

Christian Coseru, *Perceiving Reality. Consciousness, Intentionality, and Cognition in Buddhist Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 356, £ 53, ISBN 9780199843381

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Christian Coseru's *Perceiving Reality* is a remarkable philosophical work about perceptual awareness and its structure. It falls into the new genre of fusion or cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy, and it stands out for its methodological choice of emphasizing philosophical *continuity* of interests, discussions and ideas over *comparison*. This innovative approach reflects the ambitious aim of Coseru's inquiry: making a wide variety of accounts of the classical Indian tradition continuous with the contemporary debates in phenomenology and analytic philosophy of mind. This book shows the Author's mastery of both the Buddhist literature and the ongoing philosophical conversation on epistemology, and reveals his ingenuity in employing the textual materials of the tradition in an innovative way: "the goal is to go beyond the task of historical reconstruction and endeavour to propose novel solutions to enduring and genuinely universal philosophical problems" (p.6). Thus, in the framework of Coseru's enterprise, the acquaintance with the discussions and ideas of the Buddhist tradition, seen as valuable conceptual resources, could help us make progress with contemporary debates. Moreover, the Western accounts of perception and cognition could shed light on implications, strengths or problems of the thesis of the Indian thought.

Using this methodological approach, the Author addresses as the main argument of the book the continuity of Indian Buddhist epistemology with the naturalistic approaches in epistemology and philosophy of mind, and in many respects with some of the phenomenological theories of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The nine chapters of the book develop around the three concepts outlined in its title: "consciousness", which stands for the phenomenal dimension, "intentionality", a feature of the structure of experience, and "cognition", which captures the epistemic issues.

Tracing the philosophy of perception within the Buddhist tradition, in the first four chapters Coseru goes back to

Abhidharma tradition (beginning around 300 BC) – read as a phenomenological account within the Buddhist thought – and the two philosophers Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (sixth century CE) – the initiators of the Buddhist epistemological project. In the fifth and sixth chapters one of the main focuses of the book is presented: a close analysis of two texts, namely Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṃgraha* (*Compendium of True Principles*) and its *Pañjikā* (*Commentary*) by Kamalaśīla (eighth century CE). These two authors provide a model for integrating the phenomenological approach of Abhidharma and the epistemological concerns of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. The last two chapters mainly focus on the continuity of concerns between Buddhist and Western philosophy.

After this brief overview of the main structure of the book, we will see the main topics treated in each chapter and then consider more specifically some critical points that are of importance for reflecting on the different implications of the huge project of the Author.

After the first chapter of the book, which presents some introductory remarks and the main working assumptions, the second chapter continues to address methodological issues: “adopting the approach of phenomenological naturalism, I want to emphasize the pragmatic character of epistemic inquiry in the Buddhist tradition” (p.54). Here the Author introduces the idea of Buddhist epistemology as an intellectual project already built on naturalist grounds that would also benefit from further naturalization.

The third chapter offers an overview of different accounts on sensation and empirical consciousness: Coseru starts his survey from the Indian Brahmanical tradition and then explores the Buddhist one, making the reader analyse the differences between the earlier canonical literature accounts – characterized by an empirical approach to perception and a semantic fluidity of the technical terms – and the Abhidharma model – a psychological view on perception and cognition, aimed at establishing coherent typologies of consciousness and at distinguishing its functions corresponding to specific tasks.

It is in the fourth chapter that the Author addresses the issue of the Indian inquiry into the sources of knowledge, presenting the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition and its debate with the Buddhist epistemological accounts, within which the works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti represent the most relevant accounts. Here the

relationship between language and conception is explicitly taken into consideration, drawing specific attention on the importance of the philosophical debates in India.

The fifth chapter focuses on the epistemological concerns of Śāntarakṣita's and Kamalaśīla's encyclopaedic works, a synthesis and defense of Buddhist principles against its critics.

