

Vācaspati on Aboutness and Decomposition¹

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I seem to see a white picket fence outside my window. Suppose my perceptual system is functioning normally. Am I aware of a mind-independent particular, e.g., the white picket fence? If you say “Yes,” I’ll call you a *realist*. If you say “No”, I’ll call you an *idealist*. Realism is the view that perception can yield information about mind-independent particulars; idealism denies this. Both realism and idealism come in different varieties.

While all realists agree that perception can yield information about mind-independent particulars by generating perceptual awareness or knowledge, they differ on how it does so. *Indirect realists* typically claim that such awareness or knowledge is *epistemically indirect*, i.e., based on an inference from some body of evidence. For example, an indirect realist might say that I can only become aware of the white picket fence by inferring its existence on the basis of my non-inferential awareness of a mind-dependent entity, e.g., a sense-datum. In contrast, *direct realists* will deny this. For them, our perceptual awareness or knowledge of mind-independent particulars can be epistemically direct, i.e., may not depend on any inference from any body of evidence.

While all idealists agree that perception cannot yield knowledge or awareness about mind-independent particulars, they disagree on the ontological status of mind-independent items. Some idealists claim that there are no mind-independent items at all; call them *ontological idealists*. Others don’t rule out the existence of mind-independent objects, but merely insist that we are never aware of or gain any knowledge about them. Call such idealists *epistemological idealists*.

In the history of Indian philosophy, we find all these positions defended in one form or another. Some Buddhists, working within the Sautrāntika and Yogācāra traditions, defend indirect realism and idealism respectively. In contrast, philosophers who belong to the Buddhist tradition of Sarvāstivāda and non-Buddhist traditions of Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā defend direct realism. The aim of this paper is to focus on a 9th century Nyāya philosopher, Vācaspati Miśra, who defends direct realism against Buddhist arguments for indirect realism and idealism.

Why is this debate worth caring about? As we shall see, Vācaspati opposes what I call *decompositionism about aboutness*. Suppose I am aware of a white picket fence by means of perception. My experience, plausibly, is about the white picket fence. For decompositionists, this aboutness relation between my perceptual experience and the picket fence obtains in virtue of two kinds of conditions: *internal* conditions like an internal picture in my head and *external* conditions like the resemblance between the internal picture and the relevant mind-independent particular.² The Buddhist indirect realists—the Sautrāntika philosophers—defend decompositionism. They claim that perceptual experiences, and all conscious thoughts and experiences more generally, possess what they call an *objective phenomenal form* (*grāhyākāra*, literally “the phenomenal form of what is apprehended”). At least on one interpretation, this is a mental image which represents a mind-independent

¹ I am grateful to Davey Tomlinson, Chris Meyns and Cat Prueitt for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Here, an internal condition is a condition depends only on the intrinsic properties of the agent, while an external condition is a condition that isn’t internal.

particular.³ A perceptual experience is about a certain mind-independent particular insofar as this mental image resembles and is caused by that particular.⁴

In his sub-commentary *Commentary on the Import (Tātparyā-tīkā)* on the *Aphorisms on Reasoning (Nyāya Sūtra)* 4.2.33-4, Vācaspati wants to resist decompositionalism about aboutness.⁵ He motivates this view from the perspective of the Sautrāntika philosophers by drawing on some arguments given by Dharmakīrti (fl. c. 6th or 7th century CE) in his *Ascertainment of Epistemology (Pramāṇa-viniścaya)*. Then, he shows that this view leads to disastrous consequences. His argument is this. If decompositionalism about aboutness is true, then a perceptual awareness-event cannot carry information about mind-independent particulars and properties. This paves the way for epistemological idealism. But epistemological idealism is incoherent. So, decompositionalism about aboutness is false.

Here's how I shall proceed. In §1, I will briefly outline the Sautrāntika theory of perception, highlighting its commitment to decompositionalism about aboutness. Then, in §2, I will explain how Vācaspati motivates this brand of decompositionalism in light of Buddhist texts. In §3, I will show how, according to Vācaspati, decompositionalism leads to epistemological idealism. In §§4-5, I will discuss how Vācaspati resists idealism and rejects decompositionalism about aboutness.

1. Sautrāntika Decompositionalism

The Sautrāntika theory of perception arose in opposition to a form of direct realism defended by Vaibhāṣika philosophers (who belonged to the Sarvāstivāda tradition of Abhidharma Buddhism). The Vaibhāṣikas thought that when we become aware of a mind-independent particular by means of perception, our perceptual awareness-event (*jñāna*) reveals to us a worldly item that exists at the time of our awareness. But Sautrāntika philosophers were uncomfortable with this idea.⁶ Implicitly, they thought that our best metaphysical theories should constrain our theories in epistemology and philosophy of mind, i.e., whenever there is a conflict between one of our best metaphysical theories and a proposed theory in epistemology or philosophy of mind, we should reject the latter. So, contrary to how things appear, they argued that we have good metaphysical grounds for thinking that our perceptual awareness or knowledge about mind-independent particulars cannot exist at the same time as those mind-independent particulars. They were committed to:

³ This line of interpretation has been accepted by many: for example, see Dunne (2004), Dhammajoti (2007a), and Moriyama (2008). Kellner (2014) distinguishes two different uses of the notion of *ākāra* in Abhidharma texts that seem to conflict with each other. On one view, the *ākāra* of a perceptual experience is just an intrinsic property of the perceptual experience; the perceptual experience just arises endowed with this feature. On the other hand, the *ākāra* is a mode of operation, i.e., the manner in which a certain sense-modality apprehends the mind-independent particular.

⁴ This idea is present in a number of Sautrāntika texts. For a representative instance, see Chapter 9 of Vasubandhu's *Commentary on the Treasury of Metaphysics (Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya)* (Pradhan 1967, pp. 473–474).

⁵ This discussion overlaps quite a bit with certain passages in Vācaspati's *The Grain of Reasoning (Nyāyakaṇikā)*, his commentary on Maṇḍana Miśra's (c. 8th century CE) *Discrimination of Injunctions (Vidhiviveka)*. See Goswami (1978, pp. 181-192).

⁶ This theory is explained in Dhammajoti (2007a; 2007b, ch. 9).

The Doctrine of Momentariness. There are no (ultimately real) temporally extended entities.⁷

The Thesis about the Object of Awareness. Any intentional object (*ālambana*) of perceptual awareness must both cause the awareness, and resemble what appears in it.

The Thesis about Causation. If an object of perceptual awareness causes that awareness, then it must be present prior to the perceptual awareness.

If these theses are correct and perceptual processing is temporally extended, then the mind-independent particular that was in contact with the relevant sense-faculty cannot exist at the time when the final conscious perceptual experience takes place. So, whatever item appears to the subject at this stage can only be a mental image left by the initial sense-object contact.

How, then, do we become aware of, or gain knowledge about, mind-independent particulars? The Sautrāntika philosophers defend the following proposal. Any perceptual awareness is produced due to the causal interaction between a mind-independent particular and a sense-faculty. An intrinsic property of the awareness-event is an *objective phenomenal form*, a mental image that the subject is immediately aware of, which resembles the mind-independent particular that produces the perceptual awareness. It is on the basis of this phenomenal form that the agent can infer the existence of a mind-independent particular that produced the sensory awareness. This inferential judgement constitutes knowledge or awareness of the mind-independent particular that produces the initial sensory awareness-event. In a later Buddhist epistemology textbook, Mokṣākaragupta (fl. between 11th-13th centuries CE) describes this view as follows.

The view of the Sautrāntikas is this. All that appears in the form of blue, etc. is awareness itself, not an external object. For a non-conscious object cannot be manifested. Thus it is said: “That which is detected by the senses is not observed, even though it gives rise an awareness that possesses its form.”...

[The opponent:] Well, if it is only awareness that is manifested, how do you know that there are external objects?

[Reply:] The existence of external objects is demonstrated by a principle of absence. It is not the case that objective phenomenal forms, e.g., blue, are manifested always everywhere. They cannot also be produced just by dint of their own material causes (*upādāna*) [i.e., the resources for conscious mental activity internal to the mind]. For, then, each specific awareness-event wouldn't be directed at a specific object. Therefore, we can conclude that there is some cause of these objective phenomenal forms, distinct from the immediately preceding condition [i.e., the mental event that

⁷ In light of the Buddhist commitment to the idea that the basic constituents of reality are ontologically simple and impartite, Vasubandhu shows that the *Doctrine of Momentariness* just follows from two premises (Pradhan 1975, p. 193). The first premise is that all causally conditioned things, e.g. material objects, eventually perish. The second premise is that we can only explain how an object could be destroyed after persisting for a while by appealing to some changes in it, e.g., a change in the configuration of its parts or its properties. The first premise is common ground amongst all Buddhists, and the second seems plausible. But if the basic constituents of reality are ontologically simple and impartite, they aren't bearers of properties and they don't have parts. So, their destruction couldn't be explained in terms of changes in their properties or the configuration of their parts. Conclusion: no causally conditioned thing can perish after persisting for a while; they must perish immediately after being produced.

serves as the immediate cause of perceptual experience], which makes them arise only at certain times at certain places. That, indeed, is the external object.
(Krishnamacharya 1942, pp. 34-35)

I will return to this argument later. For now, just note this. On this view, perceptual experiences cannot make us non-inferentially aware of mind-independent particulars. We can become aware of them by means of some inference based on our awareness of the objective phenomenal forms of the experiences. Thus, it is tempting to draw a parallel between this theory and the kind of indirect realism that sense-data theorists defend.⁸

Within the Sautrāntika framework, objective phenomenal forms of perceptual experiences, i.e., the mental images that they involve, play an important role in explaining how a perceptual experience can *be about* or *represent* a mind-independent particular. For the Sautrāntikas, a mind-independent particular that a perceptual experience is about must satisfy two conditions: it must be a cause of the perceptual experience, and the perceptual experience must involve an objective phenomenal form, i.e., a mental image, in virtue of which it resembles the mind-independent particular. This commits the Sautrāntika to:

Sautrāntika Decompositionalism. For any subject *S* and a mind-independent entity *e*, if *S* undergoes a perceptual experience about *e*, then the fact that *S*'s perceptual experience is about *e* holds solely in virtue of:

- (i) the fact that *S* undergoes experience that involves a certain objective phenomenal form,
- (ii) the fact that *e* causes the experience to have that objective phenomenal form, and
- (iii) the fact that the experience resembles *e* in virtue of its objective phenomenal form.

