

Prajñākaragupta on the Two Truths and Argumentation

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Vijñānavādins use dream cognition as an example to illustrate their thesis that there is no object external to a cognition. They assert that from the fact that a dream cognition has no external object it necessarily follows that a waking cognition also has no external object. However, they have to confront an awkward question: If no cognition has an external object, how can we differentiate a dream cognition from a waking cognition? If the Vijñānavādins accept the difference between these two cognitions, then they cannot say that the two cognitions are the same in that they all have no external object; on the other hand, if they do not accept the difference, then they cannot use a dream cognition as an example.

According to Prajñākaragupta, a post-Dharmakīrti Buddhist logician, this dilemma can be solved by resorting to the Buddhist doctrine of two truths: conventional and ultimate. In terms of conventional experience they do not deny the difference between dreaming and waking cognitions, while in terms of the ultimate truth they deny it. However he has to answer the question that Kumārila, a Mīmāṃsaka philosopher contemporary with Dharmakīrti, has posed: If the conventional belief that a dream cognition is different from a waking cognition is discarded, how can such a discarded belief be the 'truth'? In Kumārila's view, the conventional truth, which is subject to denial, is simply a nonsense.

In this paper I shall consider how Prajñākaragupta answers this question. Prajñākaragupta's point is this. Consider the proposition to be proved: the Vedas are valid. If the Vedas are already known as valid, then it is useless to prove this proposition. But if they are already known as invalid, then it is impossible to prove this proposition. Therefore in the argument to prove the proposition, the Vedas are not to be regarded either as valid or as invalid. This means that at the first stage of the argument one has the concept of the Vedas as neutral in validity. However, as soon as one acquires the knowledge of the Vedas as valid through the argument, one has to repudiate such a concept of the Vedas. The acceptance of the Vedas as neutral in validity is to the acceptance of the Vedas as valid as the conventional truth is to the ultimate truth.