

The Limitations of Kantian Epistemology in the Study of Religion and What We Can Do About It?

The general epistemological trend for the last fifty years has been to acknowledge that human consciousness is historically embedded and, is unable, furthermore, to transcend such history, at least in any absolute way. From this position it follows that human consciousness, human experience and reports on human experience have no essence beyond their historically constructed meaning and factuality. This position comes to be encapsulated in the term "constructivism." Constructivism, in other words, is the view that a given phenomena is the product of a constellation of various socio-historical conditions, trends and factors while either bracketing or denying that this phenomena has some other, more real, essence which transcends its socio-historical location. While this epistemological development has enriched and extended the reach of religious studies, constructivism has also limited the ability of scholars to make certain investigations especially with respect to mystical and meditative experience. This paper will examine these limitations and suggest a means of getting beyond them without abandoning the valuable insights of constructivism.

An important chapter in the establishment of the constructivist paradigm in the field of religious studies was opened in 1978 when Steven Katz announced his contention in that "There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences."¹ Having set out to establish the study of mysticism in a more methodologically sophisticated fashion, Katz and others argued that the so called unmediated experiences of mystics are in fact culturally determined and

conditioned by their religious and cultural traditions. While this critique has been welcomed by most scholars, Robert Forman and others have resisted the constructivistⁱⁱ denial of unmediated experience because they hold that such experiences are central to the claims of various mystics and traditions involving yoga and meditation.

While there has been inconsistent use of terms such as “unmediated experience” and “pure consciousness,” for the purposes of this paper unmediated experience will be defined as a consciousness which has (or is) an object which is non-conceptual and not determined by socio-linguistic factors.ⁱⁱⁱ The notion of consciousness carries with it the property of cognition or knowing; accordingly, the above definition of unmediated consciousness implies a notion of non-conceptual knowledge (*nirvikalpa jñāna*). This definition of unmediated consciousness which yields non-conceptual knowledge provides a distinct contrast with Kant’s notion of knowledge which is necessarily conceptual in nature. This is the crucial difference between epistemologies which stem from the insights of Kant and Buddhist epistemologies which elaborate the possibility of non-conceptual knowledge. From a Kantian point of view, non-conceptual knowledge is an oxymoron. Is it appropriate then, one might ask, to use Kantian-based epistemologies to examine phenomena which such epistemologies deny *a priori*?

Several scholars have noticed the Kantian assumptions implicit in the constructivist denial of unmediated experience^{iv} which may be thought to correspond to Kant’s position that one can not know reality in-itself (the noumenon). Anthony Perovich argues that while a Kantian or mediated framework may be helpful in describing most kinds of experience, it lacks the ability to account for certain types of mystical experience.^v The

crucial point is not that the constructivist epistemology is wrong, and another one is right, but rather the recognition that Buddhist epistemologies describe states of consciousness and degrees of human experience that a more limited epistemology finds unaccountable. Kantian constructivist epistemology provides powerful descriptive and interpretive tools, but when it denies that there can be states of consciousness which are non-conceptual and non-mediated it goes beyond description and interpretation to legislating the bounds of human experience. One is reminded of the colonial disposition which assumed the superiority of rational Western ways over the ways of the ‘mythic East.’ As Richard King writes, “To accept modern Western epistemological theories without highlighting their cultural and social particularity is to remain within a long and well-established tradition of Western arrogance about the superiority of Western ways of understanding the world.”^{vi} Assuming the superiority of Kantian epistemology over Buddhist epistemologies, or other non-*aufklärer*^{vii} epistemologies, is an idea whose time has passed; the arrogance of ignoring native Asian epistemologies is as unacceptable as the heedlessness of uncritically lauding them.

Some scholars seem to argue that what is needed for these exceptional experiences which access the “thusness” beyond appearances is another epistemology, what King calls “an epistemology of enlightenment” rather than an “epistemology of limitation”.^{viii} While one group of scholars has been busy defending the sanctity of unmediated experience, Robert Sharf has attempted to reorient these debates by looking at the larger context of the “rhetoric of experience.”^{ix} Sharf’s analysis centers around the political and ideological dimensions which can be involved in an appeal to inner experience or private knowledge (of a mystic or meditation master for instance), which is considered

