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***Is Dharmakīrti grabbing the rabbit by the horns? A reassessment of “prameya” in dharmakīrtian epistemology***

### **Abstract**

When discussing the types of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) at the beginning of the third chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika*, Dharmakīrti reiterates Dignāga’s claim in *Pramāṇasamuccaya* I.2 that there are two means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*)—perception and inference—because there are two objects of examination (*prameya*)—particulars and universals (*svalakṣana/sāmānyalakṣana*). This acceptance by Dharmakīrti of two objects of valid cognition stands in contrast to his statement, later in the same chapter, that “the particular alone is an object of valid cognition” (*Pramāṇavārttika* III.53d: *meyam tv ekaṃ svalakṣaṇam*). The object of valid cognition is here reduced to the particular, i.e. the efficient (*arthakriyāsamartha*), and the duality of the object of cognition is explained as depending on the mode of cognition of the object rather than as a distinction pertaining to ontological status. This stand is reflected in the first chapter of the *Pramāṇaviniścaya* as well, and Dharmakīrti’s rejection of the inefficient as a suitable focus of inquiry is expressed on several occasions in his works—a well-known example being the metaphor, in *Pramāṇavārttika* I.210-211, of the pointlessness for a lustful woman to inquire about the beauty of a eunuch.

My paper will deal with a hitherto ignored passage of the *Pramāṇaviniścaya* which somewhat complicates the issue as to the scope of valid cognition, as it would appear to contradict the previous claim that only real entities qualify as objects of valid cognition. Namely, in the context of a discussion taking place in the third chapter of the *Pramāṇaviniścaya* about the notion of “*prameyatva*” and its status of faulty, over-extended (*sādhāraṇa*) logical reason in Dignāga’s classification (starting in D225b7), Dharmakīrti states that “it is not the case that only what has a real object is a valid cognition” (*na hi bhāvaviśayam eva pramāṇam*); what is non-existent, he says, also qualifies as an object of valid cognition (*prameyo ’bhāvaḥ*). Dharmakīrti then proceeds to refute the opponent’s claim that “everything exists somehow,” showing how rabbit’s horns, for instance, are *stricto sensu* non-existent.

Together with an analysis of the relevant passage, I will examine how the claim that “the non-existent can be object of valid cognition” can co-exist with the preceding statements on *prameya* in Dharmakīrti’s system and how commentators dealt with this difficulty. Further, I will attempt to trace the consequences these diverging statements had in the works of Dharmakīrti’s interpreters, considering in particular Dharmottara’s position and the critique thereof by the Tibetan logician Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge.