Abstract

With the Enlightenment, philosophers in the West recognized that the immediate given of perception is a mental image or representation, not an extra-mental object. That insight raised a pressing, epistemological question: to what degree, if any, do those mental images represent an extra-mental state of affairs? To phrase the question in slightly different terms: in what manner (if any) and to what degree (if any) does perception convey information about reality? The purpose of this paper is to explore this question and clarify some of the epistemological issues associated with perception. This exploration will be aided by references to the epistemological views of a selective sampling of key Western and Asian philosophers: the Buddhist philosophers Dignāga (5th-6th centuries), Dharmakīrti (7th century), and Longchenpa (kLong-chen rab-'byams-pa, 14th century) and the Western philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant (both 18th century).

*Keywords:* perception, information, epistemology, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, kLong-chen rab-'byams-pa, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, rDzogs-chen
Perception as Information: An East-West Dialogue

With the Enlightenment, philosophers in the West recognized that the immediate given of perception is a mental image or representation, not an extra-mental object. That insight raised a pressing, epistemological question: to what degree, if any, do those mental images represent an extra-mental state of affairs? To phrase the question in slightly different terms: in what manner (if any) and to what degree (if any) does perception convey information about reality? The purpose of this paper is to explore this question and clarify some of the epistemological issues associated with perception. This exploration will be aided by references to the epistemological views of a selective sampling of key Western and Asian philosophers: the Buddhist philosophers Dignāga (5th-6th centuries), Dharmakīrti (7th century), and Longchenpa (kLong-chen rab-’byams-pa, 14th century) and the Western philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant (both 18th century).

Dignāga (in some sources, Dinnāga) and Dharmakīrti are both Indian, Mahāyāna Buddhists whose work focused on logic and epistemology. Their investigations of perception and inference as means of knowledge played an immensely influential role in shaping both Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. Longchenpa, a Tibetan Buddhist, is considered one of the great systematizers of Buddhist paths and philosophical doctrines as well as one of the most important explicators of doctrine and practice associated with the Dzogchen (rDzogs-chen, “Great Perfection”) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Hume and Kant articulated views on perception and knowledge that played an important role in shaping epistemological theory in the West. In this paper I make no attempt to provide a systematic overview of the philosophical

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1For an overview of Dzogchen, see Studstill, 2005, Ch. 4.
views of any of these thinkers. Rather, I explore perceptual knowledge in conversation with views associated with each thinker as they relate to the various topics at hand.

**The Origins and Nature of Perceptual Knowledge**

In what sense is perception a means of knowledge? In what sense does it reveal facts about objective reality? From the perspective of common sense, these may seem puzzling questions. Isn’t it obvious that perception involves an encounter with things in the world and therefore conveys direct information about those things? I look at the apple on my desk. Perhaps I pick it up and take a bite. It appears to be simple common sense that these various perceptions – visual, tactile, gustatory – directly represent an objective state of affairs. Through my perceptions I come to know that there is an apple on my desk.

This common sense view does not stand up to critical analysis. Critical analysis reveals that those appearances do not correspond with actual data supplied by perception. If we attempt to isolate the data supplied by perception, we do not encounter objective, extra-mental, material objects. Instead, we discover that ordinary appearances are perceptual distortions or illusions – the result of the constructive activity of the mind. What, then, constitutes the actual data supplied by perception?

If we imagine perception without concepts – perception as experienced by an infant, for example – it seems probable that perceptual content may be reduced to both synchronic and diachronic differences/contrasts in a perceptual field. The infant, presumably, opens her eyes and perceives synchronic contrasts between colors and color gradations (without, of course, having any concept of “color” or “contrast”). Temporal variations in tactile, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory sensations are registered as diachronic perceptual contrasts. Perception, in other
words, is a capacity to register difference. This difference conveys no intrinsic information, notwithstanding the fact that “difference” is one way information has been defined (Floridi, 2005, sec. 1.6). Instead, registered differences may be considered data. As Floridi (2005) defines it, “A datum is a putative fact regarding some difference or lack of uniformity within some context” (sec. 1.3).

