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# Beyond Time, Not Before Time: The Pratyabhijñā Śaiva Critique of Dharmakīrti on the Reality of Beginningless Conceptual Differentiation

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The 7<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist Dharmakīrti's influential *apoha* (exclusion) theory of concept formation stands as a philosophically powerful articulation of how language could work in the absence of real universals. In brief, Dharmakīrti argues that concepts are constructed through a goal-oriented process that delimits the content of an experience by ignoring whatever does not conform to one's conditioned expectations. There are no real similarities that ground this process. Rather, a concept is merely what's left over once one has glossed over enough of the differences between elements of one's awareness that one can (erroneously but pragmatically) judge the remainder to have the same effects as what one desires.<sup>1</sup>

The question of whether or not Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory can ultimately account for the judgment of sameness that is so crucial to the formation of a concept has formed the crux of some of the most vociferous critiques of this theory, both traditional and contemporary. Drawing on traditional Buddhist cosmologies, Dharmakīrti seems to address this thorny problem by positing the existence of a foundational error in the form of the subject/object structure of conventional experience. This error undergirds the process of concept formation, which cannot occur without the already-given differentiation inherent in a world of conventional subjects and objects. Since this error is the expression of beginningless ignorance, it is therefore not subject to further scrutiny on Dharmakīrti's part. Relying on well-established and well-respected arguments to the effect that

it does not make sense to inquire about the beginning of a causal sequence, Dharmakīrti seems to hold that designating subject/object structure as the expression of a beginningless karmic imprint (*anādivāsanā*) is sufficient to account for the differentiation within a moment of cognition in *samsāra*.<sup>2</sup>

While Dharmakīrti's articulation of the role of karmic imprints in the formation of a concept effectively addresses many of the objections surrounding the judgment of sameness, it also opens him up to at least two further lines of attack. The first concerns whether or not the Vijñānavādin ontology on which he ultimately relies can coherently support the claim that subject/object duality is nonconceptual. I would like to bracket this question for a moment and turn to a more fundamental critique, one to which Dharmakīrti is most likely subject regardless of how Vijñānavādins might respond: are beginningless karmic imprints sufficient to account for the mere fact of differentiated content in the conventional world?<sup>3</sup> If subject/object structure is *not* conceptual, then Dharmakīrti must account for how differentiated content can emerge from a nondual ground; if subject/object structure *is* conceptual, he must account for how a non-agentive, fully undifferentiated ultimate reality could have the kinds of limiting factors necessary to produce a concept according to *apoha*. On either model, then, the question becomes whether or not beginningless karmic imprints can do the work necessary for the creation of conceptual differentiation.

A highly sophisticated version of this critique plays out in the works of the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century Pratyabhijñā Śaiva tradition of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. Although deeply influenced by the post-Dharmakīrtian Vijñānavādin tradition, these Śaivas follow a number of other Vedic traditions in heavily critiquing the Vijñānavādins' refusal to account for the origin of differentiation within the conventional world. The crux of this debate centers around whether or not it is possible to

identify a root cause for the differentiation of the karmic imprints that themselves produce the differentiation experienced in the conventional world. Dharmakīrti's postulation that these karmic imprints are beginningless serves precisely to indicate that this question cannot be answered: since a beginningless process has no root cause, it is not subject to a circularity objection. These Śaivas reject this position and claim that the differentiation of karmic imprints does indeed require a basis. Even as they affirm that *samsāra* itself is beginningless—because *samsāra* is fundamentally formed by temporal processes and there is nothing that exists before time—they claim that the source of the beginningless time through which *samsāra* is experienced both can and must be accounted for—by grounding of conventional world in an ultimate reality that is beyond time. For these Śaivas, rather than beginningless time being the necessary prerequisite for the manifest diversity of the conventional world, the nondual differentiation inherent in ultimate reality is itself the source of time.

This paper will begin by examining the Pratyabhijñā Śaiva critique of Dharmakīrti's attempt to account for conventional differentiation by appealing to beginningless karmic imprints. Then, it will explore Abhinavagupta's own articulation of time as the expression of nondual differentiation inherent to the ultimate itself. These Śaivas claim that the beginningless time through which *samsāra* manifests is the expression of the nondual variegation inherent to ultimate consciousness. Driven by the freedom (*svātantrya*) of consciousness to will the creation of any possible world, time arises precisely as the conceptually constructed duality of subject and object. The cogency of the Pratyabhijñā critique of Dharmakīrti's use of beginningless karmic imprints raises doubts about whether or not Dharmakīrti's own version of *apoha* is the most philosophically sustainable. Rather than dismissing *apoha* itself as a viable theory, however, the Pratyabhijñā

reformulation addresses the problem of the judgment of sameness by seeing beginningless conceptual differentiation as an expression of that which is beyond time.

#### Part I: Can Beginningless Karma Account for Conceptual Differentiation?

Dharmakīrti is hardly the only classical Indian thinker to propose that *saṃsāra* is beginningless. Moreover, the Pratyabhijñā Śaivas themselves affirm this position. Pinning down their precise objection, then, will require some clarity on broader ideas about beginninglessness in classical Indian philosophy. In an early article, Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti document the ways in which many classical Indian traditions appeal to the idea that the worlds experienced within *saṃsāra* are beginningless (Tola and Dragonetti 1980). They identify the source of speculation about beginninglessness in post-Vedic traditions with the Upaniṣadic postulation of “two entities, *Brahman* and *ātman*, who exist *in se et per se*, without an element in them of relativity or conditionality” (1980, 2). As Tola and Dragonetti note, the type of beginninglessness attributed to these ultimate realities differs from the beginninglessness of *saṃsāra* in that “the Supreme Principle cannot be abolished, whilst the empirical reality can be abolished” (1980, 2). Even in these early formulations, the specific type of beginninglessness manifested as *saṃsāra* stands in contrast to that of ultimate reality. The beginninglessness of ultimate reality is absolute, and equally entails an endlessness. The beginninglessness of *saṃsāra*, however, does not entail that *saṃsāra* too in all of its aspects is endless. If this were so, liberation would be impossible. Rather, the beginninglessness attributed to *saṃsāra* has to do with the impossibility of a causal process having an absolute beginning.

