

Taking Non-Conceptualism Back to Dharmakīrti

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Abstract:

Some recent surveys of the modern philosophical debate over the existence of non-conceptual perceptual content have concluded that the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual representations is largely terminological. To remedy this terminological impasse, Robert Hanna and Monima Chadha claim that non-conceptualists must defend an essentialist view of non-conceptual content, according to which perceptual states have representational content whose structure and psychological function is necessarily distinct from that of conceptual states. Hanna and Chadha additionally suggest that non-conceptualists should go “back to Kant” to find the most defensible version of an essentialist content non-conceptualism. I propose instead that non-conceptualists go back even further to the 7th century Indian Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti, so that they may not only find historical precedent for an essentialist content view, but also some better arguments in its favor. This essay reconstructs Dharmakīrti's essentialist non-conceptualism about the contents of conscious sensory representations, and the refined theory of conceptualization that it presupposes. In particular, I examine his arguments from the proprietary phenomenology of sensory experience, the cognitive encapsulation of sensory processing, as well as the iconic format of sensory representations, and assess the strength of these arguments relative to their modern counterparts.

**Due to journal word limits, Sanskrit text and translations are mostly absent in the published version.

They are included in this draft for reference.**

Introduction

0.1 The impasse in the modern non-conceptualism debate

Some recent overviews of the long-running debate in modern analytic philosophy over the existence and nature of non-conceptual mental content conclude on a somewhat pessimistic note (Bermúdez and Cahen 2020; Wright 2015). The dispute over whether it's possible to mentally represent the world without possessing any concept of what one represents courts the possibility of becoming merely terminological, as the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual representations will trivially depend on one's prior assumptions about concepts, concept possession, and conceptual content. The ambiguous terms of the debate have left both sides to struggle with defining a position that is neither obviously false nor non-trivially true.

Take the conceptualist side, which generally holds that it is not possible to mentally represent the world without possessing concepts for the content that is represented. If conceptualists assume that concept possession involves possessing linguistic and inferential capacities necessary for entertaining propositional thoughts (McDowell 1994), then it's no surprise that they are unable to account for how infants and animals could evidently perceive the world without possessing any conceptual capacities (Peacocke 2001a/b). On the other hand, if conceptualists adopt too relaxed a standard for concept possession, they'll unfairly define non-conceptual content out of existence, thus making the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction meaningless and the debate philosophically uninteresting (Smith 2002: 111; Toribio 2007: 449; Roskies 2008: 649; Hanna and Chadha 2011: 206).

At the same time, several central non-conceptualist arguments have also been problematically unclear about what it means for a mental state to be non-conceptual. Two versions of the non-

conceptualist thesis have been distinguished by Heck (2000). The “state view” holds that a perceptual state is non-conceptual when a perceiver stands in a concept-independent relation to it, due to not possessing the concepts that would characterize its content. The “content view” instead asserts that perception is non-conceptual because the representational content of perception is different in kind from the content of conceptual states like beliefs and judgments. A number of non-conceptualists, including Heck (2000: 486 fn. 6), have argued that the state view itself becomes incoherent if it allows non-conceptual perceptions to share the same representational content as conceptual judgments. This incoherence can only be removed by admitting that a subject's concept-independent or concept-dependent relation to some mental state is indicative of a difference in the kind of content that state has, in which case state non-conceptualism entails content non-conceptualism (Speaks 2005; Heck 2007; Bermúdez 2007; Toribio 2008; Schmidt 2015).

To ensure that the non-conceptualist thesis remains immune to the deficiencies of the state view, as well as to keep the non-conceptual content debate from becoming merely terminological, Hanna and Chadha (2011) argue that non-conceptualists should adopt a position of “essentialist content non-conceptualism.” According to this essentialist content view, non-conceptual states “have representational content whose semantic structure and psychological function are necessarily distinct from the structure and function of conceptual content” (2011: 188). Part of their reason for adopting this view is to forestall any dispute by conceptualists over what counts as a conceptual capacity. Whereas most modern non-conceptualists have taken for granted that non-linguistic infants and animals lack concepts, Hanna and Chadha allow that a “highly refined” but non-vacuous account of concept possession could legitimately classify the perceptual states of ostensibly non-conceptual creatures as being conceptual (2011: 196-200). Hanna and Chadha therefore claim that the non-conceptualist thesis can be secured only if there are perceptual states whose content cannot – even in principle – be

characterized as conceptual under a highly refined conceptualism. Such content will again be necessarily distinct in its structure and function from the content of conceptual states.

Looking to the history of philosophy, Hanna and Chadha find precedent for an essentialist content non-conceptualism in the thought of Immanuel Kant. The philosophical upshot of their historical claim is that contemporary non-conceptualists should go “back to Kant” if they are going to defend the existence of genuinely non-conceptual content that cannot just be redescribed as conceptual under a more refined theory of concepts and concept possession. Here, I will not assess the historical accuracy of the claim that Kant was an essentialist content non-conceptualist. Whether Kant was a non-conceptualist at all has been extensively debated (see McLearn 2014; Schulting 2016). At the very least, there is enough ambiguity in Kant’s sprawling system to allow this debate to persist without a conclusive resolution. Some have tried to dispel this ambiguity by reading Kant as a moderate state non-conceptualist (see Allais 2009; Tomaszewska 2014; Golob 2016). But if this reading of Kant is accurate, then Hanna and Chadha’s brand of essentialist content non-conceptualism would not be distinctly “Kantian.” More importantly, Kant’s state non-conceptualism could fall prey to some of the objections against the state view, and would hence fail as an independently viable version of the non-conceptualist thesis.

0.2 A way out of the impasse: look back to Dharmakīrti

In order to find more effective resources for defending an essentialist content view, I propose that non-conceptualists look further back in the global history of philosophy, to the works of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti (7th cent.). Dharmakīrti’s grand-teacher Dignāga (5th cent.) is perhaps the first thinker to defend the content view of perceptual non-conceptualism.¹ As Hanna and

¹ Prior to Dignāga, there were Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indian philosophers such as Vasubandhu (4th cent.) and Vātsyāyana (5th cent.) who either explicitly or implicitly claimed that perception is non-conceptual (*nirvikalpaka*), but, though I cannot elaborate on this claim here, I think these earlier versions of Indian non-conceptualism adhered only to a state view, rather than a content view. Additionally, there were many philosophical discussions pre-Dignāga of non-

Chadha require from any viable content view, both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti understand the content of non-conceptual perception and conceptual cognition to be essentially different in both their representational structure and their phenomenal, causal, and epistemic functions. These differences between perceptual and conceptual states stem from a basic and essential difference in their representational content – so much so that the objects of perception can never be the objects of conceptual states.²

Despite depending heavily on the background assumptions of Buddhist metaphysics, Dharmakīrti nonetheless anticipates several of the central strategies used in recent defenses of non-conceptualism. First, in appealing to experiential evidence for the quantitative and qualitative difference between perceptual and conceptual states, Dharmakīrti offers his own versions of two modern arguments from phenomenology, namely the richness argument (Evans 1982; Heck 2000) and the fineness of grain argument (Peacocke 2001a). A second strategy is based upon claims about the architecture and time-course of the perceptual process: According to Dharmakīrti, the external senses generate states of conscious perceptual experience before any conceptual memory traces can be activated, meaning that states with conceptually informed or structured contents must necessarily be post-perceptual. Lastly, Dharmakīrti converges with contemporary non-conceptualists (e.g., Carey 2009; Block 2014; Burge 2014) in understanding the respective contents of perception and conceptual cognition to have different representational formats: Whereas conceptual content has a discursive, propositional format, perceptual content is image-like or iconic.

conceptual awareness within theories of meditation and rarefied states of pure, non-dual consciousness. However, I bracket such discussions in this paper, and focus only on the non-conceptualist thesis as applied to ordinary perceptual representations and the conscious sensory experience of real objects.

2 It is important to qualify that Dharmakīrti does not ultimately accept the existence of mind-independent entities as being fundamentally real, which problematizes the notion that perception represents external objects (see Kellner 2017a/b). That said, he does provisionally accept realism about an extra-mental world when elaborating an epistemology of ordinary perceptual experience. Our focus here will be solely on the arguments that Dharmakīrti offers to defend the view that perceptual representations generated by external objects and sense faculties are essentially non-conceptual. My discussion of Dharmakīrti's account of sense perception thus does not consider his notions of mental perception, the reflexive perceptual awareness of awareness, or extrasensory yogic perception. Nor does my discussion consider his theory of perception as developed within the context of his ultimate anti-realism about the external world.

And yet, Dharmakīrti does not merely anticipate many of the arguments adopted by contemporary non-conceptualists – in fact, some of his arguments may be stronger than theirs. Indeed, Dharmakīrti’s more radical and unambiguous brand of non-conceptualism can avoid the defects in certain contemporary arguments, particularly those which arise from a conflation of state and content views. Dharmakīrti’s own arguments do not fall prey to this conflation, because he adopts a more capacious view of concept possession than is typically assumed in modern discussions of non-conceptualism. Having made an initial case for why contemporary non-conceptualists should go “back to Dharmakīrti” if they want to defend an essentialist content view against a highly refined but non-vacuous conceptualism, I proceed in the rest of this essay to reconstruct Dharmakīrti’s arguments for the thesis that perceptual representations are essentially non-conceptual. Section 1 elaborates Dharmakīrti’s account of non-conceptualism and the theory of conceptualization that it presupposes, as well as Dharmakīrti’s arguments against a state non-conceptualist opponent of his own. Sections 2-4 situate Dharmakīrti’s arguments against the modern non-conceptualist strategies outlined above in order to assess their relative similarities and strengths. Arguments from perceptual phenomenology are considered in section 2; arguments from perceptual processing and mental architecture in section 3; and arguments from representational format in section 4. Since this essay focuses on reconstructing Dharmakīrti’s arguments³, I will refrain from suggesting how contemporary conceptualists might defeat his version of the non-conceptualist thesis.⁴ What I aim to do here is to present Dharmakīrti’s non-conceptualist account so that it might find its place in the philosophical history of the non-conceptual content debate, and perhaps redirect its current trajectory.

3 Due to word limit constraints, I cannot include translations for most of the arguments cited. I’ve generally interpreted the verses of the *Pramāṇavārttika* (*PV*) by drawing from the glosses of Manorathanandin (11th cent.) whenever doing so would be uncontroversial.

4 I will also leave aside the many classical objections raised against Dharmakīrti’s non-conceptualism by non-Buddhist opponents – for an introductory overview, see Taber (2005). See also McAllister (2017) for non-Buddhist critiques of Dharmakīrti’s theory of conceptual content.

1.1 A Dharmakīrtian account of (non-)conceptual contents and (non-linguistic) conceptualization

The Sanskrit term for awareness that is non-conceptual is “*nirvikalpaka*,” literally “without *vikalpa*.” Deriving from the verb root “*kṛp*,” which can mean “to form, fashion, construct, arrange, invent, or imagine,” the word “*vikalpa*” and a related word for conceptualization, “*kalpanā*,” capture for Dharmakīrti the imaginative, constructive, and fabricating nature of cognitive activity. Dharmakīrti would thus take *vikalpa* or conceptual construction to be a subjective mental entity, as against some canonical Western accounts of concepts as abstract objects that do not exist in space and time. The notion of “*vikalpa*” is usually not best translated as “concept” itself, if by “concept” we mean a discrete symbol like COW that contributes its own semantic value to the total semantic value of a proposition. Instead, “*vikalpa*” typically refers to an episodic awareness-event that carries out the act of conceptual construction. The full story that Dharmakīrti gives for how the mind constructs the contents of all conceptual thought is told within his version of the so-called “exclusion” (*apoha*) theory of conceptual content, the details of which we will not consider here (see Dunne 2011; Tillemans 2021: §2.2).

Dharmakīrti makes a long story short by laconically defining “*vikalpa*”/“*kalpanā*” as a subjective awareness that is associated with linguistic expressions.⁵ The association of linguistic expressions with a cognized object grants the awareness of that object with a propositional structure that expresses a predicative relation. That is, an awareness-state represents an object as having a certain property, or as belonging to a certain class, through the cognitive identification of that object as being a referent of words for that property or class. As it turns out, such property- and class-terms do not ultimately refer to objects at all, as the trope-theoretic ontology adopted by Dharmakīrti does not view persisting, composite substances that possess shareable properties to be fundamentally real (Ganeri

5 *PV* 3.123cd, 204: “*pratyātmavedyaḥ sarveṣāṃ vikalpo nāmasaṃśrayaḥ*.” “For all living beings, conceptual awareness is a subjectively knowable state associated with words.” *PVīn* 1.4bc, 7.2: “*abhilāpinī pratītiḥ kalpanā*.” “Conceptual construction is an awareness endowed with linguistic expression.”

2001: 99-111).⁶ On this ontology, the only real objects are unique, propertyless particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*) that last only for a moment and lack spatiotemporal parts. Hence, whereas Dharmakīrti’s naïve realist opponents believe that both perceptual and conceptual representations can have a predicative structure that genuinely mirrors the object-property structure of reality (Chakrabarti 2019: 25), Dharmakīrti would claim that the predicative, object-property structure of conceptual representations must be a fabrication.

Perception, on the other hand, is characterized as a non-erroneous awareness that is devoid of conceptual construction (*kalpanāpoḍha*)⁷, meaning that perceptual awareness is free from any association with or application of linguistic terms and predicative classifiers. For reasons we’ll discuss in section 3 on the separate functions of perception and conceptual thought, perceptual states are incapable of identifying an object as the referent of a word, or as having some category-diagnostic feature – such identification only takes place in conceptual states. For now, the result is that perceptual representations cannot be predicatively structured. It is constitutive of perceptual awareness that it causally covaries with the presence of real particulars, due to which its phenomenal appearance resembles and thereby represents those particulars.⁸ So, a perceptual representation’s lack of predicative structure mirrors the absence of an object-property structure among the bare and unique

6 Even proper names are thought by Dharmakīrti’s followers to be class-terms that purport to refer to generic properties; the name “Dharmakīrti” is viewed as referring to the property *Dharmakīrtihood* that is conceptually attributed to the momentary particulars grouped together as forming one temporally composite, enduring person (Ganeri 2006: 190).