This is an instance of a general decompositionalist view on which the fact that a perceptual experience is about a mind-independent particular is necessarily decomposable into certain internal and external conditions. The internal condition has to do with an intrinsic property of the subject. In this case, it is a mental image in the subject's head. The external conditions have to do with some representation-grounding relation. In this case, it involves the relations of causation and resemblance between the experience and the mind-independent particular.

2. A Partial Argument for Sautrāntika Decompositionalism

Sautrāntika decompositionalism is partially motivated by the idea that if a perceptual awareness-event didn't have an objective phenomenal form, it couldn't be about any mind-independent particular. Vācaspati explains this idea in some detail.⁹

When an external object is apprehended by an awareness-event that doesn't have any objective phenomenal form, is this merely due to the existence of the external object? Or, is this because the external object is one of the causal conditions that together bring about that awareness-event? Or, is it because the external object depends on the

⁸ See Ayer (1956, 1963, 1967), Jackson (1977), and Robinson (1994). For discussion of the connection between the sense-data and objective phenomenal forms, see Moriyama (2008).

⁹ Vācaspati's discussion here is possibly inspired by Dharmakīrti. See Verses k. 34-37 and the commentary on them in Chapter 1 of Dharmakīrti's *Ascertainment of Epistemology* in Steinkellner (2007, pp. 30-32).

same set of causal conditions as the awareness-event? Or, is it because the awareness-event produces some result (*phala*) in the external object? (*Tātparyā-ṭīkā* on *Nyāya Sūtra* 4.2.33-4 in Thakur 1996, p. 625, ll. 13-14)

There are four options here.

Option 1. An awareness-event is about an external object just in case that object exists.

Option 2. An awareness-event is about an external object just in case that object is one of the causal conditions that together bring about the awareness-event

Option 3. An awareness-event is about an external object just in case that object is caused by the same set of causal conditions as the awareness-event itself.

Option 4. An awareness-event is about an external object just in case the awareness-event produces some result in that object.

None of these options appeal to the objective phenomenal form of perceptual experiences. The Sautrāntika philosopher wants to argue that none of these options work. The first three options are non-starters, so we can deal with them quickly.

Consider *Option 1*: namely, that an awareness-event can be about a mind-independent item in virtue of its existence. This, as the Buddhist quickly points out, is a bad proposal. For existence is neither necessary nor sufficient for an object to be grasped by an awareness-event. It's not sufficient, because, if it were, then every agent would be aware of every existent object. It's not necessary, since one can also be aware of non-existent objects.¹⁰

Next, focus on *Option 2*: namely, that an awareness-event can be about a mind-independent item just in case it's one of the causal conditions that together bring about the awareness-event. This proposal, too, must fail. First, non-existent objects—past or future objects—cannot be causal conditions but can still be objects of awareness. Second, there are some causal conditions of awareness-events (e.g., the senses themselves) that are not grasped by the awareness-events. Finally, if the Buddhist theory of momentariness is true, then this proposal rules out the possibility of there being any awareness of a currently existing object. For, by the time the awareness-event arises, the previous time-slice of the object which causes the awareness-event will have gone out of existence.¹¹ (This last remark is directed at Buddhist direct realists, i.e., the Vaibhāṣika philosophers from the Sarvāstivāda school, who think that the object of perception exists at the same time as the perceptual awareness.)

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 625, ll. 14-17: “First, one thing isn't the intentional object (*viśaya*) of another merely in virtue of its existence. For, then, since existence is also present in other intentional objects, every entity would be the intentional object of every awareness-event. So, there would be undesirable consequence that every awareness-event apprehends everything. And mere existence isn't the factor that determines whether something is an intentional object. For even non-existent things can be intentional objects.”

¹¹ Ibid., p. 625, ll. 17-20: “Therefore, an entity doesn't have the status of being an intentional object in virtue of being a cause. Moreover, since our visual sense, etc. are causes of awareness-events, there would be the undesirable consequence that they are intentional objects of visual awareness. Also, an awareness-event would never manifest an object that currently exists. For, due to its momentariness, the time-slice of an object that produces the awareness-event passes away at the time when the awareness-event that is to be produced by it arises.”

In light of the last problem, *Option 3* does look more promising. On this view, the object of awareness needn't be one of the causal conditions of the awareness-event; rather, it may itself be produced by the same set of causal conditions that produce the awareness-event. This makes room for the possibility that the awareness-event may be about an object that exists at the same time as itself. However, this proposal faces two serious worries. On the one hand, it cannot explain how we become aware of past or future objects. For those objects needn't be produced by the causal conditions that produce an awareness-event. On the other hand, it predicts that certain other effects brought about by the set of causal conditions that produce the awareness-event may also be grasped by that awareness-event.¹²

Option 4 is different: it's based on some remarks that Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa, the Mīmāṃsā philosopher, makes in a section called "The Debate About Emptiness" (*Śūnyavāda*) in his *Detailed Commentary in Verse* (*Ślokavārttika*). Unlike the Sautrāntika philosophers who construct their theory of intentionality on the basis of their metaphysical commitments, the Mīmāṃsā account of intentionality proceeds from a semantic theory (defended by the classical Indian grammarians and widely accepted by other classical Indian philosophers) known as *kāraḷa* theory. Take any declarative sentence of the following sort:

(1) Mira kicks the football.

Here, the verb "kicks" picks an act (*kriyā*) of kicking. Mira is the *agent* (*kartṛ*) who brings about that act, while the football is the *patient* (*karman*). (1) is true if and only if there exists an act of kicking, with respect to which Mira plays the agent-role and the football plays the patient-role. Now, consider:

(2) Jo perceives the picket fence.

Here, the verb "perceives" picks out the act of perceiving; Jo is the agent who brings about that act; the picket fence is the patient with respect to that act. (2) is true if and only if there exists an act of perceiving, with respect to which Jo plays the agent-role and the picket fence plays the patient-role. Since this way of analysing the truth-conditions of the sentence can be generalised to any ascription of awareness-events, some philosophers—especially within the Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya traditions—treat intentional objects of awareness-events as things that play the patient-role with respect to such events.

What does this patient-role consist in? According to one popular definition, a patient is just an object in which the relevant act produces an effect, e.g., some property. For instance, in the event of Mira's kicking the football, the football counts as the patient, because the activity of kicking produces a certain property in the football, namely, motion. Similarly, we could say that in the event of Jo's perceiving the picket fence, the picket fence becomes the object of Jo's perceptual awareness, because that awareness-event produces a certain property in the picket-fence. This, in effect, is the proposal defended by the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsakas, i.e., the followers of Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa: a perceptual awareness-event is about a mind-independent

¹² Ibid., p. 625, ll. 20-22: "In contrast, if a thing has the status of being an intentional object in virtue of being dependent on the same set of causal conditions as the awareness-event, then the property of manifesting a currently existing object would make sense. But it doesn't make sense. For it suffers from a problem of underextension with respect to the apprehension of past and future objects that don't currently exist, and from a problem of overextension insofar as it leads to the undesirable consequence that the time-slices of the senses, etc., which exist at the same time as the awareness, are intentional objects of the awareness since they depend on the same set of causal conditions as the awareness."

particular just in case it produces some effect in the mind-independent particular.¹³ But this proposal seems mysterious: what is this property that an awareness-event produces in its object?

The Bhāṭṭas do have an answer to this question.¹⁴ Their proposal is described by Vācaspati as follows:

It's manifestness (*prākāṣya*). This property isn't a property like whiteness, etc., which is epistemically accessible to everyone (*sarva-puruṣa-sādhāraṇa*). For the property produced in the object by an awareness-event is observed to be epistemically accessible solely to the subject of that awareness-event. This is just as in the following case: the subject whose combinative awareness-event (*apekṣā-buddhi*) produces the property of two-ness (*dvitva*) in certain objects is the person to whom that property is specifically accessible. (Thakur 1996, p. 626, l. 1-4)

The thought is roughly this. Some properties of objects are produced by mental states of this or that agent. These properties are different from other properties of objects such as its shape or size: while shape and size of an object may be epistemically accessible to several agents, these mind-dependent properties are only epistemically accessible to that agent whose mental states produce them. Here's how the theory can be applied to numerical properties. On the view in question, when an agent encounters two objects, she may undergo a combinative awareness of the form, "Here is one, and here is one." This in turn produces the property of *two-ness* that resides in the two objects together. Then, the agent becomes aware of the *two-ness*, she judges, "Here are two." Here, two-ness is accessible only to the agent who undergoes the relevant combinative awareness.

How does this help us with our original question? According to the Bhāṭṭas, when an agent undergoes an awareness-event, that awareness-event produces a property of *manifestness* in an entity, which thereby becomes the intentional object of the awareness-event. However, this property of manifestness isn't epistemically accessible to everyone; it is only epistemically accessible to the agent whose awareness-event produces the relevant manifestness property. Take the case where Jo is looking at the picket fence. When she is perceptually aware of the picket fence, she is aware of the picket fence, the white paint on it, the rectangular wooden panels that are part of it, and so on. She is also aware of certain perspectival features of the picket fence: the distance between herself and the picket fence, the angle from which she is looking at it, etc. These perspectival features belong to the picket fence only insofar as Jo is aware of the picket fence under those circumstances. And they are epistemically accessible solely to Jo. These together may be thought of as the manifestness of the picket fence. This is important, because it helps us explain how we become aware of our own awareness-events, and why we seem to have privileged access to our own awareness-events. On the basis of these perspectival features, Jo can infer that she is aware of the picket fence. But no one else can. Thus, when an agent become aware of something, the property of manifestness that her awareness-event produces in the object of awareness is also

¹³ Ibid., p. 625, l. 22-p. 626, l. 1: "Suppose you say, "The intentional object is the locus in which the awareness produces a result." What, then, is produced by the awareness?"

