

Infinite regress arguments (*anavasthā*) in connection with self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*): a closer look at Dignāga and Dharmakīrti

Dr. Birgit Kellner, Department for South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna, Austria

Buddhist epistemologists following Dignāga (ca. 480-540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (ca. 600-660) generally hold that every mental event is intrinsically and non-conceptually aware of itself; this is expressed in the concept of the “self-awareness” (*svasaṃvedana*) of all mental events and their associated factors.

Assuming that this self-awareness is intrinsic to all mental events, Buddhists reject the claim that they are brought to awareness by other mental events that exist independently of them. Perhaps the best known argument that they use in rejecting this “other-cognition” account is that by infinite regress: each mental event is the object of a further mental event; the chain just never stops.

This argument is not unfamiliar to Western philosophers, and it can easily be countered, for it rests on a tacit, but by no means self-evident assumption: all mental events must be known. But why shouldn't some events remain unknown? Indeed, the infinite regress can easily be stopped by introducing such mental events, and that serve as a justificational ground for those events that become known.

The quality of the infinite regress argument consequently depends on whether it can be made plausible that all mental states are known. A closer look at the works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti suggests that they indeed dealt with this issue, but in different ways.

In the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*(*vṛtti*), Dignāga appeals to memory (*smṛti*) and further assumes that all that is remembered must have been previously experienced. One possible reconstruction of his infinite-regress argument runs as follows: as soon as it is admitted that all mental events can become remembered, one has to admit that they can be experienced. But they cannot be experienced by a further mental event, for that, too, could become remembered and then require a further event for its own experience, and so on.

Dharmakīrti, in the *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, seems to argue along different lines: he appeals to general evidential principles and holds that nothing that in itself is unestablished can establish anything else. If the cognition of an object establishes the object, the object-cognition itself must be established, and this is achieved through self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*).

The paper will discuss the differences between these infinite-regress-arguments in greater detail, and reflect on what might have been Dharmakīrti's motivation for going into a different direction.