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SAKYA PANDITA AND THE STATUS OF CONCEPTS

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Nominalist views of ontology have been presented in many shapes and forms through the ages. The arguments that nominalists give against the existence of classes of entities postulated by realists can vary greatly, yet the nominalist agenda remains quite clear throughout their varied arguments. In this essay I will analyze a pair of arguments provided in defense of a nominalist view of *concepts* (*don spyi*) as presented within the Tibetan philosophical tradition.¹ Specifically, I will discuss the arguments given by the thirteenth-century Tibetan scholar Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182–1251) (henceforth referred to as “Sa-pan”). Sa-pan was undoubtedly one of the most rigorously analytic philosophical thinkers of his time in Tibet, and in his seminal work, *Epistemology: The Treasure of Reasoning* (*tshad ma rigs pa'i gter*), he puts forward a series of arguments with the intention of showing that concepts do not genuinely exist.² Establishing this point is critical to Sa-pan’s overarching philosophical goal of showing that objects of abstraction—whether universals, spatially composite entities, or temporally extended entities—likewise do not exist.

Although some light has recently been shed both on the varied roles that concepts play in the Tibetan philosophical tradition and on the different views that Geluk realists and Sakya nominalists have toward concepts, these expositions have largely ignored the root arguments that were central to early Tibetan disputes.³ Georges Dreyfus, for instance, provides a ten-page account of the controversies surrounding concepts (which he terms “object universals”) in the Tibetan philosophical tradition, yet his discussion is infused with associations that he tries to make between concepts and both natural-kind universals (*rigs spyi*) and *apoha* theory. Both of those topics are indeed illuminated by Tibetan appeals to concepts, but neither topic touches the heart of early Tibetan debates over their ontological status. That is, while Dreyfus looks at concepts through the frameworks of (1) the metaphysics of universals and (2) the philosophy of language, the crux of the debate over concepts is really to be found within discussions of (3) the philosophy of mind. In particular, although Sa-pan does indeed argue against the existence of *in re* universals, those arguments are distinct from his criticisms of concepts. Dreyfus’ discussion of concepts is also disappointing inasmuch as he focuses little attention on Sa-pan’s specific arguments posed against realist views of these purported entities, even though Sa-pan’s arguments form the linchpin of the Sakya school’s nominalism.

I feel that we have much to gain in our overall understanding of the role played by concepts in the Tibetan tradition by providing a close examination of Sa-pan’s arguments against these purported entities. By examining and elucidating the arguments constructed by Sa-pan, I have the twofold goal of drawing out the central elements of the debate between Tibetan realists and nominalists with respect to concepts while

at the same time calling attention to the overall depth and power of Sa-pan's philosophical reflection. I will begin by providing some initial background comments about concepts and their philosophical role in Tibetan scholastic thought during the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. With this initial understanding in place, I will then go on to discuss two different arguments that Sa-pan provides in support of a nominalist interpretation of concepts. I will then conclude by offering some synthetic comments about what we can learn from Sa-pan's argumentative approach.

Concepts in the Tibetan Tradition

As a point of departure, let us consider a person who has an awareness *as of* there being an object such as a table in front of him/herself. The intuitive inference to be made here is that this cognitive awareness is an awareness of *something* objective. That is, one expects that apart from one's episode of cognitive awareness of a table, there is also an objective referent—namely, a table itself—about which the cognition is aware. A moment's reflection calls the ease of this inference in doubt, however, for there certainly do exist episodes of perceptual error and illusion. One may, for example, have an awareness *as of* there being a pool of water on the horizon's desert landscape when, in fact, there is no such water.

Analogous considerations can be raised with respect to conceptual thoughts. When a number of people ponder over, for example, the question of whether tables must have four legs, it is natural to think that there is something that is the object of these ponderings. What enables multiple persons to discuss and argue successfully amongst one another about whether tables have four legs is, from a conceptualist's perspective, the fact that our thoughts pick out some item that is intersubjectively accessible. There may be various non-concrete candidates for this entity. Here, I should like to focus on one possible, although admittedly hazy, portrayal of such an entity—namely, a *concept*.⁴

As a matter of brief introduction, it is important that I elucidate the role played by concepts within the Tibetan philosophical framework during the time period at issue. Indian and Tibetan Buddhist thinkers maintain that in each and every cognitive act there is something that appears or manifests to the cognitive agent.⁵ In an attempt to strengthen philosophical weaknesses in Indian Buddhist accounts of cognition and cognitive error, eleventh-century Tibetan thinkers from Sangpu Monastery articulated a more detailed typology of cognitive objects than that found in the writings of Dharmakīrti.⁶ These philosophers labeled the object that appears to the mind in each and every cognitive act a phenomenal entity (*snang yul*). Generally speaking, it is believed that in a successful act of non-conceptual, sensory cognition the phenomenal entity that appears is a real, concrete object.⁷ In an act of conceptual thought—which is by implication non-sensory—what appears to the cognitive agent's mind is not a concrete, spatiotemporal entity. Rather, the phenomenal entity in conceptual thought is, according to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Tibetan thinkers, a concept (*don spyi*). Such entities can be distinguished from the phenomenal objects of perception inasmuch as concepts are (1) held to lack determinate

spatiotemporal positions (concepts are said not to exist here or there, at this time or that time), (2) indeterminate with respect to their specific nature (when one entertains the mere concept of a horse, it is denied that what “appears” to one’s mind is a black horse or a white horse, etc.), and (3) unable to participate in causal relations with other entities.⁸