Steven Collins’ exploration of the narrative function of *nirvāṇa* suggests a strong parallel in early Buddhist conceptions of the different types of beginninglessness represented by *nirvāṇa*

and *samsāra*. As Collins indicates, the timelessness of *nirvāṇa* contrasts to time within the conventional world. Time in the conventional world is characterized as a concept referring to the mutual dependence of the various *dharmas* that form sequences: “The sequence of the three times is thus secondary, generated by and in the process by which conditioned Existents, which are also Conditioning Factors, give rise to more of the same” (Collins 2010, 35). Time is a concept abstracted from the apparent changes in sequences of *dharmas*. The particular relationship between time and the process of conditioning comes to the foreground in discussions of *nirvāṇa* because, as the ceasing of conditioning, *nirvāṇa* is also the end of time. As Collins explains, “The process of conditioning, and so of time, can self-destruct, so that time ceases to exist, at least for an individual” (2010, 38). In this way, *nirvāṇa*, unlike all conditioned phenomena, “has a relation to the past, but not to the future” (2010, 38). This relation to the past is a conventional designation referring to the fact that a person constituted by a particular karmic stream seems to “nirvanize,” to use Collins’ verbal form, at a certain time, but “the temporal event denoted by such terms is not anything directly occurring in or to nirvana, but rather the ending-moment of the conditioned process” (2010, 38). This supposedly temporal event foregrounds *nirvāṇa*’s own atemporality through embodying the paradox of using finite verbal forms to refer to something to which the process of conditioning entailed by such verbs simply does not apply.

Along these lines, many Indian traditions accepted the two different types of beginninglessness that respectively characterize ultimate reality and *samsāra*: one that affirms a reality to which the categories of time simply do not apply, and one that affirms that it makes no sense to ask for the beginning of a temporal process. These two types of beginninglessness, then, distinguish the coherence of speaking of a reality that is beginningless because it is *beyond* time from the incoherence of asking what existed *before* time understood as manifest in causal

sequences. The idea of a cause as an absolute beginning makes no sense because the specific characteristics of any cause come from the characteristics of the cause of which it was an effect. In contemporary parlance, the acknowledgement that a causal sequence cannot have an absolute beginning *in* time is the problem of the chicken and the egg. From within the perspective of the causal stream that constitutes the conventional world, asking for the beginning of *samsāra* is as futile as asking which came first: the chicken or the egg?

Dharmakīrti's account of the workings of the judgment of sameness that produces a concept uses the incoherence of asking for the first cause in a causal sequence as a bulwark against further questioning. For him, the universe of causally efficacious particulars, both subjective and objective, exists because of ignorance, expressed by and as the beginningless karmic imprints (*anādivāsanā*) that constitute the most basic structures of a sentient being's experience. Once causally efficacious unique particulars are in place, Dharmakīrti can appeal to a combination of subjective and objective factors to account for why the interaction between an embodied being, with particular sensory capacities, desires, goals, habits, etc., and a surrounding causal environment would lead to the production of concepts via exclusion.<sup>4</sup> He thereby dismisses charges from his opponents that there's no way to account for the initial emergence of concepts. There's no way to point to the original chicken, either.

Although Dharmakīrti's move to align the most basic form of differentiation in the conventional world—the subject/object structure of a given moment of awareness—with beginningless ignorance plays on the philosophically well-founded rejection of the coherence of questions about the beginning of a causal process, he subtly shifts the location of the debate. In effect, Dharmakīrti appeals to the well-respected view that the *karma* of sentient beings is part of a beginningless temporal process in order to respond to an objection that, while closely related, is

actually targeting a different type of differentiation. The incoherence of the chicken-and-egg question does not also mean that it is incoherent to ask what the nature of the chicken is such that it is capable of producing eggs. Depending on the direction and depth of one's analysis, one might find, for instance, that the chicken is composed of some kind of ultimate atemporal stuff, and that the categories of time and space that seem to define chickens and eggs are not absolute, but rather relative. The beginninglessness of causality, then, may itself presuppose a different kind of beginninglessness: a reality that is beyond time because time itself emerges from it. Both of these forms of beginninglessness may exist side by side precisely because they speak to different realities: the beginninglessness of causal processes is not the same thing as the atemporality of the ultimate.

The Pratyabhijñā concern with an original source of differentiation seeks to address why and how there could be differentiated stuff capable of entering into causal relations in the first place. This ends up being the question of how a single moment—any moment—could contain differentiated content at all. If this variety of content has no basis in ultimate reality, then, according to these Śaivas, it has no basis at all because an effect must have a real cause and something purely undifferentiated cannot cause differentiated effects. In short, these Śaivas will argue that one cannot appeal to the incoherence of something existing before time to claim that the question of the relationship between what is beyond time and the conventional world is itself nonsensical. If this critique is successful, then a key move in Dharmakīrti's defense of the judgment of sameness proves to be insufficient.

The Pratyabhijñā Śaivas' critique of the Vijñānavādin position that conventional differentiation is an expression of previous karmic imprints comes in the context of these Śaivas' exploration of what the nature of ultimate consciousness must be if it is to account for ordinary



differentiated experiences. Utpaladeva addresses the question of what could cause a certain experience to arise at a certain time in the beginning of Chapter Five in his *Verses on the Recognition of the Lord* (*Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*). He begins by laying out his position in summary form: “If light were undifferentiated [in itself] and differentiated [from objects], then objective reality would be confused. The object that is illuminated must itself be light; that which is not light cannot be established.”<sup>5</sup> This famous verse articulates a Pratyabhijñā position that will be widely cited and defended: there is nothing beyond the light of ultimate consciousness, which itself contains all possible differentiation in the form of preconceptual appearances (*ābhāsas*).