7 *PV*in 1.4ab, 7.2; *NB* 1.4, 19.1

8 *PV* 3.224, 320: “*hetubhāvād ṛte na anyā grāhyatā nāma kācana / tatra buddhir yadākārā tasyās tadgrāhyam ucyate //*” “Absent being the cause of awareness, there is nothing else which is said to be apprehended. Among the causes of awareness, that one for which an awareness possesses a representational form is spoken of as the apprehended object of that awareness.” *PV*in 1.1, 2.7-9: “*dvididha eva hy arthaḥ pratyakṣaḥ paroḥśaś ca. tatra yo jñānapratibhāsam anvavyatirekāv ātmano ’nukārayati, sa pratyakṣaḥ. tad asādhāraṇam vasturūpaṃ svalakṣaṇam.*” “There are only two types of objects: that which is perceptible and that which is beyond the range of the senses. Of these two, that object is perceptible which causes the phenomenal appearance in awareness to conform with a positive and negative concomitance to itself. That uncommon thing, which is a real entity in nature, is a unique particular.” *NB* 1.20, 46: “*arthasārūpyam asya pramāṇam.*” We will raise the issue of perceptual resemblance again in section 4. See also Kellner (2017a/b) for further discussion of Dharmakīrti’s conditional support for (and ultimate rejection of) the view that perception represents objects in virtue of resembling them.

particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*) that are causally responsible for generating perceptual states (and are actually the only things that can be said to have any causal powers at all).⁹

Since perceived objects do not actually possess properties to which predicative terms could refer, nothing about their phenomenal appearance in perceptual awareness licenses us to cognize a distinction between the objects and their properties; any such distinction must instead be conceptually constructed. Dharmakīrti offers the analogy of milk and water: Milk that is mixed with some water still just looks like milk; the water as distinct from the milk is not phenomenally apparent. In order to have the thought, “There is water in the milk,” one must have antecedent knowledge that water and milk are separate things, which is not granted solely by the perception of their being mixed.¹⁰ Similarly, in the perceptual awareness of a red color patch, there is no apparent difference between the red color, the generic property *redness*, and the relation between them, as the latter two entities do not have any proprietary phenomenal appearance.¹¹ Therefore, since nothing in perceptual experience looks like a generic property, relation, or something that possesses properties and relations, one has to already believe the fiction that redness and relations are entities separate from red color in order to predicate them of the particular red patch and compose the thought, “This is red.” Absent any guidance from perception regarding how properties, relations, and particulars should be cognitively combined together in a predicative complex, we must instead rely on conventional rules of ordinary discourse, which dictate that a property is what qualifies a particular substance and not vice versa – this is why we commonly think, “This apple is red,” and not, “This red is apple.”¹²

9 *PV* 3.1-4, 58-62; see also Dunne (2004: 78-85) for further discussion and references.

10 *PVīn* 1.7, 10.1-3: “*jātiguṇakriyāvātām etan na sambhavty eva, rūpavivekasambandhayor apratibhāsanena ghaṭanāyogāt kṣīrodakavad atadvedini.*” “This [sensory awareness] of substances that possess universals, quality-tropes, and actions is not at all possible, because by virtue of there being no phenomenal appearance of both the relation and difference between the natures [of substances, universals, quality-tropes, and actions], the combination [of all these things in sensory awareness] is incoherent, like with the case of milk and water for someone who doesn’t know [the relation and difference between] them.”

11 See *PV* 3.147, 238: “*varṇākṛtyakṣarākāraśūnyam gotvaṃ hi varṇyate.*” “The generic property of cowhood is indeed described as lacking color, shape, or the form of syllables.”

12 *PV* 3.145-146, 235-237 (see also *PVīn* 1.7, 9.11-10.1): “*viśeṣaṇam viśeṣyam ca sambandham laukikīṃ sthitim / gṛhītvā saṃkalayya etat tathā pratyeti na anyathā // yathā daṇḍini jātyāder vivekena anirūpaṇāt / tadvatā yojanā na asti*

Now, although the predicative structure of conceptual representations is often constructed through the cognitive application of linguistic terms in accordance with semantic conventions, Dharmakīrti resists the idea that cognitive predication and classification must only be realized by overtly linguistic vehicles. Importantly, he clarifies that “conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) is an awareness in which there is a phenomenal appearance (*pratibhāsa*) that is fit for an association with linguistic expressions.”¹³ By stating that an awareness-state is conceptual if it contains a phenomenal appearance that is simply “fit” for being associated with words, Dharmakīrti's definition will also allow certain mental representations to count as conceptual even if they do not explicitly associate a word with the represented object. Dharmakīrti's commentators explain that this definition warrants the attribution of conceptual states to non-linguistic creatures – that is, creatures who have not learned any semantic conventions that govern how words refer to specific objects – who nonetheless can evince the cognitive abilities of identification and recognition that are necessary for intentional activity toward some object.¹⁴

For example, in his commentary on Dharmakīrti's *Nyāyabindu*, Dharmottara (8th cent.) reasons that a newborn infant would not know to stop crying and place its mouth on a nipple it is seeing for the first time, were it not for a recognition based on its previous experience in past lives that this presently

kalpanā apy atra na asty atah // “Having grasped and combined together the qualifier, qualificand, the relation between them, and a customary rule, one cognizes this object in just such a way, not otherwise, just like in the case of cognizing a person as having a stick. But because there is no ascertaining of generic properties, etc., as distinct from a property-possessing object, there is no association of such properties with what possesses them – hence, there is not even a conceptual construction with respect to all these things.”

13 *NB* 1.5, 23.1: “*abhilāpasamsargayogyapratibhāsapratītiḥ kalpanā.*”

14 Briefly, there are a couple possible reasons for the Dharmakīrtian claim that conceptualization necessarily precedes intentional action. First, given the theory of momentariness, the object one perceives and then desires to obtain will not exist at the time one actually obtains it; so, in order to motivate a practical effort towards obtaining an object which, strictly speaking, will not exist by the time one acts, conceptualization is needed to cognize a continuity between the object perceived in the present and the object to be obtained in the future. Second, while Yogācāra Buddhists deny the mind-independent existence of external objects, they generally admit that no ordinary person would ever be practically motivated to act if a desired object were known to exist only as an internal image in the mind. Hence, some Yogācāras believe that conceptualization motivates action through superimposing the appearance of externality onto an internal mental image. For further discussion of how Dharmakīrtian Buddhists understood the relation between conceptualization and action, see Dunne (2004: 298-309), McCrea and Patil (2006), and Patil (2009: ch. 5).

perceived nipple is identical in kind with that past nipple which was a source of nourishment.¹⁵ The infant’s recognition of the nipple as a source of nourishment cannot be perceptual, because non-conceptual perception cannot classify or re-identify objects. Indeed, because perceptual awareness is constitutively stimulus-dependent, it cannot represent anything that is not immediately present to the senses and is not the immediate cause of the awareness; hence, it’s impossible to perceptually represent past states of affairs.¹⁶ As a result, perceptual awareness cannot synthesize previously and presently experienced states in order to represent the object as being type- or token-identical. So, if the infant can intentionally seek the nipple only through recognizing the nipple as being the sort of thing that would satisfy its hunger, then this recognition has to be conceptual in nature.¹⁷

Dharmottara’s discussion of infant object-recognition is significant because it illustrates how a Dharmakīrtian¹⁸ theory of conceptualization understands conceptual construction to fundamentally involve memory-based recognitional capacities. Whether linguistic or non-linguistic in nature, conceptual classification on this account requires recollecting the content of a previous awareness, and judging that the object being currently cognized is type- or token-identical with the object that was previously cognized. In the case of linguistic classification, the identification of an object as being the

15 *NBT* ad *NB* 1.5, 25.13-14: “*bālo ’pi hi yāvad drśyamānaṃ stanaṃ ’sa eva ayam ’ iti pūrvadrśtatvena na pratyavamṛṣati tāvan na uparatarudito mukham arpayati stane.*” “Since, as long as even an infant does not judge a currently perceived nipple as being what was previously perceived by thinking, ‘This is just that,’ it will not stop crying and place its mouth on the nipple.”

16 *NBT* 1.5, 26.4-5: “*indriyavijñānaṃ tu sannihitārthamātragrāhitvād arthasāpekṣam. arthasya ca pratibhāsaniyamahetutvān niyatapratibhāsam. tato na abhilāpasamsargayogyam.*” “Sensory awareness, however, is dependent upon an object because it apprehends nothing but the object which is present to the senses. And, because the object is a cause for the restriction of a phenomenal appearance, sensory awareness has a restricted phenomenal appearance. Thus, sensory awareness is not fit for an association with linguistic expression.”

17 Later followers of Dharmakīrti clarify that non-linguistic infants are known to have conceptual awareness-states through inferring from an effect (*kāryahetu*) to its cause. Here, the effect is the infant’s intentional activity, for example, its advancing toward the mother’s breast and avoidance of her finger or other body parts which wouldn’t provide nourishment (*TSop*, 278.6-9). For any non-linguistic creature, we can infer from their evident behavior of taking desired objects and giving up undesired objects that their action is caused by a conceptual awareness-state (*TBh*, 7.21-24). This inference relies on the general premise that “a living being’s regular activity toward some object is preceded by a conceptual awareness-state.” This premise is exemplified by the intentional activity of linguistically competent agents, whose action-prompting conceptual states would be more often associated with linguistic expressions (*DhPr*, 49.30-31).

18 I take it that the following account of conceptualization would be agreeable to Dharmakīrti and his followers, despite whatever other disagreements they may have had concerning the nature of conceptual judgment and the specific role of *apoha* in conceptual construction.

referent of a name requires that one recollect the name and judge that the current object is the same as that object which was perceived when one first learned the convention that “this is called ‘x.’” Similarly, the infant’s non-linguistic classification rests upon the recollection of past awareness-states and the synthesis of their contents with the content of a currently cognized object, which then generates the non-verbalized judgment, “This [currently cognized object] is just that [previously cognized object]” (“*sa eva ayam*”). Strictly speaking, the content of this conceptual judgment (even the part of the judgment referring to “this” currently cognized object¹⁹) cannot be drawn from the content of a preceding non-conceptual perception, again because perceptual awareness cannot represent anything that is not immediately present to the senses. The recognitional judgment’s content must therefore be drawn from another source, namely stored memory traces. Accordingly, these memory traces are what grant a subject with a capacity to form conceptual representations that recognize and classify objects in a way that is fit to be linguistically expressible, whether or not the subject has the ability to actually express them in language.

Following Dharmottara’s discussion of infant conceptualization, we can thereby appreciate that a Dharmakīrtian account of conceptualization would qualify as “highly refined” in Hanna and Chadha’s terms (2011: 196-200). For them, a highly refined conceptualism is one whose theory of concept possession allows that the content of a mental state could be conceptual even if a subject fails to possess the relevant concepts, where possessing a concept entails that a subject can think of a concept using a linguistic vehicle (2011: 200). Dharmottara’s infant abides by this first criterion: The infant can have conceptual representations that are fit to be expressed by a linguistic vehicle, despite being unable

19 Prajñākaragupta (8th cent.) at *PVA* ad *PV* 3.175, 269.23-25 suggests that even the part of a recognitional judgment that appears to directly cognize a presently perceived object is itself a type of conceptual judgment wherein the present object is represented as being identical in some way with other objects: “*ayam ity api pratibhāsa idan tad iti sakalapurovarttisādhāraṇarūpādhyavasāyī. sādharmaṇatāviraheṇa tu nirvikalpaka eva.*” “Even the appearance as ‘this’ really has the form, “This is that,” which belongs to a determinate judgment about the generic nature of everything that is currently present. On the other hand, an appearance is simply non-conceptual by virtue of being devoid of any generality.”

to intelligibly express that content in accordance with semantic conventions.²⁰ Additionally, a highly refined conceptualism allows that creatures who fail to possess a concept may still evince in their intentional behavior a dispositional ability for deploying and re-using that concept. Dharmottara's infant has such a dispositional ability in the form of a memory-based capacity for recognizing and re-identifying certain objects across time, a capacity which thereby enables the infant to intentionally act toward the recognized object in accordance with its desires. Finally, we can further grant that a "highly refined" Dharmakīrtian account of conceptualization is not vacuous – in other words, it is not an account that relaxes the definition of "conceptualization" to the point of counting all contentful mental states as conceptual, thereby ruling out the possibility of non-conceptual contents in principle.

1.2 Dharmakīrti against state non-conceptualism

The infant example highlights how a "highly refined" Dharmakīrtian account of conceptualization goes hand-in-hand with the adoption of an essentialist content non-conceptualism. Now, many contemporary non-conceptualists identify non-linguistic creatures – that is, creatures who do not apply words to objects in accordance with conventional rules – as lacking concepts. These creatures are hence taken to support the claim that mental states can have representational content independently of whether a creature possesses any concepts. Once non-conceptual creatures are allowed to have content-bearing representational states, it's a short step to conclude that, since we adult humans can share some perceptual experiences with these creatures, we also can have non-conceptual perceptions (Bermúdez 1995/1998; Peacocke 2001a/b). However, because these conclusions are grounded on purported facts about concept possession and the absence thereof in non-linguistic

20 It's also noteworthy that, while a highly refined theory of concept possession can allow non-linguistic infants to have conceptual representations, Hanna and Chadha nonetheless would agree with Dharmakīrtians in taking linguistic expressibility to be an essential feature of any conceptual content (2011: 200-201). Some Dharmakīrtians construed the proto-linguistic character of infant conceptualization in a more explicit way, suggesting that even infant conceptual representations are interspersed with language in the form of inchoate inner speech – see Funayama (1992: 64-68).

creatures, they can at best establish the thesis of state non-conceptualism, not content non-conceptualism. Even if non-linguistic creatures are non-conceptual creatures, it does not yet follow that their representational states have contents that are essentially non-conceptual. If the state view is all that is being defended, then our possession of relevant concepts would make these representational contents count as conceptual when instantiated in our minds, even though those very same contents are counted as non-conceptual when represented by a non-linguistic mind (see also Speaks 2005: 382). That being so, the fact that we can share perceptual representations with non-conceptual creatures would not alone ensure that the contents of those representations are non-conceptual.