authoritative and at the same time is not subject to external critical evaluation.^x Sharf's analysis brings out important dimensions of an appeal to inner experience but in his effort to problematize the unexamined notion of experience he fails to represent the full spectrum of meanings that experience had in traditional (pre-modern) religious contexts. Sharf's essays provoke the following question: Is [religious] experience a valid category of study or is it an ideologically loaded construct of recent provenance and prominence? While it seems clear that notions of experience in the writings of such influential figures as Radhakrishnan and D.T. Suzuki are strongly colored by Western notions of experience, it would be hard to deny that some notion of experience was important throughout much of India's religious history represented in traditions of yoga and meditation. It is not simply the fantasy of apologists or romantics that traditions of yoga and meditation were designed to effect transformations in their practitioners. Although Wilhelm Halbfass has argued that Neo-Hindu notions of experience owe much to India's contact with Euro-American thought, he also recognizes India's long-standing concern with generating and evaluating religious or mystical experiences.^{xi} In response to Sharf's essays, Janet Gyatso has argued that Tibetan Buddhist traditions of meditation explicitly have and value notions of experience.^{xii} While Gyatso has examined traditions of meditative practice this paper looks at the Tibetan scholastic tradition's discussion of epistemology to see how it accounts for unmediated knowledge and thus overcomes the limitations of a more restrictive epistemology.

Tibetan monastic communities study Buddhist epistemology under a curriculum known as "The Collected Topics of Valid Cognition" (*tshad ma'i bsdus grva*) which dominates the initial years of study in Gelukba monastic colleges.^{xiii} The study of "minds and

awarenesses” (*blo-rig*) presents a detailed picture of how the human mind misperceives reality by the impositions of conceptual thought and provides a basis for understanding how one escapes such deluded conceptualizations through direct perception (*pratyakṣa, mngon sum*) and inference (*anumāna, rjes dpag*) which are the two accepted forms of valid cognition (*pramāṇa, tshad ma*) for Dignāga and Dharmakīrti.^{xiv} It is taught that one ultimately overcomes conceptual delusion through non-conceptual knowledge achieved through an extraordinary class of direct perception known as yogic direct perception (*yogī-pratyakṣa, rnal 'byor mngon sum*), marked by the union of calm abiding (*śamatha*) and special insight (*vipaśyanā*).^{xv} It is this all important state of yogic direct perception with its non-conceptual knowledge which is denied by Kantian-based epistemologies. Before examining the state of yogic direct perception let's first map its position in the Tibetan epistemological scheme.

The Western tradition has traditionally posited a single mind, such as the Cartesian cogito, which is not only a mental awareness but also a subjective awareness attached to an ego, to which Freud added the subconscious mind. The Gelukbas monastic colleges teach a comparatively nuanced array of seven types of consciousness:^{xvi} (1) direct perceivers (*pratyakṣa, mngon sum*), (2) inferential cognizers (*anumāna, rjes dpag*), (3) subsequent cognizers (*bcad shes*), (4) correctly assuming consciousnesses (*yid dpyod*), (5) inattentive consciousnesses (*snang la ma nges pa*), (6) doubting consciousnesses (*samshaya, the tshom*) and (7) wrong consciousnesses (*viparyaya-jñāna, log shes*).^{xvii}

The soteriological relevance of this elaboration of awareness is relatively straightforward. Ignorance is identified in the earliest sutras as the fundamental cause of suffering and so the goal of Buddhism, in a fundamental sense, is the overcoming of this ignorance. Thus

one seeks to move from a mind which perceives things incorrectly (#7 above), to an enlightened mind (marked by yogic direct perception- a refined category of *pratyaksa*, (#1 above) which perceives reality as it is. The relevance of this epistemology for our examination of constructivism is the distinct path it posits from conceptual, mediated awareness, to non-conceptual, unmediated awareness.^{xviii}

The subtle perception known as yogic direct perception (*yogi-pratyaksa*, *rnal 'byor mngon sum*) is a subclass of ordinary direct perception (*pratyaksa*, *mngon sum*). Direct perception provides knowledge which is non-mistaken (*abhrānta*, *ma 'khrul ba*) and free from conceptuality (*kalpanā-apodha*, *rtog bral*).^{xix} Four types of direct perception are distinguished: (1) sense, (2) mental, (3) self-knowing, and (4) yogic.^{xx} Sense direct perception which is the most exemplary class of perception is divided into five types according to the sense object apprehended: forms, sounds, odors, tastes, or tangible objects.^{xxi} Each types of sense awareness arises in dependence upon three conditions: (1) the observed object condition, (2) the uncommon empowering condition, and (3) the immediately preceding condition.^{xxii} These three conditions are best understood by recourse to an example. The sensation of sight, for example, can be described as a sense direct perceiver apprehending form which arises in dependence upon three conditions: 1) its own uncommon empowering condition, the eye sense power, 2) a form (which is the observed object condition) and 3) the immediately preceding moment of consciousness.^{xxiii} The uncommon empowering condition for perceiving sound is the ear sense power and so on.