Dignāga would contest the claim that perceptual data is intrinsically meaningless. According to him, perception is one of only two means or instruments (pramana) of acquiring knowledge (the other being inference) (Dignaga in Dignāga & Hattori, 1968, p. 24). Perception is by definition free of any conceptual influence (p. 25). Through perception we apprehend “unique particulars”\(^2\) (svalakana), which are, according to Dignāga, the only entities that ultimately exist (paramarthasatya).

The implications and meaning of these claims is contested by Buddhologists. Hattori (in Dignāga and Hattori, 1968), Hayes (1988), and Arnold (2005), however, all agree that “unique particulars” refer to moments of raw, unprocessed sensation or sensa. If sensa are the objects of perception, and perception is the only means of ultimately valid knowledge, knowledge is limited to sensory appearances alone. In other words, Dignāga would argue (and Hume would agree) that we do not know with indubitable certainty if our sensations convey information about anything external to my mind. We do know, however, that we are having an experience. As Arnold (2005) explains, Dignāga’s “claim is simply that we can always doubt whether the content of our mental events adequately represent anything real, but we cannot doubt that there are mental events” (p. 208).

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\(^2\)Unique particulars are sometimes depicted as fleeting “point instances.” As such, they appear to be hypothetical constructs demanded by Buddhist mereological analysis. Since, from a Buddhist perspective, anything reducible to component parts is not ultimately real, and anything with spatial or temporal extension is reducible, the only “things” that can be real are things that lack spatial and temporal extension, i.e., non-extended, momentary “point-instances.”
According to Hayes (2005), the purpose of Dignāga’s epistemological theory is to place strict limits on the scope of indubitable knowledge and thereby undermine the mass of opinions we ordinarily and naively entertain. Undermining opinions, in turn, serves a soteriological function by eliminating distractions from our real problem, which is suffering.

Such an interpretation has a basis in Buddhist canonical literature. In the *Brahmajāla sutta*, the Buddha claims that all forms of intellectual speculation – of entertaining opinions about any topic whatsoever either in favor of Buddhist teachings or in opposition to Buddhist teaching – serve to perpetuate the conditioned series of mental events that manifests itself as ordinary, unsatisfactory human experience. Rather than entertaining opinions either in favor of or in opposition to any particular doctrine, the Buddhist path consists in careful attention to the series of mental events themselves with the aim of understanding and overcoming the intrinsic suffering associated with ordinary experience.

Regardless of the merits of this approach to religious beliefs, it remains difficult to make any sense of Dignāga’s claim that nonconceptual perception constitutes knowledge. As an infant, I presumably enjoyed moments of nonconceptual perception. Those moments were – I feel safe in assuming – completely unintelligible. Even if Hayes’ (1988) interpretation is correct, propositions in the form of “I know that I am experiencing x” (as opposed “I know x”) are complex cognitive acts that presuppose conceptual activity. As Arnold (2005) explains,

this construction [*that we have some experience*] already reflects a second-order, propositional attitude; indeed, this use of the word ‘that’ is virtually definitional as such. This is precisely what it would mean to characterize this relationship to the phenomenological content of experience as constituting knowledge. But . . . if it is to
figure in the structure of knowledge, there must be some conceptual component even of our putatively immediate acquaintance with our own mental states. (p. 37)

The difficulties with Dignāga’s epistemology are further affirmed by Dharmakīrti’s explanation of perception as an instrument of knowledge. Rather than identify knowledge with the perceptual event itself, Dharmakīrti seems to associate knowledge with conceptual judgments that are causally constrained by perception (Dunne, 2004, p. 323). From this perspective, perception retains its privileged epistemic status as the source of knowledge without itself being identified with knowledge.