In a detailed and insightful examination of these passages, Isabelle Ratié (2010) points out that Utpaladeva here rejects two theories about the relationship between sensory objects and consciousness. The first is that a sensory object could be totally distinct from consciousness. The second is that consciousness could be entirely undifferentiated in and of itself. In the following verses, Utpaladeva takes a Buddhist External Realist (*bāhyārthavādin*) and a Vijñānavādin as respectively representing each of these faulty theories. He then uses arguments from these two Buddhist traditions to refute each other and thereby support his own claim: sensory objects are not different from consciousness, and consciousness is inherently variegated (Ratié 2010).

Specifically, Utpaladeva uses Vijñānavādin arguments to reject the idea that external objects must be inferred to account for the variety of experience, but then also uses External Realist arguments to point out that karmic imprints (*vāsanā*) alone cannot account for this variety, either. Utpaladeva presents an External Realist objection to the position that objects are of the nature of manifestation: “[Objection] Since consciousness-light (*bodhasya*) being undifferentiated cannot be the cause of a multiform manifestation, all this various manifestation lacking in an apparent cause (*ākasmika*) leads to the inference of an external object [as its only possible cause].”<sup>6</sup> The

External Realist then precludes the standard Vijñānavādin response that karmic imprints alone can account for this variety: “Not even a varied reawakening of the karmic residual traces can be taken to be the cause [of the multiform manifestations], for in that case a new question would arise: what is the cause of the variety of such a reawakening?”<sup>7</sup> Here, despite the Vijñānavādin postulation that the karmic imprints responsible for the basic structures of experience in the conventional world are beginningless, Utpaladeva claims that their causes must be accounted for.

Ratié further notes that this is a common understanding of the Vijñānavādin position on how differentiated experiences manifest in the conventional world. Her quotation of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Mīmāṃsaka Kumāriḥa’s presentation of this position in his *Explanation of the Verses* (*Ślokavārttika*) is particularly illuminating since Kumāriḥa specifically identifies the beginningless flaw manifest within conventional experience with subject/object structure itself:

According to my [the Vijñānavādin’s] doctrine, although the essence of cognition is in fact pure, nonetheless, in the endless (*anādi*) cycle of rebirths, because of a confusion due to the impregnations (*vāsanā*) that were born from previous cognitions [and] that are varied (*citra*), because they have causes that are [themselves] varied, the blue or [any other objective aspect taken on by the cognition,] stained by [the distinction between] the apprehended [object] and the apprehending [subject], arises while being seemingly differentiated in conformity [with its cause]; it does not require any other object [that would be external to the cognition]. And this relation of mutual causality (*anyonyahetutā*) between the cognition and the power (*śakti*) [that constitutes the impregnation] is beginningless (*anādika*).<sup>8</sup>

Kumāriḥa here accurately presents the Vijñānavādin denial that it is necessary to account for the initial cause of variegated karmic imprints. Differentiation does not actually have a root cause:

cognitions contaminated by ignorance merely seem to be differentiated because they arise dependent on the beginningless error of subject/object duality. Moreover, on Kumāriḷa's reading, the Vijñānavādin claims that the relationship between *vāsanās* and cognitions represents a logically acceptable case of mutual causality (*anyonyaheturā*), not a problematic circularity. This is the kind of causality typified in classical Indian philosophy by the example of the seed and the sprout. The precise reason why mutual causality is acceptable in this case is that the relationship between the *vāsanā* and the cognition, like the relationship between the seed and the sprout, is beginningless. To return again to the specific context of Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory, if there's no problem with accounting for the basic differentiation of causally specific subjective and objective particulars, then there's no problem with basing the judgment of sameness that creates a concept via exclusion on this differentiation.

Although the justification for this position seemed to be well understood, the Vijñānavādin attempt to account for the differentiation manifest in the conventional world through an appeal to beginningless karmic imprints was still widely critiqued in medieval Indian philosophical circles. While Utpaladeva himself frames the critique as coming from a fellow Buddhist, Ratié points out that Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas are similarly skeptical (Ratié 2010, 460, fn 65-66). While there is some variation among these critiques, they all revolve around the question of what the nature of *vāsanās* could be such that they could have the causal capacities attributed to them while still remaining nothing but consciousness. This question is particularly sticky since, according to these critiques, Vijñānavādins claim that ultimate consciousness is nothing but pure manifestation, and is therefore totally undifferentiated. Such an absolutely undifferentiated entity cannot itself directly be the cause of differentiation. If it were, everything should be caused all at the same time because a single undifferentiated entity would always have one and the same effect. However, if pure

ultimate consciousness is not itself the cause of differentiated *vāsanās*, then the cause must either be something other than consciousness (in which case the Vijñānavādin would merely be another externalist), or something that is less than ultimately real, in which case the Vijñānavādin must explain how something unreal could be causally efficacious (Ratié 2010, 456–58). The causal basis for the variety of experiences cannot come from something inessential to consciousness, whether that thing be an external object or an “adventitious defilement”<sup>9</sup> that is ultimately left behind.