The most significant category of direct perception for this epistemological investigation is that of yogic direct perception which provides a specific contrast with constructivist and Kantian epistemologies. As if addressing the contemporary debate over constructivism, the sixth century Indian Buddhist thinker Dignāga states that direct perception is devoid of conceptual constructions (*kalpanā-apoḍha, rtog bral*).^{xxiv}

Dignāga goes on to elaborate the nature of yogic direct perception which is available only to those skilled in meditation. Yogic direct perception, according to Dignāga, is not only devoid of conceptual construction, but is also free from the preconceptions of one's training and tradition:

Meditation adepts observe just the object itself with an observation that is entirely free of preconceptions arising from the instructions of teachers. The observation of meditation adepts of just the object itself, which observation is unspoiled by preconceptions that come down from tradition, is also sensation [i.e., *pratyakṣa*].^{xxv}

This description of gnosis beyond cultural and linguistic conditioning is heresy to contemporary constructivist notions marked by their post-structuralist and post-Kantian sensibilities. Nevertheless, it is just this kind of unmediated, non-conceptual gnosis which is essential to virtually all systems of Buddhist thought and practice.

While it is noted that immediate gnosis is posited as a goal in Buddhist traditions, it is equally true that Buddhist traditions recognize the importance of conditioning in bringing about yogic direct perception. Yogic direct perception, for example, is preceded by specific forms of meditation which culminate in the union of calm abiding and special insight which serve as the basis (technically – the uncommon empowering condition (*asādharaṇa-adipati-pratyaya, thun mong ma yin pa'i bdag rkyen*)) for yogic direct

perception. Furthermore, it is said in the Gelukba tradition that conceptual thought in the form of inference also helps one on the path to direct perception of reality.

One might be tempted to argue that yogic direct perception is also *mediated* because it requires special instructions, training, and practice in meditation. In a sense, it is true that yogic direct perception is conditioned because it has as its condition the union of calm abiding and special insight meditation. It is possible, nonetheless, to recognize a distinction between the *experience* of yogic direct perception and the *knowledge* that one attains through that experience. While this is not necessarily a distinction explicitly made in Buddhist literature, it is a distinction which can be inferred from passages such as the above two lines from Dignāga each of which speaks of what meditation adepts observe as *artha-mātra*, “just the object itself...unspoiled by preconceptions.” Dignāga is not speaking about the *experience* itself; he is describing what is the *object observed* (“the object itself”) and how that object itself is observed (“unspoiled by preconceptions”). The object observed is the content of the consciousness of a yogic direct perceiver which

is unmediated. What has occurred before that unmediated moment of consciousness arrives is marked by conditioning and mediation, but the knowledge which spontaneously arises in moments of yogic direct perception is, according to the tradition, distinctly unmediated.

Lati Rinbochay explains that unlike sense direct perception, yogic direct perception does not have an observed object condition (*ālambana-prataya*, *dmigs rkyen*) but only an

observed object (*ālambana-viṣaya, dmigs yul*).^{xxvi} This serves to reinforce the sense that Dignāga is speaking of an object of awareness itself without conditions and without mediation from tradition or teachers. Janet Gyatso describes this cooperation between conceptually mediated training and the unmediated fruit of practice as “‘post conceptual’ immediacy”^{xxvii} and “‘complexly mediate immediacy.’”^{xxviii}

The struggle to account for this “post conceptual immediacy” is a struggle, it seems, from a certain Cartesian mindset, which like Kant, has difficulty linking body and mind. This however, does not seem to be a struggle from the traditions which posit such immediate realization. The difference here seem to be primarily one of epistemological commitment. Buddhist epistemology recognizes a spectrum of mental states ranging from deluded to enlightened, each arising in response to specific conditions, and each arising due to the interaction of sense and mental faculties in contact with objects (in the world or in the mind). This is an episodic notion of consciousness events which is not represented by the notion of consciousness as a “Cartesian Theater” criticized by cognitive philosopher Daniel Dennett,^{xxix} a critique reiterated by Sharf.^{xxx} Kant’s epistemology, on the other hand, seems to remain wedded to a view of the mind as a “Cartesian Theater.” While cognitive science has tended to reject Cartesian dualism in favor of materialism, Buddhism may help point the direction to a more palatable middle way which recognizes both the influence of subject and object, as well as, body and awareness in the production of consciousness.

Yogic direct perception in this system is a central pillar of Buddhist thought and praxis and one which is simply unaccounted for in Kantian and constructivist epistemologies.