By contrast, Dharmakīrti's defends an essentialist content non-conceptualism in tandem with denying that apparently non-linguistic creatures must also be non-conceptual. Indeed, he explicitly rejects a version of the state non-conceptualist argument from the perceptual states of non-linguistic infants. His state non-conceptualist opponent argues: Perceptual awareness is non-conceptual, because it is solely generated by the sense faculties, just like the awareness-states belonging to infants.²¹ The argument's underlying premise is that every sensory awareness is non-conceptual in nature. Inductive evidence for this premise is provided by the example of infant awareness, because it is further argued that all infant awareness is non-conceptual, since infants are incapable of understanding the semantic conventions that govern the application of words to their referents. Lacking this essentially conceptual ability for linguistic classification, an infant can only have states of sensory awareness that are directly acquainted with their objects. Consequently, non-linguistic infants can only have non-conceptual states

21 *PV* 3.141, 229: “*kecid indriyajātṛvāder bāladhīvad akalpanām / āhur bālāvikalpe ca hetuṃ saṃketamandatām //*” “Some say that perception is non-conceptual because it is generated by the senses, etc., like the awareness belonging to infants. The reason that the awareness-states belonging to infants are non-conceptual is that they are ignorant of linguistic conventions.”

must already be endowed with some subtle degree of conceptuality in order to bootstrap the process of learning a semantic convention, and the corresponding acquisition of cognitive abilities for predication and classification on the basis of that learned convention.²⁴

To conclude, if non-conceptualists would concede Dharmakīrti's more capacious understanding of conceptual construction, in which representational contents can be conceptual without necessarily being linguistically mediated, and conceptual abilities are not identical with overtly linguistic abilities, then they should also follow him in adopting an essentialist form of the content view. By counting as conceptual any representation whose content is fit to be expressed in language – even if a non-linguistic cognizer is unable to express that content itself – Dharmakīrti rules out any state view that makes the non-conceptual status of a representational content dependent upon an extrinsic relation to the conceptual/linguistic capacities of a subject. That being so, he is better able to distinguish non-conceptual contents on their own terms. As Hanna and Chadha demand of any defensible non-

think that the awareness is non-conceptual – the infant's first-time awareness of a semantic convention would now be an example of a sensory state which has conceptual content. The only way out of this dilemma is to admit that infants already have the non-sensory conceptual capacities required for learning language. Hence, the state non-conceptualist's inference from infant sense perception fails, as would any similar inference which rests on an assumption that infant awareness is non-conceptual because it is non-linguistic. Some other proof of perception's non-conceptual nature should instead be sought, one which applies equally to the perceptual states of linguistic and non-linguistic perceivers, rather than being contingent upon extrinsic facts about a perceiver's lack of concept possession or linguistic capacities. For Dharmakīrti, such a proof will cite the essential nature of perception itself, namely that its representational content lacks any predicative structure which can be expressed in language – see *PV* 3.143-144, 230-232: : “*mano 'vyutpannasamketam asti tena sa cen mataḥ / evam indriyaje 'pi syād śeṣavac ca idam īdrśam // yad eva sādhanam bāle tad eva atra api kathyatām / sāmnyād akṣadhiyām uktam anena anubhavādikam //*” “If it is claimed that, ‘An infant's mind is untrained in semantic conventions; but it is with such a mind that the infant comprehends a semantic convention,’ then this could similarly be the case even with a sense-generated perceptual awareness – such an awareness would be conceptual like the rest of the awareness-states which arise subsequent to learning a semantic convention. Whatever is the proof with regards to the infant's non-conceptual perception, that alone should also be stated here with regards to linguistically competent subjects, because the sensory awareness-states of non-linguistic and linguistically competent subjects are alike. By this rejection of the sense-generated nature of infant awareness as being a proof of its non-conceptuality, other stated reasons such as their having direct experience, etc., are also to be regarded as flawed.”

24 *PV* 3.142, 320: “*teṣām pratyakṣam eva syād bālānām avikalpanāt / samketopāyavigamāt paścād api bhaven na saḥ //*” “For those proponents of the view that perception is non-conceptual because it is generated by the senses, infants would only have perceptual awareness because they lack conceptualization. But then, because infants lack the means for comprehending a semantic convention, they also would not grasp a semantic convention at a later time.” Dharmakīrti's commentators (*PVA*, 252.3; *PVV*, 159.24) suggest that if infants are to ever comprehend semantic conventions, they must to some degree undergo a cognitive and discursive state of reflective thought or inquiry (*vicāra*). This state is typically defined by Buddhists as a subtle state of mental discourse or inner speech concerned with investigating the identity of some perceived object – see Dhammajoti (2007: 105-107).

conceptualism, Dharmakīrti posits that the contents of non-conceptual states are necessarily distinct in their structure and function from conceptual contents, such that non-conceptual contents are in a fundamental sense inexpressible and unconceptualizable.²⁵

We now turn to Dharmakīrti's arguments for identifying essentially non-conceptual content with the content of conscious perceptual experience. The first set of arguments appeals to evidence for a phenomenological distinction between perceptual and conceptual states; the second set of arguments propose that perception and conceptualization have different and exclusive psychological functions; and, the third set of arguments claim that perceptual representations have a different format and structure from that of conceptual representations. All of these differences, Dharmakīrti will contend, are grounded in the essential difference between perceptual and conceptual contents.

2. Arguments from phenomenology

2.1 The richness and fineness of grain arguments

Modern non-conceptualists will often direct us to reflect on our perceptual experience to illustrate the intuitive plausibility of the general non-conceptualist thesis. One thing you are supposed to notice, they often claim, is that you are perceptually aware at any given moment of many more objects and sensory features than what you can think about or verbally describe. Looking up from this text, you might reflect on your own experience now, realize the vast amount of sensory detail that is simultaneously present to you – the plethora of shapes, colors, sounds, and tactile qualities – and find

25 Of course, this does not mean that we cannot at all talk about essentially non-conceptual contents; it would just mean that there cannot be any lossless encoding or translation of non-conceptual contents into the format of conceptual representations. The Buddhist philosophers Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla (8th cent.) address a related objection raised by the Nyāya opponent Uddyotakara (6th cent.), who charged Buddhists with self-contradiction for asserting that perception is inexpressible and non-conceptual while also applying the terms “inexpressible” and “non-conceptual” to express it. In response, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla claim that a perceptual state does not lose its non-conceptual status if it happens to be denoted by words in a conceptual judgment. That is because applying a word to an object will not make that object itself become a conceptual construction; so, perceptual states and perceptual content can themselves remain free from any association with words even though they are mentioned by words in non-perceptual states (*TSP* 1239, 373-374; Funayama 1992: 91-94).

that you simply do not have the conceptual vocabulary to describe everything that you are seeing. This phenomenological evidence motivates the so-called “richness argument” alluded to by Evans (1982: 229) and offered explicitly by Heck (2000). From the claim that perceptual experience is quantitatively rich in the sense of representing many more details than we can hope to capture with our repertoire of concepts, this argument draws the conclusion that perceptual experience has non-conceptual content. However, as several non-conceptualists and even Heck (2007: 120) have noted, the richness argument falls short of proving that perception is essentially non-conceptual. To experience perceptual contents with more representational detail than you can currently describe does not show that it’s necessarily impossible to give what Hanna and Chadha call an “adequately individuating conceptual specification” of those contents (2011: 195). It might take an unusually long and complex propositional representation to specify what is seen, but the quantitatively rich content of perception could be conceptually specified nonetheless (see also Matthen 2005: 89; Kriegel 2019: 157).

Dharmakīrti similarly believes that the non-conceptual nature of perceptual experience can be established through one’s reflexive awareness of that experience.²⁶ But, his parallel version of the richness argument does not rely on the assumption that the number of concepts in our conceptual repertoires is inevitably smaller than the number of objects we represent in any given perceptual experience. Rather, he appeals to an inherent limit on the number of conscious conceptual thoughts that can occur in the mind at any one time. To illustrate the difference between conceptual states and non-conceptual perceptions, he points out that even when your mind is elsewhere and you are thinking about something that is not currently present – such as some past or future event – you can still perceive some object that is currently present to your senses. The fact that you can perceive an object

26 *PV* 3.123ab, 204: “*pratyakṣam kalpanāpoḍham pratyakṣeṇa eva sidhyati* /” “Perception is established to be free from conceptual construction simply by means of perception itself.”

while simultaneously thinking about something else is taken as evidence that the perceptual state cannot also be a conceptual state.²⁷

Dharmakīrti rules out a competing hypothesis – namely, that the perceptual awareness of your present surroundings is also conceptual in nature – by citing the further phenomenological fact that, while a conceptual state can simultaneously occur with many other sensory states, two conceptual states are never observed to co-exist at the same time.²⁸ The fact that perceptual awareness can

27 *PV* 3.175, 275: “*anyatra gatacitto 'pi cakṣuṣā rūpam iḅṣate / tatsamketāgrahas tatra spaṣṭas tajjā ca kalpanā //*” “One whose mind has gone elsewhere still perceives a visible object by means of a visual awareness. In that visual awareness, there is clearly no grasp of a semantic convention concerning the perceived object. Conceptualization is generated from the recollection of such a semantic convention.” Another phenomenological proof of the difference between perceptual and conceptual states cites the example of a meditator who has ceased all thoughts but still perceives sensory objects. *PVīn* 1.13-14, 13.14-14.13 (see also *PV* 3.124-125, 206): “*atha vā pratyakṣasādhana eva indriyadhiyaḥ kalpanāviraḥa. yataḥ – 'samhṛtya sarvataṣ cintāḃ stimitena antarātmanā / sthito 'pi cakṣuṣā rūpam iḅṣate sā akṣajā matiḥ //*” *apratibhāsamānābhijalpā pratibhāsamānā pratyakṣā eva sarvaprāṇinām indriyabuddhir iti kim atra anyena sādhanena. na ca imāḥ kalpanā apratisamviditā eva udayante vyayante vā, ye satyo 'py anupalakṣitāḥ syuḥ. tathā hi – 'punar vikalpayan kiñcid āsīn me kalpanā īdrṣī / iti vetti na pūrvoktāvasthāyām indriyād gatau //*” *sa punaḥ pratisamhārāvyyutthitacittaḥ kiñcid vikalpayan svacittadhārāḥ saṅkalayaty evaḃ ca evaḃ ca kalpanā mama āsīd iti. tad imāḥ kalpanāḥ pratyakṣabhāvinyāḥ kathaḃ saḃhṛtavikalpe darśane 'vibhāvitā nāma. tad ayam asaḃsrṣṭavikalpo vā pratyakṣo darśanātmā drṣyātmano vā vikalpasya darśane 'drṣṭir vikalpakalpanām indriyājñāne pratihanti.*” “Or rather, perception itself is the means for establishing that a sensory awareness is free from conceptualization. Since, ‘Having withdrawn thought from everything, one who remains inwardly tranquil still perceives a visible object with the visual sense-faculty; that awareness is generated by the sense-faculty.’ All living beings have sensory awareness in which it is indeed directly apparent that speech does not appear – what then is the use here of any other proof [that sensory awareness is non-conceptual]? Nor do unperceived conceptualizations arise and pass away, such that their existence [in a sensory awareness] would still be unobserved. That is to say, ‘One who again conceptualizes something knows, “I had this sort of conceptual awareness”; one doesn’t know that in the previously mentioned state of awareness which arises from a sense-faculty [i.e., in the state where thought was withdrawn from all objects].’ One whose mind is agitated out of its withdrawn state, while conceptualizing something, combines together its own streams of mental states, and in that manner thinks, ‘And I had that sort of conceptual awareness.’ How then could these conceptualizations, which are not manifest in perception when conceptual construction had been withdrawn, really be perceptual? Hence, either this direct evidently nature of perception which is unmixed with conceptual construction, or the non-observation in perception of a conceptual construction that is perceptible in nature, dispels the hypothesis that conceptual construction is present in sensory awareness.”

28 *PV* 3.178, 278: “*tayā eva anubhave drṣṭam na vikalpadvayaḃ sakṛt / etena tulyakālānyavijñānānubhavo gataḥ //*” “When there is an experience [of, e.g., both a sensory object and the awareness of that object] by means of just that awareness itself, then two conceptual states [e.g., “This is a color” and “This is an awareness of color”] are not observed to occur simultaneously. Through this denial of the simultaneity of conceptual states, the experience is known by another [non-conceptual] awareness occurring at the same time.” Though Dharmakīrti does not explain why two thoughts cannot occur simultaneously, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla respond on his behalf by citing the linguistic nature of conceptual construction: If you are having a conscious conceptual cognition of some object, then you are thinking about that object as being associated with a name. The key claim is that if you are consciously thinking about the name of one thing or a set of things, then you cannot be consciously thinking about the name of another. So, you can only have one conceptual thought at a time, because you can only consciously think of one name for an object at a time. But, the same claim would presumably apply in the case of non-linguistic conceptual states: If you are consciously classifying one thing based on the activation of a certain memory trace, then you are not consciously classifying another thing based on the activation of a different memory trace. In sum, if the awareness of one’s present surroundings were also conceptual, then one could not also be having a conceptual thought about some other object. See *TSP* 1243-1245, 374.7-23; Funayama 1992: 94-96 – see also *TBh*, 8.11-13; Kajiyama 1966, 43.

simultaneously co-exist with conceptual thoughts thus shows that perceptual awareness is necessarily distinct from conceptual awareness. Crucially, even if you possess a vast enough number of concepts to name or classify every single thing you see, it will always be the case that as you employ one of those concepts to classify something you see, there will be consciously perceived objects that remain unnamed and unclassified. Absent the omniscient ability to classify at once every perceived object and felt sensation that is simultaneously present in a single moment of conscious experience, your awareness can always contain an unconceptualized layer of perceptual content.