Particular emphasis is on the relation between epistemic dispositions and altruistic concerns, around the main topic of discussion of those texts – namely, dependent arising. In the second part of the chapter it is examined their contributions to the Buddhist epistemology of perception.

The sixth chapter discusses perceptual and conceptual knowledges, together with their features and domains of cognition. The complex and delicate claim of the Author is that “the Buddhist advances neither indirect realism (or representationalism) nor idealism, but rather a peculiar type of active perception phenomenalism that is essentially nonrepresentational in character” (p.142). Another main topic of the chapter is the definition of cognitive errors and perceptual illusions: the Author leads the reader through the nuances of Dignāga's, Dharmakīrti's, Śāntarakṣita's and Kamalaśīla's accounts.

The seventh chapter focuses on the question whether Buddhist epistemology can be conceived of as a foundationalist enterprise. While it is commonly assumed that Buddhist epistemologists pursue a foundationalist agenda, Coseru considers two of the main responses to current debates about foundationalism: phenomenological philosophy and naturalized epistemology. Echoing the insights and main stances of these two perspectives, the Buddhist project is – as read by Coseru – essentially non-foundationalist. The project of naturalizing Buddhist epistemology means more than simply bringing it into a modern psychological framework: it also means examining its Abhidharma psychological background “while recognizing its contribution to expanding our knowledge of the phenomenology of first-person experience” (p.230). Therefore, this enlarged knowledge can contribute “to a widening of our conception of nature currently at work in the sciences of cognition, one that includes consciousness and intentionality” (p.230).

The eighth chapter examines the Buddhist epistemological role of self-awareness in a theoretical account about the mind-world relation. This account of reflexivity understands cognition as

endowed with a double aspect and is primarily aimed, for Coseru, at explaining the nature of intentionality. The experiencing subject and experienced object are correlated parts of a single intentional arc of experience with two poles, “that of a self-apprehensive intentional act (grāhakākāra) and that of a world-directed intentional object (grāhyākāra)” (p.259).

The ninth chapter sums up the discussion and adds some further discussion of the role of embodied consciousness in a naturalized epistemology. In the last pages the Author links the traditional Buddhist account of perception to the epistemological optimism about the “possibility of getting the things themselves” (p.301) and transforming our experience towards the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

This outstanding work provides a very precise and accurate historical, philological and philosophical discussion; the disappointments are therefore relatively minor.

From the point of view of the reading of the text, since it provides a lot of theoretical ramifications within different topics, it would be of great help to have some more structural outlines, summaries, argument formulations and indications of where the discussion is going next and why. Moreover, a glossary would be another helpful tool for the reader, who could often need some more guidance among the different terms directly taken from Sanskrit sources.

Often the Author begins a discussion on contemporary philosophical debates assuming that the reader already has a good deal of knowledge of the different positions on the topic. Taking for instance his definition of naturalism, it could have been useful to have a more detailed consideration of what phenomenological naturalism really is: this would have done much in seeing Buddhist epistemology as in line with it.

A few other points would maybe need to be further discussed. The notion of self-awareness doesn't seem completely unproblematic in Coseru's presentation: even though “implicitly intentional” (p.264), “the Buddhist epistemologists rest their proof of self-awareness on the experience of states of pure luminosity that presumably transcend the subject-object dichotomy” (p.265). Then a critical question could arise: should we accept Coseru's idea that all states of cognitive awareness have the subject-object dual aspect, if these meditative states imply a collapse of this duality?

Furthermore, with respect to these meditative states, the reader would maybe have preferred more textual descriptions taken from the Abhidharma phenomenology account of yogic perception, in order to have more guidance also about the claim that meditative perception offers the yogi a phenomenological reduction or *epoché* (p.171).

Despite these very few and minor points, the outstanding richness of Coseru's book will hopefully challenge both the Western contemporary debate to accept fruitful contributions coming from other fields and traditions, and the area of Buddhist studies to further develop a philosophical approach to materials that so far have mainly been the object of textual criticism and philological studies.

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