The refined form of consciousness which arises in yogic direct perception is not a category of Kantian or constructivist epistemologies nor is it accounted for in Western cognitive science.^{xxxii} Furthermore, Kantian and constructivist epistemologies deny access to the kind of direct, non-conceptual knowledge attained in this state. The question is not whether the constructivist paradigm can be seen to embrace the possibility of non-conceptual knowledge of the kind accessed in yogic direct perception or not. It seems clear that it can not. This, however, does not entail that the constructivist paradigm must be abandoned. What I would suggest is that the constructivist model be maintained for all of its obvious strengths, but appended to this model should be the recognition, at least, that unmediated, non-conceptual knowledge *might* exist in certain exceptional circumstances. Such an ascending scale of mutually contradictory perspectives is one way of viewing the Gelukba system, which initially teaches what it considers the "lower" systems of Sautrāntika and Yogācāra before teaching Madhyamaka as its final system.

On the way from Sautrāntika to Madhyamaka, a major shift occurs in the understanding of conventional and ultimate truths. Without going into detail, what was a conventional truth in Sautrāntika (emptiness) becomes apprehended as ultimate in Madhyamaka. Reality has not changed, but one's perspective on it has shifted from a more conventional and intuitive understanding in Sautrāntika to a more subtle and ultimate understanding in Madhyamaka.^{xxxiii} While this flexibility in ontological perspectives is peculiar, it may, in fact, serve as a model for a solution to the limitations of constructivist epistemology. As I argued, Kantian epistemology and the constructivist view it supports are extremely powerful and should be retained, at the same time the extraordinary state of non-

conceptual knowledge, unmediated by the sociolinguistic dimension should not be dismissed out of hand. It may be that the Kantian or constructivist epistemology can account for 99.99999% of human experience. It is the status of the .00001% which may seem insignificant in scale, but is absolutely fundamental to the underpinnings of many traditions of meditation, yoga and mysticism. A place should be made to accommodate the possibility of this important .00001%.^{xxxiii}

For the Gelukbas, as well as much of the Buddhist tradition, the perception of emptiness begins with a conceptual, conditioned, and mediated understanding of emptiness which, for those advanced enough in meditative attainments can be transformed into yogic direct perception of emptiness. This progression is outlined by Napper:

The development of yogic direct perceivers is a major goal of meditative training. Although one effortlessly has the capacity to perceive directly such things as forms and sounds with an eye or ear consciousness, one does not have that ability with regard to profound phenomena such as subtle impermanence and selflessness. Thus, these must originally be understood conceptually, that is, they are comprehended by way of a mental image^{xxxiv} rather than directly. Then through repeated familiarization with the object realized, it is possible to develop clearer and clearer realization until finally the need for a mental image is transcended and one realizes the object directly.^{xxxv}

What is described in this epistemology is an evolution from a deluded state of conceptually *mediated* knowledge to a non-mistaken, non-conceptual *direct* perception of the way things are. It is not important for the sake of argument against constructivism to accept the correct perception of reality as impermanent, selfless, and so on. What is important is that this epistemological framework accepts an array of states of consciousness, and among them can be isolated normal, common states of awareness and uncommon, extraordinary states of consciousness. Unlike the Kantian epistemology of

constructivists, this vision includes the possibility of unmediated, non-conceptual perception, an extraordinary state of consciousness which perceives reality as it is without conceptual overlays and without the interference of sociolinguistic categories. The crucial point is not that the constructivist epistemology is wrong, and this one is right, but rather the recognition that Buddhist epistemologies describe states of consciousness and degrees of human experience that a more limited epistemology finds unaccountable. Constructivism provides powerful descriptive and interpretive tools, but in denying the possibility of these soteriologically central states it oversteps its bounds as a vehicle of description and interpretation and starts to legislate human experience. When we view this process as one of a Western interpretation of a non-Western phenomenon and note the assumed universality of the Kantian constructivist view, there is the suggestion of an attitude sharing features with a colonialist or Orientalist project.

On the other hand, could it be that Buddhist epistemologies which posit the possibility of direct yogic cognition are simply as naïve as critics claim they are? On what grounds are the Buddhist claims denied? In 1990, Philip Almond argued that Katz had not supported his rather dogmatic claim that there are no pure experiences.