In sum, the basic form of the argument may be represented as follows: 1) We observe causally-specific differentiation in the everyday world. 2) Something that is causally specific must be the effect of a specific real cause. 3) Each real cause produces only the effects that are in accord with its nature. 4) Such causes must be either internal or external to consciousness. 5) These causes cannot be external to consciousness because, per Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti, external objects are irrelevant and logically incoherent. 6) These causes therefore must be internal to consciousness. 7) It is not the nature of something undifferentiated to produce different effects. For example, a cognition of blue has the causal capacity to produce only a subsequent cognition of blue, not a cognition of yellow. 8) Consciousness cannot be totally undifferentiated and produce different effects. 9) Consciousness must be inherently differentiated if it is to account for the differentiated awarenesses observed in the conventional world. Conclusion: Since there is no other viable candidate for the cause of this differentiation, the nature of reality is ultimate consciousness that inherently contains the capacity for the expression of all differentiated awarenesses.

A closer look at Dharmakīrti’s responses to objections about the relationship between the natures things seem to have in the conventional world and what is ultimately real indicates that Dharmakīrti would not accept a key premise of these Śaivas’ argument. For Dharmakīrti, things in the conventional world do not have to have real, ultimate causes. In a discussion of the judgment

of sameness in Dharmakīrti's works, John Dunne proposes that Dharmakīrti's refusal to discuss why things have the nature they do is an intentional strategy aimed at avoiding irrelevant, incoherent, and counterproductive discussions. Dunne presents his favorable reading of Dharmakīrti's refusal to engage in metaphysical speculation:

If one is hoping for an ultimately defensible metaphysical reason, then Dharmakīrti's answer to the problem of sameness is dissatisfying. On the other hand, one might suppose that we are engaged in a frustrating and fruitless enterprise when we yearn to specify in precise terms the metaphysical warrant for our use of the term "fire." In that case,

Dharmakīrti's answer is quite satisfactory, or perhaps even liberating. (Dunne 2011, 99)<sup>10</sup> This move parallels Dharmakīrti's striking refusal to disagree with an objector who, in response to Dharmakīrti's articulation of causality as the mark of what is ultimately real, protests that causality is merely conventional. Dharmakīrti responds: "Let it be so in the way as you have said."<sup>11</sup> Conventional causality is precisely that—conventional. Conventional causes can account for conventional effects; there does not need to be any deeper reality that grounds them.

Maintaining this position relies on a strict parameterization of conventional and ultimate reality. Conventional reality merely *seems* real; ultimate reality is *actually* real. Therefore, it does not matter that an undifferentiated ultimate reality is incapable of producing differentiated effects. Such differentiation is never *actually* produced; it merely *seems* phenomenally to exist to deluded sentient beings. The reason why it is not necessary to account for the ultimate causal basis of conventional differentiation is that this differentiation is beginningless. Like seeds that produce sprouts that produce seeds, all phenomena in the conventional world rely on their own previous causes and produce their own specific effects in a process without ultimate origin or grounding. The ability of sentient beings to judge that what are actually unique particulars share some subset

of causal properties simply by ignoring what does not allow these beings to accomplish their goals—that is, the ability to perform a judgment of sameness that produces a concept via exclusion—is no more or less mysterious, no more or less demanding of an ultimate explanation than is any other ignorance-contaminated phenomenon in the conventional world.

Tom Tillemans expands Dunne’s reading to further justify the wisdom of Dharmakīrti’s refusal to answer questions about how to account for causal differentiation. Tillemans doubts whether or not this approach is ultimately successful, but, also following Dunne, he gives a positive evaluation of this failure: for these two scholars, Dharmakīrti’s refusal to give an ultimate account of the grounding of concepts represents an “enlightened refusal” to engage in pointless ontological speculation (Tillemans 2011, 61). In the end, Tillemans sees Dharmakīrti as simply engaging in “a strategic refusal to justify metaphysically sameness that we do in fact recognize” (2011, 60). In this way, according to Tillemans’ terminology, Dharmakīrti offers an *analysis* of the correspondence between scheme and content that takes a certain judgment of sameness as a primitive fact that is not in need of further justification; he does not, however, provide an *account* that would fully justify this sameness (2011, 60).

As Tillemans concludes, “The interesting feature of this version of bottom-up Apohavāda, if the theory is carried out consistently, would be Dharmakīrti’s enlightened refusal to play a metaphysician’s game that was best put aside” (2011, 61). Dunne cites Dharmakīrti’s explicit denial of the legitimacy of questioning how particulars may be judged to produce the same effect in support of his and Tillemans’ shared position that Dharmakīrti refuses to engage in metaphysical speculation. Dharmakīrti asserts: “Indeed, it is not correct (*na... arhati*) to question (*paryanuyoga*) the nature of things, as in ‘Why does fire burn? Why is it hot, and water is not?’ One should just ask this much, ‘From what cause does a thing with this nature come?’”<sup>12</sup> Dharmakīrti’s focus here

on causality clearly indicates that he is comfortable providing a conventional explanation, but not an ultimate one. In this way, both Dunne and Tillemans affirm that Dharmakīrti's appeal to the causal capacities of an object, combined with subjective factors, cannot ultimately account for the judgment of sameness. Yet, for them, this supposed failure is not actually a failure, but a recognition of the inherent limitations of any attempt to ground the conventional in the ultimate.

In their assertion that manifest things must have real causes, the Pratyabhijñā Śaivas reject the idea that conventional reality is not grounded in ultimate reality. For them, the difference between various conventional realities and ultimate reality itself is not that they are real in different ways, but that they are real to different extents. Conventional realities are partial expressions carved out of ultimate reality through a process of exclusion driven by desire. The "reality" in both conventional and ultimate reality is the same reality. This contrasts strongly with Dharmakīrti's apparent position that ultimate reality does not have to causally ground conventional reality because conventional reality is a different sort of reality altogether.

