs exist if they are not real? Dharmakirti may answer that it is because that are the objects of valid cognition. But the problem remains: Are the cognitions that validate concept valid or not? That is to ask: Are the concepts of concepts valid or not? If they are valid, then they must exist in some way. Then, eventually, the ontological costs of Dharmakirti's system will be large. If they are not valid, how can they validate anything? In order to escape this dilemma, the revisionist read Dharmakirti's text in more realistic way.

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<sup>4</sup> More correctly, he is an antirealism toward universals.