At the current stage of the debate, Katz has yet to offer any epistemological argument of a sufficiently general kind to compel assent to his claims that there cannot be pure experiences. He has merely asserted that all experience is *by definition* mediated, and he has attempted to persuade us to accept this with all the rhetorical power at his disposal. But until he provides us with a sufficiently elaborate epistemology to justify his claim, there is no logical compulsion for us to accept this epistemological premise.^{xxxvi}

When this observation is combined with the post-colonial perspective offered by R. King, Katz's constructivism takes on a disturbing dimension. In order to avoid the reverse

critique, that this paper is simply lauding the exotic Buddhist alternative, a closer look at Sautrāntika epistemology is in order.

In Gelukba epistemology, the door to knowledge beyond appearances and conceptual mediation is left open; despite being extremely difficult to reach, it is attainable. This state is attainable in part because Gelukba epistemology holds that all normal sense perception is direct perception of things as they are.^{xxxvii} Sense direct perception, although direct and non-conceptual, is very different from yogic direct perception. Just because objects are given to one's senses in a direct non-conceptual fashion one does not perceive them in their full thusness. Although objects are fully disclosed to us in sense direct perception we do not fully ascertain them.^{xxxviii} Specifically, we do not ascertain the subtle impermanence and selflessness of the objects which normally appear to our senses, nevertheless that subtle impermanence and selflessness is there and does 'appear' to us in ordinary direct sense perception but it is not ascertained.^{xxxix} It is not left unascertained because it cannot be ascertained, but rather because we have not sufficiently developed our powers of perception and cognition (or as Huxley might say, we haven't cleansed the doors of perception). This is where conceptual thought comes in; it allows us to develop knowledge of what appears in direct perception but is not ascertained.^{xl}

A principle virtue of the Sautrāntika system is that it provides a clear picture of how one may develop one's mind from deluded, dualistic, conceptual, reificationist thought into non-dual, non-conceptual, direct apprehension of things as they are. In yogic direct perception one is finally able to realize the subtle impermanence which was originally

cultivated as an abstract concept (i.e., a meaning generality). When one is cognizant of this subtle impermanence through yogic direct perception discursive thought dissolves and an experience akin to the “mystical” of other traditions ensues which is likewise ineffable.

This yogic direct perception is not simply derived from a previous state of conceptual knowledge such as the meaning generality’s dissolution. Yogic direct perception, as stated earlier, arises on the basis of the union of calm abiding and special insight. The epistemologies of Kant and Katz grew out of the European Enlightenment which dissociated scientific and philosophical inquiry from contemplative, meditative, and yogic arts, which, incidentally, tend to lead to mystical states more often than the former. In the epistemology laid out by the Gelukbas there is a spectrum of mental states ranging from deluded to enlightened, defined by specific conditions. If Kant’s epistemology does not recognize the meditative stability of *śamatha* and the meditative insight of *vipāśyanā* or their union in meditative *samādhi* it is understandable that he has missed the possibility of yogic direct perception which requires these as its condition, but this does not excuse scholars who study traditions of meditation, yoga and mysticism from repeating this lack of awareness.

Concluding Remarks

Although Katz’s criticism of perennialism or essentialism has many useful features, his claim that unmediated experience is impossible does injustice to a host of religious traditions which posit unmediated experience of one kind or another. These problems

have been noted by scholars and Richard King has connected his critique of the dominant Kantian-based epistemological orientation to post-colonial discourse:

The acceptance of the reality (indeed, for these Indian traditions the *centrality*) of an unmediated and unconstructed awareness constitutes a major point of disagreement between mainstream Western intellectual thought and classical Asian traditions of spirituality. . . . I find the ease with which the neo-Kantian position has been assumed in Western discussions of mysticism to be disturbing in its own pretensions to universality.^{xli}

King's remarks are highly suggestive and look to a future in which alternative Asian epistemologies may be taken more seriously. There is, nevertheless, much inertia to such a development. In *Buddhism & Science* Allan Wallace recognizes the resistance among scholars in accepting the existence of different levels of awareness or meditative concentration described by Buddhism.

Buddhism offers something fresh and in some ways unprecedented to our civilization, and one of its major contributions is its wide range of techniques for exploring and transforming the mind through first hand experience. But many scholars of religion, including Buddhologists, appear incapable of imagining that the Buddhist tradition may have developed ways of knowing that have not already been developed in the West.^{xlii}

This paper has introduced Gelukba epistemology as a sophisticated epistemology which suggests how an alternative to the highly influential "epistemology of limitation" might look. One of the distinctive features of this epistemology, which it shares with Buddhism in general, is the isolation of different states of consciousness which lead to higher levels of gnosis. Of particular note in this regard is the union of calm abiding (*śamatha*) and special insight (*vipaśyanā*) which accompanies the yogic direct perception of emptiness and leads to an extraordinary state of non-conceptual knowledge which is soteriologically central in Buddhism. Kantian, constructivist epistemologies deny access to direct, non-conceptual knowledge. Buddhist epistemologies include an understanding of constructed

(conceptual) thought but also describe the processes by which one overcomes this deluded state of constructed knowledge. The process for overcoming ordinary conceptual knowledge is elaborated in Buddhist traditions through the description of contemplative states attained through meditative disciplines which are unaccounted for in Western epistemology or contemporary cognitive science. We must consider whether or not a complete assessment of meditative, yogic and mystical traditions can be made without incorporating insights from alternative epistemologies which are missing from the Kantian and constructivist epistemologies of the West.