Are these Śaivas, then, simply asking Dharmakīrti to do the impossible by specifying the beginning of beginningless *saṃsāra*? One crucial point here is that the Pratyabhijñā critique of beginningless karmic imprints does not explicitly concern the origin of *saṃsāra* itself. Both Dharmakīrti and these Śaivas will happily claim that *saṃsāra* writ large has no beginning; differentiation in the conventional world comes from *karma*, and it does not make sense to talk about *karma* having a specific beginning in space and time. The problem is not the beginninglessness of *saṃsāra* itself, but rather the connection between ultimate reality and conventional experience in any given moment: how does a differentiated experience arise out of a nondual ground? These Śaivas are not asking for something that exists *before* time. Rather, having argued that time itself requires an explanation, they are asking what exists beyond.

To sum up the Śaiva critique: based on the standards and assumptions widely shared by classical Indian philosophers, Dharmakīrti's use of beginningless karmic imprints is perfectly sufficient to account for the differences between various karmic streams within the conventional world. However, it is *not* sufficient to account for the mere fact that there is differentiated stuff capable of entering into causal relations. The Pratyabhijñā Śaivas offer a complex and distinctive solution to this problem: while they affirm that ultimate reality is beginningless in the sense that it is beyond time, they also claim that time itself has a “beginning” in the expression of the nondual differentiation inherent to the ultimate itself. Time is nothing but the conceptual differentiation of subject and object that comes about through Śiva's use of the “chisel of exclusion,” to use Abhinavagupta's provocative metaphor, to carve conventional worlds out of his own self.<sup>13</sup>

## Part II: Abhinavagupta on Time, Conceptual Differentiation, and the Relationship between Conventional Worlds and Ultimate Nonduality

In his fascinating hybrid ritual-philosophical work, the *Explanation of the Verses of the Mālinī [Tantra] (Mālinīślokovārttika)*,<sup>14</sup> Abhinavagupta lays out the Pratyabhijñā understanding of the relationship between time, differentiation, concepts, and the expression of the ultimate as subject/object structured conventional worlds. According to Abhinavagupta, although the beginning of a temporal causal process within the conventional world cannot be identified, time itself has a “beginning” in the sense that it is the expression of an ultimate source that is beyond time. As an expression of ultimate reality, however, this “beginning” never quite loses its own connection to that which is beyond time—it is a beginningless beginning that emerges moment by moment from the play of nondual consciousness. From the perspective of the ultimate, time never emerges for a first time. Within the conventional world, time is expressed as the delimitation, via



exclusion, of causally specific subject/object pairs. Concepts are these delimitations of ultimate consciousness: they express slivers of that which is beyond time as the causally specific particulars whose interaction constitutes the beginningless time of *saṃsāra*. I will now explore these ideas in some depth.

The overall point of the *Mālinī* is to provide grounding and explanation for Abhinavagupta's position that the Trika<sup>15</sup> revealed texts provide unique guidance because, as embodiments of Śiva's knowledge, they are expressions of ultimate reality itself. All other teachings develop as partial manifestations of them. As Abhinava explains:

The vast knowledge that is produced in the beginning (*prāk*) from the limitless reality (*sadbhāva*) that alone is identical with the world (*bhāva*) and that is the pervading nature (*vaibhava*) of the mass of the moon's (*tad*) rays has spread, [still] of the same nature (*tādr̥k*), free from things to be accepted or shunned that are created by its own creative power (*māyā*), and diversified merely by its own expanding manifoldness of rays. This [knowledge] whose nature is articulation is the heart of the highest Lord.<sup>16</sup>

Abhinava goes on to emphasize Śiva's essential unity even though Śiva is thus the source of diversity. All revealed texts (*śāstras*) contain an element of truth since they are aspects of Śiva's own self-revelation, but Abhinava's own Trika contains the most comprehensive articulation of truth possible.

An opponent, however, poses the following objection: "If [Śiva is] thus undivided and the self of the world, then how can there be—as the possibility of contraction is excluded—the riches of the Śāstras etc. which are rooted in the formation of differential thought?"<sup>17</sup> Abhinava gives the standard Pratyabhijñā response that the unity of ultimate consciousness consists in the fact that the common element in all awareness is merely the capacity for manifestation, and then refers to the

Pratyabhijñā position that the nature of consciousness is not only to reflect an object, but also to have a self-aware realization of this object.<sup>18</sup> Bringing all this together, he claims that the process of the manifestation of an awareness begins within “the sphere of the experience of consciousness” and “becomes therefore (*tadā*) perceptible as soon as it appears as resting [inwardly] in this awareness; and it only later becomes a clearly perceptible [outward object].”<sup>19</sup> Abhinavagupta then explains how Śiva places limits on his own knowledge through his own free will, thereby creating the differentiated forms of experience that constitute conventional worlds. As he sums up, “Even in this state, the conjunction and separation of constituent endless things become innumerable by combination (*saṃdhāna*) with the division of the earlier state. Only by virtue of these limiting adjuncts the various riches (*vibhūti*) of action and knowledge in the Śāstra give up the state of knowing consciousness [inwardly] to spread [in an objective form].”<sup>20</sup>

These passages are exceedingly dense and present nearly all of the Pratyabhijñā’s most important doctrines. In line with the dialogical format of most Indian philosophical texts, one could imagine many objections that Abhinava could pose in order to direct his further explanations. The objection he chooses to foreground is telling and points to the important role that time plays as the expression of the differentiation inherent to ultimate consciousness:

[Opp]: Then it would follow that divisions caused by space, time and [limited] power of action are not possible in this collection [of primary realities]. [A]: We certainly do agree, for there the *tattva* [called] ‘time’<sup>21</sup> is not known even by name. Although she pervades everything, the great goddess of time (*mahākālī*) does not manifest here. [Opp]: Then why do you accept the use of the words ‘then’, ‘again’, ‘when’, and ‘afterwards’ with reference to [something that is] undivided and complete in itself?<sup>22</sup>

The opponent here rightly points out that Abhinavagupta's entire description of how ultimate consciousness produces limited objects of awareness is suffused with temporal language.