¹⁴ For the discussion of this Bhāṭṭa view, see Umbeka's and Pārthasarathi's commentary on Verse 182 in "The Debate About Emptiness" in Kumārila's *Detailed Commentary in Verse* at Sastri (1940, p. 183) and Śāstrī (1978, pp. 227-8) respectively.

epistemically accessible to her, and her alone. That is why she is in a unique position to infer the presence of her own awareness-event on the basis of that manifestness.

This proposal might be plausible when it comes to perceptual awareness-events: since the objects of perception (plausibly) exist at the time of the relevant perceptual experience, it is at least conceivable that a perceptual awareness-event can cause its object to become manifest. As the Buddhist notices, this view is implausible when it comes to inferential or testimonial awareness-events directed at past or future objects.¹⁵ For example, my testimony-based awareness about dinosaurs cannot intelligibly be said to produce any property in dinosaurs themselves. While it is true that I become aware of dinosaurs when I read about them, there is no causal interaction between my awareness-event and them.¹⁶

Vācaspati goes on to describe another proposal possibly defended by another group of Mīmāṃsakas who follow Prabhākara Mīśra and therefore are called Prābhākaras. They explain the fact that a certain awareness-event is only about certain objects and not others by appealing to the fact that each awareness-event only has the *capacity* (*śakti*) to reveal itself and certain other objects.¹⁷ This capacity is produced by the same causal conditions that produce the awareness-event itself. But the Buddhist points out that this proposal suffers from its own share of problems. Any capacity has its own distinctive effect. So, if awareness-events have a capacity in virtue of which they reveal their objects, we need to explain what the distinctive effect of that capacity is. Now, the object of awareness cannot itself be the effect of the relevant capacity. For, in the case of perceptual awareness at least, the object produces the awareness-event and therefore cannot be brought about by any capacity that the awareness-event possesses. Moreover, we also cannot say that the relevant effect of the capacity is some property that the awareness-event produces in the object. For this won't be true of past or future objects that our awareness-events can be about.

The moral is clear. It's extremely hard to explain how an awareness-event can be only about a certain mind-independent particular and not others without by appealing to some intrinsic feature of that awareness-event in virtue of which it can represent it. This leads the Buddhist to the following conclusion:

Therefore, it's a mere fantasy to imagine that an awareness-event which lacks a phenomenal form has as its intentional object an external entity. So, let an awareness-event that has an external entity as its intentional object have a phenomenal form!

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 626, l. 4-7: "That is false, since it suffers from a problem of underextension. Indeed, there are thousands of awareness-events, produced by inference and testimony and belonging to omniscient beings, which have past and future entities as their intentional objects. And these awareness-events aren't able to produce any result in their object. For their object doesn't exist at that time. It is not possible that there is a property-bearer [i.e., the object] that hasn't been produced, but its property isn't destroyed and has nature that is produced."

¹⁶ In *The Grain of Reasoning* (*Nyāyakaṇikā*), Vācaspati offers a different solution to the problem: he claims that manifestness isn't a property of the intentional object, but rather a specific relation between the subject and the intentional object. This, on the face of it, avoids the problem that manifestness cannot be produced in past objects. See Goswami (1978, p. 190). On reflection, it's far from obvious how successful this solution is: at least on an ontology in which relations are just dyadic properties, the same problem would arise again.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 626, ll. 7-11: "Suppose you say, 'The awareness-event of a certain kind is produced from its causes having been endowed with a capacity to manifest itself and other things, such that only a certain entity is its intentional object and not everything.' Alas, good sir! Since a capacity resides in the target of that capacity (*śakya*), you must say what the target of this is. Suppose you say, 'It's the object.' No. First, the object isn't produced by this, since the object is indeed what produces the awareness-event. And it's not reasonable to say that the awareness-event produces a result that has the object as its locus. And when the target of a capacity is absent, then the capacity isn't possible." For a version of the Prābhākara view, see Sastri (1961, pp. 179ff).

That is to say, an awareness-event that has the phenomenal form of blue, etc. has as its intentional object something that is blue. For its own nature is blue. (Ibid., p. 626, ll. 11-14)

The claim is this. Appealing to a mental image helps us explain what an awareness-event is about. If an experience includes a blue mental image (and conditions are normal), it represents a blue particular outside in the external world. This blue mental image, according to the Buddhist, is part of the nature of the awareness-event; it isn't distinct from the experience itself. Thus, aboutness is decomposable into internal and external conditions.

3. How Decompositionalism Leads to Idealism

Suppose we grant that we cannot explain how perceptual experiences can represent mind-independent particulars without appealing to their phenomenal forms. However, as Dharmakīrti notes in the Chapter on Perception (*Pratyakṣa Pariccheda*) of his *Detailed Commentary on Epistemology (Pramāṇavārttika)*, merely appealing to the phenomenal forms of perceptual experiences doesn't make it easy to explain aboutness either.¹⁸ In fact, it leads to a form of epistemological idealism. Here, I describe how Vācaspati explains this argument.

On a simple version of the Sautrāntika view, a perceptual experience can be about a certain mind-independent particular if it resembles that particular in virtue of its phenomenal form, i.e., the mental image it involves. In response to this proposal, we may ask whether this resemblance is complete or only partial. On the one hand, there cannot be complete resemblance between an experience and a mind-independent item. For the former is a mental event, but the latter isn't. On the other hand, partial resemblance alone cannot be enough to generate awareness of a specific mind-independent particular; there are far too many things that the experience, in virtue of the mental image it involves, may resemble partially.¹⁹

In order to solve this problem, the Sautrāntika might point out that his brand of decompositionalism doesn't explain aboutness merely in terms of resemblance but also by appeal to causal relations between experiences and mind-independent particulars. So, partial resemblance between the phenomenal form of the experience and a mind-independent item isn't sufficient for that experience to be about that item; the experience must also be caused by that item. But this proposal will collapse in a scenario where an agent undergoes two successive perceptual awareness-events, which involve the same mental image, such that the second awareness-event is caused by the first. Here's an example. Suppose you are looking a white picket fence. First, at t₁, there is a contact between your visual sense-modality and the picket fence. Then, at t₂, you undergo a sensory awareness-event which represents something that resembles the white picket fence. Finally, at t₃, this sensory awareness-event produces a further awareness-event, which involves a similar mental image. For example, the sensory awareness-event might make you attend to the object more carefully than at the first moment. This second awareness-event, which has the same (or similar) phenomenal form as the sensory awareness-event, is also caused by it. Thus, the conditions of causation and

¹⁸ See Verses 416-446 in the Chapter on Perception (*Pratyakṣa Pariccheda*) of *Detailed Commentary on Epistemology (Pramāṇavārttika)* (Pandeya 1989, pp. 146-151). For discussion, see Kellner (2017).

¹⁹ Thakur 1996, p. 626, ll. 14-17: "Here, this is to be said. How does an awareness-event come to have an intentional object—by complete resemblance or partial resemblance? An awareness-event, which is conscious in character, cannot resemble a non-conscious object completely. If there were such resemblance, the awareness-episode itself would be non-conscious, so it would no longer have the property of being awareness. If the resemblance is partial, where is that absent? So, every awareness-event would apprehend everything."

resemblance are fulfilled. But then, the preceding sensory awareness-event (sometimes called *immediately preceding homologous condition* or *samanantara-pratyaya*) could just as well be the object of the following awareness-event.²⁰ The lesson: mere resemblance or causation plus resemblance cannot explain how a perceptual experience, in virtue of having a phenomenal form, can be about a certain mind-independent particular. Sautrāntika decompositionism doesn't quite work.

Vācaspati knows that there are other kinds of decompositionist proposals that are available to the Sautrāntika philosopher. For Yogācāra-Sautrāntika philosophers like Dignāga (5th-6th century CE) and Dharmakīrti, perceptual awareness-events are essentially non-conceptual. Even though we may perceptually apprehend an external particular without conceptually distinguishing it from any other objects, we can only act towards external particulars if we are able to conceptually distinguish it from others. This process of conceptually distinguishing the external particular from things of other kinds is what Dharmakīrti calls *determination* (*adhyavasāya*).²¹ Dharmakīrti's commentator, Dharmottara (8th century CE), turns this into a theory of what perceptual awareness-events represent. He writes:

An episode of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) has two kinds of intentional objects: the apprehended object (*grāhya*), i.e., the item in the form of which the relevant awareness-event arises, and the determined object (*adhyavaseya*), i.e., that which is to be attained. The determined object is distinct from the apprehended object. The apprehended object of perception is a momentary entity. The object, which is determined by a certain judgement produced by dint of the perceptual awareness, is a sequence of such momentary entities. The object to be attained on the basis of perception is this sequence, since the momentary entity cannot be attained. (Sastri 1994, p. 39)

On this view, a perceptual awareness can be said to represent two sorts of things. The first kind of thing—the *apprehended* object—is a momentary mind-independent item which causes the perceptual awareness and which resembles the perceptual experience in virtue of the objective aspect that the latter possesses. The second kind of thing—the *determined* object—is rather a temporally extended mind-independent item (i.e., an ordinary material object composed of instantaneous temporal parts), which the subject judges on the basis of her perceptual experiences to be what she perceives. This temporally extended entity is what an agent can act towards.

On behalf of the Sautrāntika philosopher, Vācaspati entertains a proposal along these lines.

Let the awareness-event be related by causation-plus-resemblance to its causal conditions, e.g., attention (*manaskāra*), sense-faculties, etc. Still, whatever entity is determined by the awareness-event is the thing that serves as its intentional object. Since it determines (*adhyavasyati*) the entity, the intentional object of that awareness-event is that entity, and not attention, etc. (Thakur 1996, p. 626, ll. 20-22)

²⁰ Ibid., p. 626, l. 17-20: "Moreover, an awareness-event, which is produced from an awareness of a blue object that serves as its immediately preceding homologous condition, more closely resembles the awareness of the blue object than the blue object. So, the immediately preceding homologous condition itself would be its intentional object in virtue of causation and resemblance. Therefore, the defining characteristic of the intentional object is also not causation plus resemblance."