Like its modern counterpart in the richness argument, though, Dharmakīrti's argument does not succeed in establishing the existence of perceptual content that is essentially non-conceptual and unconceptualizable. Although some things are inevitably perceived without being thought of, there is nothing in the argument to rule out that when I attend to the unthought object, I could adequately classify it with the concepts in my possession. At this point, non-conceptualists can reply by offering the fineness of grain argument, and citing phenomenological cases in which the detail of perceptual content qualitatively rather than quantitatively outstrips our conceptual capacities (see Peacocke 2001a; Kelly 2001). For instance, imagine being presented with two nearly indistinguishable shades of blue color – say, blue22 and blue23. Even though you might only possess the general concept “blue,” you are likely able to perceptually discriminate between these two shades – certainly, the visual system discriminates them insofar as the shades have subtly different phenomenal appearances. But when you later go to a paint store and look at color swatches, you may be unable to reliably re-identify which shade is blue22 and which one is blue23. Absent this ability for re-identification, non-conceptualists have claimed that you lack concepts corresponding to the shades that you can perceptually discriminate, meaning that the contents of your fine-grained perceptual discriminations cannot be captured by your conceptual capacities.

Yet, as Hanna and Chadha point out, the fineness of grain argument as stated still hinges on the issue of concept possession, and so does not directly establish that perceptual content is necessarily incapable of being conceptually specified (2011: 196; see also Schmidt 2015: 91). For one, there is a question of whether concept possession requires any ability for re-identification at all (see Speaks 2005: 381; Chuard 2006); if it does not, then the failure to re-identify blue22 versus blue23 does not entail that one did not have an initial conceptual awareness of the two distinct shades. Moreover, even if conceptualists retain the re-identification requirement, they can invoke the so-called “demonstrative concept strategy” (McDowell 1994; Brewer 1999; Schmidt 2015: 78-92). Although one may not possess the determinate concepts blue22 and blue23, one may still possess demonstrative concepts like *that shade* or just the pure demonstrative *that*. In focusing one’s attention on the fine-grained shade, that shade comes to be represented as the content of the demonstrative concept.

Dharmakīrti would resist the demonstrative concept strategy by arguing that representations with demonstrative content cannot be genuinely perceptual. Why not? After all, the demonstrative “this” is supposed to be restricted in application to just that object which is currently present to the senses, so an awareness with “this” as its content would appear to be stimulus-dependent just like a perceptual state. Dharmakīrti responds by focusing on an example that is more amenable to his view, viz., the demonstrative awareness of apparently composite objects like “This is a cow” or “This is a pot.” Now, say that you are looking at and petting a cow with soft white fur; naturally, there arises in your mind the awareness that “This is a cow.” Since this awareness has arisen in the immediate presence of a cow, it would seem to be directly ascertaining that very cow; an awareness that demonstratively refers to a cow does not arise when no cow is present. The problem is that the judgment “This is a cow” cannot be perceptual, because it is not directly linked to the causal power of a real sensory stimulus, for two related reasons. First, Dharmakīrti’s ontology denies any causal efficacy, and hence fundamental reality, to persisting composite objects such as cows or pots. As a result, there

are no real cows and pots that could either generate or be the content of any states of sensory awareness (Dunne 2004: 98ff). Second, because there is no property-possessing cow-substance, there is technically nothing that is perceived in common between one’s visual and tactile awareness of a cow (really, a particular cow-shaped arrangement of sensory qualities). All the while, the fact that you can have the same demonstrative awareness that “This is a cow,” regardless of whether you are seeing or touching the cow, shows that this awareness itself is not perceptual, since a single sensory state cannot have both visible and tactile qualities as its content.²⁹ To the extent that you can have a single awareness-state that represents both visible and tactile qualities as belonging to a single demonstratively identified object, that awareness must only be cognitive and non-perceptual, with its content being conceptually constructed through a synthesis of recollected sensory experiences. In short, perception alone cannot tell you that “This is a cow.”³⁰

So far, Dharmakīrti’s argument hinges on specific reasons why a multi-modal awareness with an ultimately unreal substance as its demonstrative content cannot be perceptual. What, then, about the demonstrative awareness, “This particular shade of blue²²,” or just “This,” neither of which refer to a

29 Dharmakīrti would likely explain the impression of cross-modal sensory experience as being due to the simultaneous occurrence of distinct, unimodal perceptual states with their distinct contents. As a general rule, he suggests (*PV* 3.522ab, 202) that different types of mental states can exist in one stream of consciousness at the same time – for example, a visual state, an olfactory state, and a conceptual state – but that two states of the same type, such as two visual states or two conceptual states, cannot occur simultaneously (*PV* 3.501, 185).

30 *PVin* 1.9d-1.11ab, 11.8-12.8: “*na anyathā idantayā iti cet //’ na hy ayam gaur ity asannihite ’rthe bhavati. idaṃ ca naḥ pratyakṣaṃ, sannihitārthanīścayalakṣaṇatvāt. na etad asti, yasmād ’avidyamānābhede ’pi tadaḥśāgocaravataḥ / sprśato ’py asti sā buddhiḥ ... //’ ‘... dravyaṃ tatspārśanaṃ yadi //’ tan na. spārśanam api dravyaṃ sprśtvā grhṇāti iti cet na ayam ghaṭa iti jñāne varṇapratyavabhāsanāt / na hy ayam ghaṭa iti jñānaṃ sparśanendriyajam yuktam, tathāsamanvāhāre varṇasya api pratyavabhāsanāt. tena rūpasparśavijñānānvayo mānasam eṣa smārto vikalpaḥ.*” “Objection: ‘A demonstrative awareness is not otherwise [than perceptual awareness].’ For, ‘This is a cow’ does not occur when the object is not present. This awareness is perceptual for us, because it has the characteristic of ascertaining a present object. Reply: This is not the case because, ‘Even though [something such as a cow or pot] is not different from what is non-existent, on account of its not being an object of that visual sense-faculty [insofar as it’s incapable of directly producing a visual awareness of itself], there is still that awareness [e.g., ‘This is a cow’ or ‘This is a pot’] for someone who is touching it...’ If it is claimed that ‘there is a tactile awareness of that object which is a substance,’ that is not so. In other words, if it is claimed that having touched a substance, a tactile awareness also grasps [the same object as a visual awareness], then that is not the case, because there is the appearance of color in the awareness ‘This is a pot.’ For, it is not reasonable that the awareness ‘This is a pot’ is produced from the tactile sense-faculty, because when there is attention in that way [i.e., to the demonstrative content], there is the appearance of color, as well. Therefore, this cognitive awareness which is linked to both visual and tactile awareness-states is a recollected conceptual construction.”

substance that possesses multiple types of sensory features? Dharmakīrti's more radical fineness of grain argument would respond by claiming that unique and momentary sensory particulars cannot figure at all in the content of even the most simple demonstrative conceptual judgments. For starters, the acknowledgment that a representation can be expressed with any linguistic terms, including pure demonstrative pronouns, would already concede that the representation has conceptual content. Even if the awareness expressible as "This blue²²" occurs in the mind of a non-linguistic creature, this awareness is still implicitly classifying an object as having the property of being blue²². Since sensory particulars do not possess properties, nor is there any real property of blue²²-hood, the cognitive attribution of this property to a property-possessing particular must be a conceptual fabrication. Similarly, Dharmakīrti would likely agree that the awareness of a pure demonstrative "This" also involves a judgment in which some object is classified as having the generic property of thisness. That one can think "This" in the presence of any sensory object at all shows that the content of that thought must abstract away from, and thereby fail to directly represent, any single object in its essentially unique particularity. Consequently, not even states with pure demonstrative content can be genuinely perceptual states.³¹

2.2 Dharmakīrti on the phenomenal vivacity of essentially non-conceptual perception

31 Dharmakīrti's view about the stimulus-independence of demonstrative judgments would also lead him to more radical conclusions than Kelly's (2001) argument from situation-dependence. Kelly points to specific experiences of color constancy, where the color of an object is experienced to be the same across different lighting conditions. Accurately capturing what is perceived in such a case will include representing how changes in lighting conditions lead to corresponding changes in the appearance of the color, even though it's also the case that the color itself remains the same across such changes. Kelly's point is that because the same demonstrative concept *that color* would be applied throughout the context-dependent changes in the color's perceived appearance, this concept is incapable of representing the complete content of perceptual experience, which means that perceptual experience has non-conceptual content. However, if one accepts that the demonstrative concept *that shade* capture some invariant features in the experience of color constancy, then there is little reason to deny that one could have demonstrative concepts which also capture the context-dependent features like the color's changing brightness (see also Peacocke 2001b: 612). It is better for Dharmakīrti's purposes to reject outright that any demonstrative concepts capture the contents of perceptual awareness.

Ultimately, Dharmakīrti's best phenomenological arguments for an essentialist content view rest on the uniquely vivid phenomenal character of perception. According to him, phenomenal vivacity is a constitutive feature of perceptual awareness; no non-perceptual states involving conceptualization can ever have as vivid a phenomenal character.³² It's not even possible to dream of or hallucinate a truly vivid conceptual content, because the vivacity of any phenomenal appearance is diminished by an association with linguistic expressions.³³ The reason for this inherent lack of phenomenal vivacity would be that since the contents of conceptual states are found neither in reality nor in our non-conceptual awareness of it, they must be cognitively constructed from information stored in memory.

As such, conceptual contents cannot be phenomenally represented in the immediate and

spatiotemporally determinate manner that perception represents sensory particulars.³⁴ Though, note that

32 *PV* 3.299, 393: “*suptasya jāgrato vā api yā eva dhīḥ sphuṭabhāsīnī / sā nirvikalpā ubhayathā apy anyathā eva vikalpikā //*” “Just that awareness is non-conceptual which vividly appears whether one is asleep or awake. Otherwise, an awareness which appears non-vividly is conceptual in both cases.”

33 *PVin* 1.32, 28.11-29.3 (also *PV* 3.283, 378): “*na vikalpānubaddhasya spaṣṭārthapratibhāsītā /' pratyastamitārthavaiśadyo hi sarva eva viplutadhiyo 'pi saṃsṛṣṭābhilāpaḥ pratyayaḥ. tan na ayam sphuṭapratibhāso vikalpako bhavitum arhati. tathā hi – 'svapne 'pi smaryate smārtaṃ na ca tat tādṛgarthavat /' middhopaplutānām apy anubhūtasmaranākārā vikalpā bhavanti. na ca te tathāvabhāsinaḥ smaryante. tan na viplavo 'nyo vā vikalpaṃ sphuṭayati. avikalpaka eva sphuṭāvabhāsa iti.*” “There is no vivid appearance of an object belonging to an awareness which is connected with conceptual constructions.’ Since, even for a disordered mind, every awareness which is associated with linguistic expression is one in which the clarity of the object has diminished. Hence, a vivid appearance must not be conceptual. For instance, ‘In a dream as well, a memory is recalled, but it is not recalled as having that sort of object which was previously experienced by a non-conceptual perception.’ Even those who are afflicted by drowsiness have conceptual states which take the form of a memory of a previously experienced object. But, these conceptual states are not remembered as having that sort of appearance [i.e., the vivid appearance of the previously experienced object]. Neither mental disorders nor anything else make a conceptual state appear vividly. A vivid phenomenal appearance is only non-conceptual.”

34 *PVin* 1.4, 7.7-8.5: “*abhilāpasamsargayogypratibhāsā pratītiḥ kalpanā. na hi sā indriyajñāne sambhavati, 'arthasya sāmartyena samudbhavāt.' tad dhy arthasāmartyena utpadyamānaṃ tadrūpaṃ eva anukuryāt. na hy arthe śabdāḥ santi tadātmāno vā, yena tasmīn pratibhāsamāne te 'pi pratibhāseran. na ca ayam arthasamsparśī saṃvedanadharmāḥ, artheṣu tanniyojanāt, tato 'rthānām apratītiprasaṅgāt. tasmād ayam upanipatyā vijñānaṃ janayan na anātmanāntarīyakaṃ pratibhāsaṃ puraskartuṃ yukto rasādāya iva parasparam. na api tadbaleṇa udīyamānaṃ vijñānaṃ arthāntaram anusartuṃ yuktaṃ rasādijñānavat.*” “Conceptual construction is an awareness whose phenomenal appearance is fit for an association with linguistic expression. That conceptual construction is indeed not possible in a sensory awareness, ‘because sensory awareness arises by means of an object’s causal power.’ Since, that which arises from the causal power of an object should imitate the form of just that object. For, words do not exist in an object, nor do they have the nature of an object, such that when the object appears, the words also ought to appear. Nor can this [word], having no connection to objects, be an attribute of awareness, since a word is applied to objects; thus, there would be the unwanted consequence that there is no awareness of objects [if a word were a property of awareness, such that a word made one cognize an awareness and not an object]. Therefore, this [object], having become proximate, is not able in producing an awareness to put forth an internal phenomenal appearance as being not of itself, just like [sensory objects such as] taste and so on [can’t generate an awareness with] each other’s [appearance]. Nor is an awareness which arises by force of that [object] able to conform with a different object, like the awareness of taste and so on [does not conform with a different object like color].”

for Dharmakīrti, a mental state does not automatically lack phenomenal vivacity if it is not generated by the external sense faculties. For instance, a mind stricken by intense lust or grief can imagine a long-deceased lover in so vivid a manner that the person appears as if they are standing right in front of oneself.³⁵ The power of such a mental disorder is that it can strip a recollected image of its mnemonic phenomenal character – such as the appearance of pastness that normally accompanies a memory³⁶ – and vividly present that image in the manner of a non-conceptual sensory awareness. On the other hand, an awareness cannot vividly represent any recollected content which retains an association with language.

Here, one may object: What about the perception of words themselves? Beyond being an obvious counter-example to Dharmakīrti’s characterization of perception as being free from any association with words, linguistic perception would also be a counter-example to the claim that semantic content inherently lacks phenomenal vivacity. When I hear someone utter a meaningful string of syllables – for example, my own name, an insult, or an urgent warning – it may seem that I directly comprehend their meaning simultaneously with my hearing of the sounds, and that the comprehended meaning appears to me as vividly as the sounds themselves. To this objection, Dharmottara replies that one’s auditory awareness only represents the pure sounds qua unique particulars, shorn of any semantic content; the sounds are not actually perceived as being words which signify anything else. The referent of a word cannot be represented by sensory awareness because, on the assumption of radical

35 *PV* 3.282, 378; *PVīn* 1.29, 27.13-28-1: “*kāmaśokabhayonmādacaurasvapnādyupaplutāḥ | abhūtān api paśyanti purato avasthitān iva ||*” “Those who are afflicted by lust, grief, fear, intoxication, dreams of thieves, etc., perceive even non-existent objects as if they were standing right in front of them.” Such mental hallucinations are used by Dharmakīrti as an analogy to illustrate the phenomenal vivacity of a yogic practitioner’s perception of the Noble Truths taught by the Buddha. Both hallucination and yogic realization involve the transformation of conceptual contents stored in memory into phenomenally vivid non-conceptual contents (see Eltschinger 2009b).

