4 A Difficult Heritage: Reflectivity and Reflexivenity in the Tibetan Assimilation of *Svasaṃvedana*

Summary 4.1 Reflectivity and Reflexivity: A Closer Look at Williams's Contribution. – 4.1.1 Reconsidering Williams's Manifesto on the Two Models of *Rang rig*. – 4.1.2 Further Considerations on the Two Models. – 4.2 Reflexivity and Luminosity of the Mind: Photism in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. – 4.2.1 The Doctrinal Developments of the Notion of the Mind's Luminosity (SKT *Prabhāsvaratā*. – TIB *'Od gsal ba*). – 4.2.2 The Convergence of *Gsal ba* and *'Od gsal ba*.

4.1 Reflectivity and Reflexivity: A Closer Look at Williams's Contribution

The Tibetan assimilation of *svasaṃvedana*, translated as *rang rig*, is by no means uniform: its complex Indian heritage encouraged further elaborations within the Tibetan intellectual landscape also. The challenges Tibetan scholars encountered in inheriting and developing this philosophical concept were closely tied to and conditioned by the exegetical practices characteristic of the commentarial tradition. The philosophical richness of the concept invited sustained reflection, yielding significant implications for both Indian and Tibetan Buddhist doxography. The present analysis will focus on the philosophical and doxographical importance that the various dimensions of the *rang rig* discourse came to acquire in the Tibetan context, particularly in dialogue with contemporary exegetical interpretations.

The point of departure will be Williams's (1998) milestone monograph on the notion of self-awareness in the Tibetan tradition. Since its publication, it has been widely assumed that the two

DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-929-0/004

categories of self-awareness outlined therein, namely, the "reflective", and the "reflexive", are representative of how that tradition has approached the topic. However, more than a decade earlier, a significant classificatory effort had already been made by Matilal in his study on perception (1986), another important contribution to the field of Indian and Buddhist studies. In that work, well known to Williams, Matilal identified three principal Indian views on self-awareness, encompassing both Buddhist and non-Buddhist perspectives. He describes these three as follows:

> (i) […] an awareness is *reflexively* aware of itself […] if it is self-aware or it reveals itself.
> (ii) […] [for being] *introspectively* aware […] we need a separate perceptual awareness to apprehend the immediately preceding awareness. I concede this is not the usual meaning of "introspection" but I recommend its use in this connection […].
> (iii) Lastly, […] [for being] *reflectively* aware […] one needs an inference […]. Here too, I recommend the use of the word "reflection" in this special sense. (Matilal 1986a, 148-9; italics in the original)

Thus, three types of self-awareness are presented: reflexive, introspective, and reflective. Williams adopts at least two of these designations, 'reflexive' and 'reflective', and builds upon them to develop a study that has significantly influenced subsequent scholarship on the topic. The contribution of his work will serve as an entry point to the section of this volume dedicated to the Tibetan reception and development of the concept of self-awareness.

By highlighting "an ambiguity (or at least a systematic lack of clarity)" in the use of the concept of self-awareness within Buddhist literature, Williams (1998, 4) acknowledges that, although the term *rang rig* is singular, its interpretations are multiple. Among these, Williams seeks to establish a fundamental and fully explicit distinction between two types of *rang rig*, in an effort to clarify – or even 'resolve' – the ambiguity found in the textual tradition. The first type refers to the use of the term within the Yogācāra (and Sautrāntika) framework, beginning with Dignāga and Dharmakīrti; the second is associated with Mi-pham's usage, which draws on a particular interpretation inherited from Śāntarakṣita. Williams (1998, 6-7 fn. 8) refers to these two types of *rang rig* as 'self-awareness (i)' and 'self-awareness (ii)', the latter also described as 'reflexive awareness' or 'the reflexive nature of awareness'. In what follows, an examination will be made of how Williams identifies and characterizes each of the two types. The first will be referred to as 'reflective self-awareness', and the second as 'reflexive self-awareness'.

The analysis will begin with the former model, which implies that the apprehended aspect (or objective aspect) becomes the 'object'

(TIB *yul*) of the apprehending aspect (or subjective aspect), and that self-awareness consists in the experience of the former by the latter. These two aspects of consciousness are linked by a subject-object relationship; this means that the other-cognition (TIB *gzhan rig*) model, that is, the pattern involved in the cognition of things that are outside one's mental *continuum*, is applied also here, even though the object is a 'simultaneous' consciousness in one's mental *continuum*.