²¹ For discussion of this concept in Dharmakīrti and his successors, see Katsura (1986, 1991), Dunne (2004), and McCrea and Patil (2006).

Here's a way of understanding the proposal. When an agent's sense-faculty causally interacts with an external particular, she at first undergoes an initial sensory awareness, which involves a mental image that the agent is immediately aware of. Then, on the basis of that initial sensory awareness, she judges that there's an ordinary material object with such-and-such features before her. The temporally extended sequence of mind-independent particulars, which is thus determined, becomes the intentional object of the agent's perceptual awareness-event.

However, the notion of *determination* that lies at the heart of this proposal is underspecified.

Well, what is this determination? It isn't just apprehension. For two phenomenal forms are indeed not apprehended. The first-hand awareness (*anubhava*) is of the form, "This is blue", and not of the form "These two are blue." (Ibid., p. 627, ll. 1-2)

If the determination of an object just consists in an apprehension of that object, then an agent's perceptual awareness of a blue material object would involve two phenomenal forms: the agent would apprehend both the form of the blue mental image *and* the form of the blue mind-independent particular. But then this seems to be incongruent with the ordinary phenomenology of perceptual awareness.

This just reinforces the distinction between the *apprehended object* and the *determined object* that Dharmottara mentions. So, following Dharmottara, the Sautrāntika philosopher might just claim that the determined object isn't apprehended at the time of the perceptual awareness; rather, determination involves a *projection* (*āropa*) of features of the mental image onto a sequence of momentary mind-independent particulars. Thus, when I perceive a blue sphere, my perceptual experience involves a blue, sphere-shaped mental image, etc. Then, I project the blue colour, the spherical shape etc., on to a sequence of mind-independent entities, and take myself to perceive a mind-independent blue sphere. This yields a different form of decompositionalism.

Dharmottara's Decompositionalism. For any subject *S* and a sequence *M* of mind-independent entities, if *S* undergoes a perceptual experience about *M*, then the fact that *S*'s perceptual experience is about *M* holds solely in virtue of:

- (i) the fact that *S* undergoes experience that involves a certain phenomenal form, and
- (ii) the fact that *S* projects certain qualitative properties instantiated by the phenomenal form of that experience onto *M*.

But even this proposal doesn't succeed.

Vācaspati explains why. The Sautrāntika, therefore, faces a dilemma with respect to the process of projection. Is the relevant mind-independent entity apprehended before the projection occurs, or not? If the agent already apprehends the mind-independent entity before she projects certain features onto it, then she is in fact aware of two things: the blue sphere-shaped image and the mind-independent blue sphere. This again conflicts with ordinary

perceptual phenomenology. This, in turn, leaves us with the conclusion that, before the projection, we aren't non-inferentially aware of any mind-independent particulars.²²

On this reformed Sautrāntika view, a perceptual awareness-event doesn't in itself carry any information about a mind-independent object; it can come to do so only insofar as it produces an inferential judgment that there's a mind-independent object which resembles and causes the relevant awareness-event. This view is vulnerable to several objections.²³

The first objection proceeds from the premise that, ordinarily, projection works much like a cognitive illusion, where we judge a mind-independent particular to be *F* when it's not in fact *F*. If this is right, then it's not clear that we can project anything onto an external object without being antecedently aware of that external object and its properties in the first place. Suppose, out for a walk on the beach, you perceptually judge a piece of seashell to be silver. Here, you project the property of being silver on to the seashell. But this projection is possible only insofar as you are first aware of the white and shiny seashell. If this is right, then we cannot project the features of our perceptual experiences on to mind-independent particulars without being antecedently aware of those particulars themselves.²⁴

The second objection is that this view cannot explain how specific actions can be directed towards specific external objects. For example, suppose I have a jumper that I really like, so I wear it as often as I can. But I really never apprehend an external object like my jumper, how can I tell that my practical undertaking, with respect to wearing that jumper, is directed at that jumper and not something else that produces the same mental imagery in me? Thus, it's quite hard to explain how specific types of practical undertakings are directed at specific objects on this view.

For our purposes, however, the most serious objection is this. If this Sautrāntika view is true, then an agent can only become aware of or gain knowledge about mind-independent items by inference. For the judgements, by means of which the intentional objects of perceptual awareness are determined, are produced by an inferential process without any independent awareness of mind-independent entities. But the worry is that such an inference can never yield awareness or knowledge about external objects. This, in turn, means that we can never aware or have knowledge of mind-independent particulars and properties. Thus, this view leads us to epistemological idealism.

²² Ibid., p. 627, ll. 2-4: "Suppose you say that determination consists in the projection of the awareness-event's own phenomenal form on to an external object. Does that happen when the external object is apprehended, or in the absence of any such apprehension? It cannot be while the external object is apprehended. As we have already said, in an awareness-event, two blue things are not manifested."

²³ Ibid., p. 627, ll. 4-7: "It is not possible to project a projectible thing (*āropya*) onto the target of projection (*āropa-viśaya*) without the apprehending the target. Without undergoing a first-hand awareness of a white and shiny object before oneself at all, one cannot project silver onto it. Moreover, if no external object were apprehended, there wouldn't be any regularity with regard to practical undertakings (*pravṛtti*). For, since other external objects are also not apprehended, there would be the undesirable consequence that there are practical undertakings directed at those as well. And, on the view that awareness-events have a phenomenal form, there is no means of knowing that there are external objects, since they are unapprehended."

²⁴ A natural worry at this stage might be that we can sometimes project the objective phenomenal forms of awareness outward on to an external object even though we may never have apprehended it before, e.g., in dreams or hallucinations. The standard Nyāya response to this, starting with Uddyotakara's sub-commentary on *Aphorisms of Reasoning* 4.2.34, is that, even in such cases, we project previously experienced properties on to previously experienced objects (Thakur 1997, p. 489ff). For example, when I dream that I am in Delhi when I am not, I am ascribing to myself (an existent object) the property of being in Delhi (another property that I've encountered before).

As we may expect, the Sautrāntika philosopher might attempt to resist this conclusion. She might argue that the idealist, who thinks that we cannot gain knowledge of the external world by inference, faces an explanatory challenge. She must explain how certain perceptual experiences only arise at certain times but not at others. The standard Buddhist idealist explanation of how our perceptual experiences arise appeals to various memory impressions or traces (*vāsanā*) contained in *storehouse consciousness* (*ālaya-vijñāna*). Storehouse consciousness serves as a repository of memory traces that can later be used for conscious mental activity. When these traces mature (due to karmic factors that depend on past good or bad deeds performed by the subject), they give rise to conscious mental activity, e.g., conscious experiences and thoughts. However, the Sautrāntika philosopher can argue that, even within this framework, in order to explain how our ordinary experiences and thoughts arise, we need to appeal to the existence of mind-independent items. The argument (a version of which we saw in Section 1) proceeds from the following general principle: in the presence of a condition C, if a phenomenon X arises only sometimes but not always, then X causally depends on something other than C. Suppose I undergo an awareness-event where something that looks like a white picket fence appears. Now, such an awareness-event only arises sometimes, even though the ingredients generating that experience (e.g., mental images of whiteness, picket fences, etc. derived from past experiences) may be present in storehouse consciousness. Then, we are forced to conclude that the relevant awareness-event cannot be explained solely by appealing to the resources for conscious mental activity present in storehouse consciousness. Something else—e.g., a mind-independent particular—is required.²⁵ So, the Sautrāntika philosopher can resist the charge that her view leads to epistemological idealism.

However, it is far from obvious whether this argument succeeds. For the idealist could, in principle, explain the fact that our perceptual awareness-events only arise at certain times and not others without appealing to external objects: “Awareness-events arise only sometimes, because their causal condition—namely, the maturation of impressions—also obtains sometimes” ((Ibid., p. 627, ll. 10-1) Here is how Vacaspati imagines the realist could resist this response.

[The realist:] Surely, an impression is just the power that different store-house consciousnesses belonging to the same sequence have of producing a specific active awareness-event (*pravṛtti-vijñāna*, i.e., a conscious experience or thought). The maturation of an impression consists in its state of being about to produce its effect. And the causal condition for that maturation is the previous time-slice of that storehouse consciousness which occurs in the same sequence and causes the present time-slice of the store-house consciousness to exist. For you don’t accept the view that the maturation of the impressions can depend on a distinct sequence. But then, either all the mental events that belong to that sequence of storehouse consciousnesses must serve as the cause of that maturation, or none of them. For they aren’t distinct from each other.

²⁵ Thakur 1996, p. 627, ll. 7-8: “Well, the fact that the phenomenal forms of blue, etc. only occasionally arise counts as the means of knowing [the existence of an external world]. Now, if something happens only occasionally even in the presence of a certain condition, then that occurrence depends on something other than that condition.”

[The idealist:] There are differences amongst effects due to differences amongst time-slices. So, since certain time-slices occur only at certain times, the effects can also only arise at certain times.

[The realist:] Surely, if that were the case, only one time-slice of storehouse consciousness would have the capacity to produce an awareness of blue, etc., as well as the capacity of activating the power to give rise such an awareness. Other time-slices couldn't have it! For, if they had it, then how could there be differences amongst effects due to differences amongst time-slices? So, all the time-slices belonging to the same sequence of storehouse consciousnesses would be capable of making the impression mature. And it is impossible for an effect not to arise when the causal conditions capable of producing it are present. (Ibid., p. 627, ll. 11-18)

The central claim here is that the idealist story about how our awareness-events arise only sometimes but not at others requires us to say that different time-slices of the same mental stream have arbitrarily different causal capacities. Why? The idealist wishes to appeal to the maturation of impressions carried by storehouse consciousness. An impression is just a dispositional state: it is the power of different time-slices of storehouse consciousness occurring within the same mental stream to give rise to experiences or thoughts of a certain kind. But, if the idealist is right, although all time-slices of storehouse consciousness may carry the same impressions, only some of those time-slices may be capable of producing a specific awareness-event by activating a specific impression. But this seems difficult to accept, since *ex hypothesi* the time-slices all have the power to generate the relevant awareness-event.