Though I am speculating here, Dignāga’s epistemology may reflect his experience as a meditator, specifically, his engagement with mindfulness practices involving the attempt to cultivate a state of bare attention to mental events. Though bare attention suspends some conceptual activity, the practice still takes place against an implicit background – a “meditator” engaged in a “practice” – that requires conceptual activity. In defense of Buddhist soteriological theory, it may well be that in advanced forms of such practice all conceptual activity ceases. Such an experience, however, would be unintelligible, though it may function as the threshold for a reorganization of the cognitive system and a qualitative shift in experience and epistemic sensitivity.

If perception involves nothing more than registering intrinsically unintelligible differences, how does our hypothetical infant ever impose meaning on what Kant recognized as a disorganized manifold of sensations? From an epistemological perspective, how is knowledge ever derived from intrinsically meaningless sensation? There is no doubt that Kant was right when he ascribed the intelligibility of ordinary experience – and the possibility of empirical knowledge – to the mediating influence of concepts (McCormick, 2005). However, we might
still wonder about the origin of concepts. Kant considers concepts the necessary conditions of intelligible experience, but this does not explain their origin.

To my knowledge, Kant does not address this problem, and at least some secondary accounts of Kantian epistemology treat these concepts as “hardwired” into the mind/brain. Given that the infant’s experience is presumably unintelligible, these “hardwired” concepts must become active in relation to the developmental stages of an individual’s growth and (at least in part) in dependence on language acquisition.

In contrast to this developmental explanation of concept formation, I would argue that the formation of concepts is better explained by two key factors. One of these factors derives from the condition of being embodied. Embodiment establishes a distinction in the disorganized manifold: that which is subject to immediate control as opposed to that which is not subject to immediate control. Some sensations impinge themselves on experience regardless of volition; others sensations are correlated with volition. This distinction – repeatedly represented in sensation and registered by the memory – may constitute the basis for the development of a non-linguistic conceptual distinction between “self” and “world.”

The second factor involves the repetition of specific patterns of sensation and memory. Imagine our infant alternately lying in her crib and lying on the floor. She experiences a more or less uniform sensation of tactile resistance. The repetition of this sensation, correlated with a set of visual patterns, forms the basis for the development of a non-linguistic concept of horizontal plane surfaces that perform a supporting function. That concept functions as a schema or template that organizes sensations in a way that makes it possible to recognize or “know” (in a non-linguistic sense) the presence of the “ground” or “floor.” Likewise, repetitions of perceptual patterns (visual and tactile) in relation to holding objects and encountering obstacles in the
process of exploring the environment may be the basis for the development of concepts that organize or synthesize apprehensions of objects with clearly defined boundaries. These concepts make it possible to recognize the proximity of an (as yet unknown) entity.³

At this point, these conceptual processes merely bring individual entities into focus. In other words, all I know is that “something” is there, without attributing qualities such as substance or labeling the entity with a term (whether as a “thing” in a general sense or as a specific kind of thing, e.g., an apple, a rattle, etc.). Perceptual knowledge of specific kinds of entities (knowing there is an apple on my desk without necessarily representing that knowledge in linguistic terms) emerges through the gradual development of concepts based on repeated encounters with the functions of items correlated with more refined capacities to distinguish patterns of sensation. At an early stage of conceptual development, the apple is simply an unidentified object on a uniform surface. By repeatedly seeing apples, holding apples, and tasting apples, however, a concept forms that makes it possible to organize perceptions such that the individual knows, given the requisite set of sensations, *there is an apple*. Again, this concept is non-linguistic. It is not necessary to apply a term to the object to identify/know the object. However, I suspect that concepts for specific types of things are often formed in association with the terms for those things.

At least one possible objection to this account involves the supposition that we form concepts based on some kind of repeated regularities in sensation. Dharmakīrti would agree that we form conceptual judgments based on sensory images or impressions. However, those sensations – according to both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti – never repeat. Every sensation is a

³ This explanation echoes Hume’s account of the origins of ideas such as substance and a necessary connection between cause and effect. See my comments below.
“unique particular.” Any attempt to explain the formation of concepts in dependence on sense data must take this into account.