As Williams explains, this model stems from Dignāga and, more broadly, from Yogācāra epistemology. It is also closely tied to the ontological tenets of that tradition, as the argument for self-awareness is intimately connected with the demonstration of non-dual, consciousness-only reality. In fact, what is at stake

> in the argument for self-awareness (i) is an epistemological theory showing that the one *dravya* ['substance'] which serves as a substratum for conceptual construction in Cittamātra is, as a matter of fact, non-dual self-aware consciousness. (Williams 1998, 15)

In this framework, consciousness is regarded as the central element, the fundamental and inherently existing factor that serves as the backbone of the entire ontological structure. Following the Abhidharma assertion that conceptual constructs (SKT *prajñaptayaḥ*) must be grounded is some real substance (SKT *dravya*), and in opposition to the Madhyamaka view of *prajñaptimātra*, which holds that everything is 'merely a conceptual construction', the Cittamātra system necessarily posits a *dravya*, thereby implying the inherent existence of something (Williams 1998, 11). Following Willias, according to the Cittamātra view, that substance is identified as an inherently existing, non-dual consciousness. In the absence of external objects, both subject and object are understood to be consciousness; hence, self-awareness arises. In other words, such a consciousness is self-aware precisely because both the perceiving subject and the perceived object are aspects of the same consciousness:

> there is no other thing for [self-aware consciousness] to be aware of, and therefore [it is] self-aware in that a subjective aspect of consciousness takes an objective aspect of consciousness as its object. The argument for *svasaṃvedana* in this Cittamātra context is intimately involved with the argument for nondual consciousness-only, and combines with the need for a *dravya* to give what seems to me to be the characteristically Cittamātra perspective of an inherently-existing nondual consciousness continuum. (Williams 1998, 15)

According to Williams, self-awareness, together with its underlying ontological program,[1] is the target of the critiques Candrakīrti and Śāntideva make: the criticism of a situation where consciousness knows itself *via* a subject-object relationship.

In Williams's view, this reflective structure is included in both Sautrāntika and Yogācāra tenets, notwithstanding their different views regarding the existence of external objects. From the Sautrāntika standpoint, objects, which are assumed to exist outside the mind, serve as the causes for their corresponding cognitions; the mind apprehends these objects by taking on their aspects. By contrast, according to the Yogācāra doctrine, it is the seeds (SKT *bījāni*; TIB *sa bon*) deposited in the store-consciousness (SKT *ālayavijñāna*; TIB *kun gzhi rnam par shes pa*) that function as the causes of mental events. These events are comprehensive of both the subjective and the objective aspects of consciousness, understood as two facets of a single cognitive event that arise simultaneously. Thus, from a Yogācāra perspective, there are no external objects: all phenomena are of the nature of mind. At least, within the Sākāravāda subschool, consciousness appearing with the aspect of the object is all that exists.

A key expression for better understanding Williams's presentation of the reflective model – drawn from the dGe-lugs Tibetan text he selects as a convenient source for illustrating the two types of *rang rig*, one which will deserve closer attention (§ 4.1.1) – is the following: "the apprehending aspect's experience of the apprehended aspect is explained as the meaning of self-awareness" (Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.11-12).[2] The Tibetan passage here does not clearly indicate whether what Williams calls the reflective self-awareness is to be identified with the subjective aspect itself, or rather with the result of the cognition performed by the subjective aspect, that is, its experience of the objective aspect.[3]

1 Were one also to mention the soteriological dimension of this Cittamātra framework, one should remember that such a consciousness "is the substratum for that polarization into postulated inherently separate subjects and objects, a polarization which forms the root delusion, the illusion of duality" (Williams 1998, 15).

2 Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.11-12: "'*dzin rnam gyis gzung rnam myong ba rang rig gi don du bshad do* ||".

3 In this regard, see also Kellner (2010, 214 fn. 31). The same problem seems to be spreading among some modern interpreters of the tradition: cf., for instance, the debate between Coseru (2012, 259 and 265) and MacKenzie (2015b, 40-1). Yiannopoulos's straightforward criticism towards most contemporary accounts of the reflexive nature of awareness in Buddhism points out two main misunderstandings, and the second resonates with one of the aforementioned readings of self-awareness: "Reflexive awareness has been systematically misrepresented as a particular kind of consciousness that takes itself as an object, or even as being strictly identical with the 'subjective aspect' of ordinary cognition" (Yiannopoulos 2012, 154).