36 See Prajñākaragupta’s comments (*PVA* ad *PV* 3.133, 249.18-20) to the effect that the appearance of an object as being past would make that appearance non-vivid and non-sensory: “*ko ’yan niścayo nāma. rūpasya sphuṭasya pratibhāsanam iti cet. na, prāg eva pratibhāsanāt. pūrvatvena pratibhāsane tadākārāntaram eva aspaṣṭam.*” “What is this thing called ‘determinate judgment’ (*niścaya*)? If you say it’s the appearance of a vivid visual object, then that is not the case, because the vivid visual object appears only prior to a determinate judgment. In the appearance of the visual object as being past, there is just a different representational form of that visual object, one which is non-vivid.”

momentariness, the particular object which was once baptized as the referent of a word no longer exists by the time that word is subsequently used.³⁷ Even if the particular object were vividly perceived previously, it can no longer figure as a vivid content of sensory awareness once it has gone out of existence, since perception can only represent what is immediately present to the senses.³⁸

The same conclusion could follow even if we recast the argument without such radical metaphysical commitments to the momentariness and bare particularity of sensory objects. Assume that perceived particulars were enduring so that they could be present at the time of our cognizing their names. Or, assume that words refer to real and perceivable generic properties, such that a cognized word still refers to something which is perceptually present. In either case, Dharmakīrti would say that an object qua semantic content cannot figure in the vivid phenomenal appearance of perceptual experience, since the relational structure of conceptually constructed contents – that is, the relation between verbal signifier and signified referent, or the more fundamental relation between qualifying property and qualified property-possessor – cannot be translated into the non-linguistic format of sensory representations.³⁹ Thus, the phenomenological impression that semantic contents are vividly represented in an auditory awareness must be false: To judge that conceptual contents are actually

37 *NBT ad NB 1.5, 27.11-13*: “*na ca saṃketakālabhāvi darśanaviśayatvaṃ vastunaḥ sampraty asti. yathā hi saṃketakālabhāvi darśanam adya niruddham, tadvat tadviśayatvam api arthasya adya na asti. tataḥ pūrvakāladr̥ṣṭatvam apaśyac chrotrajñānaṃ na vācyavācakabhāvagrāhi.*” “An entity which exists at the present moment is not the intentional object of a perception which occurred at the time of learning a semantic convention. Since, just as the perception which occurred at the time of learning a semantic convention is now ceased, similarly an object now is not the intentional object of that earlier perception. Thus, not perceiving an object as being what was perceived at an earlier time, an auditory awareness does not grasp a relation between verbal signifier and signified referent.”

38 *PV 3.129-130ab, 209*: “*asya idam iti sambandhe yāv arthau pratibhāsinau / tayor eva hi sambandho na tadendriyagocaraḥ // viśadapratibhāsasya tadārthasya avibhāvanāt /*” “There is a relation just of those two entities which appear in the signifier-signified relation stated as, ‘This is the name of this referent.’ At that time when a semantic convention is applied to the previously perceived object, that object is no longer an object of the senses, because at that time there is no manifestation of the previously perceived object with its vivid appearance.”

39 *PV 3.232-233, 329-331*: “*te kalpitā rūpabhedā nirvikalpasya cetasaḥ / na vicitrasya citrābhāḥ kādācitkasya gocaraḥ // yady apy asti sitavādir yādrg indriyagocaraḥ / na so abhidhīyate śabdair jñānayo rūpabhedataḥ //*” “Those conceptually constructed entities [i.e., properties and property-possessors], which have distinct forms and variegated appearances, are not the object of a non-variegated non-conceptual awareness that is occasioned only by a real entity. Even if whiteness and so on were a kind of sensory object, it isn’t denoted by words, since the representational forms belonging to states of sensory and linguistic awareness are different.”

experienced in a sensory awareness is to be confused by the simultaneity or rapid succession of perceptual and conceptual states.⁴⁰

Hence, unlike the modern arguments from richness and fineness of grain, Dharmakīrti's arguments from phenomenology are better poised to take the basic difference between the phenomenal characters of perceptual and conceptual awareness as being indicative of an essential difference in their representational contents.⁴¹ The proprietary phenomenology of perceptual awareness can serve as evidence of its unique representational content because, as we'll see in section 4, the phenomenal character of an awareness is in Dharmakīrti's view grounded upon its content. And, as we'll discuss in the next section, this dependence of phenomenal character on representational content is in large part a causal dependence. At least when it comes to the awareness of sensory objects, an awareness-state's phenomenal vivacity or lack thereof is typically determined by the extent to which it bears a direct connection with a causally efficacious and spatiotemporally determinate particular. So, for instance, the sensory perception of a fire has a vivid phenomenal appearance because that perception is directly generated by the real fire that is its content. By contrast, a conceptual judgment "That is a fire" is several causal steps removed from the perceived fire-particulars themselves, since forming the judgment requires that one first activate a memory trace and then recall the semantic convention that governs the usage of the word "fire," by which point the perceived particulars are no longer present.⁴²

40 *PV* 3.133, 213: "*manasor yugapad vṛtteḥ savikalpāvikalpayoḥ / vimūḍho lāghuvṛtter vā tayor aikyaṃ vyavasyati //*" "Whether two conceptual and non-conceptual mental states exist simultaneously or in quick sequence, a confused person judges the two states to be one and the same."

41 *PV* 3.130cd, 209: "*vijñānābhāsabhedo hi padārthānām viśeṣakah //*" "Since, a difference in an awareness-state's appearance is what distinguishes the objects [of awareness-states]." See also Manorathanandin's comment (*PVV* ad *PV* 3.130, 156.4-7: "*na ca pratibhāsabhede 'pi śabdendriyajñānāyor ekaviśayatvaṃ yasmād vijñānasya ābhāsabheda ākārabhedāḥ padārthānām grāhyānām viśeṣako bhedakah. yadi tu pratibhāsabhede 'py arthābhedas tadā viśvam ekaṃ dravyaṃ syāt.*" "Nor can linguistic and sensory awareness-states have the same intentional object despite a difference in their appearance, because a difference in an awareness-state's appearance (i.e., a difference in its representational form) is what distinguishes (differentiates) objects (objective contents). However, if there were no difference in objects despite a difference in appearance, then the world would be a single thing."

42 Though, the phenomenal vivacity of awareness is not necessarily connected to the immediate presence of external particulars, since it is possible to have phenomenally vivid non-conceptual hallucinations as discussed above. We will ultimately see in section 4 that Dharmakīrti thinks that a state's degree of phenomenal vivacity is intrinsically related to the type of representational format it has.

Accordingly, Dharmakīrti's arguments from phenomenology can advance upon their modern counterparts in establishing that perceptual contents are essentially distinct from conceptual contents, because Dharmakīrti can ground the phenomenological differences between perceptual and conceptual states in their different causal etiologies, which in turn explain the difference in their representational contents. Put more simply, Dharmakīrti thinks that we can infer a difference in content from a difference in phenomenal character for the same reason that we can generally infer a difference in causes from a difference in effects.⁴³ We turn now to his causal arguments for the essentially non-conceptual contents of perceptual experience.

3. Arguments from mental architecture

For several contemporary non-conceptualists (e.g., Pylyshyn 2007: 99-124; Raftopoulos 2009: 167-170), certain flaws in the modern arguments from phenomenology mentioned above necessitate a new strategy for establishing the existence of essentially non-conceptual content, whereby mere subjective introspection is supplanted by the scientific study of perception. Now, although Dharmakīrti obviously was unaware of modern science, he still offered a set of arguments which broadly anticipate recent empirically informed defenses of non-conceptual content. These arguments posit that perceptual states are essentially distinct from conceptual states in terms of their immediate causal origins – specifically, sensory awareness necessarily arises prior to the onset of, and independently of any influence from, conceptualization. Dharmakīrti would therefore agree with some recent defenses of non-conceptualism that sensory perception is fundamentally bottom-up and encapsulated from the influence of “top-down” cognitive processes. Together, these non-conceptualists would claim that the

43 *PV* 3.184, 285: “*asti cen nirvikalpaṃ ca kiñcit tattulyahetukam / sarvaṃ tathā eva hetor hi bhedaḥ bhedaḥ phalātmanām //*” “If there is some non-conceptual perception, then all awareness which shares the same causes as that non-conceptual perception is likewise non-conceptual. For, the difference in results is due to a difference in cause.”

non-conceptual nature of perceptual processing contributes to the essentially non-conceptual structure and function of perceptual representations.

3.1 An empirical model of non-conceptual early vision

Some recent scientific models of perception posit hierarchical stages of sensory processing in which neural computations operate at different degrees of complexity and abstraction. We can take vision as a paradigm since it has been the sensory modality most discussed by empirically informed non-conceptualists. To start, Pylyshyn and Raftopoulos distinguish between an early and late stage of vision. Early vision takes place during the first 150 ms after a stimulus is received by the retina. Following Lamme and Roelfsma (2000), they divide early vision into two phases. First, there is a fast feedforward sweep of information propagated from the retina to the primary and secondary visual cortices, and then to higher visual areas in the ventral and dorsal streams. As soon as the feedforward sweep arrives at a specific area in the visual hierarchy, the phase of local recurrent processing commences wherein neurons within that area communicate “horizontally” with each other, and also send feedback signals down to lower visual areas in the hierarchy. Then, starting at 150-200 ms after stimulus onset, global recurrent processing takes place in which cognitive areas selectively access visual information and modulate its further processing in visual areas (Raftopoulos 2019: 261ff). At this stage, mnemonic circuits interact with visual processes: selected visual signals are matched against stored identity- and category-relevant information in order to form and test a hypothesis about what object has been perceived. If there is a sufficient match between the pattern of mnemonic and visual signals, then that pattern can then be encoded in working memory and broadcast to cognitive areas for further processing involved in explicit belief-formation, verbal report, and intentional action.

This account of visual processing is taken to have two significant upshots for non-conceptualism: (1) phenomenal perceptual awareness arises during early vision, and (2) early vision is

cognitively encapsulated, meaning that the early processing of visual information is not influenced by any information or top-down modulation from cognitive/conceptual areas. According to Raftopoulos (2009: 172), local recurrent processing is the stage of early vision at which visual representations first phenomenally appear as conscious percepts. During the feedforward sweep, rudimentary sensory features – for example, color, shape, texture, spatial location, orientation, and motion – are unconsciously registered at different levels of the visual hierarchy. Then, the onset of local feedback interactions within the visual system leads to the binding and segmentation of these sensory features into a viewpoint-centered array of two-dimensional surface features, textures, and contours, which further encodes the respective distances of these surfaces relative to the viewer. With the formation of this array – which Marr (2010) has called the “2½-dimensional sketch” (not quite 2-D like a drawing, and not quite 3-D like objects themselves) – there first comes to be “something it is like” for a perceiver to consciously view the world.

The claim that phenomenal awareness of early visual content arises prior to that content’s being cognitively processed draws support from the phenomenon of partial report superiority first investigated by Sperling (1960), wherein subjects who are quickly shown a visual array report seeing the details of the array even though they can only identify a few of its details after the array has disappeared. One conclusion drawn from this phenomenon is that the visual information which one perceptually experiences is quantitatively richer than what the limited capacity of working memory allows to be encoded and broadcast to the cognitive areas involved in conceptual classification and verbal report. Put simply, the conclusion is that perceptual consciousness “overflows” our cognitive access to it (Block 2011). A second related conclusion is that the phenomenally conscious perceptual representations formed in early vision are a different format than the types of representations that can be stored in working memory. In short, the phenomenal content of perception is iconic, whereas the representations stored in working memory are discursive or language-like (Raftopoulos 2010; more on

the iconic format of perceptual representations in section 4). Finally, because this phenomenal content arises prior to its being processed by mnemonic and cognitive areas outside the visual system, it is claimed to be immune from cognitive penetration. That is, early visual processing does not use information stored in cognitive and non-visual memory in an online manner to generate phenomenal visual representations.

3.2 Dharmakīrti on the cognitive encapsulation of sensory awareness

It is striking how Dharmakīrti's account of perception converges with scientifically informed non-conceptualists in claiming that perceptual consciousness is temporally prior to and encapsulated from cognitive states. Dharmakīrti specifically argues that perception is encapsulated from a type of semantic memory in which one recalls a semantic convention, but his conclusions apply to memory-based conceptualization in general. The memory of semantic conventions enables a form of conceptual classification that carries out cognitive and hence non-perceptual functions involved in thought. One such function involves a reflective judgment that cognitively synthesizes the past and present – in the case of linguistic classification, a currently perceived object is associated with a previously learned word, and is cognized as being (type- or token-) identical to previously perceived objects.⁴⁴ Reflective synthesis in turn enables the essentially conceptual function of binding objects into a predicatively structured complex. Again, whether linguistically mediated or not, these cognitive functions of classification and predicative binding cannot be genuinely perceptual, because sensory perception can only present what currently exists, and because the real particular which is the object and cause of perception cannot itself possess the properties and relations that a conceptual state imaginatively attributes to it.⁴⁵

44 See Notake (2011, 383 fn. 33) for references by Dharmottara and Manorathanandin to these two distinct but related construals of the reflective, synthetic judgment about past and present (*pūrvāparaparāmarśa*).