Before considering Dharmakīrti’s answer to the problem, how plausible is the claim that every moment of sensation is utterly unique? The claim appears to me to be at least somewhat plausible. It seems likely that if we paid careful attention to the phenomenological content of experience we would note at least some degree of variation – however subtle – from moment to moment. That variation may stem from slight shifts in perspective and orientation, lighting, proximity, attention, etc. This variation also applies at the level of ordinary appearances and the classification of macro-objects. At the phenomenological level, every sensation associated with apples (for example) is in fact unique. No two apples appear exactly the same. How, then, does the mind classify these distinct sets of sensations (associated with distinct objects) within one category (“that pattern of sensations, which is unlike any other pattern I have every encountered, may be classified as an apple”)?

Before considering Dharmakīrti’s answer to this question, I should note that two issues are being addressed here. The first relates to my explanation of the unconscious formation of concepts based on repetitive patterns of sense data. If sense data never, in fact, repeat, how can they serve as the basis for the formation of general concepts? The second issue concerns the activation of concepts in response to sensory data. Specifically, how are general concepts matched to unique sets of sensations in a way that makes possible perceptual judgments? Though these are distinct issues, the epistemological problem is essentially the same in both cases: how do we recognize the general in the specific?

One answer, going to back to Plato and Aristotle, is that general forms have real existence and that particular things either participate in (Plato) or instantiate (Aristotle) those
forms. As empiricists, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and Hume reject such claims. Ideal forms are not
given through raw sensory data. Instead, these philosophers all take a nominalist position toward
concepts and terms identified with concepts. General properties are not found in the data, but
exist only as mental constructs. If this is the case, how can concepts be in some way derived
from data (my claim) or applied to data in order to arrive at general judgments (Dharmakīrti’s
concern)?

According to Dharmakīrti, perception is causally constrained by the unique particulars
that comprise reality. The causal relationship between unique particulars and perceptual events
entails that perceptual or sensory events are also unique particulars. However, the particulars
that serve as the causal referents of a sensory event exercise a common effect through their
combined action in producing the sensory image. The sensory images produced by unique
particulars in turn have the capacity – in spite of their uniqueness – to produce a common effect.
That effect is the judgment that classifies or categorizes a set of sensations under a common
concept (Dunne, 2004, pp. 116ff, 322). In sum, classification is constrained by information
conveyed by the object, specifically, information pertaining to the object’s “causal functionality”
constructed sameness that accounts for a correct judgment’s reference in the nomological natures
of causally efficient things” (pp. 322-323).

Dharmakīrti’s emphasis on causal functionality as the mechanism that makes possible
generalized perceptual judgments may parallel my own claim that the functions associated with
sensations play an essential role in the formation of concepts. However, Dharmakīrti’s overall
attempt to reconcile the general with the particular appears unnecessarily complex. It seems
more plausible to suppose that persons simply have the cognitive capacity to assess degrees of
similarity among individually unique sensations and group sensations accordingly. In other words, the capacity to group individually unique sensations under a single concept does not depend on some type of commonality associated with things themselves.

Up to this point, I have presented perceptual knowledge as closely aligned with data supplied by perception. Even though perception alone does not convey knowledge – we need concepts as well – knowledge is limited to perceptual data. As concepts develop in infancy, the infant is able to organize perceptions in a way that makes possible the identification of forms in association with certain sensory patterns and functions. The infant crawling across the floor does not know what a chair is. Nevertheless, she is able to bring into focus a form, understand the spatial proximity of that form, and recognize the tactile resistance that would eventually be associated with that form if she were to crawl in its direction without stopping. These are all instances of knowledge given that they make possible the negotiation of an environment, the gratification of needs, the avoidance of pain, and ultimately, the survival of the organism.

Moreover, the knowledge is justified by perception, in the sense that the “object” is a set of sensations associated with a common function.