Williams (1998, 4 fn. 5) acknowledges this indeterminacy and comments on this part of the text by remarking a "lack of clarity". Then, he appears to take the passage as implicitly allowing for both readings, reflecting the fact that different strands of the Indo-Tibetan tradition have offered both interpretations. On the one hand, Williams recalls Dignāga's claim that self-awareness is the *phala* 'result' of cognition, and observes that this has been interpreted as the outcome of the intentional cognition by which the subjective aspect apprehends the objective one. However, as the present inquiry has shown (ch. 3.1) – particularly on the basis of Kellner's close analysis of the *PS* and the *PSV* – the validity of this reading of Dignāga's account has already been seriously questioned. On the other hand, Williams also notes that certain Tibetan thinkers, particularly within the dGe-lugs tradition, interpret self-awareness not as the result of a cognitive act but rather as the subjective aspect itself. There is at least a third way in which the dGe-lugs tradition might appear to be engaging with a reflective model of self-awareness, namely the one proposed in Newland's exegetical account (1992, 203-4). Building on the definition of *rang rig* in the Sautrāntika system by the dGe-lugs scholar *Phur-bu-lcog Byams-pa-rgya-mtsho* (1825-1901), who identifies it as "the apprehending aspect" itself,[4] Newland further explains:

> Self-consciousnesses are one entity, indivisible and simultaneous, with the apprehending consciousness that they observe. […] That is, a self-consciousness accompanying an eye consciousness apprehending blue must apprehend not only the eye consciousness, but itself as well. Since they are apprehenders, and since they are generated in the aspect of the apprehending, or subjective, side of an experiential moment, they necessarily apprehend themselves. […] They directly and non-mistakenly perceive themselves in a non-dualistic manner, that is, without any appeareance of subject and object as different. (Newland 1992, 203-4)

Newland distinguishes *rang rig* from the subjective aspect of experience, even though the two are simultaneous and indivisible. Nonetheless, the three perspectives just mentioned, two from Williams and one from Newland, may simply reflect the analytical approach adopted in the step-by-step deconstruction of *rang rig* into its various 'components', which are examined and ultimately assessed from the standpoint of the dGe-lugs Prāsaṅgika perspective. According to this view, the identification of self-awareness (as perceiver) with

4 Phur-bu-lcog Byams-pa-rgya-mtsho 2006, 175: "'*dzin rnam rang rig gi mtshan nyid*" ('the apprehending aspect' is the definition of self-awareness).

consciousness (as perceived) leads to a logical absurdity, as it implies the identity of subject and object – a position considered untenable.[5]

All of these articulations of *rang rig* from a dGe-lugs perspective may thus be regarded as possible interpretations that, from Williams's point of view, would fall under his first type of self-awareness. Thus, this model encompasses at least three main views offered by the dGe-lugs tradition regarding reflective self-awareness: one that identifies it with the subjective aspect of cognition; another that considers it as the result of the subjective aspect's cognition of the objective aspect; and a third, that distinguishes *rang rig* from the subjective aspect while nonetheless considering them simultaneous and indivisible.

These articulations appear to lend support to the 'ambiguity' highlighted by Williams, offering different ways of conceiving the relationship between *rang rig* and consciousness that retain a certain degree of dualism and thus fall within the scope of his reflective model. However, as will be explored in the following pages, these articulations of self-awareness may not necessarily point to a genuine dualistic interpretation of *rang rig* itself. Rather, the so-called reflective model might represent an analytical or conceptual device used to unpack a cognitive process that is, at its core, intended as non-dualistic. In this light, the reflective model could be understood less as a doctrinal position and more as a didactic framework – perhaps marginal, and likely later than Dignāga – developed to conceptually express an experience of *rang rig* that remains fundamentally reflexive and non-dual.

As for the second type of self-awareness, the reflexive one, Williams presents it in terms of inherent self-knowing, the proper reflexivity of consciousness as such. In his view, this model targets

5 In an article devoted to the later dGe-lugs reception of the Buddhist doctrine of perception, Klein makes a similar point by describing how *rang rig* is explained and analyzed in the dGe-lugs monastic curriculum in recent times: "In relation to the self-knower, all other consciousnesses are *objective* apprehension aspects (*gzung rnam*); a self-knower is the only type of consciousness that is never an appearing object of any other non-conceptual consciousness in the same *continuum*. The consciousness which a self-knower apprehends never apprehends that self-knower" (Klein 1985, 74; italics in the original). In Klein's understanding, the apprehending subject is identified as the factor of experience, *rang rig*, while the apprehended object is considered as involving two factors: the object of cognition along with the consciousness that apprehends it. This appears to be how the functioning of a mental event in which *rang rig* is posited is generally analyzed in the dGe-lugs understanding of it. Such a type of *rang rig*, however, leads to some problems: "because the self-knower is a factor of experience that is one entity [TIB *ngo bo gcig*] with the perceiving consciousness, the difficulty remains of explaining more fully how the two factors of a single directly perceiving consciousness relate to one another" (Klein 1985, 75). For a summary of Klein's (1985, 73-7) section on the perceiving consciousness as both subject and object, that is, on *rang rig*, see Klein 1986, 110-14. On the topic, see also Cozort 1998, 154-7; Dreyfus 1997, 408-9. For a discussion on the differences between the Sa-skya and the dGe-lugs views on *rang rig*, cf. Cozort 1998.

