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Explanation or Insight?

Competing Transformative Epistemic Ideals

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I. Transformation through Knowledge of Reality

Plato and classical Indian Buddhist philosophers are united in their conviction that true knowledge of reality is transformative, and is that without which there is no real liberation from an ordinary existence shot through with endemic confusion and error.* Such knowledge is not to be understood by recourse to common usage but is the ideal, complete, or perfect cognition (whatever that turns out to be) of reality (whatever that turns out to be).[1]

Vasubandhu, who stands within the strand of Indian Buddhist thought that I will be focusing on, opens his *Treasury of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*) with praise for the Buddha as the destroyer of all blindness—his commentary, *bhāṣya*, clarifies that '"Blindness" is ignorance, for ignorance hinders the seeing of things as they truly are'.[2] This choice of terms of praise is a declaration by Vasubandhu of what he takes to be the most salient feature of the Buddha: his

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[1] For such a way of thinking about knowledge in the history of European philosophy, see Pasnau 2013 and 2017.

[2] *AKBh.* I.1. This and subsequent translations of the *Treasury* are by Pruden, with occasional modification (including giving English renderings of words his translation leaves in Sanskrit), unless otherwise noted.

knowledge, or 'seeing things as they truly are'. 'By this', he goes on to say, 'the Buddha is sufficiently designated.' Only secondarily is the Buddha praised for what he is able to do and be for others in virtue of this incomparable knowledge, *viz*., remove others from the 'mire of transmigration' by alleviating *their* ignorance.

As far as Vasubandhu in the *Treasury* is concerned, the Buddha's Path is a path of knowledge—where 'knowledge' is to designate the perfect cognition of things as they are, whatever that turns out to be.[3] He next defines '*abhidharma*'—the topic of the treatise—in terms of ideal cognition: '*Abhidharma* is pure *prajñā* with its following. *Prajñā*… is the discernment of the *dharmas*'.[4] Let '*dharmas*' here designate, simply, knowable reality. *Prajñā's* 'following', meanwhile, is 'its escort, namely, the five pure *skandhas*'—that is, all the constituents of a person transformed, made pure, by the presence of *prajñā*. Finally, 'Apart from the discernment of the *dharmas,*' he goes on to say, 'there is no means to extinguish the defilements, and it is by reason of the defilements that the world wanders in the ocean of existence' (*AKBh*. I.3). Ideal cognition of what is really real is the *only* means of transforming ourselves and our experiences positively. While Dignāga, working broadly along Vasubandhu's lines, does not offer such a definition of *prajñā*, he does specify that the perfection of it 'is non-dual knowledge [*jñāna*]; it is the Buddha, the object to be realised'.[5] 'Non-dual' knowledge is not identical to Vasubandhu's 'discernment of *dharmas*'; but both gloss *prajñā*, in its perfection, as a knowledge-state and the ultimate goal.

Plato, for his part, frequently depicts Socrates as equating virtue with knowledge or a kind of knowledge (*Laches* 194d, 195a; *Protagoras* 333b, 361b; *Charmides* 164d; *Meno* 89a; *Apology* 20b–c), or considering knowledge the only source of goodness (*Meno* 87d–89a; *Gorgias* 466b–468e; *Philebus* 30c, 66b–c). In the *Euthydemus,* 'knowledge [*epistēmē*] causes rightness [*orthotēta*] and good fortune' (*Euthyd.* 282a4–5), so that 'it is necessary that every man should prepare himself by every means, in such a way that he will be as wise as possible' (282a5–6). The cave allegory at the heart of the *Republic*, the dialogue that will centrally concern us in what follows, vividly describes the transformative effects of such knowledge on the whole of the *psychē*—once one has gone through the

[3] Vasubandhu is not an innovator here in granting such significance to knowledge—for instance, 'all unwholesome states are rooted in ignorance and converge upon ignorance, and all are uprooted when ignorance is uprooted' (*SN* 20.1); and 'Knowledge is the best of things that rise up; Ignorance excels among things that fall down' (*SN* I.74). A sample of further such remarks, just from the *Connected Discourses: SN* 12.22, 12.35–36,22.113–114, 22.126–135.

[4] *AKBh.* I.2a. *Prajñā* in the Indian Buddhist context is used to designate collectively the final two parts of the Eightfold Path (Theravāda), or one of ten perfections, or the final of six perfections (Mahāyāna), and—with its 'knowledge' root, *jñā*, along with its intensifier prefix, *pra*—it is most often translated into English as 'insight' or 'wisdom'. As Vasubandhu immediately specified what he means by it, I leave it here untranslated. Its role, as specified in I.3, is the crucial point here.

[5] *Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha* 1, trans. Tucci, modified. Frauwallner 1959: 116–20 gives an overview of this less discussed work.

education described in order to attain true and full knowledge of reality, one's whole way of seeing and engaging with the ordinary word is transformed (*Rep*. 516c–d, 517c–e). Each of these contexts may be problematic in its particular way, and they may well not all be saying quite the same thing. But the basic theme is strikingly consistent: Knowledge (like Vasubandhu, knowledge of reality or existing things) makes our ordinarily confused selves and experience good.[6]

Characterizing the final end and mechanism of transformation as knowledge of reality, both Buddhist and Platonist are, in a similar weak sense, 'intellectualist'. They lead with the understanding. It is not just that the final end is epistemic; they have from the first an account of human beings and behaviour on which conception *guides* perception, on which thinking gives existence and identity to our desires and projects, our fears and pains. It is bad conceptions that account for and explain the bad desires and the bad actions; and so, conversely, lasting change in behaviour, motivation, and emotional life only comes from restructuring our cognition thoroughly and radically. Only knowledge sets us free.

It can do this because seeking ideal or perfect cognition is an activity which involves 'the whole soul' (as Plato has it, in the *Republic*)—the whole of one's phenomenology, of whatever experience arises, 'follows' or 'escorts' *prajñā* (in Vasubandhu's idiom) by becoming involved in the project and practices of perfecting cognition. Dispositions to feel and to act, evaluative and practical judgements, perceptions, desires, and actions—all the facets of life more readily recognized as 'moral'—are engaged in the knowledge-seeking activity, such that knowledge-seeking can reform and improve them even before perfect cognition is fully attained.

Just as perfect knowledge is quite unlike anything ordinarily called 'knowledge', the reality known is, Buddhist and Platonist agree, quite different from what it is ordinarily thought to be. A preliminary characterization of this can be found by recalling Plato's scandalous demotion of familiar everyday reality—*real* reality for every ordinary person—to the status of mere 'becoming', while only something else (something most people do not even credit with existing) is *really* real, or has 'being'. On the Buddhist side, the first of the four noble truths, the truth of suffering, is not in the least transparent to anyone—otherwise the Buddha's accomplishment would not be so significant, and Brahma would not have had to beg him to teach. Still less obvious are the associated claims that existence is marked by transience and no-self, as well as suffering; and that change and generation and conditions are forms of suffering. *That* we are thoroughly conditioned and changing—that is to say, that there is no independent agent or enduring subject—is something virtually incomprehensible to our ordinary, default ways of thinking and experiencing ourselves and the world. That *the world* is similarly devoid of

[6] Lloyd 2014: 19–22 specifically considers some of the practical effects of epistemic ideals in Plato and Aristotle, though his focus is more social than personal.

discrete, identifiable, middle-sized dry goods interacting in causally explanatory ways is likewise far from any ordinary conception of reality. For Buddhist and Platonist alike, seeking knowledge of real reality thus draws our attention away from familiar personal concerns and personal-involving categories (such as agency and choice) towards a radically different sort of reality.

This means that Buddhist and Platonist share further a deeply pessimistic view of our current, ordinary state (which is nothing like what it ought to be), joined to a strikingly optimistic view of our capacity to overcome or escape this ordinary and unfortunate condition.[7] In a very un-Aristotelian vein, the view of ordinary life according to both Buddhist and Platonist is not one of minor flaws and peccadillos in essentially decent people behaving more or less decently, but one of comprehensive confusion and utterly misplaced values and motivations creating a social world that is thoroughly deluded and, as a result, pervaded with unnecessary misery. At the same time, because the source of the error is essentially in our remediable cognitive condition—because the reality we ought to know *can* be known by us—transformation into a substantially improved condition is possible. Even if absolutely perfect cognition is exceedingly rare, it is attainable and approachable: we can all get closer to it and, insofar as we do, we and our lives are improved. Because the gulf between the condition we find ourselves in and the state we aspire to is so vast, for both Platonist and Buddhist, and because it takes the whole of our psychology into its sweep, the sort of transformation enjoined upon us is a comprehensive one.

