

**Christian Coseru.** *Perceiving Reality: Consciousness, Intentionality, and Cognition in Buddhist Philosophy.* Oxford University Press 2012. 384 pp. \$78.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199843381); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780190253110).

Coseru's highly syncretic work focuses on a narrow Buddhist epistemological tradition that begins with the Abhidharma philosopher Vasubandhu's complex analyses of perception and is developed by Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Kamalaśīla, and Śāntarakṣita. Coseru explains how Buddhist epistemology evolved in dialogue with competing conceptions internal to Buddhism and against broader orthodox Indian philosophies, particularly Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā. Coseru's main argument is that although widespread interpretations of Buddhist epistemology are foundationalist, a more useful way to understand it is as a form of phenomenology consistent with enactivism and a (causal) naturalism based in descriptive accounts of cognition: rather than foundationalism, 'a more suitable alternative' to understanding this tradition is the phenomenological interpretation because 'the main tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, has a phenomenological orientation' (198-9).

Coseru's close textual reading of the Buddhist epistemologists, particularly Kamalaśīla and Śāntarakṣita, reveals that these philosophers wrestled conscientiously—over a millennium ago—with subtle arguments in philosophy of mind that have only recently begun to come into focus in Western philosophy. Coseru's broad, deep understanding of the different philosophical traditions and methodologies he brings to bear on Buddhist epistemology and vice versa—naturalism, phenomenology, philosophy of mind, analytic philosophy, philosophy of language (Indian and Western), cognitive science, enactivism, Buddhist epistemology, Buddhist psychology, Nyāya, and Mīmāṃsā, among others—is incredibly rich in insightful, complex, syncretic analyses and typically text-based, historically grounded argumentation, all of which constitutes a model case for the claim that these traditions are continuous with each other, and need to be treated as such. This latter claim may be the main—I think correct—subtext of the entire work.

One central phenomenological assertion is the reflexivity thesis: every perception involves not only the object *as perceived* but the subject of awareness phenomenologically *given* as the perspectival point from which perception is experienced (218, 240-1). A related thesis is that not only is all cognition intentional, but—contrary to the claim that brute sensations lack intentional content—all perception is intentional. There is *something it is like* to perceive—for example, seeing a red strawberry—that characterizes perceptual experience, even in the absence of conceptually/linguistically structured thoughts of the form 'that is a red strawberry'.

The importance of nonlinguistic perceptual experience with intentional content, however conceptually inchoate, is central here. For Coseru, the warrant for 'pure' perception (without conceptual proliferation) is found not only in appeals to common sense examples, say, of an infant seeing a white lotus (165), but in appeals to the yogic perceptions (170, 281) of the many skilled meditation masters whose phenomenological analyses informed the Abhidharma philosophies of perception and psychology (274).

Some disappointments may be noted. First, given the role the reflexivity thesis plays in his argument and that the supports for the reflexivity thesis are the Abhidharma analyses of yogic perception, I would have preferred to see more textual extractions from the Abhidharma describing the

phenomenology of yogic perception, and some assessment of those analyses. Instead, Coseru trades in standard metaphors, such as the proponent's, of the candle that both lights up things and is made visible, and the opponent's, of the blade that cannot cut itself. These guide understanding, but are insufficient for persuasive purposes.

Second, there is an asymmetry in the idea that cognitive states are (subject/object) dualistic and the standard pan-Buddhist claim that there are non-dual states at the core of yogic claims connected with enlightenment. Do enlightened beings have non-dual perceptual experiences or dualistic but nonconceptual ones? Although silent about this, Coseru goes to some lengths to discuss the possibility of describing the indescribable, together with analyses of what may be said within both Buddhist and other Indian philosophies of language, particularly the *apoha* (negative) doctrine of meaning. He spends considerable thought on disputes within and between Buddhist and Indian philosophies about whether universals/particulars, genus/species, and likeness/difference, among others, are required for perception, intentionality, or meaning. His multi-disciplinary command of these issues is very impressive, but I was uncertain, ultimately, whether his account rendered it plausible that non-conceptual yogic perceptual states—whatever they are, exactly—could bear the weight of everything that rests on appeals to them. I'm curious to hear more, though.

