

Can one prove that objects exist outside of consciousness ? The Pratyabhijñā's criticism of inferential externalism

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In this paper I wish to examine the way the Kashmirian non-dualistic Śaiva philosophers Utpaladeva (10th century) and Abhinavagupta (10th-11th centuries) present and criticize a theory expounded by some Buddhist philosophers whom the two Śaiva authors identify as Sautrāntikas.

According to this theory, the objects of which we are aware must correspond to some entities existing outside of consciousness. These entities, however, cannot be perceived; for perceiving them would mean making them objects of consciousness, which would be contradictory with their external status: they would be nothing but internal aspects of consciousness. Nonetheless, according to these Buddhists, one cannot draw from this the conclusion that there is no such thing as an external entity, as the Vijñānavādins do. For we are aware of a multiplicity of objects, and there must be a cause of this phenomenal variety; but it cannot be, as the Vijñānavādins contend, a beginningless mechanism of residual traces, since either these residual traces exist outside of consciousness (and then the Vijñānavādins' idealism amounts to a disguised externalism) or they are nothing but consciousness – and then their variety remains inexplicable, because consciousness is in itself nothing but an indifferenciated capacity to manifest things. The Sautrāntikas portrayed by Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta conclude from this that just like a mirror can bear a multiplicity of appearances by reflecting a multiplicity which is external to it, in the same way, consciousness must reflect an external multiplicity: although external objects can never be perceived, they must be inferred in order to explain phenomenal variety.

In *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikās* I, 5, 8-9 and their commentaries, Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta endeavour to criticize this theory which challenges their own idealistic principles: according to them, the Sautrāntikas' inference is neither legitimate nor even possible. The passage is particularly revealing as regards the strategy developed by the Pratyabhijñā philosophers with respect to their Buddhist opponents: after using the Sautrāntikas' arguments in order to criticize the Vijñānavādins' theory of residual traces, they use some Vijñānavādins' arguments in order to criticize the Sautrāntikas' inference of external objects, thus showing the shortcomings of both Buddhist sides by merely letting them enter into dialogue with each other. However, they also exploit this discussion so as to underline their idealism's superiority on the Vijñānavādins', for it enables them to present their criticism of inferential externalism as going further than that of the Vijñānavādins.