45 *PV*in 1.8, 10.5-14 (see also *PV* 3.174, 274): “*saṅketasmaraṇopāyaṃ dṛṣṭasaṅkalanātmakam / pūrvāparaparāmarśāsūnye taccākṣuṣe katham //’ na hi idam iyato vyāpārān kartuṃ samartham, sannihitaviṣayabalena*

According to Dharmakīrti, memory cannot causally precede or contribute to the production of sensory states, as that would militate against the essential functions of both memory and sense perception. It's essential to sensory awareness (as well as to its epistemic status and proprietary phenomenal character) that it is immediately generated by the joint causal activity of a sense faculty and a spatiotemporally proximate sensory particular.⁴⁶ If a sense perception depended upon memory as its cause, then it would not bear an immediate causal connection to its object, as the memory would intervene between the event of sensory contact with the object and the sense perception's arising.⁴⁷ For that matter, an object would not be an object of sense perception if it needed a memory to occur first before generating a sensory awareness. In the background of this argument is the metaphysical assumption that all things, being radically momentary, exhaust their intrinsic causal powers immediately upon coming into existence (Tillemans 2021, §1.3-4). Since every existing thing has to exert its intrinsic causal power in the one moment of its existence and immediately give rise to its effect in the next moment, the object which did not immediately produce the sensory awareness could neither

utpatter avicāra katvāt. vicāra katve ca indriyamanovijñānāyor abhedaprasaṅgāt. abhede ca atītānāgatavastuprabhedagrahaṇāgrahaṇohānūhārthabhāvāpekṣānapekṣādiprasaṅgaḥ. manovijñānābhisamskṛtam indriyajñānam pratyeti iti cet, na, yathoktāgrāhiṇas tathāpratipattyayogād aviśaye 'pravṛtter jāyādīsambandhātītaśabdavyavahārādīnām indriyajñānāviśayatvāt. tasmān na indriyajñānam arthasamyojanām kalpanām āviśati." "Aided by the recollection of a semantic convention, [conceptualization] consists in the synthesis of what is perceived. How can that exist in a sensory awareness which is devoid of reflective judgment about past and present?" For, this [sensory awareness] is not capable of performing these many functions, because, due to arising by the force of an object which is present to the senses, it does not involve thinking. And, because if sensory awareness did involve thinking, then there would be the unwanted consequence that sensory and cognitive awareness are not different. If there is no difference between them, then it would undesirably follow that [there is no difference between] the object-dependence and object-independence of apprehending or not apprehending, and conceiving or not conceiving, respective to the past, future, and real entities. It may be objected that sensory awareness cognizes what is constructed by cognitive awareness. That is not so, because generic properties and the like, relations, what is past, linguistic usage, and so on are not the contents of sensory awareness, since that which does not apprehend the aforementioned objects is not fit to cognize such things, as no awareness engages with something which is not its content. Therefore, sensory awareness does not enter into the act of conceptualization which consists in the binding of an object [with properties, relations, etc.]."

46 *PV* 3.190cd, 289: "tasmāc cakṣuś ca rūpaṃ ca pratītya udeti netradhīḥ // " "Therefore, a visual awareness arises only in dependence upon the visual sense and a visible object."

47 *PV* in 1.5, 8.9-11: "arthopayoge 'pi punaḥ smārtam śabdānuyojanam / akṣadhīr yady apekṣeta so 'rtho vyavahito bhavet // " "If a sensory awareness depended on a recollected association with a word despite an object's causal contribution [to producing the sensory awareness, insofar as it's in proximate contact with a sense-faculty], then that object would be placed at an interval [from the sensory awareness]."

delay producing it until after the occurrence of the intervening memory-state.⁴⁸ Additionally, if a memory-state necessarily preceded the arising of a sensory state, it would follow that the putative object of perception is actually an object and cause of a memory-state, instead. As a result, memory would then be the immediate cause of sense perception, which would absurdly allow sensory states to arise even when there is no object present to the senses. That being so, a sense perception that follows after a memory could not actually be a sense perception, as it will have lost the feature of stimulus dependence that is essential to any non-conceptual sensory awareness.⁴⁹ On the other hand, if the same proximate object could give rise to both a sense perception and a memory simultaneously, then the object-generated memory could not be serving as a cause for the sense perception.⁵⁰

While Dharmakīrti's account of sense perception does not allow memory-states to have a role in generating sensory states, the account of memory he presumes does allow sensory states to have a role in generating memory-states. (In this context, Dharmakīrti explicitly discusses the memory of semantic

48 *PVin* 1.6abc, 9.2-5: 'yaḥ prāg ajanako buddher upayogāviśeṣataḥ / sa paścād api' syāt. ātmābhedenā sāmāthyāviśeṣān na ekasya ekatra kriyākriye syātām.' "Because there would be no difference in its causal contribution, what doesn't generate an awareness earlier' would 'also not do so later.' A single object at a single moment would not be both active and inactive, since there would be no difference in the object's causal capacity by virtue of there being no difference in its nature." In other words, the object's intrinsic capacity to produce an effect would not change from one moment to the next. So, if the object is by nature inactive and incapable of producing an effect in a prior moment, then it would remain incapable of producing it in the next moment.

49 *PVin* 1.6d, 9.6-9: "tena syād arthopayoge 'pi netradhīḥ // arthasya sāḥsādbuddhāv anupayogāt smṛtiprabodhe ca upayuktatvān na asya anupakāriṇo buddhir bhāvam apekṣeta. arthābhipātakte ca buddhijanmany abhilāpasmrtyantarābhāvāt siddham avikalpakam pratyakṣam." "Hence, there would be a sensory awareness even when an object ceases to exist.' Because the object doesn't causally contribute to the immediate production of an awareness [that is associated with a linguistic expression, given that it has to wait for the arising of a relevant memory], and because it instead causally contributes to the awakening of a memory, the awareness of that useless object would not depend upon its presence. Perception is established as non-conceptual because, when the production of an awareness is brought about by the presence of an object, there is no intervening recollection of a linguistic expression."

50 *PV* 3.186-188, 286-288: "saṃketasmaranāpekṣam rūpam yady akṣacetasi / anapekṣya na cec chaktam syāt smṛtāv eva liṅgavat // tasyās tatsaṃgamotpatter akṣadhīḥ syāt smṛter na vā / tataḥ kālāntare 'pi syāt kvacid vyākṣepasambhavāt // kramena ubhayaḥ cet prāg eva syād abhedataḥ / anyo akṣabuddhihetuś cet smṛtis tatra apy anarthikā //'" "If a sensory object, being dependent on the memory of a semantic convention to produce a sensory awareness, were not capable of producing a sensory awareness independently of such memory, then it would be capable of producing visual awareness only when a memory is present, like an inferential sign. [An inferential sign indicates the presence of some other object to be inferred only when it awakens the memory of a concomitance between the inferred object and the sign.] Since that memory arises from the contact with that sensory object, sensory awareness would arise from memory. Or, if a sensory awareness does not arise due to memory, then it could come about even some time after that memory, since it is possible to be distracted by some other object after the memory. If an object were the cause of both sensory awareness and memory in a sequence, then both would occur initially [i.e., at the same time, not in a sequence] because their cause would be the same. If something else were the cause of sensory awareness [which would explain why it sequentially arises after memory], then memory is useless with respect to that sensory awareness as well."

conventions, but his arguments will also apply to the memory involved in non-linguistic object recognition.) An occurrent memory-state arise when a corresponding memory trace is activated by a triggering cause. For the memory trace of one’s ostensibly acquired knowledge that a certain type of perceived object is denoted by a certain word, the trigger will be a perception which seems to represent the relevant type of object. With the memory trace activated, there arises an occurrent memory of this semantic knowledge, such that one can now identify the perceived object as being denotable by a recalled name. The point is this: A perceptual state must precede the onset of semantic memory in order to serve as the trigger of the relevant memory trace – if memory were not preceded by a perception, then one would not know which object is supposed to be identified by the recalled name.⁵¹ So, if sensory awareness must occur prior to the onset of cognitive states like semantic memory in order to serve as a triggering cause for such states, then it stands to reason that these cognitive states cannot have any causal influence over the representational content and phenomenal character of that prior sensory awareness.⁵²

Dharmakīrti further illustrates the functional encapsulation of perception from conceptualization in a couple ways. First, like modern non-conceptualists such as Fodor (1983: 66) and Pylyshyn (1999: 344), Dharmakīrti cites examples of perceptual illusions which persist despite our knowledge of how the world actually is. A paradigm case for Fodor and Pylyshyn is the Müller-Lyer illusion, where one seemingly perceives two lines as being unequal in length even after learning that

51 *PVīn* 1.5, 8.11-14: “*na hi saṅketakālabhāvitam abhilāpasāmānyam asmaratas tadyojanā sambhavati, śabdāntara iva. na ca arthābhīpātakṛte ’saty āntare vikāre śabdaviśeṣe smṛtir yuktā, tasyā atakṛtatve tannāmāgrahanaprasaṅgāt. tataḥ smṛtyā vyavadhānān na arthopayogo ’nantaravyāpārāphalaḥ syāt.*” “Since, an association with that [particular word] isn’t possible for someone who isn’t recalling the general expression which was present at the time of learning a semantic convention, just like in the case of [an association with] another word. Moreover, when there is no inner [sensory] transformation brought about by the presence of an object, then it wouldn’t be appropriate for there to be a memory of a particular word [for that object], because if memory is not brought about by that [object], it would not be apprehending the name of that [object]. Thus, because of the intervention of memory, the object’s causal contribution would not possess a result immediately subsequent to its functioning.”

52 Though, this line of argument is sound only on Dharmakīrti’s external realist theory of perception. If Dharmakīrti qua Yogācāra idealist drops sensory contact with an external object as a necessary causal condition of perception, then prior memory-states or memory traces are free to generate what appear to be sense perceptions of external objects – see Kellner (2017b: 315).

they're the same length. Dharmakīrti cites a case of double vision in which the illusory appearance of two moons cannot be dispelled by one's knowing that there is really just one moon. Other examples he discusses include the illusion of seeing a mesh of hair experienced by someone with debris floating in the vitreous fluid of their eyes, or the illusion of seeing an unbroken ring of light when one rapidly whirls a firebrand in a circular motion.⁵³

Part of Dharmakīrti's motivation for raising these types of illusion is to prevent them from serving as counter-examples to Dignāga's characterization of perception as being devoid of conceptualization (Dunne 2020). The illusions of two moons, floating hair-mesh, and light-rings are also non-conceptual in nature, but since they are not veridical states, they cannot be counted as genuine states of perception qua source of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). Nonetheless, these illusory states are to be distinguished from other pseudo-perceptual illusions which are instead cognitive in nature, because non-conceptual illusions are the product of purely sensory defects rather than erroneous post-perceptual judgments. Cognitive illusions essentially originate from inappropriately triggered memories. Seeing a coiled rope sitting in dim light may trigger a memory of one's previous experience of things that are called "snake," leading one to mistakenly think in the present moment, "Snake!" One may also be primed to recall and mistakenly think of a snake if someone else first panics and shouts, "Snake!" Upon realizing that there is just a rope, the illusion ceases. But, a non-conceptual illusion like the appearance of a floating hair-mesh arises from a sensory defect and not from a memory; one does not have to have previously seen a similar floating hair-mesh, or been told about hair-meshes, in order to experience the illusion. Non-conceptual illusions persist as long as the relevant sensory defect persists, and therefore cannot be dispelled by thinking or being told that the illusion is unreal.

Next, Dharmakīrti claims that the immunity to cognitive influence which defines certain perceptual illusions as non-conceptual also holds for perceptual states in general. Conceptual states are

53 *PV* 3.291-298, 386-391; see the translations in Dunne (2020).

not tethered to the presence of external objects, given that they primarily originate from memory-states, and depend on these memory-states for their content. The object-independence of conceptual states accordingly allows them to be generated and ceased voluntarily through a subject's top-down control. One can voluntarily think of an object, and it may also be possible to stop having that thought if one so desires. But, the same is not true for sensory awareness – if all the necessary causal conditions for perceiving some object obtain, then that perception will arise even if one is trying to think of some other object. And, like the illusory hair-mesh but unlike the illusory rope-snake, no amount of reflective analysis or imagining otherwise can bring an occurrent sensory state to cease if its causal conditions are still in place.⁵⁴ However, if cognitive states such as desires could generate genuinely sensory awareness-states, then sensory awareness would lose its function of perceptually representing external objects, since it would lose its direct causal connection to those objects.⁵⁵

In claiming that sense perception must be encapsulated from the causal operation of cognitive states like memory, Dharmakīrti's architectural arguments support the thesis that sensory awareness has an essentially non-conceptual functional role: Through being causally tethered to the presence of a proximate sensory object, a perceptual state functions to vividly represent that object in its spatiotemporal determinacy and concrete particularity. Conversely, conceptual states are not causally

54 *PV* 1.9abc, 11.1-7: “*vikalpothāpitā sā ca nivartyeta icchayā matih / na arthasannidhim ikṣeta...? api ca iyaṃ viśeṣānādivikalpothāpitā satī pravṛttā api samagrasāmagrikā punar icchayā nivartyeta tadanyavikalpavat. śakyante hi kalpanāḥ pratisaṅkhyānena nivartayitum, na indriyabuddhiḥ, sāmagrīsākālye 'pi vinivartya gobuddhim aśvam api kalpayato godarśanāt. na api iyaṃ arthasannidhim apekṣeta. na hi gavādivikalpo 'rthasannidhāv eva bhavati.*” “That thought which was instigated by a conceptual awareness may be made to cease at will; it would not observe the presence of an object....’ Even though it occurs together with its full set of causal conditions, this [thought] which was instigated by the conceptual awareness of a qualifier, etc., may still be made to cease at will, like any other conceptual awareness. For, conceptual states can be made to cease through reflective analysis. That is not so with sensory awareness, because someone who has ceased their awareness of a cow and is also currently imagining a horse still has a perception of the cow when the whole set of causal conditions [for that perception] is present. Nor would this [conceptual thought] depend upon the presence of an object. For, a conceptual awareness of a cow, etc., doesn't exist only in the presence of a cow.”