Call this shared ethical outlook 'impersonal idealism', for it sets as an ethical ideal the attainment of ideal knowledge of an impersonal reality. I will not argue for it here, or explore further its salient contours.[8] Instead, I want to look at where the similarity ends.

For Plato, real reality comprises unchanging, intelligible, well-structured unities related so as to form a well-structured, intelligible whole. What could be more conspicuously different from the Buddhist account of reality as fundamentally transient and lacking complex unity and teleological structure? This metaphysical difference is not trivial. But because we are looking in both cases at an ethics which casts this reality as 'to be known', this metaphysical difference is connected

[7] The power to learn is 'present in everyone's soul', Socrates says in the *Republic* (518c4–5). The Mahāyānists speak of Buddha Nature being present in each one of us; and an early intra-Buddhist dispute in the *Kathāvatthu* (*Kv.* XVII.3) indicates a commitment to improvement always being possible, from one rebirth to the next; see also *Numerical Discourses* III.61 (PTS I.173–4), where the Buddha's rejection of the fatalistic view that 'all is the result of *karma*' reveals an implicit commitment to the possibility of persons to improve.

[8] This is the focus of Carpenter 2023 and Carpenter forthcoming-a. The view differs from the 'self-cultivation philosophy' Gowans 2023 attributes to Indian Buddhists more in emphasis than in principle: in the comprehensiveness of the change enjoined upon us (there is no true nature there that is to be cultivated); and in the role perfect cognition of impersonal reality plays in effecting this radical transformation.

to a less conspicuous but equally deep epistemological difference, and to correspondingly different conceptions of how pursuing such knowledge will affect and transform the person pursuing it. Indeed, for the would-be knower, the more significant difference is in the accounts of what such transformative, liberatory knowledge is.

In brief, Plato offers an explanation-based account of knowledge, trenchantly criticizing the epistemic pretensions of perception. The Indian Buddhist tradition, by contrast, is distinctly suspicious of the epistemic credentials of conceptualization; even when conceptual cognition is granted its due, as Vasubandhu does in his *Treasury of Abhidharma*,[9] or Dignāga in his *Compendium of Means of Valid Cognition* (*Pramāṇasamuccaya*, which devotes Chapters II and V to the validity of concepts, and reasoning done with them), the highest and transformative form of knowledge is perception-like. Dignāga, in fact, offers an account of perception on which it has precisely those characteristics that Plato thinks make perception vulnerable to critique.

The critique gets its bite not by weighing up epistemic arguments but rather through examining ethical implications. The difference in the two accounts of knowledge means that what one is *doing* when one knows or seeks knowledge on the Platonic view is substantially different from what one is *doing* when one knows or seeks to know on the Buddhist account. And this in turn means that what knowing, or seeking to know, *does to the person pursuing knowledge* is different—or at least can be expected to be different. Ultimately, whether we opt for a Platonic or a Buddhist conception of knowledge rests on which of the promised transformations we judge to speak most eloquently.

II. Plato's Ethical Epistemology

The *Republic*'s unfolding description of true knowledge, assimilated at 511b–c to dialectic, culminates with

> do you call someone who is able to give an account of the being of each thing dialectical? But insofar as he's unable to give an account of something, either to himself or to another, do you deny that he has any understanding [*noũn*] of it?[10]

[9] 'Conventional knowledge bears on all…All the conditioned *and unconditioned dharmas* are the object of conventional knowledge' (*AKBh.* VII.3a, emphasis mine).

[10] *Rep*. 534b3–6; this and subsequent translations of the *Republic* are by Grube (rev. Reeve), with modifications. Plato's epistemic vocabulary is not fixed across the dialogues; *sophia*, *nous, epistēmē*, as well as verbal forms (e.g., *oida, gignōskō*), among others, may be used to indicate the ideal sort of cognition we ought to strive for. Most often Plato's contrast term, for a cognition which falls short of the ideal, is *doxa* or *doxazō*—often badly rendered in English as 'belief/believe', and better rendered with the old-fashioned 'opinion/opine' or perhaps with 'judgement/judge' (see Moss and Schwab 2019). In the central books of the *Republic*, *epistēmē, nous,* and *dialegesthai* are favoured.

This rule applies to knowledge of all objects, including the good itself:

> Unless someone can distinguish in an account the form of the good from everything else, can survive all interrogation [*elegchōn*] as if in a battle, striving to examine [*elegchein*] not in accordance with opinion but in accordance with being, and can come through all this with his account still intact, you will say that he doesn't know the good itself or any other good. (534b8–c5)

As set up at the end of Book V, knowing is a power to *do* something. By the end of the discussion it is clear that what one does, or is in a position to do as a knower, is to *give and defend a logos*. The *logos* at issue is an account of 'what is', and in each case of what the object known is. Dialectic 'systematically attempts to grasp with respect to each thing itself what the being of it is' (533b1–2). The accounts must of course be true (or, at 477e7, unmistaken, *anamartētōi*); and they must also be clear (the clearer, the better: *saphēneia*, 479c10; *phanoteron*, 478c13; *saphesteron*, 511c4), maximally precise (*akribestata*, 484c8), and reliable or stable (*pagiōs,* 479c4; *bebaiōsētai,* 533d1).[11] These distinguishing marks of knowledge are first announced in Book V's staged discussion with some imagined 'lovers of sights and sounds' who reject such knowledge distinguished from correct judging, because they deny there is any reality suited for such cognition. There are no fully determinate objects, they claim, so devoid of obscurity as to be cognizable precisely and stably; but only such a reality would be liable to the sort of intelligible account of its nature described in the Divided Line passage in Book VI. Moreover, only by fully examining and securing all hypotheses through their explanatory relations with each other would such an account be devoid of ambiguity and *ad hoc* elements so that it is, as Socrates says it must be, invulnerable to refutation—whether by contrived counterexamples or by the advent of additional information. Such an account of the nature of a thing would be *explanatory*—reasoning about the *aitia* as the *Meno* has it (*Meno* 98a2–3), with detailed consideration in the *Phaedo* of what makes for a good explanation.[12]

Such accounts must be *dialectical* because they leave no hypothesis unexamined and unexplained (*Rep.* 511a–c, 533b–e). Everything used in an account itself has an account, and an infinite regress is avoided by making the most foundational explanatory items inter-explanatory. Thus such knowledge is comprehensive and integrative, and requires recognizing the good order of the whole:

[11] This trio of characteristics of knowledge are concisely articulated in the *Philebus* (see Carpenter 2015), and they remain at work over the course of the *Republic*'s more extended examination of knowledge.

[12] The relevant passage of the *Phaedo* (96a–103a) has been much discussed since Vlastos' seminal 1969 paper. Recent contributions which highlight in different ways the theme of adequate explanation include Sharma 2009; Menn 2010; Bailey 2014; Ebrey 2014; and Wiitala 2022. Kamtekar (this volume) focuses, rather, on cause in discussing this passage.

> if investigation of all the subjects we've mentioned brings out their association and relationship with one another and draws conclusions about their kinship, it contributes something to our goal and isn't labor in vain .... (*Rep.* 531c9–d3)

As in the *Euthyphro*, where if Euthyphro has the knowledge of piety he claims, he should be able to say what piety is and teach this to Socrates; as in the *Charmides*, where if Charmides is temperate, then he knows what temperance is and can articulate this, so here in the *Republic*, knowing is in principle articulable, and as such transmissible through teaching.[13] Its articulability is the sort of articulability that could enable a knower to make another person know *just what they know*, in just the way they know it: that is, it would render the pupil able to articulate and defend an explanatory account of the nature of what is known in such a way that she too could teach this to others. And, as the *elenchus* of the Socratic dialogues foreshadows and the *Republic*'s assimilation of *epistēmē* to *dialektikē* underscores, seeking such articulable knowledge is typically an activity pursued in concert with others.

III. Plato's Criticism of Perception

With such an account of knowledge—ideal knowledge, the sort that promises transformation by aiming at and attaining it—it is hardly surprising that Plato is not impressed by the epistemic credentials of sense-perception, or *aisthēsis*.