Abhinava even begins his explanation of the unity of revealed texts by referring to "this vast knowledge that is produced in the beginning..." If the ultimate is undivided, temporal distinctions have no place in relation to it. Therefore, there should be no "in the beginning" in relation to ultimate awareness.

Abhinava responds by not only granting that the ultimate is beyond time, but by affirming that since time is nothing but a particular expression of the ultimate, there is a sense in which time itself is beyond time! As he states: "We say that this is correct, but in reality these concepts of earlier and later do not exist for knowledge, even if the creation of *tattvas* has manifested perceptibly and time has unfolded."<sup>23</sup> The key point is that the limitations experienced within the conventional world, including temporal divisions, are both *part of* the ultimate because there is nothing that is not part of the ultimate, and unable to truly limit the ultimate because the ultimate exceeds any duality. Abhinava contends: "Therefore time is unable to cause differentiation in consciousness, nor is this time capable of becoming a differentiator [i.e. a differentiating quality] of the object of perception. For the universe does not exist outside of knowledge, otherwise it (*tad*) would not appear."<sup>24</sup> In short, the mere fact of differentiated appearances means that these appearances are somehow inherent to ultimate reality, even though they are experienced through limiting adjuncts such as time. Time itself cannot cause differences. Rather, it is an expression of the differentiation inherent in the ultimate.

Abhinava goes on to explicitly identify time with the expression of the differentiation of the ultimate: "It is only by causing the appearance of diversity that the Lord manifests time. This manifestation of diversity is termed 'the power of time'. Thus it is because of our (*āsmākīnāt*)

accordance (*anurodhataḥ*) with Śiva's (*etat*) power of time manifesting that qualifications [of time referred to by words] like 'then' etc. exist."<sup>25</sup> In this way, Abhinava closely links time to the nondual differentiation that is inherent to ultimate reality. He continues to remind his opponent that, while their expression is constitutive of conventional worlds, both time and differentiation equally exist within the ultimate: "It is not [the case], that [time] does not exist in [Śiva] at all, [for] how can anything exist except in him. It could spread in another reality [and] would still be dependent on light."<sup>26</sup> Abhinava sums up the main point about time: "it has been said (*kila*) that as much as (*yathā tathā*) the highest Lord causes the construction of plurality to appear, indeed also time appears. But still he is never divided in the real sense. For, [as] he is consciousness, he simultaneously appears manifold [because of his autonomy]."<sup>27</sup> Time, then, is the expression of the inherent differentiation of the ultimate in terms of the experiences of limited subjects and objects.

As Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta argue at length in their Pratyabhijñā corpus, this mutual exclusion of subject and object is itself conceptual: the mechanism by which Śiva creates conventional worlds is none other than *apoha*, and so concepts are inherently expressions of ultimate reality.<sup>28</sup> In the *Mālinī*, Abhinavagupta both references and reformulates the famous verse with which Dharmakīrti begins his exposition of *apoha* in the *Autocommentary on the Explanation of Trustworthy Awareness*. Dharmakīrti's verse, "All entities, due to being established in their own natures, naturally partake of exclusions from homogeneous as well as heterogenous [things],"<sup>29</sup> aims to provide the fundamental rationale for why unique particulars may be judged to be the same despite there being no real similarities on which this judgement is based. Abhinavagupta uses the idea that "all things are established in their own natures," and therefore inherently different from everything else, to indicate not that similarities are unreal, but rather that unity and difference are

intertwined. After reminding his interlocutor that “even duality is not impossible in the nondual reality,”<sup>30</sup> he states, “However, within difference, because all things are established in their own natures, I think that this word ‘nondifferent’ will become differentiated naturally.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Abhinava embeds Dharmakīrti’s opening verse on *apoha* into his own discussion of the differentiation inherent in ultimate consciousness. Just as the presence of conceptual differentiation points back to a unifying source, the unifying source itself is not devoid of difference, but rather naturally expresses itself as the conceptual distinctions that shape conventional worlds.

Abhinava again aligns time with the appearance of the conventional world in the context of reversing the process of manifestation through the Krama ritual centered on Kālasaṃkarṣiṇī, the goddess who devours time.<sup>32</sup> He describes the end state of this ritual as one in which “neither past nor future is divided from the present.”<sup>33</sup> This process of moving outside of the divisions of time results in the yogin becoming “one who moves in the void [of consciousness] (*khecaraḥ*),” who “has annihilated one’s individual (*nija*) existence and relishes (*carvaṇām labhate*) only the vibrant experience [of the nectar] of one’s own immortality [i.e., the transcendence of time], [in which] flows an abundance (*saṃdoha*) of ambrosia that is the highest bliss.”<sup>34</sup> However, Abhinava still emphasizes that the absence as well as the appearance of the world is not other than time:

For it is taught that time, which is the appearance of the world, is (*yaḥ... sa*) the vibration (*saṃsphāraḥ*) of the rays of one’s own consciousness that is projecting (*kalana*) [the world]. The absence of the world is [also] it [i.e., time], it is nothing else... But in the manner described [above], restraint, appearance, devouring etc. *appear*. And there is no other reality in the world than appearance in this way.<sup>35</sup>

Here, the manipulation of time is aligned with whether or not one experiences oneself as existing as an independent subject in a world defined by the experience of time. This technique is effective precisely because time is both the expression of the conventional world *and* inherently present even in the still moment of realization that embodies that which is beyond conventional time.