It is important that concepts be distinguished from both token conceptual appearances in one’s mind and objective entities existing in external reality. Like the objects of sense perception, concepts are items that are assumed to be capable of appearing to multiple persons. In this way, different token conceptual appearances that momentarily dawn in the minds of individual thinkers can all correspond to the same intersubjectively shareable concept. On the other hand, we must also distinguish concepts from objective, general entities existing independent of the mind. Concepts, according to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Tibetans, exist in the mind (*blo la gnas*), not in external reality (*don la gnas*). While Sa-pan and his opponents do argue about whether universals exist in reality or in the mind, both parties agree that concepts are mentally constructed entities.⁹ Sa-pan’s rejection of concepts is, therefore, a rejection of intersubjectively shareable mental entities. While his subsequent arguments in the *Treasure of Reasoning* against the existence of universals and materially composite entities center on the question of whether these general entities exist objectively or only as mental constructs, Sa-pan’s arguments against concepts focus on the question of whether these purported mental entities could be epistemically evaluable objects at all.

Now, in this framework, the phenomenal entity (*snang yul*) of a conceptual thought—a concept—needs to be distinguished from the implied entity (*zhen yul*)—a real, external object—of the thought. To illustrate this difference, suppose that I reflect on the concept of a horse, pondering whether horses have split hooves. In this act of conceptual awareness the *phenomenal* entity is held to be the concept of a horse, whereas this thought’s *implied* entity is some property instance of being a horse in the external world. In this essay we are looking into the status of phenomenal entities. Hence, unless otherwise noted, any use of ‘entity’ shall be referring to the phenomenal entity, and not to the implied referent/entity, et cetera.

In line with his nominalist agenda, Sa-pan seeks to argue that the phenomenal entities of conceptual thought do not exist as epistemologically evaluable objects. Put another way, his claim is that concepts are not objects of rational judgment.¹⁰ Importantly, insofar as for Sa-pan and his Tibetan interlocutors *to exist is to be epistemologically evaluable*, concepts, as mere epiphenomena of conceptual thought, are held by Sa-pan to be nonexistent. Because this usage differs from our ordinary understanding of existence, in what follows I will be using the expressions ‘robustly exist’ and/or ‘exist robustly’ to convey the idea that certain entities exist as epistemologically evaluable objects.¹¹

Within the same sequence of arguments, in addition to arguing against the robust existence of concepts, Sa-pan also seeks to show that perceptual illusions, or vividly appearing nonexistents, likewise do not robustly exist. As the case of perceptual illusions is relatively uncontroversial, I will focus on Sa-pan’s arguments in their

relation to the existence of concepts, and shall only discuss illusions insofar as they help us to understand Sa-pan's argumentative technique.

The arguments that Sa-pan provides are framed against the backdrop of Tibetan scholastic thought of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He wishes to combat the view held by some Tibetans that the phenomenal entities of *unsound* cognitions exist in a robust way. Specifically, he asserts:

Some Tibetans say: were the objects of unsound conceptual thought—concepts—and the objects of unsound nonconceptual thought—perceptual illusions—*not* to exist, then the very foundation of this 'unsoundness' would be nonexistent. Therefore, these two kinds of phenomenal entities exist, and [these entities] are established through the power of reflective awareness, which apprehends the two unsound cognitions.¹²

Granting robust existence to the phenomenal entities corresponding to these two forms of cognition is, in Sa-pan's mind, philosophically unwarranted and untenable, and incompatible with the central tenets of Buddhism. As we can see from this quoted passage, Sa-pan and his philosophical interlocutors are at odds about what ontological commitments are required in order to maintain the view that certain cognitions are unsound. Sa-pan's position is that formulating the relevant points concerning cognition can be made without committing one to 'tagalong' existential claims, whereas his opponents are presented as maintaining the view that a coherent position about the soundness of cognitions can only be upheld if we antecedently grant that the appearing entities in all cognitions exist as epistemically evaluable objects of thought.

In looking at the passage cited above, it is evident that much of the argumentative interplay between Sa-pan and his philosophical interlocutors with respect to the status of concepts hinges on the notion of an *unsound* cognition (*'khrul shes*). In my elucidation of Sa-pan's first argument it will become quite clear that part of what is at issue in these historical Tibetan debates is just how we are to interpret the notion of 'unsoundness.' Obviously, speaking of the soundness, or lack thereof, of a *cognition* is rather remote from contemporary analytic philosophy. My intent in representing the relevant Tibetan term with this locution is to communicate the idea that there is something *defective* about unsound cognitions, and yet these cognitions are still held to be capable of providing *knowledge*. Within this domain of philosophical discourse, Tibetans are in agreement that the unsoundness of any cognition concerns an error with respect to the phenomenal entity (*snang yul*) of that cognition.¹³ What is in dispute between Sa-pan and his Kadampa interlocutors is just what it is about these phenomenal entities that renders their corresponding cognitions unsound, even though these cognitions might still bestow knowledge.

Sa-pan provides two primary arguments in defense of his antirealist position concerning concepts. These correspond in a loose sense to two distinct modes of argumentation—one argument composed for Buddhist believers like himself, and one pitched for a more general philosophical audience.¹⁴ The first argument makes an appeal to the relationship between cognitions and the respective phenomenal objects of these cognitions. This argument is founded upon the above-mentioned

supposition that we are dealing exclusively with *unsound* cognitions, and insofar as, for Buddhists, *all* conceptual thought is unsound, concepts are the phenomenal entities of unsound cognitions.