Third, there are disagreements within Buddhist traditions about the authority and interpretation of Abhidharma, a compilation of yogic analyses based on conventions held long after the Buddha's death. Philosophers new to Buddhism would be better served if Coseru provided not only a general explanation of the Abhidharma and its epistemic warrants, but more guidance, particularly about the claim that meditative perception offers the yogi a phenomenological reduction or *epoché*. Does the yogi, seeing a strawberry, experience a non-conceptual trance in which there is an appearance of a strawberry, and is this some sort of immediate experiential *epoché*? Coseru seems to answer in the affirmative.

There are different accounts of intentionality, but the one Coseru sketches takes it to be a constitutive feature of conscious cognitive states rather than a relational or representational property. What the yogi has mastered is akin to the *epoché*, but what are bracketed aren't metaphysical assumptions, but confabulatory conceptualization tendencies. We make assumptions about what empirical awareness discloses. Buddhist epistemologists, according to Coseru, bracket those assumptions, figure out what the structure of awareness is like, and ground epistemic concerns on that sort of psychological/phenomenological analysis.

For Coseru, then, the yogic perceptual claim is about the possibility of direct access to a realm of immediacy, rather than a privileged window into 'ultimate reality'. His defense of epistemological optimism attempts to work against both skepticism and naive realism (in one move: phenomenological bracketing). For Coseru, the appeal to non-ordinary states of cognitive awareness works to ground rather than dismiss our situated condition. It's a plea for understanding cognition as unfolding in action, and thus as revealing 'the order of the causal domain' (and its natural efficacy), rather than an unchanging metaphysical domain ('indetermination as the ground of being') (299).

Coseru says a great deal about the difference between an epistemic warrant for perceptual experience to count as knowledge insofar as it is either non-erroneous or non-deceptive. There is a difference between an error based on conceptual proliferation (say, faulty classification) and one due

to faulty sensory equipment (to use a classical Indian example, when jaundice alters the perception of a white conch rendering its appearance yellow) (189). In the former case, there is error; in the latter case, there is deception (akin to illusion). The main issue here seems to be this: The Buddhist epistemologist who wants to be able to appeal to pure perceptual experiences as epistemically warranted needs a qualifier to rule out cases of error, such that pure (nonconceptual) perceptions *that are not faulty* are warranted: the idea is that ‘error’ seems to require conception, but ‘deception’ can be non-conceptual.

Consider a mirage on a hot road giving the impression of liquid: Perception presents what seems like—what is *perceived as*—glistening liquid. Scrutiny reveals it to be a mirage. But disambiguation (or, for the Buddhist, pragmatic efficacious disclosure) does not remove the illusion: the road still is *perceived as* glistening. Perceiving liquid where there is none is a perceptual error. Coseru would argue here that ‘truth’ and ‘error’ are logical predicates suited for conceptual analysis, whereas ‘illusoriness’ and ‘deceptiveness’ are phenomenological concepts, more apt as descriptive categories of perceptual experience. I think, however, that though ‘glistening’ survives phenomenological bracketing, ‘liquid’ does not, however closely we associate these two, ironically, conceptually. But I may be failing to properly simulate/imagine the *epoché*.

Moreover, if phenomenological perception is supposed to be pure, but it presents *wholes* that do not exist in the Buddhist account of ultimate reality, then it is deceptive *tout court*. Coseru does not address this puzzling inconsistency. Instead, Coseru appeals to what he sees in these attempts to describe the structure of awareness as a proto-Gestalt theory: we perceive wholes rather than discretely assembled parts, *as* structureless given—not some kind of discrete object or sense data, but the givenness of experience that includes the perceiver’s perspectival outlook: there is no seeing apart from ‘seeing as’ and there is no ‘seen’ apart from ‘as seen’. That does not mean there are no better or worse ways of seeing as: that’s where the error theory—the erroneous/deceptive distinction—is supposed to come in. Again, the broader difficulty he doesn’t address is that *all* visual perception is deceptive if Buddhist metaphysics is correct about the unreality of wholes, not just mirages.

My objections (likely based on my limited understanding) aside, this incredibly rich, informative, insightful work raises the level of discourse for the topics Coseru unites in meaningful dialogue with each other: mind, consciousness, reflexivity, phenomenology, naturalism, perception, cognition, intentionality, embodiment, enactivism, cognitive science, epistemology, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Abhidharma, Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka, among others.

The text contains an abbreviated list of referenced texts and an index, but no glossary.

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