Abstract In this essay, it is argued that Abhinavagupta’s theory of error, the apûrṇakhyāti theory, synthesizes two distinguishable Pratyabhijñā treatments of error that were developed in three phases prior to him. The first theory was developed in two stages, initially by Somānanda in the Śivadrṣṭi (ŚD) and subsequently by Utpaladeva in his Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikās (ĪPK) and his short auto-commentary thereon, the Īśvarapratyabhijñāvṛttī (ĪPVr). This theory served to explain individual acts of misperception, and it was developed with the philosophy of the Buddhist epistemologists in mind. In a third phase, Utpaladeva developed in his Śivadrṣṭivṛttī (ŚDVr) a second theory of error, one that involved the noncognition of non-duality (abheda-khyāti) and served to explain both the appearance and perception of multiplicity, despite the strict monism to which all Pratyabhijñā authors subscribe. Abhinavagupta’s treatment of error, then, is significant not only because it was meant to explain all the various theories of error offered by opposing philosophical schools, as Rastogi has shown, but more importantly because it synthesized the thinking of his predecessors on the matter in a single, elegant account of error.

Keywords Pratyabhijñā · apûrṇakhyāti · abhedākhyāti · abheda · Error · Buddhist epistemologists

Introduction

Navjivan Rastogi has argued that the Kashmiri tantric polymath Abhinavagupta (fl. c. 975–1025) espoused a theory of “error by commission,” one that claims that perceptual error is constituted by the occurrence of an incomplete cognition.
(apūṅnakhyāti) that leads to an erroneous judgment regarding the nature of what is perceived. He further argued that Abhinava simultaneously espoused a theory of “error by omission,” for he describes error as involving a noncognition (akhyaṭī). By doing so, Abhinavagupta claimed that his own theory of error could accommodate those of every contemporaneous philosophical school, this by synthesizing them with his own.

Left out of Rastogi’s analysis, however, is any thorough study of the discussions of error that appear in the writings of the Pratyabhijñā authors who preceded Abhinavagupta, namely Utpaladeva (fl. c. 925–975), Abhinavagupta’s paramaguru, and Somānanda (fl. c. 900–950), his paramesṭhitiguru, despite the fact that both authors made substantial contributions to the Pratyabhijñā’s treatment of the matter. While an analysis of these authors’ views does not invalidate Rastogi’s conclusions regarding the telos of Abhinavagupta’s inclusive nomenclature—that he meant to account for all the various theories of error of all contemporaneous philosophical schools—, the evidence found in the writings of Somānanda and Utpaladeva also indicates that Abhinavagupta’s apūṅnakhyāti theory reveals a significant debt to his predecessors. Specifically, the apūṅnakhyāti theory synthesizes two distinguishable Pratyabhijñā theories of error that were developed in three phases prior to Abhinavagupta.

The earlier theory was developed in two stages, first by Somānanda in the fourth chapter of the Śivadrṣṭi (ŚD) and subsequently by Utpaladeva in his Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikās (ĪPK) and his short auto-commentary thereon, the Īśvarapratyabhijñāvṛtti (ĪPV). This treatment of error is concerned with “error by commission,” and it serves to explain individual acts of misperception, including, according to Utpala, both those caused by conceptual error (e.g., the perception of silver for mother of pearl) and those caused by perceptual error (as in, e.g., the perception of two moons due to the existence of a defect of the indriya).

In a third phase, Utpaladeva subsequently developed a theory of “error by omission,” which is found in his Śivadrṣṭivṛtti (ŚDV). This second theory served to explain the appearance of the multiplicity of the universe, despite the strict monism to which all the Pratyabhijñā authors subscribe, and it also was intended to explain the capacity of the individual cognizer to experience multiplicity.

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1 See Rastogi (1986, pp. 5–6 and passim). Rastogi (1986, p. 9) states that “error by omission” occurs when one “...visualize[s] a particular aspect of the object and overlook[s] or miss[es] another.” On the other hand, “error by commission” requires the agent of cognition to (ibid.) “...add something to the object. It is not that we simply miss some of nacre itself but that we also bring something of silver to it.” In this article, I use the term “error by omission” to refer to error resulting from the failure of an agent of cognition to cognize a particular percept, or to distinguish between two percepts; and I use the term “error by commission” to refer to errors resulting from the agent of cognition’s active perception of one percept for or as something other than that which appears in the ken.

2 See Rastogi (1986, pp. 4, 23–25 and 33, fns. 110 and 111). See also Īśvarapratyabhijñāvimarṣint (ĪPV) ad Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā (ĪPK) 2.3.13 (vol. 2, p. 113, line 11 to p. 114, line 2 of the KSTS edition); and Īśvarapratyabhijñāvṛttivimarṣint (ĪPVV) ad ĪPK 2.3.13 (vol. 3, from p. 152, line 22 to p. 153, line 2 of the KSTS edition; and p. 154, lines 13–24 of the same).

3 Nothing of what might have been written by Laksmanagupta, Abhinava’s guru and the disciple of Utpaladeva in the lineage of the Pratyabhijñā, is known to us, as Pandey noted some time ago and as is well known. See Pandey ([1963] 2000, pp. 164–165).