The second principal argument is a more general argument that notably does not rely on this presumption that conceptual thought is universally unsound. This argument is much longer and more complex than the first, and calls attention to the notions of *intersubjectivity* and *private objects*. After discussing the two arguments individually below, it will be helpful to address the implications of Sa-pan's two arguments. Let us first, however, engage in a critical examination of each of Sa-pan's arguments.

Cognitions and Their Objects

The first argument that Sa-pan uses to criticize claims of robustly existing concepts appeals to the relation between cognitive episodes and the phenomenal entities that manifest in these episodes. Although Sa-pan's first argument is quite brief, and will likely be regarded as philosophically unpersuasive by most readers, drawing out the argument in detail will enable us to see more clearly the central debate between realists and nominalists over the ontological status of concepts. I will begin by offering a very abstract analysis of cognitive awareness, and then subsequently use this analysis to show how Sa-pan argues that concepts do not robustly exist.

We might ask what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for a cognitive episode to be related to a phenomenal entity in some such way as to ensure that the phenomenal entity manifesting in that cognition exists in an epistemically robust way. To be precise, let us speak of a class of all cognitive episodes Σ , a class of phenomenal entities P , and a two-place relation R that holds between cognitive episodes and the phenomenal entities that manifest in these episodes. $R(s, p)$ can thus be used to express the relation between a cognition (*shes pa*) $s \in \Sigma$ and the phenomenal entity of that cognition $p \in P$. As explained in the previous section, Tibetan thinkers believe that for each $s \in \Sigma$ there exists a $p \in P$ such that $R(s, p)$. Let us further grant that there is a property E , which is the property of being epistemically evaluable (or 'existing robustly'). In providing a theory of cognition, what conditions must be placed on the members of P with respect to the property E ? Should we, for instance, require that each cognitive episode $s \in \Sigma$ stand in the relation R to some object $p \in P$ such that $E(p)$?¹⁵ Or, should we merely hold that there is some subset of cognitive episodes, $\Omega \subseteq \Sigma$, such that for each $s \in \Omega$ there exists a $p \in P$ in which $R(s, p)$ and $E(p)$, while still granting that for members of $\Sigma \setminus \Omega$ there is no corresponding phenomenal entity having the property E ?¹⁶

Sa-pan's Kadampa interlocutors are credited with holding the former opinion. According to Sa-pan, they maintained that for each and every cognition there must be a corresponding robustly existing phenomenal entity. In acts of sensory cognition the cognitive episodes take as their phenomenal objects real objects (in successful acts of perception) or illusions (in unsuccessful cognitive acts). In conceptual cognition mental episodes map to a concept. Sa-pan, by contrast, forcefully asserts that a

restriction must be placed on the class of cognitions for which there correspond robustly existing phenomenal entities. His view is that a robustly existing entity only appears to the mind in those cases in which the cognition is itself sound. For any cognition that is unsound, although we may say in a loose sense that there is still something appearing to the agent's mind, Sa-pan denies that this item exists as an entity that can be epistemically judged. As an illustration, let us suppose that a person has an awareness as of a chair being in her field of vision. Sa-pan's view is that acknowledging the robust existence of a chair demands that this person's perception was not in some way faulty. In an unsound perceptual act, the illusion that appears to a perceiver is held not to exist robustly—which is to say that what appears is not something about which informed epistemic claims can be made.

Let us look more carefully at Sa-pan's contention. His position is that the property *E* is to be attributed to a phenomenal entity *p* only in those cases where the corresponding cognitive episode *s* is sound. This is certainly not a trivial constraint, and it may very well be controversial. Is it not possible that even in a defective cognitive act a robust entity may successfully, and in a systematic way, appear? A red/green color-blind person, for example, has perceptual cognitions that are systematically skewed. More specifically, we might imagine that one such color-blind person is looking at a red book. His perception of the book is defective insofar as the actual color of the book is misrepresented in the person's perceptual cognition.¹⁷ Yet, even with this unsound perception, the perceiver seems to have solid grounds on which to maintain the existence of a book in front of himself. Resolving this kind of question is of great import to the cogency of Sa-pan's argument. Just how Sa-pan would address such a hypothetical situation will be addressed further below.

Returning to Sa-pan's argument, let me now spell out his method of analysis. When seeking to determine whether a cognition, *s*, does or does not manifest a robustly existing phenomenal entity, *p*, Sa-pan's claim is that there is a robustly existing phenomenal entity only in those cases in which the cognition *s* is sound. Sa-pan claims, "Supposing there are such things as concepts and illusory falling hairs, by virtue of these objects being existent, the conceptual thoughts and visual cognitions apprehending each of them respectively would be sound."¹⁸ Put in the contrapositive, Sa-pan's condition states that if a cognition corresponding to an appearing entity is unsound, then there is no epistemically judgable entity appearing to the mind. Hence, to show that a particular posited object does not exist in a robust manner, Sa-pan's contention is that it is sufficient to show that the cognition corresponding to that purported object is not sound.

No argument whatsoever is given by Sa-pan in support of the idea that conceptual cognitions are unsound. That such cognitions are unsound is the doctrinal belief upon which Sa-pan's argument for Buddhist believers rests. As a thirteenth-century Tibetan figure, Sa-pan's philosophical outlook was largely informed by the Buddhist framework within which he operated. It was an accepted tenet of Buddhist thought that conceptual thought (*rtog pa*)—all conceptual thought—is unsound. Of course, this presumption would have been disparaged by the Hindu thinkers with whom *Indian* Buddhists of the first millennium were engaging. Sa-pan, however, was raised

in a deeply Buddhist Tibetan culture that lacked substantial non-Buddhist antagonists. Thus, in one sense, Sa-pan had no reason to argue for the idea that conceptual cognitions are unsound, for all those with whom he would be arguing would have accepted that view anyway.