However, the development of our cognitive and conceptual systems does not stop here. The concepts I use to organize my experience as an adult go significantly beyond those I have described above. As an adult, my “knowledge” that there is an apple on my desk includes implicit ontological presuppositions. Specifically, I attribute substance to perceptual objects. Buddhists would also argue that I implicitly attribute an intrinsic essence to objects: that the

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4This phrasing is somewhat misleading, since it suggests that sensory patterns and functions are different types of things. In actuality, perceived “functions” are a type of sensory pattern, one that I highlight because it has more direct and tangible implications for aiding or inhibiting human projects.
apple on my desk is marked by an intrinsic property of “apple-ness” that serves to define it as an entity distinct from other types of entities.

The tendency to develop such cognitive proclivities may have evolved because they accelerate the way we process environmental information and consequently have survival value. This possibility notwithstanding, these proclivities represent concepts and associated judgments that are not based on perceptual data. As both Hume and Kant recognized, the idea of substance is not derived from empirical experience. Neither, as Buddhists would emphasize, does perception ever access an essence informing a particular entity. In this sense, the perceptual “knowledge” associated with ordinary appearances is a distortion of the legitimate knowledge that recognizes and classifies forms based on patterns and regularities in sensation coupled with associated functions. In spite of the epistemic distortion involved, these erroneous concepts are based on more basic, perceptually justified concepts, and therefore the perception of ordinary appearances does not compromise a person’s ability to negotiate her environment. Concepts of substance and essence, however, may amplify the automaticity of information processing in a way that reduces attention to the environment. This encourages a tendency to divert attention from the immediacy of sensation, which may in turn inhibit one’s capacity to negotiate the environment as well as diminish one’s potential for aesthetic appreciation.

If these second-order concepts are not verified by perceptual data, how do they develop? In his Treatise of Human Nature (1739), Hume set out to answer this question with respect to five ideas: space, time, cause and effect, external objects, and personal identity. Though each of these concepts plays a key role in influencing the way we organize perceptions and “know” our environments and ourselves, Hume shows that none are directly justified by empirical experience. Our abstract idea of space is an inference derived from sensory impressions of
tactile and visual extension (Feiser, 2004). In the case of time, Hume accepts a legitimate idea of time as “a copy of impressions as they are perceived by the mind at its fixed speed” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2). However, “he argues that we frequently entertain a faulty notion of time” in the sense that “we mistake time for the cause of succession instead of seeing it as the effect” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2). Such a mistake implicitly attributes independent, abstract existence to an inference derived from the succession of ideas and impressions. Hume shows that our idea of a necessary connection between causes and effects is a mental “habit” uncritically inferred from our experience of conjoined events – “that is, repeated sense experiences where events resembling A are always followed by events resembling B” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2).

In an effort to organize our perceptions, we . . . assume that there is no distinction between our perceptions and the objects that are perceived. . . . We then conflate all ideas (of perceptions), which put our minds in similar dispositions . . . ; that is, we associate resembling ideas and attribute identity to their causes. Consequently, we naturally feign the continued and external existence of the objects (or perceptions) that produced these ideas. . . . (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2)

Based on this account, Hume argues that the idea of external objects is “philosophically unjustified” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2). Nevertheless, “we go on to believe in the existence of these objects because of the force of the resemblance between ideas” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2; see also Rosenberg, 2005, p. 25). Hume’s critique of personal identity echoes Buddhist views on the ultimate non-existence of the self. Hume points out that we do not actually experience a unified “self” but “a bundle of different perceptions” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2). The idea of a self is derived from memory and “the resemblance or causal connection within the chain of our perceptions” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2).
Hume appears to consider that idea legitimate as long as its origins are understood. Based on his analysis, however, he naturally rejects any idea of the self construed as a “soul” or an “unchanging substance” (Feiser, 2004, sec. 2).