One vein of Plato's criticism focuses on the pleasures and pains of the body that are intrinsically related to sense-perception. Sense-pleasures and pains are, according to a view Socrates relates in the *Philebus*, nothing but witchcraft;[14] they wrongly make the soul 'believe the truth is what the body says it is' (*Phaedo* 83c5–d7). In particular they deceive us about what is good. The *Timaeus* describes them as 'those dreadful but necessary disturbances: pleasure, first of all, evil's most powerful lure; then pains, that make us run away from what is good' (*Tim.* 69c8–d2, trans. Zeyl). The desires for sense-pleasures and the fear of bodily pains lead us to all sorts of bad, shameful, and harmful behaviour.

But this should not be mistaken as a brute rejection of an essentially evil and corrupting body, which somehow infects perception with its defects. In fact, it is the other way round. It is the epistemic deficiency of perception which infects sense-pleasures and pains: sense-pleasures and pains are *false* in the *Republic* (584a–587a), they mislead the soul about the truth in the *Phaedo*, and they are

[13] Recall also the explicit argument from *Meno* 86e–87c, that if virtue is knowledge, then it can be taught.

[14] *Phlb.* 44c5–d5, concerning the pleasures in particular; Socrates makes it clear he does not share the view.

generally false and impure in the *Philebus*—although the *Philebus* allows that some sense-pleasures may be approved of as 'true' and 'pure' (*Phlb*. 51c–e; 66c6), while some non-bodily pleasures may be defective (e.g., the false hopes of the foolish man, *Phlb*. 37a–40e). Thus even when criticisms are made by reference to the body, this is not driven by a rejection of sense-pleasures and pains for their embodiedness. It is just that, in their intimate familiarity, and their visceral attractive and aversive qualities, they make most vivid the defects which would beset *any* perception-like cognition regarded epistemically, whether based in the physical senses or not (even, that is, those perception-like cognitions of appearances which are the province of opining, *doxazein*)—namely, the essentially *private* and *episodic* nature of perception.

Both of these objections are brought against perception in the *Theaetetus*' sustained examination of the supposedly 'Protagorean' thesis that knowledge is perception.[15] Take privacy first. On a common-sense metaphysics, bodies are well individuated from one another, so that what is experienced through one body cannot be shared, as such, with any other.[16] Sense-perception thus raises a verification problem and an idiosyncrasy problem—there is simply no way of knowing what another's perceptions are like, and no way to confirm or disconfirm which of apparently competing perceptions should be judged 'correct', for 'no man can assess another's experience better than he' (*Tht.* 161d3–4); and there is no reason to think that the contents of any two persons' perceptions are the same, for the contents of perception are 'private (*idion*) to the individual percipient'.[17]

As Plato's discussion in the *Theaetetus* shows, such privacy survives the dissolution of the common-sense individual bodily perceiver into individual moments of perceiving, and indeed becomes more acute as the perceptual content becomes private to each individual moment of perceiving. Thinking through such dissolution highlights the episodic nature of perception as such. Even if there is an enduring subject experiencing a succession of many such perceptions, any one sense-perception arises as what it is without any essential, logical connection to any other. One sense-perception cannot confirm or disconfirm another, for they are each themselves and different from the others. And it is not a matter of sense-perception itself to *relate* perceptions to one another as prior/posterior, more/less

[15] Aufderheide (this volume) discusses the Protagoreanism of the *Theaetetus* in detail, including in §2 the privacy of perception, and episodicness (as lack of causal connection) in §3. McCabe 1994, 133–41, offers detailed discussion of how privacy and episodicness emerge from the *Theaetetus*' Protagorean account of perception in service of the 'perception is knowledge' thesis; the book more widely articulates the specifically epistemic inadequacy of sensibles.

[16] This concern exercised philosophers immediately preceding Plato, such as Democritus and of course Protagoras, and may be related to Democritus' demotion of cognitions arising 'through the senses' (*dia tōn aisthēseōs*) to mere 'bastard' cognitions, compared to the 'legitimate' cognitions 'arising through the mind' (*dia tēs dianoias; adv. Math* VII.138, DK 68B11; see also *adv. Math.* VII.139, DK 68B139).

[17] *Tht*. 154a2. See also Protagoras' challenge to 'refute [his statement] if you can, by showing that each man's perceptions are not his own private events' (*Tht.* 166c3–5, trans. Levett, rev. Burnyeat).

accurate, or even similar/dissimilar.[18] Such relating is the business of the intellect, as it builds a *logos* or account of the nature of a thing, respecting epistemic norms of knowing, as described above: clarity, precision, the consistency and coherence that make for stability, and explanatoriness. In this way, sense-perception is essentially *alogos*—'unreasoning sense perception', as the *Timaeus* calls it (69d5). It is not the sort of thing which permits of an account—perceptions just are what they are; and while one might appeal to them in making an explanation (particularly partial and unstable explanations of behaviour), it is not sense-perceptions that do the explaining but rather the use they are put to by intelligence. For explanations require logical connections, and these are not within the purview of sense-perception nor of any cognition that is perception-like in this way, presenting an unquestioned appearance without explanation or ascertainable and determinate relation to other cognitions.

As *alogos* and *idion,* perceptions cannot be transmitted, or conveyed between perceivers, nor taught or examined jointly. About the extremists among those who take perception as the model for knowledge, Theodorus exclaims, *'Pupils,* my good man? There are no pupils and teachers among these people' (*Tht.* 180b9–c1). The intractably incommunicable and *alogos* nature of sense-perception highlights the feature which disqualifies any cognition from a claim to be knowledge. 'Judging things correctly without being able to give a reason [*logon*]', Socrates says in the *Symposium* (202a5–8), 'Surely you see that this is not the same as knowing [*epistasthai*]—for how could knowledge [*epistēmē*] be unreasoning [*alogon*]?' Reason may be able to discern intelligibility within perceptual reality, and this will be relevant when considering the further ethical implications of knowledge-seeking on Plato's account of it. But this is the work of reason; perceptual cognition itself cannot be or even of itself lead to knowledge. It is the wrong sort of activity, as well as having the wrong sort of objects. Because it is the wrong sort of activity, the objection extends to any cognition of 'appearances' that is perceptual in these ways—judgements that rest with appearances, accepting them as they are without aiming to discover explanatory links between them, without making them into something articulable, transmissible, and liable to joint examination and critique.

IV. Dignāga's Ideal Knowledge

Dignāga, a fifth-century CE Buddhist epistemologist, will have no trouble agreeing with Plato's practical concerns about sense pleasures—the earliest Buddhist

[18] 'Both [perceptions—one auditory, one visual] together are two, and each of them is one…[and] you [are] also able to consider whether they are like or unlike each other…Now what is it through which you think all these things about them? It is not possible, you see, to grasp what is common to both either through sight or through hearing' (*Tht.* 185b2–9).

texts recognize sense-pleasures as 'a danger' (e.g., *MN* 13); failure to see this is a 'pernicious view' (*MN* 22). But this danger in sense-pleasures is not due to the essential obscurities perception inherits from its connection with the body, nor to the way that the body makes things necessarily private to the individual and devoid of logical interconnections.

In the first place, perception is not essentially related to the body at all, for it is standard in Buddhist philosophy of mind to recognize mental perception (the cognition of mental stimuli by the mind) as a sixth mode of perception. Vasubandhu, for instance, confirms that 'one should distinguish six classes of sensations: those which arise from the contact of the five material organs, the organ of sight, etc., with their object; and those which arise from contact with the mental organ' (*AKBh*. I.14c; see also *AKBh*. III.32). He is here discussing *vedanā*, distinguished as the felt hedonic tone (pleasant, painful, or neutral) arising according to the six sense modalities; but the bare consciousness of stimuli (independent of affective valence) is likewise sixfold, according to sense-organ, and not fivefold: there are 'six classes of consciousness (*vijñāna*), visual, auditory, olfactory, taste, touch, and mental' (*AKBh.* I.16).[19] While the *dangers* of sense-perception come from the attractive and aversive qualities of *vedanā,* whether based in a material or a mental sense-organ, it is the six classes of consciousness arising from contact of an organ with its object that are the sense-perception proper in the sense of the registering or awareness of sense-objects (including mental sense-objects). In epistemological contexts such perception is called *pratyakṣa*, translated 'perception', 'direct perception', or 'immediate perception' in English, and it is usually contrasted with *anumāna*, 'inference' (e.g., *AKBh*. II.46b, II.62a–b; IV.75); this is the distinction Dignāga works with.[20]

Dignāga is careful about definitions,[21] and the definition he offers of perception deliberately does not appeal in any way to bodily sense-perception—indeed, he criticizes those who do tie their definitions of perception to the body.[22] Instead, in his chapter on perception in the *Compendium of Means of Valid Cognition*

[19] And while the five senses based in bodily sense-organs may be contrasted with the mental sense-modality (as at *AKBh.* I.14, with *vedanā*), this is not a difference in whether it is *perception* or not (see, for instance, *AKBh*. IV.75).