Now, instead of trying to demonstrate that conceptual cognitions are in some way unsound, Sa-pan's argumentative program is—as it should be—to show that *given* the erroneous nature of conceptual thought, the phenomenal entities in these conceptual cognitions do not robustly exist. As I have stated above, it does seem that the possibility exists for unsound cognitions to doxastically judge appearing entities, or, at least, it is not obvious that these cognitions *cannot* be thus judged. Sa-pan has a purported antagonist object on just these grounds and propose that unsound cognitions can correspond to robustly existing objects. This antagonist's example is that of a multicolored rope being mistakenly apprehended as a snake. Here, do we not have a case in which there is an unsound cognition and yet the cognition does have a genuinely existing object—the multicolored rope?

Sa-pan's reply, and the correct reply in this case, is that his antagonist has conflated the cognitions and purported objects at work. In this example of a multicolored rope being mistakenly apprehended as a snake, there is both a perceptual (nonconceptual) cognition and, subsequent to this, a conceptual cognitive episode. Sa-pan's position is that the perceptual cognition is itself unmistaken and does establish an existing entity, a multicolored form. The conceptual cognition that conceptualizes this multicolored form as a snake is mistaken, however. The phenomenal entity of this cognition does not exist. Thus, the antagonist has failed to provide an example of an unsound cognition establishing a robustly existing entity. This point is expressed clearly by Sa-pan's fifteenth-century commentator, Lo-Kenchen, who argues:

We reply by saying: As for this awareness that apprehends a multicolored rope as a snake, is it an activity of one's sense cognition, which acts upon reality, apprehending a multicolored rope? Or is it the subsequent activity of conceptual thought, which thinks "Snake!?" If the former, then inasmuch as it's a sound cognition, it is unacceptable as an example of an unsound cognition. If it's the latter, it is unsound by virtue of the held object not existing. . . . Therefore, when one, subsequent to a sensory cognition, forms the idea "Snake!" via conceptual thought, in dependence on these former and subsequent cognitions, two constituents manifest, and these must in turn be individuated.¹⁹

For this example, Sa-pan's response is, I believe, well founded. Unfortunately, his first argument ends here. This is disappointing, for I believe that the criticism supplied by Sa-pan's "antagonist" misses the point, and that Sa-pan and Lo-Kenchen are just responding to a red herring. In the example above, the conceptual cognition is not merely unsound with respect to its phenomenal entity (*snang yul*), it is also mistaken with respect to its implied referent (*zhen yul*). What is really at issue in Sa-pan's argument is the status of the phenomenal objects of conceptual cognitions—concepts—but that point is missed in his opponent's illustration of a rope being wrongly conceived of as a snake.

The example of a rope being mistaken as a snake is relatively easy for Sa-pan to deal with. But what would Sa-pan say if his interlocutor were to offer as an example a situation in which someone perceived a snake and conceptually apprehended it as a snake? Here, too, Sa-pan and his antagonists are committed to the belief that the conceptual thought “Snake!” is unsound. In fact, much like my earlier example of a color-blind individual, such a conceptual act is *systematically* mistaken inasmuch as normal persons (when confronted with the appropriate conditions) will regularly conceptualize the perceived object as a snake. Whereas in the example given above it is obvious that the thought “Snake!” doesn’t refer to anything in reality, one may think that the matter is not nearly so clear in an example where a perceived snake is conceptualized as a snake.

When a person conceptualizes a particular perceived entity as a snake, the thought “Snake!” would have as its phenomenal object not a concrete object such as a flesh-and-blood snake (although this object does exist) but rather a concept (*don spyi*). Thus, there is no asymmetry between a perceived y being conceptualized as a z and a perceived y being conceptualized as a y . This is because in neither case is the phenomenal object of the conceptual thought the perceived object. Yet, although he does address the red herring argument in which a purported interlocutor confounds a phenomenal entity with an implied entity, Sa-pan does not give any arguments for why the phenomenal entities in conceptual thought do not exist robustly, except insofar as he affirms his point that these purported entities are derived from unsound cognitions. This argument would thus not persuade Sa-pan’s Kadampa interlocutors, for these thinkers agree with Sa-pan that conceptual cognitions are unsound. What these two sides disagree on is what consequences flow from the very idea of an unsound cognition. Thus, without some way to adjudicate between the two differing interpretations of unsoundness that would be offered by Sa-pan and his opponents, there is little reason to think that Sa-pan’s first argument will bring us closer to resolving our dispute over the robust existence of concepts.

Intersubjectivity and Private Objects

Sa-pan’s second argument relies not on the idea that conceptual thoughts are one-and-all unsound, but rather on another basis—one concerning intersubjectivity. This second argument is more nuanced than his first and is spelled out at much greater length. The fact that Sa-pan allocates much more space to elucidating this latter argument suggests that he saw this argument as more philosophically relevant than the former one. Whereas the first argument was built on a dogmatic appeal to Buddhist doctrine,²⁰ the latter argument engages in more thoughtful philosophical reflection on how concepts could possibly be shared entities, given that they are mentally constructed entities. From my standpoint, this argument is more philosophically interesting than the first and shows admirable philosophical insight.