While the debates over constructivism and essentialism (or perennialism) have provided some of the terms of this investigation, there is a broader context which merits mentioning. This broader context concerns a question about the use of Euro-American methodological tools to study Asian traditions. This question emerges when one takes seriously the possibility that Asian traditions of thought, in this case, Buddhism, may offer unique explanations of reality and knowledge which do not find precise analogues in Western traditions of thought. If this possibility is taken seriously, then there is no guarantee that Western methods allow scholars complete access to these Asian traditions. This line of thought opens onto a field of questions such as the one animating this paper which questions Western epistemological assumptions in the study of mysticism and seeks to introduce an alternative "non-Western" epistemology.

Investigations such as this may ultimately contribute not only to changes in methodology, but also to institutional structures. The place of meditation in the academy, for example, is an institutional question which may be impacted by this line of inquiry. Whereas

meditation and yoga have been considered appropriate subjects for physical education they have traditionally been considered inappropriate as part of the regular full credit curriculum of universities. If, for example, Buddhist epistemologies are taken more seriously so might the academic use of meditation which serves as a central component in the Buddhist epistemology of enlightenment. Is it appropriate for a class on meditation to receive the same academic credit as a class on music, sculpture, architecture, or engineering? Questions such as these form part of the broader spectrum of concerns related to this paper's epistemological investigations. By identifying these related concerns one may anticipate institutional resistance to scholarship which, as Foucault suggests, is a principal axis in the matrix of power which conditions knowledge. Richard King depicts as hypocritical the assumption of the universality of Kantian epistemology, and Allan Wallace suggests as cultural blindness the refusal to recognize the import of Buddhist meditation technology. Institutional resistance offers a further axis along which alternative epistemologies may be marginalized or ignored.

This paper suggests that the use of constructivist epistemology has limitations which negatively impact the study of many religious traditions. I have demonstrated, in particular, on how the soteriological underpinnings of Buddhism are compromised by the denial of yogic direct perception. Rather than calling for the abandonment of the dominant epistemology, what has been suggested is the expansion of its purview to include the possibility of unmediated, non-conceptual knowledge. Traditions such as the Gelukba system examined here suggest directions for delineating alternative "epistemologies of enlightenment."

Epistemologies, in the process of establishing criteria for knowledge, put limits on what can be known. Where those limits are set is not inconsequential; the continued investigation of alternative epistemological stances offers the promise of greater understanding and deeper engagement with cultures and traditions outside the more limited space circumscribed by Kantian constructivist epistemologies.

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ⁱKatz 1978 (p. 26). capitalization of “NO” in the original.

ⁱⁱForman 1990 (p. 3). The term “constructivism” in this context specifically refers to the view that denies the possibility of pure or unmediated states of consciousness and insists that all states of consciousness are constructed; it is directly related to what is sometime called “social constructivism.” This “constructivism” should not be confused with “constructive theology,” which is used in the context of religious studies but with a completely different meaning. The same term (“constructivism”) is used in a completely unrelated way in mathematics.

ⁱⁱⁱPaul Griffiths defines three different conceptions of unmediated/pure consciousness in discussions of mysticism (Griffiths 1990, pp. 78-91).

^{iv}For example: Perovich 1990, King 2002, Adam2002.

^vPerovich 1990 (p. 242).

^{vi}King 1999 (p. 182). Richard King argues that “the social-constructivist stance of scholars like Katz and Jantzen on this issue effectively undermines the authority and truth-claims of many of the mystics and traditions they are examining. This is particularly the case with regard to Asian traditions such as Advaita Vedanta, Raja Yoga, most forms of Buddhism...” (R. King 2002 (p. 172).

^{vii}The German word to describe the European Enlightenment, *Aufklärer*, is used to dissociate the 18th century European concept of rational Enlightenment with the enlightenment of the Buddha.