[20] It is imperfect convention to render *anumāna* as 'inference'; Katsura 2007: 76 describes it more accurately as 'hypothetical reasoning based on induction'. Dignāga argues that every conceptually structured truth-apt cognition (including concept formation, application, and any form of language) takes this same form; and since for the purposes of this discussion it is the contrast with non-conceptual cognition that is salient, I will favour in what follows the broader English rendering of 'reasoning' for *anumāna*.

[21] See his criticism of the Nyāya account of perception later in the chapter (*PS* I.iii.1), on the grounds that they include redundant specifications in their definition. If something is already entailed by what is included in the definition, there is no need to specify it separately, and indeed one must not do so.

[22] In his critique of the Nyāya account of perception (*PS* I.iii), Dignāga specifically rejects the restriction of perception to sense-perception: 'If the senses were limited to five only, pleasure (*sukha*), etc. must be uncognizable' (*PS* I.iii.2c).

(*Pramāṇasamuccaya*), he defines perception (*pratyakṣa*) strictly according to its objects; and these objects are not sensibles but, strictly, *particulars* (*svalakṣana*):

> The means of valid cognition are perception and inference [*anumāna*]. There are only two because the knowable has a twofold character [*lakṣaṇadvayam*]. Apart from the particular [*svalakṣaṇa*] and the generality [or 'universal', *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*] there is no other knowable . . . and we shall prove that perception is only of the particular and inference only of the universal.[23]

Naturally one can categorize perceptions, and it is important for ensuring we have got the same thing in view that one of the kinds Dignāga acknowledges is sense-perception. In fact, Dignāga distinguishes three kinds of perception:[24] physical (based in material sense-organs), mental, and 'yogic' perception (*PS* I.6, on which more later). But he makes clear that such classification is a matter of convenience—'in response to the view of others' (*PS ad* I.6), who distinguish, for instance, according to whether a perception is or 'is not dependent on any sense-organ' (*PS ad* I.6)—and has no bearing on whether a cognition counts as perception.

According to Dignāga, the only thing that makes any and all perceptions *perceptions* is that they are *of* particulars. And what is a particular? As an initial elaboration, we may say that a particular is *as such* non-repeatable. It is *this* and not anything else. From this alone it would follow that no cognition involving a name, a label, a classification of any sort could be a perception, for such things are necessarily repeatable. And indeed, Dignāga says, 'Perception is free from conceptual construction [*kalpanā*]' (*PS* I.3c; I.6ab), and specifies that *kalpanā* is 'the association of a name, a genus, *etc.*' (*PS* I.3d). He concludes discussion of this verse with 'that which is devoid of such conceptual construction is perception', so that we have the biconditional: all and only non-conceptual cognitions are perceptions—which, he adds, 'occur in the form of immediate experience' (*PS* I.6ab).

Now if perception is free from conceptual construction, 'inexpressible' (*PS* I.5), so that 'one must not use even the word "thus"', as Plato has Socrates say in the *Theaetetus* (183b1),[25] and if it 'occurs in the form of immediate experience', then perception for Dignāga will accordingly be episodic, *alogos*, and private (*idion*).

[23] *PS* I.i.2b2–c1. This and all further translations of *Pramāṇasamuccaya* I are by Masaaki Hattori, modified by reference to Steinkellner's 'hypothetical reconstruction of the Sanskrit text'.

[24] And not four, as Dharmakīrti would have it—see Franco 1986 and 1993.

[25] Cf. *Tht.* 157b4–5: 'Nor should we allow the use of such words as "something", "of something", or "mine", "this" or "that".' Socrates' conclusion follows from a theory of perception and perceptibles able to underwrite the Protagorean–Theaetetan claim that perception is knowledge, and thus all perceptions are true (to the perceiver)—including the not strictly bodily seemings that Protagoras thinks are authoritative for those to whom they appear. For detailed discussion, see McCabe 1994: 137–41 and Burnyeat 1990: 21–8.

Any activity of drawing together distinct perceptions, classifying, comparing, identifying, or labelling them, will be due—for Dignāga just as Socrates describes at *Theaetetus* 184c–185d—to conceptual mental activity. This leaves perception itself, stripped of all conceptualizing, to be simply the immediate presentation of unspecified content, unrelated to any other perception. Any perception is isolated and thus insulated from any other, so that 'what one is immediately experiencing is always true' (*Tht.* 167a8), *in a sense*. Perceptions may differ from one another, but they cannot *contradict* each other—and even their difference can only be cognized by a different, conceptual form of cognition. They are in a relevantly similar sense private: the particular contents or object of a moment of perception are unrepeatable, and so one cannot be related to any other moment of cognition without losing the particularity that constitutes it as perception; still less could they be evaluable by another cognition, or even said to be transmitted *as perceptual* to another cognition or mind.

Perception on Dignāga's account of it, then, is just what Plato calls *alogos*, with all the associated features which Plato objects to. Perceptions are moments of non-conceptual cognition private to the perceiving subject, or to the occurrent moment of perception, essentially unshareable and unrepeatable. They are by definition not susceptible to rational account, nor such as to play a role in an explanatory account.[26] For, as soon as they are made fit for relating to other cognitions, they lose thereby that which made them perceptions—namely, their non-conceptuality. They cannot be taught to another in virtue of being in possession of them. If one could 'teach' another person to perceive, one would not thereby have brought them to have the same perceptions that one has oneself.

This, of course, would be no conflict at all, if Dignāga acknowledged the epistemic inferiority of perception. But he does no such thing. Moreover, he is in no position to do any such thing. On the contrary, although he does not discuss it very explicitly here, Dignāga must suppose that the transformative, liberatory cognition ultimately sought is perceptual in kind.

The most straightforward way to make this clear is to recall that Dignāga states plainly that there are only two *pramāṇa*s: perception and 'inference' or reasoning. There is no third form of valid cognition (*PS* I.2a–3b). Since he explicitly clears out any conception whatsoever from the domain of perception; and since perception is *only* of particulars; and since *only* perception is of particulars ('a general term does not express particulars', *PS* V.2, trans. Hayes), it is absolutely clear that whatever has any conceptuality to it at all must be reasoning or 'inference', with

[26] See *Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha* 48–50. This controversial implication is implicitly rejected by Dharmakīrti, who tries to make Dignāga's particulars play such an explanatory role with respect to generalities, or valid concepts, by positing a causal link between them—see discussion of *telic* function in Dunne 2004, Coseru 2013: 252–3 on 'natural connection' (*svabhāvapratibandha*), and Tillemans 2011 on bridging the scheme-content gap (although it may be doubted whether Dignāga himself even aimed to bridge such a gap).

generalities or universals as its only objects. But, Dignāga argues later, universals are not really existing things (*PS* II.16). Therefore, *a fortiori*, what is known by reasoning is not reality as it is. And so, if real reality can be known at all, it will have to be known by perception.

But reality can be known as it is, in such a way that transforms experience and liberates from suffering—because the Buddha, Dignāga reminds us in his opening verse of praise, was the *sugata* (the one who attained awakening) and the 'personification of means of valid cognition'. Therefore it must be known by perception. Indeed, the object of perception is, Dignāga says, cognized simply 'as it is' (*PS* I.5), echoing a familiar Buddhist injunction to know things 'as they are' (as seen, for instance, in Vasubandhu's comment on *Treasury* I.1, cited above).