Sa-pan begins by asking that we grant that concepts are objects of conceptual thought and are distinct from a person’s cognitions of them. This is not to say that these concepts are supposed to be fully objective—existing entirely independent of

thought—but merely that concepts denote entities existing *apart* from our cognitions of them. That is, we should accept that concepts are not themselves mere cognitions.²¹ Having made this assumption, Sa-pan goes on to claim that to the extent that there are no factors acting as reasons for errors arising, any such entity appearing to one person should also be apprehended by another person who is in the same place/situation. That is, there should be no difference with regard to the possibility of the object manifesting to these two people.

This idea is certainly in accord with our general understanding of how *perception* works. When some phenomenal entity is taken to be perceived by one person but then fails to appear to other sufficiently constituted cognitive agents placed in the same observational setting, we generally have good grounds on which to reject the existence of such an entity. Specifically, it is easy to see how Sa-pan's first requirement is applicable to certain types of perceptual illusions. When an illusory entity appears to one perceiver due to a defect in the agent's sense organs, another person (without this defect) placed in the same situation would not perceive the illusory entity. A typical example used in Indian and Tibetan writings is that of a white shell appearing yellow to a person with jaundice. No yellow shell exists, and we corroborate this conclusion by pointing out that other persons placed in the same perceptual situation see not a yellow shell but a white one. The outstanding question that Sa-pan has not yet answered is how and why this understanding can and should be extended to a person's relationship with concepts, which are non-perceptual. Sa-pan's defense of this criterion, as well as his argument that the criterion cannot be fulfilled by concepts, is at the same time both obscure and stimulating.

Sa-pan needs to show that concepts, unlike external physical objects, are not entities that can be intersubjectively ascertained, even when two people find themselves in structurally identical cognitive states. While intersubjectivity raises no problems in the case of objectively existing physical entities, matters are quite different with respect to concepts, for these entities are assumed to be mentally constructed, mind-dependent objects. It is agreed by Sa-pan and his contemporaries that concepts reside in the mind (*blo la gnas*) and not in external reality (*don la gnas*). Thus, far from attempting to ground the existence of concepts as independently existing objective entities, Sa-pan's contention is that the robust existence of concepts cannot even be proven when they are portrayed as intersubjective mental entities.

The mere fact that concepts are mentally constructed does not, by itself, show that these purported entities cannot be intersubjectively shared objects. Taking an example from our own philosophical tradition, we can note that mathematical concepts can be interpreted as mental constructs (as intuitionists like L.E.J. Brouwer believed), but this does not preclude mathematical concepts from being shared entities. It is at least logically possible, therefore, for one and the same concept to dawn in the minds of two (or more) different people. Sa-pan thus has his work cut out for himself. He must show that mind-dependent concepts simply cannot be robustly existing, intersubjective entities.

To the suggestion that concepts could be robust entities that, nonetheless, cannot directly manifest to others—by virtue of these entities being permanently depen-

dent on an individual person's mind—Sa-pan offers the following retort: "If they are dependent solely on an individual's mind, though one could, through introspection, express [concepts] to another person, they would not understand."²² This is to say that although (or, even if) one could, in some way, verbalize one's own concepts to another person, this expression could not be carried out in such a way as to give the other person an understanding of the purported concepts.

As one can see, Sa-pan is speaking of these entities as though they would be private objects—constituents of the private states of a single person, unknowable by others. Insofar as he speaks about private objects being unknowable by others, it seems that Sa-pan is arguing for the *epistemic* privacy of such entities (were they to exist). That is, concepts would be *in principle* unknowable by others, as opposed to merely unknown. This is an interesting thought, first of all because it is quite similar to arguments about private states and private languages in our own analytic tradition, but also because Sa-pan's comments were developed during the first half of the thirteenth century. Much like the arguments used by post-Wittgensteinian thinkers, Sa-pan seeks to prove that there cannot be such things as private objects. There are two types of arguments that are commonly made when arguing about private objects and the difficulties of gaining knowledge of them: arguments from *acquisition* and arguments from *manifestation*. Arguments from acquisition purport to show that one person could never acquire, in her own mind, the private objects of another person, whereas arguments from manifestation claim that even if she does happen to acquire the private objects of another person, she could never be in a position to realize that the right object has arisen in her mind. I will show that Sa-pan employs both of these forms of argumentation in order to defend the view that concepts could not be intersubjectively sharable.

Sa-pan anticipates the reply that there is no inconsistency with respect to the expressions of one person leading to the understanding of these expressed objects by another person. That is, if Sa-pan wishes to assert that it is impossible for an agent to communicate understanding to another person concerning concepts, then this impossibility is not the result of some sort of intrinsic logical inconsistency. Given that there is no *prima facie* inconsistency, Sa-pan must explain where this epistemic incapacity lies. For better or for worse, Sa-pan's reply to this challenge is to invoke a criterion of verification. Given the privacy of these supposed entities, there would be no way to verify the relationship between any two agents' concepts, expressions, meanings, et cetera. Sa-pan puts the matter thus:

By *expressing* that which is solely dependent on one's own mind, inasmuch as a person *understands* that which is dependent on one's own mind, it is *not* possible that a person could understand the *commonality* between the expressions of both persons. This is due to the fact that there is no method by which to link the two together.²³

This is an instance of the so-called *argument from acquisition*. Understanding—which is to say, knowledge—of another person's private concepts is in principle impossible because there is no means by which to examine the (private) object about which another person is speaking. This inability to compare one another's concepts

calls into doubt our ability to hit upon the right concept when attempting to engage in communication with other persons; and this inability is sufficient grounds for denying that one can gain knowledge of the phenomenal entities arising in another's conceptual thoughts.