Prima facie, therefore, the Sautrāntika does have an argument for the existence of external objects: “Awareness-events of blue, etc., are not caused by the mind-sequence in which they occur, since they only arise sometimes and not always.” The argument seeks to show that perceptual awareness-events have a certain property, i.e., the property of not being caused by the stream of mental events in which they occur. This is the *target property* (*sādhya*) of the inference. The inference seeks to establish the target property by appealing to another property of those awareness-events, i.e., the property of arising sometimes and not always. This is the *reason property* (*hetu*) that provides evidence for the target property.

In her refutation of the Sautrāntika realist, the idealist notes that, in order for this inference to be successful, the reason property has to be exclusive: whenever it is present, the target property has to be present. And the idealist wants to say that the reason property fails to be exclusive in this sense.²⁶ Why? The idealist repeats herself: we don't need to appeal to any external object—i.e., any object external to the stream of mental events in which an awareness-event occurs—in order to explain why that awareness-event occurs at a certain time but not at others. So, the fact that an awareness-event only occurs sometimes but not others is compatible with the claim that awareness-events are caused solely by conditions that are internal to the stream of mental events in which they occur. Thus, the reason property can be present in an awareness-event even when the target property is absent. This makes the reason property non-exclusive (*anaikāntika*): its presence fails to exclude the absence of the target property. The idealist explains this thought in two steps.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 628, ll. 1-2: “[The idealist:] This is unreasonable. Since the fact that awareness-events of blue, etc. arise only sometimes can be explained even if they are caused solely by the sequence in which they occur, the reason property put forward here is suspected to be compatible with the absence of the target property. As such, it is non-exclusive (*anaikāntika*).”

First, the crucial problem for the Sautrāntika realist, as the idealist notes, is that her position itself involves a tension. The realist is committed to the claim that ordinary material objects—which are conceptually constructed streams of time-slices—can causally affect an agent’s perceptual awareness-events in distinct ways. At the same time, she doesn’t want to say (as the idealist does) that the difference amongst time-slices of storehouse consciousness can causally explain why perceptual experiences only arise at certain times and not others. So, her position is somewhat inelegant. On the one hand, she thinks that these conceptual constructions can account for the difference in effects. On the other hand, she thinks that ultimately real differences amongst time-slices can’t.²⁷ By contrast, the idealist’s position is more coherent: she thinks that these differences amongst time-slices can explain why different awareness-events arise at different times and not always.

In response, the realist could highlight the problematic consequences of the idealist’s position: if the idealist is right, then the different time-slices of storehouse consciousness can’t possibly carry the same impression, i.e., the power to produce the same awareness-event. This seems false.²⁸

This is where the idealist can make her second point. She could point out that the realist faces an analogous challenge. Note that sometimes, two distinct material objects can produce phenomenally or introspectively indistinguishable perceptual experiences. Either the realist must say that these experiences are the same, or they must say that they are distinct. If they are the same, then there may be a sense in which different momentary time-slices of storehouse consciousness could produce the same experience or thought. If they are distinct, then the idealist could also say that different momentary time-slices of storehouse consciousness produce distinct experiences and thoughts.²⁹ So, this isn’t really a problem for the idealist.

Thus, on balance, the realist’s position seems much worse than that of the idealist. So, the reason property of the realist’s inference hasn’t been shown to be exclusive with respect to the target property. This, in turn, clears room for the idealist to say: “Therefore, even though awareness-events may have objective phenomenal forms, no [external] entity can be inferred, whether or not it is detected by the senses” (Ibid., p. 628, ll. 11-2). So, we cannot be non-inferentially or inferentially know anything about mind-independent particulars.

While the realist argument fails, the epistemological idealist can still run her own argument: “Intentional objects aren’t distinct from the mind, since they can be apprehended, just like

²⁷ Ibid., p. 628, ll. 3-5: “[The realist:] Surely, we have said that a difference amongst time-slices cannot account for the difference in effects.

[The idealist:] Who other than honourable sir can say that the constructed sequences [of momentary time-slices of material objects], which is devoid of all causal capacities, can be a reason for the difference in effects, but the ultimately real difference amongst time-slices can’t?”

²⁸ Ibid., p. 628, ll. 5-8: “[The realist:] If the difference amongst time-slices could account for the difference in effects, then different time-slices couldn’t have the same power. If distinct time-slices don’t have the same causal capacity, once a certain time-slice of storehouse consciousness produces a certain awareness of a blue object, a different time-slice couldn’t again produce that awareness of the blue object.”

²⁹ Ibid., p. 628, p. 8-11: “[The idealist:] Well, can the defender of external objects account for how different streams of blue lotus time-slices produce streams of awareness-events that have the same phenomenal form, i.e., of a blue lotus? If he says that the awareness of a blue lotus that is produced by a distinct stream of blue lotus time-slices is also distinct, then we can also say that the awareness of blue object that is produced by a distinct time-slice is also distinct. Therefore, from a particular set of causes, a specific particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) is produced, and that particular produces a certain effect and not any other effect.”

feelings” (Ibid., p. 628, ll. 13-14). Everyone agrees that there are intentional objects, e.g., the blue thing that appears in a perceptual experience as of something blue. The debate between the realist and the idealist is about whether such objects are distinct from awareness (and its intrinsic features) or not. According to the idealist, apprehensibility (i.e., the property of being something that can be apprehended) is invariably accompanied by the property of being non-distinct from awareness and its features, e.g., in the case of feelings (i.e., hedonic states like pain and pleasure) which aren’t distinct from the awareness-events that apprehend them (or their intrinsic features). So, since intentional objects can be apprehended, they must also be non-distinct from the awareness-events apprehend them (or their intrinsic features).

The upshot is this. If we accept the Sautrāntika realist’s claim that a perceptual awareness-event can be about a mind-independent particular only in virtue of possessing a phenomenal form, we need to say how a perceptual awareness-event can represent mind-independent particulars in virtue of possessing this phenomenal form. The idealist argues that no good answer to this question can be given. This undermines the claim that perceptual awareness-events can carry information about mind-independent particulars. This makes it hard to defend the claim that we are aware of or know anything about such particulars, and paves the way for epistemological idealism.

4. The Argument Against Idealism

Vācaspati agrees that the Sautrāntika brand of decompositionism leads to epistemological idealism. However, he thinks that epistemological idealism is incoherent. According to the epistemological idealist, the intentional objects of our awareness-events aren’t distinct from those awareness-events (or their intrinsic features). But this view is untenable.

Here, first, this is to be said. If apprehensibility were pervaded [i.e., invariably accompanied] by non-distinct from awareness, then distinction would be refuted. But this is not pervaded by non-distinctness. That is to say, in a case where one undergoes a first-hand awareness of a blue object that is spatially extended and separate, its extension and separateness isn’t the nature of the awareness-event. Extension involves pervading multiple spatial regions. Since an awareness-event is simple, non-spatial, and impartite, it cannot pervade multiple spatial regions. This is just as has been said [by Dharmakīrti:]

Therefore, the appearance of spatial extension belongs neither to the object nor to the awareness. Since the nature [of being extended] is refuted with respect to one [i.e., atoms], it is also not possible with respect to many.³⁰

In the same manner, separateness from an object also not the nature of an awareness-event. If it were so, then an awareness-event would ultimately be separate from an object. Therefore, since separateness is also not the awareness-event, it must be

³⁰ This is a variant of verse 211 in The Chapter on Perception (*Pratyakṣa Pariccheda*) of Dharmakīrti’s *Detailed Commentary on Epistemology (Pramāṇavārttika)* (Pandeya 1989, p. 107). Unlike Thakur, I am reading the Sanskrit as, “*tasmānārthe na vijñāne sthūlābhāsas tadātmanah /ekatra pratiṣiddhatvād vahuṣv api na sambhava/*” In the relevant context, Dharmakīrti is arguing that spatial extension that appears in perceptual awareness can belong neither to a material object nor to the awareness itself. It can’t belong to the material object, because either it has to be one (i.e., an atom), or many (i.e., a plurality of atoms). An atom can’t have spatial extension; if one atom can’t have spatial extension, it’s hard to explain how a plurality of them could have it (given that it’s hard to explain a plurality of them compose a spatially extended object). Similarly, given that awareness-events are themselves simple and impartite, they can’t be spatially extended either.

accepted as non-existent. Thus, since that which exists cannot be identical to that which doesn't exist, you—even if you don't like it—would have to accept that awareness manifests that which is distinct from it. (Thakur 1996, p. 628, l. 19-p. 629, l. 5)³¹

The argument is complicated, so let me unpack it.

In any case of perception, we seem to be perceiving something that is spatially extended and located away from different objects. Spatial extension (*sthaulya*), for Vācaspati, the property of pervading different regions of space (*nānā-dig-deśa-vyāpitā*), while separateness (*viccheda*) is the property of occupying separate regions (*vicchinna-deśatā*) from other things.³² These represented properties of spatial extension and separateness cannot belong to the nature of the perceptual awareness. After all, perceptual awareness-events cannot be spatially extended, and, if epistemological idealism is true, they can't be located away from any of their intentional objects. This yields the conclusion that what perceptual awareness-events represent doesn't exist. If that is right, then what is represented by perceptual awareness-events must be distinct from awareness-events themselves. That already contradicts the conclusion that the epistemological idealist arrived at. To make things clearer, we can formalise the argument as follows (by supplying a missing premise).

The Argument from Spatial Properties

Idealism. If epistemological idealism is true, the intentional objects of our perceptual awareness-events are not distinct from them or their intrinsic features.

Spatial Content. Some intentional objects of our perceptual awareness-events have spatial properties that cannot belong to those awareness-events or their intrinsic features.

The Missing Premise. For any two entities x and y , if x has certain properties that cannot belong to y , then x is distinct from y .

Conclusion 1. Some intentional objects of our perceptual awareness-events are distinct from them and their intrinsic features.

Conclusion 2. Therefore, epistemological idealism is false.