This need not mean that all perceptions, including all visual, audio, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory sense-perceptions, are liberatory—although there may well be something of attainment along that trajectory in being able to recognize bare physical sensations for what they are without overlaying them with conceptual interpretation. But Dignāga specifically acknowledges a distinct category of perception: 'the yogin's intuition of the thing itself, unassociated with the teacher's instruction' (*PS* I.6cd) is a form of *perception*, not reasoning. If not all perception is liberatory, this at least is the liberating sort of knowledge, and it is perceptual in kind.[27] Arguably its perfect form would be pure reflexive awareness, without any object to introduce a subject–object duality into the cognitive experience, since only this would be *structurally* or formally free of all distinctions introduced by conceptualization.[28]

V. Ethical Transformations of Ideal Cognition

It may be said that, on the epistemic level, we do not have an actual objection here, but a mere disagreement. Plato and Dignāga agree that perception is devoid of conceptuality, *alogos*, without intrinsic connection one to the other, experiential, episodic, non-repeatable, non-transferable, *idion*, utterly without articulable structure or content. Plato thinks such a thing cannot possibly count as

[27] We may find confirmation of this in Dignāga's explicit discussion of perfect knowing, the *Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha* 53, 'The man who knows according to the truth does not perceive anything corresponding to names' (trans. Tucci). Coseru (this volume, §7) discusses yogic perception, as well as the related claim that (at least for Dharmakīrti, Dignāga's successor) 'conceptual cognitions cannot be a vehicle for the attainment of nonconceptual states'—though it is a matter of some controversy, and debate among Buddhist philosophers themselves, what role conceptual cognitions may play in the progress towards transformative non-conceptual cognition.

[28] For Dignāga, recall, perfect cognition is non-dual (*Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha* 1). Vasubandhu says much the same in his *Thirty Verses* (*Trimṣikā*), especially vv. 24, 28–30; and while the position in this text is in some respects different from that in his *Treasury*, it is in just those respects closer to Dignāga on this point.

knowledge. But that's just because he has an explanation-based account of what knowledge is. Dignāga, with a perception-based account of perfect knowledge, will not see in any of these acknowledged features of perception anything which counts against it, epistemically.

There are different lines on which the disagreement may become a debate, including metaphysical and methodological: one might argue that the sort of entity fit to be an object of Platonic knowledge cannot exist; or one might argue that even simple ordinary judgements such as 'these are two fingers, one longer than the other' cannot be explained by appeal to only a transient reality devoid of logical structure. One could even conduct the debate along political lines: Plato thinks it is *politically* essential that we can teach and not just brainwash each other; and for that, it is essential that the knowable be something shareable and the knowing be something we can pursue jointly. Perception as an epistemic ideal is politically dangerous, he would argue, and leads to a Foucauldian dystopia in which everything really is just power, and might therefore makes right. Conversely, the Buddhist may press the point that all conceptualization imposes a general identity which as such does violence to the particular,[29] whose full particularity can only be appreciated perceptually, so that the political implication of Plato's alternative epistemological ideal can only be fascism.

While any of these lines of inquiry may reveal important philosophical points, because we are considering Buddhist and Platonist as offering an ethics of knowledge, I set them aside to pursue the ethical and moral-psychological angle on the debate. Precisely because Buddhist and Platonist agree that the moral project is one of self-transformation through perfect knowledge of reality—agree that having such knowledge will transform the knower, and pursuing it improve her—their diametrically opposed conceptions of ideal knowledge may ground ethical objections to alternative conceptions of ideal knowledge. Aiming at ideal knowledge *does something to us*, to the person who so aims—call these the ethical transformations of ideal cognition—and it is how ideal knowledge changes us, or fails to change us, that may be objectionable.

Aiming at the ideal commandeers and shapes the whole soul, for Plato, or, for the Buddhist, the whole person-constituting psychological set (recall the entourage following perfect knowledge at the beginning of Vasubandhu's *Treasury*). This is because, as an ideal, knowledge recommends values and sets standards which must be respected and even preferred above others, insofar as one is engaged in pursing that ideal. On any account, aiming at knowledge implies valuing reality over desire-satisfaction and this may ground similar effects on the aspiring knower, regardless of the conception of knowledge aimed at. But different accounts of ideal cognition also imply different values: on a Platonic account

[29] Along the lines proposed, for instance, by Adorno in his *Negative Dialektik* (see in particular Adorno 1970: 30–3, 151).

of ideal knowledge, accuracy, clarity, explanatoriness, and articulability are central, while the Buddhist perception-based conception of ideal cognition foregrounds values of immediacy, undistortedness, and self-effacement. *Practices* of striving for the cognitive ideal are at the same time practices that inculcate, enact, and embody these different values of ideal cognition, thus shaping one's habits and character differently according to the values pursued.[30] It is in considering the effects on the knower of seeking knowledge, and of orienting oneself towards very different conceptions of reality, that the differing ethical effects of Buddhist and Platonic accounts of knowing become manifest.[31]

1. Shared Transformations

With their shared, if differently conceived, notions of real reality as *impersonal*, and of ordinary convictions and ambitions as thoroughly misguided in just this respect, there is a set of transformations through knowing that Plato and Dignāga or Vasubandhu may equally lay claim to. These have to do with detachment from the norms and values of the body; detachment from the norms and values of society; and the reconfiguration of patterns of valuing, desiring, and experiencing accordingly.

Consider first Plato. Acquiring or perfecting the power to articulate explanatory accounts demands that one turn one's attention towards non-physical intelligible reality and away from changing, sensible matters. The metaphor of 'turning', introduced via the image of the prisoners in the cave who cannot turn their heads (*Rep.* 514a), persists throughout this discussion in *Republic* VII: turning from becoming towards being at 518c; turning towards what is true (521c); studying subjects that turn the soul away from becoming and towards truth and being (525a, c); and practising dialectic, with the help of lesser forms of knowing, turns the soul around (532c). At a minimum, what is not attended to thereby exerts less sway over one's outlook and motivations:

> When someone's desires incline strongly for one thing, they are thereby weakened for others, just like a stream that has been partly diverted into another channel… Then, when someone's desires flow towards learning and everything of that sort, he would be concerned, I suppose, with the pleasures of the soul itself by itself, and he would abandon those pleasures that come through the body. (485d5–8, 10–12)

[30] As an example of this sort of inquiry, Carpenter 2016 considers the effects of knowing on the soul's affective states according to the similar account of perfect knowledge offered in Plato's *Philebus*.

[31] The relevant metaphysical differences are often closely connected to the epistemological differences, so it will be in this way that the different conceptions of the reality to be known will figure in the discussion that follows.

After the proper orientation of the soul towards true knowledge, the disinterest effected concerns social goods as much as bodily: 'will a thinker high-minded enough to study all time and all being consider human life to be something important?' Socrates asks (486a8–10). 'He couldn't possibly.'

Moreover, in diverting energy away from the bodily and the socially recognized scales of value, one is actively attending to something else instead. Taking knowledge as one's goal changes one's values to those of perfect knowing, and puts material and social goods into a different perspective: someone who has acquired true knowledge would not desire the rewards or envy those who in the ordinary social order are honoured and hold power (516d); indeed, he would rather endure any suffering than 'share their opinions [*doxazein*] and live as they do' (516d7).

As one strives to know reality, one *enacts the values* constitutive of real knowledge. On the Platonic account, studying coherent bodies of knowledge, such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, or music engages one in actively preferring clarity, truth, precision, coherence, and explanatoriness over the temptations of convenience, pleasure, novelty, and impulse. And seeking to give in principle (instead of *ad hoc*) explanations of what things are (and why they are as they are) entails the simultaneous recognition that sensations cannot help with this—not only are they often mistaken and misleading, they are simply of the wrong kind. Seeking perfect Platonic knowledge requires one to take a different and more distanced attitude towards the deliverances of the senses;[32] insofar as there is intelligibility to be found there, it is in virtue of real intelligible objects, and not on account of the unintelligible sensory qualities themselves.

Similarly, to recognize true knowledge as the cognitive ideal is to recognize how completely ordinary thinking in ordinary life fails to do just that. Preferring the cognitive values of ideal knowledge diminishes the attractions not only of creaturely pleasures but also of the intrinsically social desiderata of status and power, and the esteem that attaches to these.[33] Just as one becomes detached from and sceptical of the deliverances of the senses, one ceases to give the benefit of the doubt to customary values as well as to customary ways of thinking, which are ultimately based on trusting and valuing *alogos*, contingent matters.