Kant takes a fundamentally different approach to our ideas of space, time, substance, etc., though the ultimate epistemological implications of his claims share Hume’s skeptical orientation. For Kant, ideas of time, space, personal identity, substance, etc. constitute the necessary conditions of experience. Though none of these ideas are conveyed through raw sensation, experience could not occur unless such ideas or concepts organized the manifold of sensory intuitions. From this perspective, it makes no sense to view concepts as an epistemological problem because they produce appearances independent of the data supplied by perception. Rather, concepts are the conditions of intelligible experience – and therefore empirical knowledge – itself. This account, however, necessarily implies a distinction between *phenomena* (things as they appear to us) and *noumena* (things as they are in themselves). Empirical experience is limited to phenomena: things as they are construed through the concepts and schemata that organize and synthesize sensory apprehensions. This leaves “things in themselves” beyond the reach of possible knowledge. In this sense, Kantian epistemology reflects a skeptical stance regarding our capacity to know an objective, extra-mental state of affairs.

**The Epistemology of Perception**

What does this account of the origins of concepts and their relationship to knowledge tell us about perception as a medium of information? For example, what does it mean to know – via perception – that there is an apple on my desk?
From the perspective of ordinary experience and its implicit ontological presuppositions, “knowledge” of the apple on my desk means identifying the presence of an extra-mental, material entity. Upon reflection, however, we realize that experience is limited to sensation. Perception is not an encounter with an extra-mental object, but the cognition of a mental image/sensation (or collection of images/sensations). As sensation, any attribution of substance is at best a warranted inference, at worst an illusion.

What, then, do we actually know based on information or data supplied by perception? In terms of perceptual knowledge, “objects” are patterns of sensory experience associated with specific functions. We identify such patterns through the combined activity of concepts and memory. These concepts not only comprise the schema that make possible the recognition of specific patterns (“objects”). As Kant understood, they also construct a sense of spatial and temporal orientation that contextualizes experience and makes intelligible experience possible. Pattern recognition (via concepts) constitutes knowledge given the fact that (1) those patterns are represented in experience, and (2) they make negotiating an environment possible. In other words, it is through perception that we recognize real constraints that ultimately bear directly on our continued survival.

Ordinary appearances that involve the erroneous imputation of substance and extra-mental, objective status likewise enable us to negotiate the environment. This is because these appearances are isometrically correlated with our ability to organize and recognize sensory patterns. The pragmatic functionality of ordinary appearances is one reason why the “reality” of those appearances is so deeply taken for granted. This correlation notwithstanding, ordinary appearances are not objects of perceptual knowledge because such appearances are not warranted based on evidence supplied by the senses.
These observations suggest the need to modify Kant’s phenomenal-noumenal distinction. For Kant, an appearance is empirical even if that appearance is constructed. This is necessarily the case given Kant’s view that intelligible experience requires the influence of concepts through the synthesizing activity of the understanding. If this is true, any attempt to go beyond ordinary appearances is fundamentally misguided. Such an attempt would deny the necessary conditions of experience and the possibility of knowledge.

Concepts that organize the manifold are indeed necessary for knowledge. However, in opposition to Kant, it is possible to distinguish between concepts (and knowledge) justified by experience vs. concepts (and “knowledge”) unjustified by experience. A concept that organizes a pattern of sensation as an ontologically neutral, experiential form associated with a certain function is consistent with the data supplied by perception. A concept that construes appearances as material, extra-mental, objective entities is not consistent with sensory data. In other words, it is possible to identify legitimate empirical knowledge distinct from ordinary appearances. On these grounds, Kant’s claim that ordinary, phenomenal appearances are the domain of empirical knowledge is unwarranted.