In response to this argument, the idealist might concede that the intentional objects of our perceptual awareness-events are not identical to this awareness-events, but are in fact non-existent. But even though the conclusion will remain intact. For that which exists cannot be identical to that which doesn't exist. As long as the idealist concedes that awareness-events can be about something other than themselves, they will be contradicting the conclusion of the earlier idealist argument. So epistemological idealism is incoherent.

Suppose we grant that our perceptual awareness-event can represent non-existent objects that are distinct from them and their intrinsic features. Vācaspati now says that, if the idealist allows, they must also allow that they can represent *existent* particulars and properties that are distinct from them and their intrinsic features: “Then, even an existent object [which is distinct from awareness] could be manifested by it” (Thakur 1996, p. 629, l. 5). The rest of Vācaspati's discussion is a defence of this claim. Call it *The Analogy*. Vācaspati starts out

³¹ In his commentary *The Grain of Reasoning (Nyāya-kaṅikā)*, Vācaspati states the same argument; see Goswami (1978, pp. 187-8).

³² For more detailed explanation of these notions, see *The Grain of Reasoning (Nyāya-kaṅikā)*, especially Goswami (1978, p. 187 ll. 10-15).

from the observation that the epistemological idealist must herself tell some story about how perceptual awareness-events can represent non-existent objects. Whatever that story about aboutness is, there will be an analogous---if not better---story available to the Nyāya realist about how perceptual awareness-events can represent existent objects. So, the *Analogy* cannot be easily be rejected.

5. The Nature of Aboutness

In this section, I will show how Vācaspati defends the *Analogy* by appealing to a non-decompositionalist account of aboutness.

A. Aboutness as a Natural Relation

The idealist could try to reject the *Analogy* by offering the following argument.

The Idealist Argument from Causal Inefficacy

The Act Model of Awareness. If there is an intentional object of an awareness-event that is distinct from the awareness-event and its intrinsic features, then it must play the role of a patient in relation to the act of awareness.

The Patient Role. If something plays the role of a patient in relation to an act of awareness, then the act must produce a result in that object.

Causal Inefficacy. If there is an *existent* intentional object of an awareness-event that is distinct from the awareness-event and its intrinsic features, then the relevant act of awareness needn't necessarily produce a result in that object.

Conclusion. Therefore, there is no *existent* intentional object of an awareness-event that is distinct from the awareness-event and its intrinsic features.

The Act Model of Awareness is motivated by ascriptions of awareness-events, like “Jo sees the picket fence.” *The Patient Role* is motivated by the commitment of *kāraṅka* theory, which underlies the Bhāṭṭa theory of aboutness. *Causal Inefficacy* is plausible at least given the failure of the Bhāṭṭa view of aboutness. If this argument succeeds, then the realist is in trouble. Vācaspati responds to this worry in three stages.

The first part of the response involves pointing out that the same challenge can be raised against the idealist, who (according to the reasoning presented in the last section) must also think that perceptual awareness-events can represent distinct non-existent objects.

[The idealist:] How can an awareness-event, which doesn't causally affect an object that is distinct from it, manifest it?

[Vācaspati:] How does an awareness-event, which cannot causally affect the spatial extension, manifest this spatial extension? (Ibid., p. 629, ll. 6-7)

In response, the idealist could argue that there is something about the nature of awareness that allows it to represent such non-existent objects. But the same idea could also be deployed by the Nyāya realist.

[The idealist:] By its own nature.

[Vācaspati:] There is nothing wrong with saying the same with respect to external objects. If something is related to another thing in virtue of its own nature, it doesn't depend on anything else in order to be so related. This is just as in the case of an inferential mark and its relation to the target property. Since an awareness-event is about a certain object in virtue of its own nature, then its being about the object doesn't depend on anything else. (Ibid., p. 629, ll. 8-9)

The key idea here is that the relation of aboutness between an awareness and its object is a *natural relation*. The thought can be explained using the example that Vācaspati mentions.

According to Vācaspati, it is possible for an agent to become certain that an object *o* is *F* on the basis of inference, "The object *o* is *F*, because it is *G*," only if the agent is able to ascertain beforehand that the reason property (or the inferential mark)—i.e., the property of *G*-ness—bears a *natural connection* (*svābhāvika-pratibandha*) to the target property—i.e., the property of *F*-ness. Vācaspati explains the idea as follows.

Therefore, whatever the relation may be, it's reasonable to say that if it is a natural and invariable relation that belongs to a certain entity, then that entity is the indicator (*gamaka*) [i.e., the reason property], and the other relatum is the indicated object (*gamyā*) [i.e., the target property]. Thus, the relation of smoke, etc. with fire, etc. is natural, not the relation of fire, etc. with smoke, etc. Those fire, etc. are indeed apprehended without smoke, etc. In contrast, when they become connected to wet fuel, etc., then they are related to smoke, etc. Therefore, the relation of fire, etc., which obtains in virtue of an incidental condition, i.e., wet fuel, etc., is not natural, and therefore isn't invariable. In contrast, the relation of smoke, etc. with fire, etc. is natural, since no incidental condition (*upādhi*) for it is apprehended. For, since no deviation [i.e., a case where the reason property is present, but the target property is absent] is observed, it doesn't make sense to postulate an unapprehended deviation. Therefore, an invariable relation is a part of an inference. And it is not appropriate to say that the naturalness of a relation is blocked by an unobserved incidental condition which is suspected to be observable due to the absence of any evidence that either proves or disproves its existence. (Ibid., p. 135, ll. 8-16)³³

The passage contains a number of important ideas, so let me explain them carefully. Compare two inferences:

- (3) The hill contains smoke. Therefore, the hill contains fire.
- (4) The hill contains fire. Therefore, the hill contains smoke.

The inference in (3) can generate certainty in the conclusion that the hill contains fire only if the relevant agent is antecedently certain that fire always accompanies smoke. In other words, the agent must be sure that the relation of smoke with fire is an invariable one; fire never fails to obtain at a place where smoke exists. How can one become so sure? The answer is that one must ascertain that relation of smoke with fire is *natural*, i.e., not an artefact of some other background *incidental condition* (*upādhi*). An incidental condition is a condition such that (i) in the presence of the condition, the intended target property accompanies the intended reason property, but (ii) in the absence of the condition, the intended target property may not

³³ For a discussion of this notion of a natural relation, see Oberhammer (1964, 1965), Vattanky (1984, pp. 76-9), and Patil (2009, pp. 107ff).

accompany the intended reason property. So, if there were an incidental condition that induces the connection of smoke with fire, then, in its absence, smoke could be present at a place where there is no fire. Now, even after searching thoroughly for such a condition, an agent shouldn't be able to find any such condition. So, an agent can be certain that the relation of smoke with fire is natural and therefore invariable.

Compare this inference to the inference in (4). The latter can generate certainty in the conclusion that the hill contains smoke, only if the relevant agent is antecedently certain that smoke always accompanies fire. In other words, the relevant agent has to be sure that the relation of fire with smoke is invariable. But Vācaspati points out that an agent (who undertakes a thorough investigation) cannot easily be sure of this. This is because even though the agent may perceive smoke and fire occurring together on numerous occasions, she will in fact find an incidental condition, i.e., contact of fire with wet fuel, such that: (i) in the presence of that condition, fire invariably gives rise to smoke, and (ii) in the absence of that condition, fire doesn't give rise to smoke. Given that the connection of fire with smoke depends on such an incidental condition, the relation between them cannot be natural. Since the agent cannot ascertain that the relation of fire with smoke is natural, she cannot take it to be invariable. So, she cannot take the relation for granted for the purposes of inferring smoke from fire.

Now, note how this applies to the case of awareness-events and their intentional objects. If Sautrāntika decompositionism about aboutness were true, then the relation between an awareness-event and its intentional object couldn't be natural. Why? According to Sautrāntika decompositionism, the relation of aboutness that connects a perceptual awareness to its intentional object doesn't belong to the nature of the perceptual awareness itself: it obtains in virtue of an internal condition, namely the phenomenal form of the awareness-event, and some further external condition like causation and resemblance. If the relation of aboutness that an awareness-event bears to its intentional object could be decomposed in this way into internal and external conditions, then the presence of the awareness-event would be accompanied by the presence of the intentional object only when the background external conditions were in place. So, the external conditions would serve as the incidental condition due to which the relation of the awareness with its intentional object holds. This, in turn, would mean that the awareness-event could sometimes obtain even without an intentional object. So, even though an agent may undergo a veridical perceptual experience about a yellow banana in one situation, it is in principle possible for an agent to undergo a hallucination that has the same phenomenal form, even though the relevant intentional objects—the banana, its yellowness, etc.—are absent.

This is not how things in fact are. Whenever we undergo an awareness-event, the awareness-event manifests something. So, given that we can't find any case where there is an awareness-event but no intentional object, we must take the relation between awareness-events and their intentional objects to be a natural one. To take a concrete example, suppose I undergo a perceptual awareness of a blue object. More specifically, it means that the relation of aboutness that connects awareness-events of a certain type with (say) blue objects isn't dependent on any further incidental condition such that (i) the presence of that condition ensures that awareness-events of type are accompanied by blue objects, but (ii) in the absence of that condition, awareness-events of that type could be present without the presence of any such blue object. More generally, this means that when an agent is aware of an entity, she undergoes a mental event or state of a certain kind, such that an agent couldn't undergo a mental event or state of that kind unless *o* were present.

Why is this significant? The challenge that the idealist raised against the realist was this: how can a relation of aboutness obtain between an awareness-event and its (existent and distinct) intentional object even though the awareness-event cannot affect its intentional object in any way? The realist's response was that the idealist could be asked the same question, since the idealist (as shown by **The Argument from Spatial Properties**) also should think that perceptual awareness-events represent non-existent objects that are distinct from them and their intrinsic features. Now, if the idealist's claim is that perceptual awareness-events do this in virtue of their own nature, the realist could make the same appeal to natural relations in order to explain how perceptual awareness-events represent *existent* objects that are distinct from them and their intrinsic features. The point is that, if an entity *x* bears a natural relation to an entity *y*, nothing over and above the existence of *x* is needed for the relation to obtain; *x* doesn't have to causally impact *y* in order to be so related to it. The point is clear in cases where the natural relation is a causal one: smoke doesn't have to causally impact fire in order to be naturally related to it. The point is also clear in the case of other non-causal natural relations, e.g., the relation between certain properties of precious stones ("rainbow-like lustre") and the property of being a specific kind of jewel like a ruby (Ibid., p. 136, l. 22).³⁴ The same, Vācaspati claims, is true of the natural relation of aboutness. He explains the point as follows.