In the context of his exposition of the nature of *karma* and the apparent limitations of agency expressed thereby, Abhinava draws on the idea that the “beginning” of conventional worlds is a beginning *of* time, not a beginning *within* time. He further uses the distinction between the beginningless of causal sequences and the beginninglessness of ultimate reality to the exact opposite effect of how Dharmakīrti employs it: instead of denying any connection between the karmic conditions of various sentient beings and ultimate reality, Abhinava claims that all actions are the expression of Śiva’s will. In response to an objector who claims that the postulation that all agents are but limited expressions of Śiva’s own agency would demolish the distinctions between agents in the conventional world, Abhinava states: “You are right, Sir! For you should know that there is never any effect, which is produced by good or bad [actions]. But those who do not understand it in this way experience [the effects] without [ever] realizing this. For what is called *karma* is [actually] an impurity (*mala*), which has ignorance as its source.”<sup>36</sup> *Karma* is indeed the reason why individuals experience themselves as existing within a particular world, and this experience is an error. Moreover, the cycles of worlds created in this way are beginningless: “Here [in our system] exists this great creation of Śiva which is replete and inside of which all other [cycles] of creation and resorption take place. It is not proper to say that this is the *first* creation, for how could something be first etc. in a reality that is without space or time.”<sup>37</sup> Rather than using this beginninglessness of causal processes to claim that there is no need to provide an

ultimately real root cause for diversity, Abhinava uses it to point to the inherent connection between the ultimate and the diverse worlds of conventional experience.

As Ratié points out in a different context, the Pratyabhijñā Śaivas claim that their position that ultimate reality is the source of both difference and identity in the conventional world allows them to avoid the contradiction into which they accuse Dharmakīrti of falling (Ratié 2014). As we have seen, these Śaivas argue that beginningless karmic imprints that are not inherent in ultimate reality cannot account for the diversity experienced in the conventional world. This critique hinges on the idea that something undifferentiated cannot cause differentiation because it is contradictory for a thing with a purely unitary nature to cause different effects. However, for these Śaivas, it is not contradictory for ultimate consciousness to be the cause of both unity and diversity in the conventional world because ultimate consciousness inherently contains both.

To bring all of this together: time is the expression of the differentiation inherent in ultimate reality by its very nature. This expression manifests as the karmically conditioned experiences of limited subjects, which are themselves formed alongside of limited objects via *apoha*, which is the process of exclusion whereby Śiva carves conventional worlds out of himself. Concepts simply are the expression in time of a particular slice of the inherent differentiation of the ultimate.

Perceived, so to speak, from their own sides, both time and ultimate reality are beginningless, but in different ways. The beginninglessness of time is the fact that a first cause of a causal process unfolding in time cannot be identified. The beginninglessness of ultimate reality is the fact that the ultimate is beyond time since time is a limited manifestation of its inherent differentiation.

Ultimate consciousness is both the source of time and always exceeds its own temporal expressions. This connection between the ultimate and the conventional in terms of the expression of time is important because it accounts for the way in which it is possible for diversity to manifest

at all. Rather than maintaining ultimate reality as pure and utterly removed from the conventional, Abhinava links the two realities in part by claiming that the beginninglessness of the conceptually constructed, causal worlds of *samsāra* relies on the nondual beginninglessness of the ultimate.

## Conclusion

Whether or not Abhinavagupta's own exploration of time is philosophically viable, close attention to the different types of beginninglessness referenced in the Pratyabhijñā debate with Dharmakīrtian Vijñānavāda reveals what is at stake in the Śaiva demand for an explanation of the origin of differentiation. It is not a demand to account for the beginning of a causal process. In their critique of Dharmakīrti's position that a beginningless karmic imprint is sufficient to account for the diversity experienced within the conventional world, the Pratyabhijñā Śaivas do not deny that 1) differentiation among karmic imprints is the immediate cause for differentiated experiences; 2) that the causal processes expressed by these karmic imprints are beginningless; or 3) that it is not possible to identify a root cause for a temporal process from within this process itself. The origin of differentiation does not come from a root cause, such as an original seed producing all subsequent seeds and sprouts. Rather, the origin of diversity must be an expression of the nature of the ultimate stuff that itself constitutes causal processes. Otherwise, causality would be either random or nonexistent, leaving no way to account for the limited realities of various conventional worlds.

In short, according to these Śaivas, rather than rendering the question of the causes of diversity irrelevant, it is precisely the fact that causal processes are beginningless that means that they must be an expression of the differentiation inherent in ultimate reality itself. Precisely because one cannot identify an initial cause for the string of cause and effect within the



conventional world, one must account for the reality of the stuff involved in these causal processes. Since Dharmakīrti relies on beginningless karmic imprints to account for the diversity of the conventional world, he cannot simultaneously maintain that ultimate reality is purely undifferentiated without entering into a contradiction. The incoherence of the question of what exists before time does not mitigate the necessity of accounting for the beginningless origin of time itself, which can only be found in an ultimate reality that both encompasses and moves beyond the conventional world. To the extent that Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory relies on beginningless karmic imprints to provide the basic structures of *saṃsāra* that must be in place before a concept may be formed via exclusion—and this seems to be a significant extent—a defense of his account of concept formation would benefit from addressing this question head-on.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dunne (2011) for a useful overview of Dharmakīrti’s *apoha* theory.

<sup>2</sup> See Prueitt (2018) for an articulation of the role of karmic imprints in *apoha* for Dharmakīrti.

<sup>3</sup> Dharmakīrti explicitly argues that subject/object duality is *not* conceptual, and this position is essential to his defense of *apoha*. However, there is at least one passage, PVSV ad 1.98-1.99ab (Dharmakīrti 1960, 50–51), that casts some doubt on whether or not this is his final position.

<sup>4</sup> See Prueitt (2018) for details.

<sup>5</sup> ĪPK I.5.3. Sanskrit and translation in Torella (2013, 19, 112).

<sup>6</sup> ĪPK I.5.4. Sanskrit and translation in Torella (2013, 20, 112-113).

<sup>7</sup> ĪPK I.5.5. Sanskrit and translation in Torella (2013, 20, 113-114).

<sup>8</sup> Translation and Sanskrit text in Ratié (2010, 455).