One might reply—and many often have—that this analysis flies in the face of commonsense experience. Just as it is often claimed that I can understand what a person means when she says “red,” even though my qualia may be private to me, so too, it seems obvious to many people that there are a plethora of cases in which we can understand what a person is talking about when she speaks of the concept “bachelor,” et cetera. It seems quite obvious to these persons that we do successfully apply linguistic conventions in such a way that we can inform other persons about the mental states that we are experiencing. Seeing this as a possible criticism, Sa-pan entertains the rejoinder that conventions of language can be utilized to draw the link between one person's mental states and another's. The idea behind the rejoinder is that there is, as a brute matter of fact, a commonality between different persons' mental experiences, and by virtue of this commonality we, as humans, are able to apply linguistic conventions to these experiences. It is by these linguistic conventions that the knowledge of another person's private states is in fact possible.

In response to this line of reasoning, Sa-pan offers the following dilemma: Let us grant that conventions of language are used to identify (believed) similarities between peoples' phenomenal states. Now, in any given instance in which one person A employs such a convention, the correct phenomenal entity either does or does not appear to person B. Let us suppose that the concept about which person A is speaking does in fact dawn in person B's mind. Here, the conceptual appearance that dawns in person B's mind is person B's private object, and not numerically identical to whatever conceptual appearance arises in person A's mind. Therefore, person B is still not in a position to realize that the concepts actually do match up correctly. If, on the other hand, the correct concept does not arise in person B's mind, then she is similarly in no position to recognize a mutual similarity between A's object and her own object. In either case, this inability to *realize* that one has hit upon the correct concept in those cases when the right concept does dawn in one's mind again threatens our claims to knowledge of another's private concepts. This is an instance of the *argument from manifestation*.

Having offered both an *acquisition* and a *manifestation* argument against the knowability of private entities, Sa-pan concludes that concepts—that is, the appearing entities of conceptual thought—appearing to one person would be fundamentally unknowable by any other person. What must further be addressed is how this principled privacy of concepts allows us to conclude that concepts, as such, do not exist. This point, however, is never directly addressed by Sa-pan. Rather, he glides directly from the thesis of epistemic privacy to the conclusion that concepts do not exist. Given the epistemological spin that Tibetans place on robust existence, we can see how it could be that the epistemic privacy of concepts would be sufficient for concluding that these concepts do not exist. Existence, for Sa-pan, is bundled up with the idea that any such item be epistemologically robust. Demonstrating the

epistemic privacy of concepts suggests that these phenomenal entities do not—and, even more strongly, cannot—be objects of epistemic judgment. If Sa-pan's second argument holds up, he has shown that it is impossible for one cognitive agent to be doxastically well informed about the concepts of some different agent.

Synthetic Remarks

Although Sa-pan's second argument is more convincing than his first one, I believe that neither of Sa-pan's two arguments against the existence of concepts establishes its intended conclusion in an entirely forceful way. Being charitable to Sa-pan, we may suggest that this is because in both cases he is employing a *reductio ad absurdum* technique. In the first argument his claim is that if concepts existed, it would absurdly follow that their corresponding cognitions are sound. The second argument is to the effect that if concepts existed, it would absurdly follow that these concepts would be epistemically private entities. Yet, Sa-pan does not provide a satisfactory argument for (1) why there is some inconsistency in having unsound cognitions refer to robustly existing entities, or (2) why epistemic privacy disqualifies concepts from being epistemically evaluable to any extent at all.

One thing that I do believe Sa-pan's arguments have done is to cast doubt on the views of his Tibetan philosophical predecessors by calling into question the *necessity* and *worth* of concepts. In his first argument, Sa-pan wishes to show that an acceptance of the existence of concepts would be incompatible with the entrenched view that conceptual thought is one-and-all unsound. Yet, even without proving this point, he does succeed in calling into doubt the perceived presumption on the part of his forerunners that all cognitions must have robustly existing phenomenal objects. The possibility that cognition—including mistaken/unsound cognition—can be explained without requiring that all cognitions refer to some robustly existing appearing entity suggests that one could apply Ockham's razor and shave away concepts without doing any harm to well-established views of mind and cognition. This is, after all, Sa-pan's main point of contention with his Kadampa opponents, for it was these thinkers who maintained that an adequate account of cognitive activity is only possible by granting robust existence to concepts. With his second argument, Sa-pan has ventured to show that concepts, were they to exist, would only have the status of private, non-intersubjective, entities. As such, concepts would be epiphenomenal to most issues related to knowledge and cognition—and it is epistemology, not metaphysics itself, that Tibetan Buddhist thinkers hold to be most important. Thus, because concepts would play no epistemic role, they are theoretically dispensable posits.

As anyone remotely familiar with Tibetan philosophy knows, Sa-pan's arguments did little to persuade the later Geluk school of Buddhism to drop their appeals to epistemically robust concepts.²⁴ Nonetheless, Sa-pan did succeed in adding depth to the debates between realists and nominalists in Tibetan philosophy. The real importance of Sa-pan's arguments in support of concept nominalism is that these arguments forced subsequent thinkers, in both the Sakya and Geluk traditions,

to sharpen their metaphysical and epistemological arguments. Insofar as intellectual development is best cultivated through argumentative dialogue, Sa-pan can be credited with inspiring much of the philosophical growth in the Tibetan tradition during the first half of the second millennium.