Suppose you ask, "How can the awareness of a material entity that is causally inefficacious with respect to it have the material entity as its intentional object?" Is the expression "awareness of a visible entity" (*rūpavijñāna*) supposed to pick out a means of knowing, or its result? If it is a means of knowing, then it isn't causally inefficacious with respect to the physical entity, since it causes acts of avoidance, grasping, and indifference to arise. If it is a result, then the question is unreasonable. What result of an act is causally efficacious with respect to the patient of that act? Caitra's arrival at the city, which is caused by his movement, doesn't causally affect the relation of inherence by which the contact between Caitra and the city resides in the city. In the same way, in order for there to be a natural relation of aboutness between an awareness and its object, the awareness doesn't have to produce some further effect. (Ibid., p. 629, ll. 14-20)

The argument is this. On the idealist's view, if an awareness of a physical entity were possible, then it couldn't causally affect that entity, and if it couldn't affect that entity, it couldn't be about that object. The underlying idea is that an awareness, insofar as it is an act or event, can only have a distinct entity as its patient if it could produce some result in the entity. Vācaspati's response is this. If we take the awareness of the physical entity to be a means of knowing whether the object is to be obtained, avoided, or neither, then it can indeed affect the relevant physical entity by generating the relevant actions. If we take the awareness of the physical entity merely to be an awareness-event in which the relevant causal process culminates, then it's just a mistake to ask whether it is causally efficacious with respect to the physical entity. Results of acts or events don't have to be causally efficacious. For example, consider Caitra's act of going to the city. Here, the city plays the role of the patient with respect to the act of going. The result of that act is Caitra's arrival at the city, which in turn consists just in the physical contact (*samyoga*) between Caitra and the city. But once this result obtains, it doesn't produce any further effect in the city. Similarly, once the agent's perceptual or cognitive processes has culminated in an awareness-event directed at a certain

³⁴ For discussion, see Patil (2009, p. 107 and pp. 122ff).

object, the awareness-event doesn't have to produce any further effect in the object in order to be about it.

B. Aboutness As A Self-Linking Relation

This response to the idealist might seem uninformative. For we can still intelligibly ask what sort of natural relation obtains between an awareness-event and the physical entity that serves as its object. Is it a causal relation like the relation between smoke and fire? Or is it a non-causal relation like the relation between rainbow-like lustre and the property of being a ruby? If it is the former, then the proposal cannot work for awareness-events that represent past or future objects. If it is the latter, then the intentional object must just be a feature of the awareness-event itself just as rainbow-like lustre is a feature of the ruby. If the realist wants to say that the aboutness relation is neither a causal nor a non-causal natural relation, then there can't be any natural relation between the awareness-event and its intentional object.

Vācaspati's first reaction is that, if the question is simply in virtue of what relation the natural relation between the awareness-event and its intentional object holds, then the question may not have an informative answer.

[The idealist:] If the awareness-event isn't related to its object, how can it be of the object?

[Vācaspati:] How can a relation obtain between two relata? If one posits a further relation, there would be a regress. Therefore, a relation can obtain between two relata without any further relation. Similarly, an awareness-event can be of an object without a further relation. There is no problem of overgeneration. A certain awareness-event, produced by its causal conditions, can only be of a certain object, not another. One cannot subject the very nature of things to one's commands or complaints. The same goes for your questions like "Let this not be the case! And why is it not so?" (Ibid., p. 629, ll. 9-14)

For any property that an entity *a* may possess, we can ask if there is a further relation in virtue of which *a* possesses that property. But if we keep positing new relations in response to such questions, we will be in trouble. For example, take any entity *a* such that *a* bears the relation *R* to *b*. We can ask: By which relation does the property of being *R*-related to *b* reside in *a*? Suppose we say that there is further relation *R** by which this property resides in *a*. We can then ask: By what relation does the property of *R**-related to the property of being *R*-related to *b* reside in *a*? Thus, positing new relations (or properties) to explain existing properties launches us on an infinite regress. At some point, we would have to appeal to the very nature of *a*, and say that the fact that *a* is *R*-related to *b* is at least partly explained by a brute fact about the nature of *a*. This brute fact isn't further explainable in terms of some further relation or property. Similarly, according to Vācaspati, the fact that an awareness-event is about an object should be treated as a brute fact about that awareness-event. It isn't further explainable in terms of some further deeper fact about the awareness-event.

The idea can be explained once again using the example of Caitra's going to the city. When Caitra goes to the city, Caitra comes into contact (*saṃyoga*) with the city. Now, we may ask, "In virtue of what relation is Caitra in contact with the city?" Since contact is a quality (*guṇa*) in the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika ontological scheme, such qualities always reside in substances by a relation of inherence (*samavāya*). But, once again, we can ask, "In virtue of what relation

does the contact inhere in the city?” Given that there is a danger of an infinite regress here, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers claim that there is something about the nature of one of the relata, e.g., the inherence, in virtue of which it is related to the other, i.e., the city. Such a relation, in later Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika ontology, came to be called a *self-linking relation* (*svarūpa-sambandha*): if an entity x is related to y by a self-linking relation R , then there is something about the nature of x that explains how it is related to x . On Vācaspati’s view, a feature of a self-linking relation like this is that the nature of one of its relata cannot be determined without determining the nature of the other. For example, the nature of the inherence relation by which the contact with Caitra resides in the city cannot be determined without determining the nature of the city itself.

An awareness-event’s property of being about an object is just its being invariably connected to the object. We have said that an awareness, which is to be determined by an introspective awareness, cannot be so determined unless its object is determined. If you ask, “How can that which doesn’t inhere in the patient be of the patient?” then we can say, “A relation of inherence that connects the result of the action with its patient doesn’t inhere in the patient, so how can it be of the patient?” If you say, “It’s because it is dependent on the patient,” then we can ask, “What is this dependence on the patient?” If it is the property of being determined on the basis of the determination of the patient, then the same can be said here on the basis of different considerations. (Ibid., p. 629, ll. 21-23)

The claim then is that the relation of aboutness that connects the act of awareness with its intentional object is a self-linking relation, such that the nature of the awareness cannot be determined without determining the nature of its intentional object. For example, when I am looking at the picket fence outside my window, I cannot undergo an awareness of the form, “I am seeing that picket fence,” without determining what it is I am seeing. In this sense, our epistemic access to the facts about what awareness-events we are undergoing depends on our epistemic access to what objects we are aware of.

Thus, Vācaspati seems to reduce the relation of aboutness to a self-linking relation: in order to explain how an awareness-event is related to its intentional object, we don’t have to appeal to a further relation, only to the nature of the awareness-event itself. This doesn’t imply that the intentional object is identical to the awareness-event, or part of its nature. It just means that there is a constitutive relation between the awareness-event and its intentional object; an awareness-event of that kind couldn’t obtain unless it were about the relevant intentional object. Moreover, self-linking relations involve a kind of epistemic dependence, whereby the nature of one relatum cannot be determined without determining the nature of the other relatum. This is true of awareness-events: in order to introspectively determine that an awareness-event obtains, the agent must antecedently determine that its intentional object obtains. This, once again, conflicts with the Sautrāntika decompositionalist picture. For, on that picture, we can determine whether we are undergoing an awareness-events simply by becoming aware of certain intrinsic properties of the awareness-event, e.g., its phenomenal form; we don’t have to determine the intentional object of awareness in order to gain such self-knowledge.

C. Aboutness as an Irreflexive Relation

Vācaspati’s last move will be deemed problematic by Yogācāra idealists like Dharmakīrti. For they are committed to:

Reflexivism. An awareness-event constitutes a non-inferential awareness of itself.

In fact, *Reflexivism* is the just basis for an idealist argument that Dharmakīrti offers in *The Ascertainment of Epistemology*.

A blue thing and its awareness are not distinct because they are invariably apprehended together.

Even though the two appear as different, the form of the blue thing isn't distinct from the experience of the blue thing. For the two are invariably apprehended together, like the double-moon seen by someone with eye-disease (*timira*). There is no apprehension of one of the two when the aspect of the other is not apprehended. And this is not possible if they are distinct in nature because nothing else could cause them to have this connection. (*Pramāṇaviniścaya* 1.54ab in Steinkellner 2007, pp. 39-40)

If *Reflexivism* is true, then, whenever we are aware of any putative object of perceptual awareness, e.g., a blue object, we are also aware of the awareness itself. But this fact cannot be explained if the blue object and its awareness are distinct. For example, a causal theory of representation cannot account for this, because an awareness cannot cause itself, and therefore cannot be about itself. Similarly, a resemblance-based theory cannot account for this either; for, as we have seen, resemblance-based accounts of aboutness suffer from problems of overgeneration. From this, this Dharmakīrti concludes that the blue object that seems to appear in perceptual awareness isn't distinct from the awareness itself. So, epistemological idealism is true.

Why might *Reflexivism* be true? Dharmakīrti notes that Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas could insist that an object and its awareness aren't apprehended together: first, we become aware of the object, and then, by means of the *manas* or the inner sense, we become introspectively aware of that first awareness. Dharmakīrti offers an answer:

The awareness of an object cannot be established for someone who isn't directly aware of his apprehension.

The apprehension of an object is not due to the existence of the intentional object. What, then? It's due to the existence of the apprehension of that. And if the existence of the apprehension is not revealed by a means of knowing, then it does not attach itself to everyday practices that are based on its existence. Therefore, if the apprehension were unestablished, then the object would also be unestablished. If that were the case, the entire world would vanish! For even if something exists, we cannot act on the supposition that it exists unless it is established. Therefore, someone who is not directly aware of her awareness-events is not aware of anything at all.

(*Pramāṇaviniścaya* 1.54 cd in Ibid., pp. 40-1)

The argument is this.