Here we see some of the ethical relevance of the fact that the reality we are directed to know is an impersonal one, not a specifically 'moral reality' and not a reality constructed around person-involving categories and concerns. To seek ideal knowledge is to 'turn away' from the human, to take one's normative bearings from cognitive ideals and a reality independently conformable to these.

[32] 'Investigation through the eyes is full of deceit, as is that through the ears and other senses' (*Phd.* 83a3–5, trans. Grube).

[33] Think here of the true and false coin of *Phaedo* 69a–d; or of the incommensurability which prevents any exchange of goods between Socrates and Alcibiades in the *Symposium*.

Those who have had a taste of real knowledge 'are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs' (*Rep*. 517d5); focusing on seeking ideal knowledge (loving wisdom) delivers the soul 'from ignorance, fear, savage desires, and *other human ills*' (*Phaedo* 81a6–8, emphasis and translation mine); in the *Theaetetus*, 'the scrambling of political cliques for office; social functions, dinners, parties with flute girls—such doings never enter [the philosopher's] head, even in a dream' (*Tht*. 173d4–6). Orienting oneself towards ideal cognition has the transformative effect of making one, within the human world, less fearful and gluttonous, less dazzled by fame and fortune in discerning what is right, and more willing and able to forego the socially constructed goods and ignore social expectations when necessary.

A Buddhist perception-based conception of ideal cognition may claim a similar disenchanting effect from sense-pleasures and social pressures, though the precise means will differ, as a perception-based account of perfect knowledge engages different norms: *viz*., norms of immediacy, direct experience, and undistortedness. To make conception-free perception the apex of cognitive achievement does not, as Plato feared in his portrayal of 'lovers of sights and sounds' (*Rep*. V. 475d), lead one to be enamoured of each and every sensory perception. On the contrary, proper appreciation of true perception reveals the imperfection of everyday cognitions associated with ordinary desires for pleasure or social station, riddled as they are with the distorting effects of conceptualization. 'The attachment to things as if they were real is proper to fools and is the consequence of error' (*Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha* 48). Perfecting cognition involves the elimination of *all* conceptualizations, these among them; and even the first stage towards this—recognizing them for the false projections they are—has a positively dampening effect on one's attraction to ordinary pleasures and diversions.

Even when one aims to engage in conceptual thinking—and both Dignāga and Vasubandhu recognize this has its place—doing so well leads to recognition of the authority of perception-like cognition and detachment from the persuasive force of those concepts. For reasoning well demands simultaneously recognizing the inadequacy of conceptual thought as such for grasping reality as it is. So while Vasubandhu endorses the validity of conventional (hence, conceptual) knowledge of ultimate reality (*AKBh*. VII.3a), this cannot be had without the recognition that in fact this reality is one which can only be known *as it is* by immediate, non-conceptual apprehension. Dignāga was deeply interested in the validity of concepts and reasoning; but engaging in such conceptual reasoning well includes recognizing that the standards one is beholden to are not those of accuracy in getting ultimate reality right, for concepts just cannot do that—'a general term does not express a particular'.[34] For both, reasoning well includes the recognition

[34] *PS* V.2; later, 'there is no way that a general term can express particulars' (*PS* V.11, trans. Hayes).

that no matter how accurate or correct on its own terms, all conceptual cognition necessarily mistakes real reality, and thus even reasoning leads away from taking the received categories and concepts of ordinary life as authoritative and incontrovertible.

The first step, then, towards perfect cognition conceived as perception-like is to recognize the conceptual as something we bring to experience, rather than something we discover in the world. And this very exercise of separating out the conceptualizations and seeing them for the distorting impositions that they are is an exercise in distancing and alienating oneself from the desires they engender. More than that, in fact, the Buddhist will claim that such work actually eliminates the psychological causes that give rise to such unhelpful desires: taking the distorting conceptualizations at face value is a necessary precondition for conceiving an unwholesome desire in the first place, so to rid oneself of the conceptualizations is to rid oneself of the very possibility of such desire arising.

The sort of detachment engendered in this way is so radical as to raise important questions for the Buddhist view about the viability of any sort of critical social-political engagement.[35] For if conceptualization is misleading as such, then engaging in it in 'better' or 'worse' ways, when *not* done for the sake of attaining a truer and more direct apprehension of reality, is not just a distraction; it is the active exercise of deficient cognitive norms to the exclusion of the more apt cognitive values one ought to cultivate. It is, in Buddhist terms, a form of attachment to the everyday and its misguided standards.[36] The obvious response from a Buddhist like Vasubandhu or Dignāga would be to insist that such critical engagement always be done in the service of attaining real liberatory knowledge (as Plato insists at *Republic* 525c–527b). It remains an open question what such political engagement could actually be.

2. Platonic Transformations

But these transformative effects of detachment are for Plato merely the beginning—perhaps even the precondition for further and more significant

[35] This goes beyond the general question, which afflicts Buddhist and Platonist alike, of why the wise would be motivated to engage in the lesser reality at all—see Harris (this volume) for a treatment of the motivational question as it arises for both Plato and Śāntideva; and Griffin (this volume) for similar worries from an epistemological angle.

[36] Moore 2016, especially ch. 5, argues that the view discernible primarily in the Pāli Buddhist texts is that 'Buddhism is radically deflationary about the importance of politics to human life, coming about as close as possible to being overtly anti-political without actually embracing anarchism' (2). On the whole, political institutions and actions tend to feed ego attachment, he argues, while having limited consequence on the truly important goals in life. As Moore 2015: 51 puts it, 'government is both necessary and inevitable, but it doesn't matter very much what form it takes. In any event, one should not play an active role in government if one can avoid it'.

transformation. A second set of significant effects on the soul is deeply rooted in the *explanation-based* nature of Plato's account of (perfect) knowledge, and the corresponding understanding of reality as liable to such explanation. These include (i) the *unifying effect on the soul* of seeking knowledge; (ii) the cultivation of hope, appreciation of beauty and love of the world; and (iii) the interpersonal engagement with others as accountable.

Plato in the *Republic* may agree with the Buddhist that personal identity is not given; but it *is* an attainment, something to aspire to. Through the pursuit of a unified account of a unified, coherent intelligible reality, one *creates* a truly unified self from inchoate experience. We are not simply diverted from bodily pleasures, and come to devalue them; the pursuit of coherence and intelligibility *informs* our sensations and perceptions, so that they are shaped by the epistemological values on which we lay priority. The *Philebus* gives us the most detailed account of how perception and even sensation can be incorporated into a unified life by arising in, and thus being given their distinct identities by, practices of valuing and seeking epistemic perfection.[37] But the *Republic* is already clear that those in different cognitive conditions *enjoy* differently—enjoy different objects, under different circumstances, to different degrees, and with different values and meanings attached.[38] And the *Republic* expresses more explicitly how such shaping of pleasures and pains amounts to a *unification* of the soul which manifests in the form of recognizably moral conduct (*Rep*. 442e–443b)—as well as, of course, the sharply drawn contrast case in which the failure to admit cognitive norms their proper place entails a failure to establish such unity, coherence, and agreement in the *psyche,* making one a tyrant tyrannized by one's own incoherent, disunified passions (*Rep*. 577d–e, 579d–e).

Unity arises in the soul from seeking this sort of knowledge because the process of inquiry, in reshaping our values, unifies the *psychē* by giving the whole soul a common aim, and one which can inform and not just override a diversity of concerns and interests. But this single aim also has a unifying effect because what it aims at is itself coherent and well integrated, *viz.,* a unified comprehension of a unified reality. Only because reality itself is coherent does the attempt to know it take on the systematicity and integrated character it has. And the systematic and unified nature of the knowledge sought has a unifying effect on the one seeking it.

Moreover, this intelligible reality reaches into the everyday world of experience, lending it what order and meaning it has. Forms, understood as interexplanatory intelligible existence structured, and therefore made intelligible, by the Form of the Good (or simply, structured according to what goodness

[37] See Carpenter 2006, 2011, and forthcoming-b.