^{viii}Richard King 2002 (p. 179). King calls Kant’s view and those influenced by Kant “epistemologies of limitation” and asks whether it is possible to outline a “constructivism grounded in an epistemology of enlightenment.” Anthony Perovich (Perovich 1990, p. 250) argues that this is a lesson that, ironically, could have been learned from Kant himself. Kant understood the extraordinary nature of knowledge of the divinity and accepted that it was beyond the constraints of his system. Thus in this paper “Kantian epistemology” does not refer directly to the system of Kant, but to the way in which his system has been interpreted and used.

^{ix}Sharf 1998 and 1995.

^xSharf suggests that the socio-economic concerns of the religious academic have unwittingly colluded with the nationalistic political motivations of certain Asian apologists such as D.T. Suzuki and

- Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in the elaboration of the rhetoric of experience (Sharf 1998, pp. 95-103). Sharf distinguishes the motivations of the theologian and the “secular scholar” and emphasizes those of the “secular scholar” (Sharf 1998, pp. 95-98, 103). Sharf suggests the rhetoric of religious experience proved serviceable to religious scholars who needed an irreducible object of study (religious experience), immunity from empirical dismissal, and a cross-culturally tolerant purview.
- ^{xi}Halbfass 1988 (pp. 392-394): “All this exemplifies the extent of critical reflection upon experiences and phenomena of immediate awareness in the Indian tradition. India has not simply been fascinated with experience and visions. It has also produced much analytical thought about their veridical status, and about the nature of experiencing and the immediacy of such awareness.” In discussing Indian epistemological theorists Bimal Matilal notes that in Sanskrit *pratīti*, *pratyaya*, and *anubhava* are used in senses analogous to the English “experience.” Matilal goes on to note that “Experience is usually appealed to, in the Western tradition, when our search for certainty (in Cartesian epistemology) is supposed to come to an end and hence a knowledge-claim can be established. *Pratīti* or *anubhava* becomes also the ultimate court of appeal for many Sanskrit philosophers...” (Matilal 1991, p. 23). Dignāga states that the *anubhava* of direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) is free from conceptual construction (*avikalpakam*) (Hattori 1968, p. 27).
- ^{xii}Janet Gyatso challenges Sharf’s claims that the rhetoric of experience is primarily of recent provenance and is not traditionally prominent in Buddhism by detailing the function and importance of “experience” in three Tibetan meditative traditions. The three traditions are Mahāmudrā (Great Seal/ Gesture), a branch of Dzogchen (Great Perfection), and the four initiations of the anuttara (unexcelled) tantras. (Gyatso 1999, p. 115).
- ^{xiii}Klein 1998(p. 21).
- ^{xiv}These two forms of valid cognition, direct perception and inference, form the basis of the epistemology of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. These forms of cognition are distinguished by their objects; direct perception knows specifically characterized phenomena (*svalakṣaṇa*, *rang mtshan*), and inference knows generally characterized phenomena (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*, *spyi mtshan*).
- ^{xv}Napper 1980 (p. 20).
- ^{xvi}Dreyfus 1997 (p. 373) While Dreyfus cites Cha-ba as the source for the sevenfold typology, Cha-ba’s writings are no longer extant. This may be why Napper (1980) and Klein (1998) claim that the source for the sevenfold typology is undetermined.
- ^{xvii}Napper 1980 (pp. 15-16). I have substituted “inattentive consciousnesses” for Napper’s “awarenesses to which the object appears but is not ascertained” as a translation of *snang la ma nges pa*.
- ^{xviii}This sevenfold typology does not occur in Dignāga or Dharmakīrti and represents an epistemological innovation by Cha-ba which has been adopted by the Gelukbas. Cha-ba’s additions include the three middle consciousnesses: subsequent, correctly assuming, and inattentive consciousness. Dreyfus 1997 (p. 365-378) provides an explanation of how these innovations addressed problems with Dharmakīrti’s epistemology. These additions which accompany the sevenfold typology support a series of innovations by Tibetan thinkers following a tradition of innovation which can be traced to Dharmottara (750-810 C.E.) in India. Whereas all forms of direct perception were considered valid for Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, Ngok Lo-dza-wa (1005-1109) and Cha-ba introduced a distinction between perception (*mngon sum*) and valid perception (*mngon sum gyi tshad ma*) which is carried on by Gelukbas. See Klein 1998 (p. 43) and Dreyfus 1997 (p. 354-365). Dreyfus mentions Śubhagupta (650-750) as a possible influence on Dharmottara (p. 365-364).
- ^{xix}Napper 1980 (p. 16).
- ^{xx}Napper 1980 (p. 17). – (1) *indriya-pratyakṣa*, *dbang po’I mngon sum*, (2) *mānasa-pratyakṣa*, *yid kyi mngon sum*, (3) *svasamvedana-pratyakṣa*, *rang rig mngon sum*, (4) *ygoi-pratyakṣa*, *rnal ‘byor mngon sum*
- ^{xxi}Ibid
- ^{xxii}Napper 1980 (p. 17). These three conditions are (1) *ālambana-pratyaya*, *dmigs rkyen* (2) *asādharaṇa-adipati-pratyaya*, *thun mong ma yin pa’I bdag rkyen* and (3) *samanantara-pratyaya*, *de ma thag rkyen*.
- ^{xxiii}Napper 1980 (p. 53).
- ^{xxiv}*Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1:3cd; Hayes 1988 (p. 134). See also Hattori 1968 (p. 27).
- ^{xxv}Hayes 1988 (p. 136); (*Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1:6cd)