Dharmakīrti's Argument

The AA Principle. If an agent is able to act (i.e., make judgments and speech reports, or perform physical acts) on the basis of an awareness-event, then the agent must be aware of that awareness-event.

The Principle About Action Guidance. If an agent undergoes an awareness-event, then she is able to act on the basis of that awareness-event.

Conclusion. Therefore, if an agent undergoes an awareness-event, she must be aware of that awareness-event.

Dharmakīrti's reason for accepting the *AA Principle* is just that if an agent is to act towards an object on the basis of an awareness-event, she must be aware of the awareness-event that serves as a means of knowing with respect to that object. The *Principle About Action Guidance* is implicit, and nowhere defended. But it is plausible enough. Together, these two principles entail that if an agent undergoes an awareness-event, she must be aware of that awareness-event.

The Naiyāyikas cannot accept this conclusion. If the conclusion of **Dharmakīrti's Argument** is correct, and the Naiyāyikas are right in thinking that any awareness of an awareness is distinct from that awareness, then there will be a regress: without undergoing an infinite sequence of awareness-events and higher-order awareness-events about them, it won't be possible for an agent to act on the basis of any awareness-event.

If the awareness of the object is apprehended by another awareness-event, then the latter will itself be unestablished [i.e. won't be an object of awareness]. So, it won't establish [i.e., bring about an awareness of] the first-order awareness. Thus, another awareness must arise. Then, if a person were to wait for the end of these awareness-events, he wouldn't be aware of anything. For when one awareness-event is unestablished [i.e., not an object of awareness], all of them are. And since there would be no end to the production of these awareness-events, the world would be blind and mute. (*Pramāṇavinīścaya* 1.54 cd in Steinkeller 2007, p. 41)

This gives us reason to accept *Reflexivism*. If *Reflexivism* is true, then the claim that the aboutness consists in a self-linking relation and therefore involves a kind of epistemic dependence between awareness-events and their intentional objects will become hard to defend: if the apprehension of an object depends on the apprehension of the awareness (as Dharmakīrti seems to suggest), then the determination of the awareness cannot depend on an antecedent determination of the object. So, Vācaspati is wrong.

Vācaspati resists this line of reasoning. Following his predecessor Uddyotakara (6th century CE), he thinks that *Reflexivism* is highly counterintuitive if we think of awareness-events as cognitive acts of a certain kind. In his sub-commentary on the *Aphorisms of Reasoning* 4.2.34, Uddyotakara writes: "An act cannot be the same as its patient" (*Nyāyavārttika* on *Aphorisms of Reasoning* 4.2.34 in Thakur 1997, p. 490, l. 2). To see what this means, recall the view on which any episode of awareness is an act and its intentional object counts as its patient. Uddyotakara's claim basically is that an awareness-event cannot be its own object, since there is a general metaphysical truth about acts, namely that an act cannot be its own patient. So, the aboutness relation between an awareness-event and its intentional object is irreflexive. To explain the idea, Vācaspati quotes a verse from Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa's lost work *The Great Commentary (Brhaṭṭīkā)*: "Just as the tip of a finger cannot be touched by itself, so also an awareness-event cannot be apprehended by itself" (Thakur 1996, p. 630, ll. 3-4). This contradicts *Reflexivism*.

Here, Vācaspati anticipates a response from defenders of *Reflexivism*. The Buddhist could say that an awareness-event isn't an intentional object of awareness in the same sense as we

take, e.g., the picket fence, to be an object of awareness. The picket fence is an object of awareness, intuitively, insofar as it is a patient of an act of awareness, whereby the act or event of awareness somehow operates on that object. Since an awareness-event cannot produce any effect in itself, it cannot be the patient in this sense. However, there is a different sense which an awareness-event could be said to be apprehended by itself. If an awareness-event is to manifest anything to an agent, the agent must become aware of those intrinsic properties in virtue of which it represents that thing. Thus, awareness of awareness is necessary for any awareness whatsoever.³⁵ If this is right, then any awareness-event must constitute an awareness of itself. However, Vācaspati finds this response implausible.

This is the import here. What, then, is this property of being manifested in virtue of the manifestation of the awareness? It is not the case that, due to the manifestation of the awareness, a different manifestation with respect to an object is produced. Moreover, the manifestation of a target property takes place only when the manifestation of the inferential mark [i.e., the reason property]. And the target property isn't manifested when the inferential mark is manifested, but rather when the manifestation of the inferential mark is destroyed. Suppose you say, "The manifestation of the object or of the awareness isn't anything distinct from the awareness. The awareness itself, insofar as it is reflexive self-awareness, is both of object and itself." If this is so, what follows? A thing cannot depend on itself. Neither is it established that an awareness can manifest both itself and something else. For the manifestation of awareness is due to the *manas* [i.e., the inner sense], while the manifestation of the object is due to the senses. Nor is the manifestation of the object dependent on the manifestation of the awareness that serves as a means of knowing the object; it depends only on the existence of the awareness that serves as a means of knowing the object. It has been made known that nothing here is dependent on any effect. Thus, it is established that the awareness, which is the topic of dispute, is distinct from its own manifestation. For it is manifested, just like the awareness of one being with respect to the awareness of another. (Ibid., p. 630, ll. 14-22)

The thrust of this argument is just that it's unclear how the intentional object of an awareness-event could be manifested on the basis of an awareness of the awareness-event.

First, it cannot be the case that the agent first becomes aware of the awareness, and then the object is manifested. For that would mean that the initial awareness of the awareness produces a distinct awareness of the object. If that were true, then the process in question would be exactly analogous to an inferential process where one infers the presence of smoke on a mountain the basis of fire. In such a scenario, one first becomes aware of the reason property (e.g., the smoke), but then that initial awareness disappears, making way for the final awareness of the target property (e.g., the fire). But that's not how our awareness of objects is generated; in ordinary cases, our awareness of objects isn't generated on the basis of an initial awareness of the awareness itself.

³⁵ Thakur 1996, p. 630, ll. 4-10: "Well, an apprehension isn't apprehended. For it doesn't have the status of a patient. A patient is that which comes to possess an effect produced by the act. An apprehension doesn't produce any distinct effect in itself. In fact, an apprehension, once its inherent nature has emerged, is said to be apprehended when it is manifested independently of anything else. If it didn't manifest itself, then it would also not manifest any objects. For the objects depend on its manifestation for their own manifestation. Therefore, anything, which is manifested on the basis of the manifestation of something else, is said to be manifested when that other thing is manifested. Just the manifestation of the stick-bearer [as a stick-bearer] depends on the manifestation of the stick, so also does the manifestation of intentional objects depend on the manifestation of the awareness itself..."

Second, one also cannot say that an awareness-event, in virtue of being reflexively self-aware, simultaneously manifests both itself and its object. On the one hand, this would lead to a problem of self-dependence (*ātmāśraya*). Since, on this picture, the manifestation of an object of awareness is supposed to depend on the manifestation of the awareness, this would make the manifestation of the awareness depend on the manifestation of awareness. But dependence is essentially irreflexive: a thing cannot depend on itself. On the other hand, it is far from obvious that our awareness of our awareness-events is identical to our awareness of the first-order objects of awareness. It seems that we often become aware of our conscious mental occurrences only by turning our capacity for attention (i.e., the *manas* or the inner sense) on those mental occurrences, while we become aware of objects of perception by turning our senses towards them.

Finally, Vācaspati turns to Dharmakīrti's own argument for *Reflexivism*. Vācaspati denies the conclusion of the argument: he claims that the awareness of an object cannot require an awareness of the means of knowing by which the object is revealed. According to Vācaspati, the existence of an awareness is sufficient for the manifestation of its object: no further awareness of the awareness that serves as a means of knowing with respect to that object is necessary. But it remains unclear which premise of Dharmakīrti's argument he rejects. On the one hand, he might be rejecting the *AA Principle*, which was motivated by the thought that in order to act towards an object on the basis of an awareness-event, an agent must be aware of the awareness which serves as the means of knowing that discloses the object. On the other hand, he might be rejecting the *Principle about Action Guidance*, which just says that any awareness-event is able to guide actions with respect to its object. Both these moves seem plausible in light of Vācaspati's earlier criticism of *Reflexivism*.

What's important, for our purposes, is Vācaspati's idea that the relation of aboutness cannot be reflexive: an awareness cannot be about itself. Once again, this idea is not only incompatible with idealism, but also with Dharmottara's decompositionism which seeks to decompose the relation of aboutness into two components: the phenomenal form of the awareness and the act of determination that the agent makes on the basis of her immediate awareness of that objective aspect. This proposal can only work if some version of *Reflexivism* is true. Denying that the relation of aboutness can be reflexive rules out this view.

6. Taking Stock

Let's take stock. In this essay, by focusing on the work of Vācaspati Mīśra, I have attempted to explain a debate about aboutness in classical Indian epistemology and philosophy of mind. For the Sautrāntika Buddhists, the fact that an awareness-event, e.g., a perceptual experience, carries information about a mind-independent entity is explainable in terms of certain further facts about that awareness-event. The first of these facts is that the awareness-events involves a phenomenal form, i.e., a mental image that the agent is immediately aware of. The second is that this mental image stands in some representation-grounding relation, like resemblance, to the mind-independent entity. I went on to explain how the Yogācāra idealists took this view to undermine realism.

In response, Vācaspati offered an argument against these idealists. To support this argument, he painted a picture of aboutness that is incompatible with the Sautrāntika philosopher's decompositionist approach. What's significant in Vācaspati's rejection of decompositionism is his characterisation of aboutness. On his view, it is a *natural, self-*

linking and *irreflexive*. It is natural in the sense that an awareness couldn't occur without the relevant object. It is self-linking because we can't explain why a certain awareness-event about a certain object by appealing any condition beyond the very nature of the awareness-event. It is irreflexive in the sense that an awareness-event cannot be about itself. The lesson that Vācaspati intends to impart is just this: our conscious experiences and thoughts can carry information about mind-independent particulars only if the aboutness relation between these mental states and those particulars is *prime*, i.e., non-decomposable into internal and external conditions.

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