[38] For instance, the philosophic soul of Book IX enjoys a good meal when hungry (*Rep.* 582b), but she does so without inflating the pleasure or mistaking it for a true one.

requires), manifest—even if only approximately—in the everyday world, making that world itself something intelligible (albeit imperfectly) according to the understanding of 'intelligence' implied by the ideal knowledge set out. In this way metaphysics can connect the unifying effect of knowledge-seeking with the cultivation of hope, appreciation of beauty, and love of the world. 'Look for coherence and meaningful distinctions and relations,' we might say, paraphrasing Socrates in the *Philebus*, 'and you will indeed find it.' No matter how confusing, incoherent, and inexplicable things may seem to be, there is indeed order to be found, and so it is worthwhile trying to make sense of the world—to discover its coherent, mutually explanatory structure, and to find meaning in it. This is most immediately an enabler of natural science; for although sensibles are distinct from intelligibles, there is intelligibility and order to be found *in* sensible reality—without such a guiding hypothesis it would be difficult to determine which arrangements of ideas about the world were genuinely explanatory. Indeed, on Plato's view it is only better understanding of real, intelligible reality that will enable us to see the world around us better, enable us to recognize what intelligibility is (imperfectly) there and could be made there in the everyday world. The philosopher who turns her attention back to the ordinary world 'will see vastly better' than those who have no inkling of intelligible reality, and they will 'recognise each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image' (*Rep*. 520c3–4).

But beyond scientific inquiry, Plato's epistemic hopefulness is at the same time a confidence that goodness and intelligibility can be present in the world around us—for the good order of the world appears as beauty, thus linking truth and genuine beauty—making the world one worthy of love. On the Platonic view, even the everyday world has structure, order, and therefore goodness in it, of a sort we are able to discover, and indeed to extend, in virtue of our progress towards ideal knowledge. This is not just consolation for the genuine imperfections of the sensible world but also grounds the necessary practical hope that the part of the world we create through our activity can be made more intelligent, more orderly, and more full of purpose than it is, and grounds the confidence that it is worth striving to do this.

Finally, on such an account of knowledge, an intelligible world is a shared and shareable world, so that knowledge-seeking brings us into community with others, who are made answerable to each other.[39] Seeking to give fully explanatory accounts is an activity one does in tandem with others, for it is essentially dialectical. Since it requires interrogating every axiom, it cannot be foundational or deductive, and it requires the challenging perspective of another to reveal the places where explanation is as yet incomplete. Moreover, explanation is something one gives *to another*. Seeking knowledge thus engages us in making ourselves *accountable* to others for our own thoughts—conceiving others as amenable

[39] The ideas in this paragraph are expanded and defended in Carpenter forthcoming-c.

to reason, owed a reasoned explanation. This is particularly important socially when we consider that the alternative to reasoned explanation is force. As the Protagoreanism of the *Theaetetus* shows, perceptions, not shareable through a *logos,* can at best be induced by another, and such inducing is simply an exercise of power or manipulation.[40] To seek ideal Platonic knowledge puts one into relation with others as fellow truth-seekers: one is responsible for giving an account of oneself (see *Laches* 187e–188c; *Tht.* 169a–c), of why one is reasonably warranted in thinking what one does, that will satisfy the committed seeker after truth—figured in Plato's Socrates, who will not be dazzled by fine words or baffled by bluster.

3. Buddhist Transformations

It is quite clear that Dignāga's perception-based account of ideal knowledge can make no claim to transform the knower in these Platonic ways. For each of these—the unifying effects of seeking knowledge, the connection between truth and beauty that grounds rational hope that there is goodness in the world, the accountability to each other—rely on a *logos*-based conception of knowledge, and specifically on rejecting the episodic, insulated, and non-transmissible features of perception which Dignāga himself endorses.

For Dignāga and Vasubandhu alike, there is no teleological order in the world, manifesting as beauty and signifying hope for meaningfulness and understanding; one does not make one's mind into a well-formed whole by becoming such as to trace out the lineaments of well-formed realities. And, in keeping with the perceptual and experiential conception of ideal cognition, the enterprise of seeking transformative knowledge is a fundamentally solitary one, tailored to the individual mental complex ('soul' or mind) within which it should arise.[41] Renunciants may live in community and this may usually be a necessary support to their practice, and articulations of the Buddha's teaching in conventional language may be helpful to many. Some Buddhist philosophers—Vasubandhu and Dignāga among them—may even take such discourse to be an essential part of the process of acquiring knowledge of reality as it is.[42] But this could never *constitute* the perfect

[40] 'that man is wise who … makes good things appear to' another (*Tht.* 166d6–8), and 'the doctor causes changes by means of drugs, the wise man by words' (*Tht.* 167a5, translations mine). There is no reasoning with someone's idiosyncratic perception, nor with the means by which such a perception is induced, and bringing others to share the same does not engage with them as rational beings but rather as receptive objects on which to assert one's image-inducing powers.

[41] Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*) III.97–103, for instance, tailors meditational objects and practices according to personality type.

[42] 'Such [reason-giving] inquiries are indispensable for all who seek knowledge' for most Buddhist thinkers, Coseru 2013: 245 argues, even against a background 'emphasis on direct experience as a preferred mode of knowing' (243); Dignāga and Dharmakīrti in particular 'regard conception as secondary' (252).

cognition of reality, which is ultimately transformative.[43] Indeed, inference is even included by Dignāga in a list of defective cognitions: 'erroneous cognition, cognition of empirical reality, inference, its result, recollection, and desire are not true perceptions and are accompanied by obscurity [*sataimira*]' (*PS* I.7cd–8ab).[44] Conceptual and inferential cognition remains purely instrumental: one engages in such conceptual activity not for the sake of perfecting the goods internal to the practice but rather as the best means available for eventually realizing a different set of goods, evaluated along quite different and orthogonal measures of immediacy, non-distortedness, and non-interference.[45]

But an account of perfect knowledge modelled on perception may have transformative effects of its own to recommend it, which come to light by reflection on what one would be doing in seeking knowledge so described. I will highlight four closely related transformations: *self-effacement, radical receptivity and acceptance, existential fearlessness, and care.*

Since our starting point is the mass of conceptually informed cognitions we are always already having, and since the goal is unmediated, non-conceptual apprehension of reality, the first step in cultivating ideal cognition will be distinguishing the conceptual from the perceptual, and recognizing the conceptual as a distorting imposition on a reality that is not like that. And since the conceptual overlay is not something imposed upon us by the world, we see it is introduced by us, so that learning to perceive is simultaneously a matter of learning a kind of self-awareness—learning that and how one is involved in determining experienced reality.

Aiming at immediate and undistorted apprehension of reality, one thus trains in refraining from injecting experience with gratuitous conceptual material that does not belong to it, discounting and dismissing this conceptual interpolation as a distortion. More particularly, by considering the source of the distorting interpretive overlay on reality, we come to recognize the egoism implicit in conceptualization. For conceptual schema and interpretations are motivated, or else they are habitual from countless instances of previous presumption, and both

[43] Even considered as a *pramāṇa,* Dignāga's *anumāna* does not share the internal norms of Platonic dialectically grounded *logos* of being; and so a practice of aiming at perfect Dignāgean reasoning would not effect the same changes on the inquirer as pursuing Platonic dialectic. Which features these different conceptions of good reasoning share and do not share merits careful study.

[44] As Eli Franco observes, 'all three types of *pratyakṣābhāsa* [not true perception]…are produced through conceptual construction' (Franco 1986: 79). See also Eltschinger 2009, 51, for the contrast with Dharmakīrti on this point.

[45] See Vasubandhu's account of the path of seeing (*AKBh.* VI.23–44), and beyond that the path of meditation (VI.70), which—all doubt and examination having been expelled (*AKBh.* VII.1)—consists only of moments of directly knowing. It is not clear that these knowledge experiences are utterly non-conceptual, but they are devoid of reasoning, since reasoning is an indication of lingering doubt, the removal of which is a pre-knowing mental state called 'patience' (*kṣanti*). Any *discussion* of the Four Truths known is preliminary to this process (*AKBh.* VI.1–4).

motivations and habitual presumptions are forms of ego.[46] To make over an unconceptualized reality as one sees fit is an assertion of self—of one's power, of one's right, of one's entitlement to determine the meaning of reality according to one's own judgement and categories. Thus, conversely, practices in refraining from such conceptualization in order to experience reality as it is are practices in restraining the ego, refraining from self-assertion so as to enact a radical self-effacement.