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- ^{xxvi}Napper 1980 (pp. 66-67). Three conditions are required for ordinary sense direct perception: (1) the observed object condition, (2) the uncommon empowering condition and (3) the immediately preceding condition (*samantantara-pratyaya, de ma thag rkyen*) (which is the immediately preceding moment of consciousness). (Napper 1980, p. 17) Yogic direct perception requires(2) and (3), but not (1).
- ^{xxvii}Gyatso 1999 (p. 139), "...the various kinds of immediacy that are projected at the end of these paths represent what we might call a 'post conceptual' immediacy rather than a preconceptual one. This is an immediacy or naturalness that is won, like the acquisition of bodily skills, through a process of habituation. It is the fruit of a course of training." And Gyatso 1999 (p. 138) - "However, while we may note the many instances where the Tibetan commentators themselves grant that meditative experience is framed and interpreted through conceptual categories, we cannot deny that these same commentators will still maintain that the final fruit is, nonetheless, a direct realization of a primordial reality. This was seen in all three of the traditions just considered."
- ^{xxviii}Gyatso 1999 (p. 142)
- ^{xxix}Dennett 1991. Dennett, materialist in orientation, argues that it is possible for a computer to have what people normally call consciousness. His goal requires that he first critique common notions of consciousness especially Cartesian mind-body dualism. It is interesting that Sharf enlists his support to argue against the uncritical notions of experience which he believes dominate current thinking. This is perhaps misrepresenting the situation, but one might wonder about enlisting the help of Cārvākas to argue against Buddhists!
- ^{xxx} Sharf 1998 (pp. 110-111).
- ^{xxxi}This lacuna in western neuroscience is one of the points that has animated considerable discussion at the Mind and Life conferences between Western scientists, philosophers, and the XIV Dalai Lama which have been held every two years since 1987. see Houshmand et. al. (eds.) *Consciousness at the Crossroads* (1999) and Wallace (ed.) *Buddhism and Science* (2003).
- ^{xxxi}The Gelukbas may have found it easier to accept such a radical shift in part through their study of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti whose work is marked by a similarly radical shift in perspective from what is called "Sautrāntika" to Yogācāra -- from an acceptance of the existence of external objects (realism) to their rejection (antirealism /idealism). Dreyfus 1997 (pp. 49, 104 etc). Dreyfus refers to this radical shift in Dignāga and Dharmakīrti as a strategy of "ascending scales of analysis."
- ^{xxxi}Clearly these figures are not meant to represent actual calculations of unmediated/ enlightened/ mystical experiences, but are meant to suggest the rare nature of sustained enlightened perception. Again, this suggestion is from a certain point of view, namely a conventional, Kantian-friendly point of view. From certain perspectives, such as those of Buddhist Mahayana, 100% or 99.9999% of human experience is enlightened. Samsara is Nirvana. Rather, a more gradual, exoteric perspective is being suggested here.
- ^{xxxi} "mental image" is used to translate *don spyi* (artha-sāmānya) which Dreyfus translates as "object universal."
- ^{xxxi}Napper 1980 (p. 20).
- ^{xxxi}Philip Almond, "Mysticism and Its Contexts" in Forman 1990 (p. 216).
- ^{xxxi}This position can be traced to Dignāga see Klein 1998 (p. 91).
- ^{xxxi}Klein 1998 (p. 96).
- ^{xxxi}Ibid. Selflessness in Sautrāntika is considered a permanent phenomenon and is not perceived by direct perception, even yogic. This is not the case in the higher systems. see Klein 1998 (p. 214). and Napper 1980 (pp. 66-67).
- ^{xi}Klein 1998 (p. 211).
- ^{xli}King 2002 (p. 182).
- ^{xlii}Wallace (ed.) 2003 (p. 6).