55 *PV* 3.176, 276: “*jāyante kalpanās tatra yatra śabda niveśitaḥ / tena icchātaḥ pravarteran na ikṣeran bāhyam akṣajāḥ //*” “Conceptual states arise with respect to that object to which a word is applied. Hence, were sensory states to arise because of a desire, they would not observe an external object.” *PV* 3.185, 285: “*anapekṣitabāhyārthā yojanā samayasmṛteḥ / tathā anapekṣya samayaṃ vastuśaktyā eva netradhīḥ //*” “Independent of an external object, conceptual association is due to the recollection of a semantic convention. So also sensory awareness exists just by means of the causal power of a real object, independently of a semantic convention.”

tethered to proximate sensory objects, and so they perform cognitive functions that cannot vividly represent those objects in a spatiotemporally determinate and concrete manner. In turn, the non-conceptual origins and operation of sense perception together suggest that sensory content is also essentially non-conceptual, insofar as that content is not derived from memory, which is the main source of conceptual contents.⁵⁶ Thus, the differences in phenomenology and psychological function between perceptual and conceptual states motivate Dharmakīrti to conclude that there is an essential difference between those states at the level of their representational contents. We now consider his most direct statements in defense of an essentialist content non-conceptualism, and their coherence with contemporary accounts of how non-conceptual and conceptual contents essentially differ in their format and structure.

4. Arguments from representational format

Most modern non-conceptualists are not necessarily committed to the sort of “thin” and austere ontology adopted by Dharmakīrti, in which there are no real composite, persisting, and property-possessing objects, nor any abstract generic properties that belong to those objects. Nonetheless, some non-conceptualists like Raftopoulos converge with Dharmakīrti in taking the purely sensory, non-cognitive nature of perception to entail a “thin” view of phenomenal perceptual content, according to which sensory awareness only phenomenally represent the sorts of “low-level” features that are computed in the early stages of perceptual processing. In the case of vision, these would be rudimentary surface and spatio-temporal features such as color, shape, texture, spatial location, orientation, and motion; in the case of auditory awareness, phenomenal features would include volume, timbre, and pitch, and so on. The austere non-conceptualism of Dharmakīrti would take the thin

56 *PV* 3.189, 288: “*yathā samitasiddhyartham iṣyate samayasmṛtiḥ / bhedaś ca asamito grāhyaḥ smṛtis tatra kim arthikā //*” “Whereas the memory of a semantic convention is admitted for the purpose of knowing an object which is accepted as the referent of a word, a unique particular, which isn’t accepted as the referent of a word, is apprehended by sensory awareness. What use does memory have in that case?”

contents of sensory awareness to be essentially non-conceptual because these contents cannot actually be the contents of conceptual thought – what we perceive are spatiotemporally concrete and unique particular tropes (*svalakṣaṇa*), whereas what we think about are only abstract generalities (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*).

Because most contemporary defenders of thin perceptual content probably would not adopt the extreme claim that thoughts can never refer to the objects of sense perception, the content non-conceptualists among them would instead say that conceptual states cannot represent the objects of perception using the same representational format used by perceptual states. The difference between conceptual and perceptual representations hence would be comparable to the differences between a photograph of an apple and the sentence, “This is an apple.” The important difference is that pictorial and perceptual representations have an iconic non-propositional structure, whereas linguistic and conceptual representations are propositionally structured. From this essential difference in representational format, a thin view of perceptual content would follow to the extent that an iconic format prevents perceptual contents from including the sorts of “high-level,” abstract kind-properties and categories which can figure in conceptual thought. Even if generic properties like *being an apple* existed such that one could make sensory contact with them, an austere non-conceptualism would claim that these sorts of abstract entities cannot be intrinsically represented in the spatiotemporally determinate format of iconic representations. As it turns out, Raftopoulos and others (e.g., Fodor 2008: 185-186; Quilty-Dunn 2016: 260) have argued that if the phenomenal contents of early vision are iconic in nature, then they can only represent low-level sensory features. Dharmakīrti’s essentialist content non-conceptualism would also endorse this claim about the iconic format of sensory content and their correspondingly thin nature.⁵⁷ Here too, we can see that Dharmakīrti’s brand of non-

⁵⁷ In discussing the iconic and thin character of perceptual content on Dharmakīrti’s account, I am only considering the content of non-conceptual sensory representations. I therefore bracket Dharmakīrti’s theory of extrasensory yogic perception, according to which it may be possible to have a direct, non-conceptual vision of certain abstract properties like impermanence and selflessness – see Eltschinger (2009b).

conceptualism compares favorably with some contemporary alternatives. If an essential distinction between sensory and conceptual contents must be drawn at the level of their representational formats, and the iconic format of sensory content is inherently incapable of phenomenally representing abstract entities, then it will be implausible for non-conceptualists like Block (2014) and Burge (2014) to maintain that perceptual content is both iconic and can represent high-level properties.

4.1 Modern accounts of non-conceptual representational format

One reason why iconic perceptual representations are taken to be essentially non-conceptual is that they lack the sort of propositional structure required for satisfying the Generality Constraint posited by Evans (1982) as a necessary condition for any representation to count as being conceptual. According to Evans, conceptual/propositional thought possesses a compositional structure that allows a subject to understand new thoughts by recombining the components of previously understood thoughts. So, for example, if on the basis of understanding the thoughts, “The chair is brown” and, “The floor is white,” a subject is also able to understand what it means to think, “The chair is white,” and, “The floor is brown,” then we can consider the subject to possess the concepts *chair*, *brown*, *floor*, and *white* that enable it to entertain these thoughts and comprehend their contents. Iconic perceptual content, however, purportedly lacks such a compositional structure, and so cannot be considered to be conceptual. As with pictorial representations like maps or photographs, perceptual representations are not decomposable into semantically significant constituents in the way that propositions are (Fodor 2007, Heck 2007). While there is only one correct way to subdivide the semantic parts of the sentence “I see the yellow square” (the meaning would not be recoverable if one thought “see the” was a proper semantic unit of the sentence), there is no incorrect way to subdivide the parts of the yellow square image according to their semantic significance (Laurence and Margolis 2012: 302). The holistic nature of iconic content entails that the parts of the square-image are all equally images of the square-parts –

no part of the image is any more central in determining the representation's image-content. The yellow square could be decomposed into two adjoining images of yellow rectangles, or could be further decomposed into a grid of minimally discriminable pixels of yellow. The image itself, however, does not require that it be understood as being a representation *as of* a yellow square, or *as of* two adjacent yellow rectangles, etc. Such a “representation *as*” would only arise through a concept-guided interpretation of the image.

Content non-conceptualists will claim that, just like pictorial representations, iconic perceptual representations are holistic and cannot be canonically decomposed in the manner of propositional contents. Perceptual iconicity is grounded upon two basic elements (Green and Quilty-Dunn 2021): First, there is an isomorphism between a perceptual icon and the object represented; each part of the icon is a representation of some part of the object. Second, each part of the perceptual icon holistically represents multiple features of the corresponding object-part simultaneously, without representing those features as belonging to a separate individual. For example, the visual representation of a red apple has a part that represents the apple's left edge. In representing the apple's left edge, this image-part will also inevitably encode that edge's orientation, shape, surface texture, luminance, specific color value, and so on. On the other hand, the discursive representation “The left edge of the red apple” fails to convey all of these additional features, while having a separate vehicle for representing the individual that exists over and above those features. The holistic encoding of multiple features also marks out perceptual representations as having a distinctly analog, rather than digital, format. At least according to Dretske (1981), digital representations only contain information that is “nested” in or entailed by the information that is explicitly represented. So, nested in the discursive representation “The left edge of the red apple” is also the information that the apple has a color, that the apple is a bounded object, and so on. Analog representations, on the other hand, additionally contain non-nested information; features

like orientation, surface texture, and luminance are represented by the image of the red apple's left edge even though they are not entailed by the image's being of a red apple's left edge.

4.2 Dharmakīrti on the iconicity and holism of perceptual representations

Leaving aside whatever disputes he may have with modern non-conceptualists about the objects of perception, Dharmakīrti is in basic agreement with them about the essentially iconic format of perceptual representations, as well as the specifically isomorphic and holistic character of their iconic contents (see also Guerrero 2015). Since perceptual awareness for Dharmakīrti represents neither stable, property-possessing objects nor any shareable/repeatable properties, perceptual content would lack the recombinable elements that compose the propositional, subject-predicate structure of conceptual content. As he describes it, conceptual states have a “variegated” (*citra*) representational form or appearance, in the sense that a single content can be decomposed into multiple constituent parts which specifically represent a property-possessing individual or the various properties that it possesses. Non-conceptual perceptual awareness, however, lacks this sort of fictional variegated structure; its representational structure instead conforms to the unique, propertyless nature of the external particulars that causally occasion the awareness.⁵⁸ Isomorphism should therefore follow from Dharmakīrti's ostensibly resemblance-based account of representation: given that a perceptual state represents an object by virtue of containing a phenomenal appearance which resembles that object, it should be the case that every part of the perception's phenomenal appearance stands in a one-to-one relation with some part of the object represented. Dharmakīrti's account could also accommodate the analog character of iconic contents: For instance, the object of vision is a “visible form” or “colored shape”

58 *PV* 3.232, 329: “*te kalpitā rūpabhedā nirvikalpasya cetasaḥ / na vicitrasya citrābhāḥ kādācitkasya gocaraḥ //*” “Those conceptually constructed entities [i.e., properties and property-possessors], which have distinct forms and variegated appearances, are not the object of a non-variegated non-conceptual awareness that is occasioned only by a real entity.”

(*rūpa*), that is, something which both is a color and occupies a location, in which case a visual representation of color would necessarily represent shape and vice versa.

On the point of isomorphism, however, some important qualification is needed in light of complications concerning Dharmakīrti's mereological reductionism, that is, his rejection of composite objects and his acceptance of atomism. The Picture Principle proposed by Fodor as a definition of iconicity – "If P is a picture of X, then parts of P are pictures of parts of X" (2007: 108) – cannot be straightforwardly applied on Dharmakīrti's account of perceptual content, if he thinks that what we actually perceive are only partless unique particulars rather than composite objects like tables and pots. At the same time, the fundamental atomic particulars which constitute external reality are infinitesimal in size, and so they cannot be distinctly perceived with our ordinary sense faculties, either. Thus, given that neither composite objects nor individual atoms are perceptible, Dharmakīrti posits that when enough atomic particulars compile together their causal powers – without thereby forming a whole composite object – they are collectively sufficient for generating a single perceptual awareness.⁵⁹ Sautrāntika Buddhists who accept this possibility of collective atomic causation without composition suggest that the content of perceptual awareness is a unitary macroscopic particular qua "sensory field" (*āyatanasvalakṣaṇa*; see Chu 2006). A perceptual representation which takes this macroscopic particular as its object should resemble or conform with it – so, just as the external particular qua sensory field is a unitary entity comprised of multiple spatially arrayed particles (without actually being a composite object), the perceptual awareness of this macroscopic particular takes on the form of a unitary image comprised of multiple sensory features arrayed in different locations. As an illustration, Dharmakīrti analogizes this unitary sensory image of multiple features to the variegated color of a butterfly, painting, or cloth (Dunne 2004: 398-399). If there is going to be an iconic isomorphism on Dharmakīrti's account between a perceptual representation and the external world as suggested by

59 *PV* 3.195-196, 297; see Dunne (2004: 102-103)

Fodor's Picture Principle, then it must hold between the external world conceived as a unitary sensory field or perceptible scene, and a unitary perceptual representation or image of that scene.

Now, even though a perceptual representation is also said by Dharmakīrti to be a variegated unity of multiple features, he grants it immunity from the sort of material or analytical decomposition to which composite objects and conceptual contents are subject.⁶⁰ For starters, a perceptual representation cannot be materially decomposed because it is mental and hence non-material in nature. More importantly, a perceptual representation resists being analytically factorized because its phenomenal appearance is experientially unified – no sensory feature is phenomenologically isolatable from the unitary representational gestalt (*ākāra*) in which it is located. In order to factorize a perceptual representation of a unitary sensory field into distinct features, one must ignore a given feature's holistic experiential character, and cast one's focus instead onto the distinct external entities that are causally responsible for that feature's presence in experience. But, one does not directly experience these distinct external entities themselves, being that they are atomic and imperceptible. As a result, one is no longer attending to what appears in the non-conceptual perceptual representation – namely, a phenomenally holistic array of sensory features – when one conceptually individuates one aspect of the array as being, say, blue and not yellow.⁶¹ The specific experiential character that one ignores when isolating a certain sensory feature is its being simultaneously represented together with other features.

The simultaneous appearance of sensory features in a single perceptual state is Dharmakīrti's best evidence for the holistic, unitary format of perceptual representations, and the reason why the

60 Though, this is only a qualified immunity, since Dharmakīrti seems to ultimately deny at *PV* 3.209-219 that awareness can have a representational form which is both multiple and unitary, just as he finds it incoherent for a material object to be both a unified whole and a multiplicity of parts. The upshot would be that awareness is fundamentally empty of representational content and hence a dualistic subject-object structure – see Inami (2011) for discussion.

61 *PV* 3.220-221, 317: “*nīlādiś citravijñāne jñānopādhir ananyabhāk / aśakyadarśanas taṃ hi pataty arthe vivecayan // yad yathā bhāṣate jñānaṃ tat tathā eva prakāśate / iti nāma ekabhāvaḥ syāc citrākārasya cetasi //*” “In a variegated state of awareness, the representational form of blue color, etc. is an attribute of awareness which cannot be perceived as being unconnected with other representational forms. Distinguishing that form from the others, one descends upon the external object. Awareness manifests in that very way in which it appears. Thus, the variegated representational form in awareness should be unitary, indeed.”

multiplicity of features represented does not undermine the phenomenal holism of perceptual experience.⁶² We've already seen how a certain type of phenomenal simultaneity figures as evidence in Dharmakīrti's arguments from phenomenology and mental architecture: When one conceptually identifies or linguistically labels any single sensory feature, one must be non-conceptually perceiving all the other features that are simultaneously present, with this perception of all the other features being causally encapsulated from, and thus uninterrupted by, one's conceptual thoughts. Yet, this sort of phenomenal simultaneity between perceptual and conceptual states cannot on its own establish that perceptual representations are essentially non-conceptual. This is only accomplished through taking the simultaneous appearance of multiple sensory features in a single perceptual state to be made possible by the uniquely unitary and holistic format of perceptual representations, a format which is essentially distinct from that of conceptual representations.