Such self-effacement undermines the motives to insist that reality conform to our schema, and it thus engenders in turn a radical receptivity and acceptance—of experienced reality in general and of the reality of others in particular. One no longer forces experiences, things, and others to be 'this' or 'that'.[47] Rather, for any particular perceived, to perceive it is simply to attend to it and accept it as it is. This cultivates a powerful capacity for acknowledging others, in all their particularity and without the distortions that arise from classifications and categorizations that inevitably fail to do justice to any individual reality. Such acknowledgement is not a decision one might withhold or a policy one might violate; rather, it emerges simply from the cultivated practice of aiming to see truly, to know reality, and from the consequent dissipation of the egoistic impulse to determine reality.

The reflexive aspect of such radical receptivity and acceptance turns the practice of non-identifying towards oneself. Canonical descriptions of analysing one's own experience into its impersonal elements conclude that, for each item identified, none of them is 'me'. As an argument to an ontological conclusion, this could well lead one off in search of what then the true self *is*. But when embedded within a practice of recognizing and refraining from conceptual imposition, such analysis is a practice of reiterated disidentification. It is the mental exercise by which one removes the habit and temptation of identifying oneself with or as anything at all. Released from the compulsion to identify oneself *as* 'this' or 'that', one is freed from the existential anxiety around threats to such identities, and freed thereby from the afflictive emotions, attitudes, and behaviours arising from identity-existential threat.

With the radical acceptance engendered by the pursuit of non-conceptual cognition as Dignāga understands it, and the freedom from afflictive emotions this

[46] Different Buddhists have different ways of cashing this out. While it is not a matter Dignāga discusses in his *Compendium,* his *Investigation of the Percept* (*Ālambanaparīkṣā*) argues that objects of perception and their causes are wholly internal to mind, thus aligning himself with Vasubandhu's Yogācāra. Dignāga picks up in his *Investigation* arguments against extra-mental objects that Vasubandhu offers in his *Twenty Verses*, which appeal explicitly to one's previous mental actions to explain the specific qualities of one's current experiences.

[47] Thus Vasubandhu includes as part of the description of the path to liberatory knowledge a set of 'patiences' which are cognitive apprehensions of the four noble truths. This essential and constitutive part of the path to perfect knowledge is an attitude of deep acceptance from recognizing that reality is as it is—allowing it to be thus, without complaint or resistance.

brings, the everyday world and one's experiences of it no longer present as a puzzle or a problem to be solved and resolved. In focusing on the particular as the exclusive object of perception, Dignāga embraces the radically episodic nature of perception: no perception is intrinsically or explanatorily related to any other. Each simply is itself, without pointing to anything beyond itself. Reality is transient and dependently arising, but not in any way forming a whole rather than a heap. There is nowhere that all this is going and no *reason* behind why various causes and conditions give rise to the various things they give rise to. They just do. Looking for explanations here leads *away* from reality as it is, so in seeking knowledge of such a reality one must *stop* searching for meaning and explanation, stop supposing there will be some final ground that justifies it all and thereby makes it good. There is no such consolation for the ineradicable alterations and mutual dependencies of these alterations on each other. Our job as knowers is to come to appreciate just this about reality. Experiential recognition of this inoculates one against false and totalizing ideologies; it frees one from the craving to have things settled and ordered by forcing explanatory classifications which deny particularity; and it frees one from pain at the constant failures of the world to be rational.

Finally, perceiving reality undistortedly is a practice in acknowledging dependencies. These dependencies are not explanatory; they are simply the repeated experienced recognition that this too does not enjoy sublime independence. There is no unhindered agency any more than there is unrestricted patiency, for both categories are construals of reality that restrict its essential particularity in the service of constructing explanatory relations. Practice in appreciating this essentially compromised nature of whatever arises enables one to experience others in everyday life in this light, thus creating a link between practices of coming to know reality, the reality known, and attitudes of forbearance and concern. I see the world under its aspect of essenceless dependent arising, which means that I experience other persons too *as* compromised and embedded, no more (or less) in control of their actions and emotions than I or anyone else, each of these arising in discernible relation to other factors and governed by distorting conceptualizations and the implicit egoism of determining reality according to them. The practice of aiming at non-conceptually mediated experience and accepting this reality as it is, without egoistic overlay or trying to 'tame' it with explanatory conceptualizations, has its effect on my everyday experiences of others, who I am able to recognize and accept as the suffering beings they are—suffering both in the metaphysical and in the phenomenological sense.

I recognize that they too are suffering—suffering precisely in that moment and activity in which they cause harm to others, or even to myself—and this recognition enables, first of all, forbearance, for I no longer bring to my experience of others' bad behaviour the unhelpful interpretation that they are free agents, deliberately causing harm. Without that interpretation, my own reactive emotions are

not triggered. But more than that, to the extent that this recognition of suffering arises against a background of successfully eliminating egoistic conceptualizing from my own forms of cognition, the immediate response will be an attitude of care.[48] For, conditioned by such mental practice, there are no other concerns left to obstruct or interrupt the response to suffering as 'to be eliminated'. When the fearful and greedy impulses to self-assertion are eliminated through just this process of coming to see just this sort of reality, there is no longer anything left to impede the concern that arises in response to suffering.[49]

Such radical receptivity and acceptance, I think, is not something available to the Platonic version of impersonal idealism, with its understanding of intelligibility and explanation, and the gap between 'is' and 'ought' that this holds open by its commitment to an intelligible reality distinct from and only imperfectly present in the everyday world. And while the Platonic knower may desire that everyone be good and enjoy goodness, this is not out of a responsive care and concern for the essentially suffering nature of any sentient being's experience. For the Buddhist, however, the very same practices in perceiving reality as it is result in both the undistorted recognition and acceptance of others as they are *and* the care and concern for the suffering that constitutes their unawakened and confused experience.

VI. Conclusion

The metaphysical differences between Buddhist and Platonist are easy to spot, but hard to know what to do with. They seem to just disagree. How would one adjudicate that disagreement?

The epistemological disagreement is equally evident, but more telling—for after all, our sole task for both is to seek transformative knowledge of impersonal reality. This means that the epistemological differences may be assessed not just for their fit with their respective metaphysics or for their intrinsic coherence, but also according to the effects that pursuing such knowledge does indeed have on us. Who has the more plausible moral psychology of ethical transformation? And who has the more compelling portrait of the sort of person we become by pursuing this ideal form of cognition?

[48] *Karuṇā* is most commonly translated as 'compassion', though badly so, given *karuṇā* is most likely based on the verbal root *kṛ* ('to do, make, accomplish'), like the word *karma*—the opposite of the passivity implicit in the *passio* of 'compassion'. (Mayrhofer 1956: 168 offers no alternative origins for *karuṇā* than for *karuṇam* ('work, undertaking'), clearly derived from *kṛ* ('to do'); see also Monier-Williams 1899: 255. Krishnan Ram-Prasad confirms, personal correspondence, that the absence of the feminine *karuṇā* from the *Ṛg Veda*, together with plausible semantic shifts, suggest it is a later derivation from the same verbal root, *kṛ*.) 'Care', which also has a verbal use, captures better the active engagement implicit in *karuṇā*, without losing the affective aspect.

[49] That concern for suffering is our default, enabled to emerge when learned conceptions impeding it are dropped, is argued persuasively by Dunne 2019 with reference to current psychological research.

There is something attractive and plausible in each view of who we are and who we might and ought become. There is something vital in the Platonic hope for a shared intelligible reality that we, together, may come to know, expecting to be held accountable to one another for our reasoned views. But there is also something precious in the Buddhist focus on lived experience, particularity, and exercises of disidentification that enable one to face fearlessly the uncertainty and insecurity of the world, and the suffering insecurity and dependence of oneself and others. Conversely, each view has less attractive effects, made more evident by contrast with the other: pursuit of Platonic knowledge makes one too concerned with unifying one's own soul and too uncaring about the particularity of other persons; pursuit of Buddhist knowledge, for its part, leads to apathy and quietism.

One might attempt strategies for accommodation and amelioration, incorporating distant cousins of the positive Platonic transformations into the Buddhist epistemo-ethical project, or vice versa—though the cousins may turn out to be unrecognizably distant relations indeed. One could still at least use the apparent advantages in the other system as a guide for how one might want to reform one's preferred form of impersonal idealism. But because the different effects of seeking ideal cognition arise from different and incompatible conceptions of that ideal, there will be some transformations that it is simply impossible to have together. Recognizing this offers us greater insight into the way that transformative effects are calibrated to the ideals one pursues in general, and specifically into what is at stake in selecting a conception of knowledge to take as an ideal.

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