Notes

- 1 – Two brief methodological points are required here. First, by virtue of my own interests and constraints of space, I shall solely be discussing *philosophical* issues relevant to Sa-pan, and will ignore historical, religious, and philological issues that may be of interest to scholars in other disciplines. I by no means wish to deny the importance or relevance of these other issues, even with regard to our understanding of Sa-pan’s philosophical views.
Second, I will be employing English translations of Tibetan philosophical terms that are at times less than perfect semantic matches. It is to be acknowledged that the relation between English and Tibetan technical terms is often tenuous. Yet, I believe it is critically important for the relevant Tibetan philosophical terms to be rendered in English in such a way that they can be readily understood by philosophers in our own Anglo-American philosophical tradition.
- 2 – My analysis appeals to both Sa-pan’s root text itself and his auto-commentary: *sa skya paNDi ta kun dga’ rgyal mtshan, Tshad ma rigs pa’i gter gyi rtsa ba dang ’grel pa* (Qinghai: Tibet People’s Press, 1989).
- 3 – For a different characterization of these arguments please see M. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 89–97. Kapstein bases his interpretation of these arguments on the exegesis provided by later commentators on Sa-pan. I believe, however, that many of these later writers alter the conclusion of Sa-pan’s actual arguments, presenting a substantially different (and weaker) thesis. Another discussion of the general debate over concepts can be found in G. Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakirti’s Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 250–60. An enlightening look at concepts by a contemporary Tibetan (writing in Tibetan) can be found in the master’s thesis, ‘Bum sKyabs, “Bod kyi gtan tshigs rig pa’i ’jug sgo,” in *Bod kyi shes rig dpyad rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Chinese Tibetology Press, 1991).
- 4 – It may be claimed that the philosophical notion of a ‘concept’ is hopelessly obscure. I myself agree with that contention. This lack of clarity, presuming there actually is one, is exactly what I am looking for here, however. The relevant Tibetan notion of *don spyi* is itself unclear and capable of being interpreted in various different ways.

Others, in trying to provide more literal translations, have rendered *don spyi* as “object universal,” “meaning universal,” “objective generality,” “mental image,” et cetera. I am not fond of the first three translations both because they are artificial English words that have no place in Western philosophy and because their nomenclature carries with it realist metaphysical baggage. In using the terms “universal” and “objective,” we are led to presume that *don spyi* are (or would be) objective entities existing independent of thought. While the term *don spyi* is linguistically associated with the term “universal/generality” (*spyi*), the two terms share much less in common philosophically than is commonly thought. The inclusion of concepts (*don spyi*) under the category “universal entity” (*spyi*) by later Geluk Tibetans is merely nominal (*sgras brjod rigs kyi sgo nas*) and not reflective of a deep ontological relation. (To make a dramatic analogy, we might say: *don spyi* are to *spyi* as sea horses are to horses. The breakdown of horses into the dichotomy of land horses and sea horses is merely nominal.)

Translating *don spyi* as “mental image,” while evocative, evokes the wrong image of these entities (although there are indeed a variety of Tibetan thinkers who portray concepts in this way).

- 5 – Talk of a cognitive *agent* distinct from the cognitive act itself is misleading on the Buddhist model. I use this terminology throughout this essay for pragmatic reasons, and do not wish to be pegged as upholding the view that Buddhist thinkers accepted the existence of *agents* over and above mental *events* themselves.
- 6 – It is likely that the Tibetan typology of cognitive objects formulated by Ngog Lotsawa, Chaba Chokyi Sengge, and others has some sort of (at least rudimentary) roots in Indian sources, even if parallel terms are ever explicitly employed.
- 7 – This leaves aside cases of “mental sense perception.”
- 8 – The Kadampa pramana text, *Tshad ma'i de kho na nyid bsdus pa*, falsely attributed to Longchenpa, states the definition thus: “*mtshan nyid ni mi gsal don byed mi nus pa ste/ de'ang mi gsal ba ni yul nges pa med pa dang/ dus nges pa med pa dang/ rang bzhin nam rnam pa nges pa med pa. . .*” (Klong Chen Rab 'byams, *Tshad ma'i de kho na nyid bsdus pa bzhugs* [Sichuan: Sichuan People's Press, 2000], p. 4). For more on the authorship of this text, please see L. van der Kuijp, “A Treatise on Buddhist Epistemology and Logic Attributed to Klong Chen Rab 'Byams Pa (1308–1364) and its Place in Indo-Tibetan Intellectual History,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31 (2003): 381–437. Along these same lines, the characterization of concepts explicitly provided by Chaba Chokyi Sengge in his seminal work *Tshad ma yid kyi mun sel* is: “*don spyi ni yul dus 'dres par snang pa dang mi gsal zhing don byed mi nus pa*” (phywa pa chos kyi sengge, *Tshad ma yid kyi mun sel* [Unpublished manuscript], p. 2.6).
- 9 – A nice discussion by the Kadampa author of the *Tshad ma'i de kho na nyid bsdus pa*—which appears to have been written prior to Sa-pan's *Rigs gter*—

distinguishing concepts from universals is found in klong chen rab 'byams, *Tshad ma'i de kho na nyid bsod pa bzugs*, pp. 26–29.