Dharmakīrti's commitment to the phenomenal unity and holism of perceptual representations suggests that he conceives of perceptual content in a similar way to how some contemporary non-conceptualists understand the phenomenal content of early vision. Indeed, Dharmakīrti's account may roughly anticipate Marr's notion of a 2½-dimensional sketch, which again involves the viewer-centric mapping of a perceptual scene of rudimentary surface features like such as color and shape, as well as their viewer-relative depth/distance. This sort of representation is supposed to be non-conceptual because its specification of surface features is not constrained by the concepts that a perceiver possesses, nor are concepts constituents of this sort of representational content. As for Dharmakīrti, his

62 *PV* 3.197 & 3.207, 299 & 307: “*atha ekāyatanatve 'pi na anekaṃ drśyate sakṛt / sakṛd grahāvabhāsaḥ kiṃ viyukteṣu tilādiṣu //... nānārthā ekā bhavet tasmāt siddhā 'to apy avikalpikā / vikalpayann apy ekārthaṃ yato anyad api paśyati //*” “Objection: Even though a sensory field is unitary, multiple objects are not perceived simultaneously. Reply: Why does there appear to be a simultaneous apprehension of sesame seeds and so on which are scattered in different locations? ... Therefore, it is established that there may be a single awareness which has multiple objects. Thus, this awareness is non-conceptual, since even while conceptualizing one object, one perceives another object.” It should be noted that these two verses are pulled from a complicated discussion (*PV* 3.197-224) in which Dharmakīrti argues both for and against the variegated unity of representational forms. See Dunne (2004: 398-400) for Dharmakīrti's dismissals at *PV* 3.198-206 of various objections against the simultaneous appearance of multiple features in a variegated perceptual representation. See also the acknowledgement in footnote 60 above that these dismissals may not be representative of Dharmakīrti's ultimate view.

notion of a variegated perceptual image can be characterized in basically the same way: The visual awareness of a unitary sensory field would consist in simultaneously representing a surface array of holistically bound colored shapes and their viewer-relative depths⁶³, without grouping these features into discrete, spatiotemporally composite, and viewpoint-independent three-dimensional objects that have unseen parts.

The unitary and holistic character of iconic sensory content for Dharmakīrti additionally suggests against an otherwise plausible interpretation of his account in the light of Clark’s (2004) “feature placing” model of perception (but cf. Ganeri 2011: 240). Given that, within Dharmakīrti’s external realist ontology, the external world is comprised of a spatial array of atomic, extensionless particles that causally generate a sensory image in the mind, it is tempting to read Dharmakīrti as taking that sensory image of the external world to contain a perceptual array of spatially located minima sensibilia, that is, minimally discriminable points of sensory features. While this reading would seem to capture the variegated nature of perceptual representations for Dharmakīrti, framing it in terms of Clark’s feature-placing model would be a mistake. That is because, according to Clark, sensory feature-placing involves the predication of qualities to spatiotemporal locations, with this location-quality structure being analogous to the explicitly subject-predicate structure of propositional content (2004: 453). Clark sees this parallel structure between perceptual and conceptual contents as making it possible for sensation and thought to communicate with each other (2000: 151). But, on Dharmakīrti’s account, to attribute a feature-placing structure to perceptual content would be to attribute it with the wrong type of variegation, namely, the kind of analytic decomposibility which he thinks is characteristic only of conceptual contents. A feature-placing structure is canonically decomposable into a representation of a feature, a representation of a placetime, and a representation of the instantiation

63 Evidence that Dharmakīrti would view spatial depth/distance as part of the phenomenal content of perception can be derived from his characterization of a unique particular as being that object whose phenomenal appearance differs depending on its proximity to the senses; see *NB* 1.13, 40: “*yasya arthasya sannidhānāsannidhānābhyām jñānapratibhāsabhedas tat svalakṣaṇam.*”

relation that predicates the feature to the placetime (Quilty-Dunn 2017: 193-194). Consequently, a feature-placing structure cannot characterize iconic perceptual content if this content is standardly understood to resist any canonical decomposition (but cf. Guerrero 2015: 204). Nor should it characterize perceptual representations as Dharmakīrti understands them, insofar as their unitary and holistic nature prevents them from being factorized into more primitive experiential or semantic parts. Even if a feature-placing language makes no reference to property-possessing objects, a representational state whose content is expressible by a feature-placing sentence – for example, “It’s blue here” – would fail to satisfy Dharmakīrti’s criterion for counting as a non-conceptual perception, being that non-conceptual contents are not capable of being associated with any language at all.

4.3 Iconic representational format grounds perception’s essentially non-conceptual nature

The uniquely iconic character of sensory representations demonstrates for Dharmakīrti that sense perception is essentially non-conceptual, because he thinks that the basic differences between the respective representational formats and corresponding phenomenal characters of perceptual and conceptual states is only explicable if these states have fundamentally different types of content. Having specified how the iconic format of perceptual representations grants them with an essentially different structure than that of predicative conceptual representations, we can now see how, according to Dharmakīrti, an iconic format would essentially restrict the types of objects that perception can represent. On the question of whether one can non-conceptually perceive abstract, high-level kind-properties like *being a pine tree* or someone’s *being angry*, Dharmakīrti would most certainly answer in the negative. He already has enough reason to doubt that abstract generic properties are genuine objects of perception, given that he thinks they are unreal and have no causal power to generate perceptual states. But more to the point here, he would also admit that the holistic character of iconic perceptual representations prevents them from taking abstract properties as their contents. If an iconic visual

representation can only encode determinate sensory features like color, shape, and spatial location in a holistic manner, then not only would a visual representation be unable to encode color separately from shape and location, but it would also be unable to encode a separate property like redness which is abstract and has no particular color, shape, or location in itself.

Let's grant for the sake of argument – as Dharmakīrti does⁶⁴ – that abstract properties like redness could be objects of perception, such that perceptual states and conceptual states could represent the exact same types of things. Were that so, the respective representational formats and phenomenal characters of sensory and conceptual states would just stand as different modes or means of accessing the same object. However, Dharmakīrti and his followers reject this possibility, because the representational format and phenomenal character of sensory and conceptual states are incompatible with each other, and hence these states would be representing the same object to exist in two mutually incompatible ways. In particular, sensory states present an object as being both phenomenally vivid and spatiotemporally determinate, while conceptual states do not – yet, the same object cannot in itself be both vivid/spatiotemporally determinate and non-vivid/spatiotemporally indeterminate. The lesson is this: If awareness-states are to genuinely represent the same object, but the object itself cannot have two mutually incompatible natures, then sensory and conceptual states cannot be genuinely representing the same object if their ways of representing that object are mutually conflicting.⁶⁵

One objection here would be that Dharmakīrti is committing what Millikan (1991) calls a “content externalizing” fallacy, that is, the mistake of conflating the properties of a representational

64 *PV* 3.233-235, 331-332: “*yady apy asti sitatvādir yādr̥g indriyagocaraḥ / na so 'bhidhīyate śabdair jñānayo rūpabhedataḥ // ekārthatve 'pi buddhīnām nānāśratayā sa cet / śrotrādicitāni idānīm bhinnārthāni iti tat kutaḥ // jāto nāma āśrayo 'nyonyah cetasām tasya vastunaḥ / ekasya eva kuto rūpaḥ bhinnākārāvabhāsi tat !/*” “Even if whiteness, etc. is a kind of sensory object, it isn't denoted by words, since the representational forms belonging to states of sensory and linguistic awareness are different. If it were claimed that awareness-states, despite sharing the same object, differ in virtue of their different causes, then why would auditory and other sensory states be said to have different objects? Awareness-states of the same entity might indeed happen to have mutually distinct causes. Nonetheless, how could that very same entity have a nature which appears through different representational forms?”

65 The existence of conflicting representations of the same purported object suggests a further lesson to some Yogācāra Buddhists: awareness-states do not actually represent any mind-independent objects at all (e.g., see *MAVṬ* 1.4, 18.25-19.14; Stanley 1988: 22-23).

vehicle with that of the content represented. Someone who supports the common-sense view that we can perceive and think about the same object may allege that Dharmakīrti is unduly imputing the phenomenal vivacity or non-vivacity of sensory and conceptual states onto the object represented, and then concluding that because the same object cannot have both a vivid and non-vivid appearance, sensory and conceptual states cannot be representing the same object. A representative response to this objection is offered by the Dharmakīrtian Buddhist philosopher Jñānaśrīmitra (11th cent.). To a detractor who points out that the same tree can appear non-vividly when perceived at a distance and vividly when it's nearby, Jñānaśrīmitra responds by granting that a difference in phenomenal appearance does not necessarily correspond to a difference in the thing itself (*vastu*). Nonetheless, he insists that states with different phenomenal appearances must not share the same intentional object (*viṣaya*). For example, the perception of a cloth apprehends a different intentional object than the perception of a pot, because the former contains the phenomenal appearance of a cloth and the latter does not. Or, the jaundiced awareness of a yellow conch shell does not represent the same intentional object as a veridical perception of the actually white conch shell, just because the phenomenal appearance of the shell as yellow is contrary to the appearance of the shell as white. So too with perceptual and conceptual states – they cannot be representing the same intentional objects if their phenomenal and representational formats are fundamentally contrary to one another.

From this sort of argument, we can surmise that Dharmakīrti and his followers would likely endorse the “Phenomenal Intentionality thesis” articulated by Horgan and Tienson (2002), which in its basic form holds that a mental state’s intentional content is determined and constituted by that state’s phenomenal character. More precisely, the view takes intentionality to be such that any two mental states which are phenomenal duplicates would share exactly similar intentional contents (*ibid.*: 524). In the terms of classical Indian logic, Jñānaśrīmitra espouses the same basic claim: the property of having

one and the same intentional object is pervaded by a non-difference in phenomenal appearance.⁶⁶ As Dharmakīrti puts it, a difference in phenomenal appearance is one of the basic reasons why those who “reflect on reality” (*tattvacintaka*) do not infer the objects of perception and conceptual constructions to be identical.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The primary aim of this essay has been to reconstruct Dharmakīrti’s arguments for an essentialist content non-conceptualism, and show how these arguments anticipate or even improve upon parallel versions offered by contemporary non-conceptualists. Though these arguments are motivated in part by a background trope ontology of unique and momentary particulars, they nonetheless share with their modern counterparts a common appeal to the unique phenomenology of perceptual awareness, the unique psychological function of perceptual processing, and ultimately the unique format of perceptual representations. But austere ontology aside, what moves Dharmakīrti’s account toward an essentialist view of non-conceptual content, and hence away from the deficiencies that Hanna and Chadha have identified in many modern non-conceptualist arguments, is its sensitivity to the threat posed by a capacious and refined conceptualism, one which would legitimately posit that conceptual capacities are more widespread than what parties to the modern non-conceptualist debate have typically granted. Accepting this posit as his own, Dharmakīrti therefore defends the non-conceptual nature of perceptual awareness in a way that still justifiably retains an essential distinction between non-conceptual and conceptual representations. In so doing, Dharmakīrti’s comprehensive account could serve as a theoretical starting-point for the non-conceptualism debate that would perhaps help efforts to move it beyond its current terminological impasse.⁶⁸ If Hanna and Chadha are right that

66 *AP*, 106.33-34: “*ekaviṣayatvaṃ hi pratibhāsābhedenā vyāptam....*”; see McCrea and Patil (2010: 61-62) for translation.

67 *PVSV* ad *PV* 1.70, 171.1-2: “*tattvacintakās tu pratibhāsādibhyo na abhedam anumanyante.*”

68 Indeed, a fuller study of Dharmakīrti and classical Yogācāra Buddhism might contribute to a broader philosophical and scientific discussion of non-conceptual awareness which extends beyond the confines of the modern debate over non-

an essentialist content view is the only plausible form of the non-conceptualist thesis, and if I am right that Dharmakīrti offers among the most consistent articulations of that view, then one upshot of this essay is that contemporary conceptualists have a well-defined target for their objections.

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conceptual content (cf. Coseru 2012; Spackman 2021; Thompson 2020). Here, we’ve only considered Dharmakīrti’s account of non-conceptual perceptual content as developed under the presumption that the function of sense perception is to represent objects in the external world. In the last analysis, however, Dharmakīrti rejects this presumption and claims that conscious mental states are only ever non-conceptually acquainted with themselves. What’s more, this reflexive perceptual acquaintance is ultimately non-representational, insofar as awareness intrinsically lacks a representational structure (*ākāra*) involving an intentional object to be apprehended (*grāhya*) and a vehicle that carries out that apprehension (*grāhaka*) (Kellner 2017a/b). The appearance of any dualistic representational structure – even in the putatively non-conceptual perception of objects – is a fundamentally cognitive illusion that happens to be as experientially stubborn as illusions born of sensory defects (Eltschinger 2005: 169-171; Eltschinger 2009a: 61; but cf. Prueitt 2017: 30-34). Dharmakīrti and Yogācāra thinkers generally identify the cause of dualistic representational structure as a deep-seated, self-perpetuating ignorance, the memory traces of which condition all mental states of unenlightened beings. But, the Yogācāra identification of a cause for subject-object duality in turn indicates the possibility of its elimination. This is all just to suggest that contemporary non-conceptualists might consider taking on the view that non-conceptual awareness is an achievement and not simply the default state of ordinary sensory experience.

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- DP* *Dharmottarapradīpa* (Durveka Miśra) in Malvania 1971
- MAVṬ* *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭīkā* (Sthiramati) in Yamaguchi 1934
- NB* *Nyāyabindu* (Dharmakīrti) in Shastri 1994
- NBṬ* *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* (Dharmottara) in Shastri 1994
- PV* *Pramāṇavārttika* (Dharmakīrti) in Tosaki 1979
- PVA* *Pramāṇavārttikālaṅkāra* (Prajñākaragupta) in Sāṅkṛtyāyana 1943a
- PVV* *Pramāṇavārttikavṛtti* (Manorathanandin) in Sāṅkṛtyāyana 1938
- PVSV* *Pramāṇavārttikasvopnājñavṛtti* (Dharmakīrti) in Sāṅkṛtyāyana 1943b
- PVīn* *Pramāṇaviniścaya* (Dharmakīrti) in Steinkellner 2007
- TBh* *Tarkabhāṣā* (Mokṣākaragupta) in Krishnamacharya 1942

TS/P *Tattvasamgraha/pañjikā* (Śāntaraksita/Kamalaśīla) in Krishnamacharya 1926

TSop *Tarkasopāna* (Vidyākaraśānti) in Tucci 1956

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