<sup>9</sup> Mirroring the language in Vasubandhu’s commentary on Chapter 1, Verse 22 of Asaṅga’s *Distintuishing the Middle from the Extremes (Madhyāntavibhāga)*, Dharmakīrti describes ultimate consciousness thus: “This consciousness is naturally luminosity (*prabhāsvara*); flaws are adventitious,” *prabhāsvaram idaṃ cittaṃ prakṛtyāgantavo malāḥ* // PV 2.208cd (Manorathanandin 1938, 82; my translation).

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<sup>10</sup>With the substitution of “fire” for “red”, this passage is repeated from Dunne (2004, 125–26), where it forms part of a larger discussion of these same issues.

<sup>11</sup>PV 3.4cd. Dunne’s translation in (2004, 392). Sanskrit in Dharmakīrti (1979, 62). See Prueitt (2019) for an extended discussion of this verse as it relates to Dharmakīrti’s understanding of the disconnection between ultimate and conventional reality.

<sup>12</sup>PVSV ad 1.167ab. Dunne’s translation in (2004, 125, fn 114). Sanskrit in Dharmakīrti (1960, 84).

<sup>13</sup>Abhinava uses this metaphor in his benedictory verse to the chapter on *apoha* in his short commentary on the *Verses of the Recognition of the Lord*: “We praise Śiva, the sculptor of variety, who—by his mere will—using the chisel of exclusion, carves out objective entities, which are the mass that is not different from his own self,” *svātmābhedaḥ śaṅkārān bhāvāms tadapohanaṭāṅkataḥ / cindan yaḥ svecchayā citrarūpakṛt taṃ stumaḥ śivam //*, ĪPV ad I.6.0 (Abhinavagupta 1918, Vol. 1, 237; my translation).

<sup>14</sup>For an excellent overview of the context and purpose of the *Mālinīśloka-vārttika*, see Hanneder (1998, 1–32). For an interesting analysis of how Abhinavagupta reads his own nondualism into the *Mālinīvijayottara*, the root tantra that serves as the springboard for Abhinava’s text, see Sanderson (1992). Sanderson (1986) also addresses the ritual aspects of this and other Trika texts. For a broader perspective on the relationship between ritual and understanding in various types of tantras, see Sanderson (1995).

<sup>15</sup>“Trika” is Abhinavagupta’s name for his own ritual system, which focuses on the trio of goddesses Parā, Parāpara, and Aparā. The Trika is highly influenced by Krama and Kālīkula ritual, and also incorporates Pratyabhijñā exegesis. For a description of the texts and tenants of Trika Śaivism, see Sanderson (2007, 370–81).

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<sup>16</sup>MŚV 15-17ab. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 60-61).

<sup>17</sup>MŚV 24cd-25ab. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 62-63).

<sup>18</sup>As Utpaladeva famously states at ĪPK 1.5.11, “[The wise] know that the nature of manifestation is a grasp (*vimarśa*); otherwise, the manifesting consciousness (*prakāśa*), while being coloured by objects, would be similar to an inert entity (*jaḍa*) such as a crystal or [any other reflective object].” Ratić’s translation in Ratić (2010, 465). Sanskrit in Torella (2013, 22). For a detailed analysis of this famous passage, see Alper (1987).

<sup>19</sup>MŚV 30-32a. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 64-65).

<sup>20</sup>MŚV 48-49. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 66-67).

<sup>21</sup>Time (*kāla*) has a specific place in the reformulated version of the Śaiva version of the Sāṅkhyan *tattvas* (loosely, elements of reality) on which the Pratyabhijñā Śaivas base at least one presentation of their ontology. Here, time is one of the five *kañcukas* (“sheaths”) that serve to individuate various distinct subjects in the conventional world. In the *Mālinī*, Abhinavagupta opens his broader discussion of time in light of this category.

<sup>22</sup>MŚV 52-54. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 66-69).

<sup>23</sup>MŚV 55-56. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 68-69).

<sup>24</sup>MŚV 61-62ab. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 68-69).

<sup>25</sup>MŚV 99cd-101ab. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 74-75).

<sup>26</sup>MŚV 101cd-102cd. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 74-75).

<sup>27</sup>MŚV 125b-126. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 78-79).

<sup>28</sup>For more on the relationship between concepts and subject/object duality in Pratyabhijñā and Dharmakīrti’s *apoha*, see Prueitt (2017).

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<sup>29</sup> PVSV 1.40. Translation by Eltschinger, Taber, Much, and Ratié in Dharmakīrti (2018, 29).

Sanskrit in Dharmakīrti (1960, 25).

<sup>30</sup> MŚV 1.123. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 78-79).

<sup>31</sup> This is my translation, modified from Hanneder's. The Sanskrit is as follows: *bhede tu*

*viśvabhāvānāṃ svasvabhāvavyavasthiteḥ / abheda iti śabdo 'yaṃ manye bhedayate rasāt //*, MŚV

1.124 (Hanneder 1998, 78). Hanneder's translation, "But [in the sphere] of duality of all things, I

think, the firmness of their own individual natures will automatically (*rasāt*) cause the word 'non-

dual' to become something dual" (1998, 79), while unproblematic, does not pick up on the

technical sense of the phrase "*svasvabhāvavyavasthiteḥ*" given this phrase's presence in

Dharmakīrti's PVSV 1.40.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed explanation of the various forms of tantric Śaivism present in medieval Kashmir,

including the Krama and Kālīkula, see Sanderson (2007).

<sup>33</sup> MŚV 151ab. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 82-83).

<sup>34</sup> MŚV 144. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 82-83).

<sup>35</sup> MŚV 153cd-154ab, 158. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 84-85).

<sup>36</sup> MŚV 314-315. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 108-109).

<sup>37</sup> MŚV 366cd-368ab. Translation and Sanskrit in Hanneder (1998, 116-117).