I have argued that pattern/function recognition is a form of knowledge. Those patterns have significance in relation to human projects associated with survival, the avoidance of pain, and the pursuit of pleasure. The fact that we are able to negotiate our environments in relation to those patterns suggests that they are correlated with an objective ground. Both these points, however, leave the ultimate, metaphysical meaning of sensory patterns and their associated functions unexplained. The raises an obvious question: is it possible for us to grasp that meaning through some kind of sensory or intellectual capacity? Plato argued that abstracting the intellect from its involvement with the senses would make this kind of knowledge possible. However, the
constraints intrinsic to our sensory capacities and the concept-dependent nature of knowledge appear to argue against that view. The ultimate meaning of sensory patterns – whether they represent material entities, whether they are grounded in some non-material noetic matrix, etc. – is unknown and (apparently) unknowable given the sensory and cognitive capacities associated with ordinary consciousness. This conclusion affirms Kant’s transcendental idealism, i.e., his claim that “things in themselves” (*noumena*) are unknowable.

*If* it were possible to go beyond the limits of ordinary cognition, it would require a reorganization or transformation of the cognitive system with a corresponding qualitative shift in our experience and epistemic capacities. Such a possibility is precisely what Buddhists (and members of other mystical traditions) claim is possible. Here we may reconsider Dignâga’s claim that nonconceptual perception is a means of knowledge because it directly accesses the ultimately real, i.e., unique particulars.

Against this claim, I have argued that nonconceptual perception in the context of ordinary experience would be meaningless. However, it seems plausible to suppose – given the testimony of so many mystics from diverse religious traditions – that nonconceptual perception (or nonconceptual experience) may precipitate the transformation of experience by upsetting the system of concepts that construct ordinary experience. Such a disruption may in turn prompt a self-organizing transformation of the cognitive system accompanied by new epistemic possibilities.

From that vantage point, what, then, have mystics reported concerning of ultimate reality and its relation to the world we occupy? Because that knowledge exceeds the limitations of ordinary epistemic capacities, ultimate truth is often “described” as inexpressible. Moreover, the words that mystics do tend to use are not so much intended to describe reality (a description that
would be meaningless for us without the requisite shared reference in experience) but to guide practitioners on a path toward experiencing reality/truth for themselves. Having said that, I will close with a Tibetan attempt to explain the inexpressible. As a prefatory note, it may help to recall that substance is never an object of experience. In an ontological sense, we have absolutely no access to “what” anything is. The appearances that “light up” within the perceptual field are not substantial things. What, then, constrains this lighting up such that it assumes a particular form? Here is how Longchenpa answers that question – an answer that, given our own epistemic limitations, is best interpreted in an evocative or poetic sense.

According to Longchenpa, phenomenal appearances are symbolic representations of qualities (or combinations of qualities) intrinsic to a supremely meaningful, ultimately real Ground (gzhi) (Guenther, 1989). These appearances have intense semantic value due to their ontological continuity with the Ground. However, in the context of ordinary experience, appearances tend to be objectified through the imputation of linguistic signs on experience. This objectification of appearances through language suppresses the potential epistemic value of appearances – a value that is felt rather than known. These objectifications veil the Ground, but at the same time are meaningfully ordered because they are isometrically coordinated with It. This order and constraint is the basis for the intelligibility associated with ordinary appearances, yet that intelligibility is purely conventional since ordinary appearances are a radical distortion with respect to their true foundation. Conventional-ultimate correspondence, however, means that every distortion – every ordinary appearance – implicitly encodes information about ultimate reality. In this sense, nothing ever strays from the Ground.

Whether we accept this explanation or not, the fact remains that knowledge is limited – adequate for pursuing human projects but completely inadequate for understanding the
metaphysical background that would explain these recurrent patterns of sensation we interpret as “objects” in a “world.” For Kant, this epistemic limitation made room for faith in a religious belief system. Another option in the face of our epistemic limitations might be to embrace and fully appreciate the unknown. Given the compelling nature of ordinary appearances and the taken-for-granted conviction (implicit in ordinary experience) that we “know” and “understand” the nature of our environment, recognizing the limits of knowledge may itself be a significant accomplishment in an epistemic sense. This is true especially if mystics from apophatic traditions are right and unknowing is a means of realizing the divine.
References