- 10 – Sa-pan's essential contention is that concepts (which are *snang yul*) are not cognitively held objects (*gzung yul*). That is, he wishes to draw a distinction between *snang yul* and *gzung yul*. Members of the Kadampa (and later Gelukpa) school maintain, by contrast, that all *snang yul* are *gzung yul* (and vice versa).
- 11 – My hope, in this regard, is to avoid a characterization of Sa-pan as engaging in prolonged discussions of and argumentation about “nonexistent objects.”
- 12 – Sa skya paNDi ta, *Tshad ma rigs pa'i gter gyi rtsa ba dang 'grel pa*, p. 40: “*bod rnam rtoḡ pa 'khrul pa'i yul don spyi dang/ rtoḡ med 'khrul pa'i yul med pa gsal ba gnyis med na/ 'khrul pa gzhi med du 'gyur bas snang yul gnyis yod la/ de'ang 'khrul shes gnyis 'dzin pa'i rang rig gi shugs la grub bo zhes zer ba.*”
- 13 – Thus, while the *sound/unsound* dichotomy revolves around the status of the *snang yul* (phenomenal entity), the *tshad ma/tshad min gyi shes pa* (knowledge bestowing / knowledge unbestowing) dichotomy concerns the status of a cognition's *'jug yul* or *'dzin stangs kyi yul*.
- 14 – Sa-pan's arguments are not, however, an instance of the well-known “argument from scripture / argument from reasoning” dichotomy.
- 15 – That is, should we accept that $\forall x [\Sigma(x) \rightarrow \exists y (P(y) \wedge R(x, y) \wedge E(y))]$?
- 16 – Here $\Sigma \setminus \Omega$ symbolizes the set $\{x \in \Sigma : x \notin \Omega\}$. The latter claim would thus be $\forall x [\exists y (P(y) \wedge R(x, y) \wedge E(y)) \leftrightarrow \Omega(x)]$.
- 17 – This misrepresentation is rooted within the perceptual apparatus of the color-blind person himself. This is to be contrasted with a case in which, for example, a white wall having a red light shined upon it leaves a perceiver with a cognition of a red-appearing wall. There, the misrepresentation of the situation is not grounded in defective sense-organ functioning.
- 18 – Sa skya paNDi ta, *Tshad ma rigs pa'i gter gyi rtsa ba dang 'grel pa*, p. 40; “*don spyi dang skra shad la sogs pa yul yin na de 'dzin pa'i rtoḡ pa dang mig shes gnyis ma 'khrul par 'gyur te/ yul yod pa'i phyir.*”
- 19 – Klo bo mkhan chen bsod nams lhun grub, *Tshad ma rigs gter gyi 'grel pa'i rnam bshad rigs lam gsal ba'i nyi ma* (Qinghai: Chinese Tibetology Press, 1988), pp. 13–14: “*thag khra la sbrul du 'dzin pa'i blo de/ thag khra gzung don du byed pa'i dbang shes la byed pa yin nam/ de'i rjes su 'dzi ni sbrul lo snyam pa'i rtoḡ pa la byed pa yin/ dang po ni ma 'khrul pa'i shes pa yin pas 'khrul shes kyi dper mi rung la/ phyi ma ni gzung yul du med pa'i rgyu mtshan gyis 'khrul ba yin na zhes lan 'debs par byed do/ ... des na dbang shes kyi rjes su rtoḡ pas sbrul lo snyam du gzung ba'i tshes snga phyi la bltos nas cha gnyis 'byung bas so sor phye ste lan 'debs tshul mdzad pa yin.*”
- 20 – I am not using “dogmatic” in a pejorative sense here.

- 21 – Just what Sa-pan wants with this premise is not entirely clear. My view is that we are being asked only to grant that concepts would be entities *encountered* by conceptual thought—and thus nonidentical with these thoughts. The fifteenth-century Sakya scholar Śākya Chokden interprets Sa-pan as meaning that concepts must be *external, concrete* objects (*shes pa las rdzas tha dad pa'i phyi rol gyi don*) if they are to be cognitively held entities (*gzung yul*) (Śākya mchog ldan, *Tshad ma rigs gter gyi rnam par bshad pa sde bdun ngag gi rol mtsho* [Delhi: Shervany Press, 1984], p. 8). This goes beyond anything said in Sa-pan's actual argument and is, I believe, an example of later Geluk influence on Śākya Chokden's presentation of Sa-pan's argument. The claim that cognitively held entities are one-and-all external objects is actually a *corollary* of Sa-pan's "proof" that concepts do not robustly exist. Śākya Chokden, thus, puts things precisely backward when he appeals to the claim that cognitively held entities are external objects in order *to prove* that concepts are not robustly existing intersubjective entities.
- 22 – Sa skya paNDi ta, *Tshad ma rigs pa'i gter gyi rtsa ba dang 'grel pa*, p. 42: "rang rang gi blo kho na dang 'brel na rang rig pa bzhin du gzhan la bstan kyang go bar mi 'gyur ro//."
- 23 – *Ibid.* (italics mine): "gang zag rang rang gi blo dang 'brel pa rkyang pa de brjod pas rang rang gi blo dang 'brel pa de go ba'i phyir gnyis ka'i brjod bya thun mong ba go bar mi nus te gnyis la mtshams sbyor ba'i thabs med pa'i phyir ro//."
- 24 – Even within the Sakya school, Sa-pan's arguments were met with a lukewarm review. Subsequent Sakya scholars quite often reinterpreted the results of Sa-pan's arguments in order to formulate a position much more amenable to the views of the Geluk school.