the defining characteristics of mind: its quiddity, its distinctive feature. It represents a perspective that departs from the ontological and epistemological framework of the Yogācāra project, and instead emerges as an alternative model of self-awareness

> which is initially and usually mixed with self-awareness (i) but comes into its own in certain innovations in the theory of *svasaṃvedana* which were stressed by and probably originated with Śāntarakṣita. (Williams 1998, 18)

Actually, as Williams (1998, 28 fn. 12) notices, a well-formulated reflexive account is already present before Śāntarakṣita, in Vinītadeva's *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* (D no. 4230, vol. we: 6*v*) – as shown at the beginning of this inquiry (§ 2.2) in the consideration of the lamp image in the Mahāsāṃghika school. The peculiarity of the reflexive model is expressed by Williams in the following terms:

> Thus the character of self-awareness here has nothing to do with taking itself as an *object* in a way which might lead to an infinite regress. Rather, self-awareness *means* reflexivity, where there is no sense of referring to an actual subject/object relationship and, therefore, no stage of validation beyond the consciousness itself. […] In other words, the epistemological model based on act and agent where an agent acts on itself is inappropriate. (Williams 1998, 28; italics in the original)

The reflexivity of consciousness does not involve any intentional subject-object structure and, therefore, unlike the reflective model, it avoids the difficulty of an infinite regress. According to Williams's model of reflexive awareness, consciousness validates itself through its mere occurrence, without the need for any additional means of validation.

Thus, according to Williams, two different understandings of *rang rig* can be identified within the tradition: one revolving around a certain dualism, the other based on an account of mere non-dual luminosity.

> The subjective aspect in experiencing the objective aspect is involved in a situation of *at least some sort of duality*, and inasmuch as it depends on an objective aspect which depends upon an "external" object, it can itself be said to be dependent upon the external object insofar as there is one. But here [in the reflexive model] the mere luminosity is said to be without any dependence on an external object, and *completely uninvolved in any dualistic appearances of subject/object*. (Williams 1998, 20; italics added)

These two categories represent the fundamental structure of his exegetic interpretation of the concept of self-awareness in the Tibetan tradition and have become an important point of reference for subsequent scholarship.

4.1.1 Reconsidering Williams's Manifesto on the Two Models of *Rang rig*

Now that the main elements of the two broad categories of self-awareness outlined by Williams have been introduced, in order to trace their textual source, it is necessary to analyze the passage he treats as a kind of manifesto, and consider more closely how he interprets the Tibetan material he deliberately selects to support his distinction.

In his 1998 monograph (2-18), Williams derives these categories from his reading of an explanation of *rang rig* offered by the dGe-lugs scholar Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa (also known as Mi-nyag Kun-bzang-bsod-nams, 1823-1905) in his commentary on the ninth chapter of Śāntideva's *BCA*, entitled *sPyod 'jug shes rab le'u'i spyi don rim par phye ba zab mo rten 'byung gi de kho na nyid yang gsal sgron me*. In this text, Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa draws inspiration from the *sTong thun chen mo* (that is, *Zab mo stong pa nyid kyi de kho na nyid rab tu gsal bar byed pa'i bstan bcos skal bzang mig 'byed*), an encyclopedic treatise by mKhas-grub-rje (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang, 1385-1438). Along with rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen, Tsong-kha-pa's immediate successor at dGa'-ldan, mKhas-grub-rje is regarded as one of Tsong-kha-pa's two principal disciples.[6] Both texts express the fully-fledged dGe-lugs perspective. Following mKhas-grub-rje (1972, 418),[7] Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa opens his passage with a citation from the *Tarkajvālā* (henceforth *TJ*), a work traditionally attributed

6 For further information on the scholar and his works, see Lessing, Wayman [1968] 1993, 11-16; Cabezón 1992, 13-22. For an introduction to *sTong thun chen mo*, a work that attempts to summarize the main Mahāyāna strands around the topic of emptiness, see Cabezón 1992, 1-11.

7 For its translation, see Cabezón 1992, 345-6.

to Bhāvaviveka,[8] and subsequently offers a detailed explanation of self-awareness. The full excerpt used by Williams to illustrate the distinction between the two types of *rang rig*, identified in the text by the numerals (i) and (ii), is presented below with the original Tibetan and Williams's corresponding English translation:

> *rtog ge 'bar ba las | sems tsam pas rnam shes ni gnyis su snang ste | rang snang ba dang yul du snang ba'o || yul du snang ba'i rnam shes ni phyi rol gyi yul gyi rnam par gyur nas rang snang ba'i rnam shes kyi yul du 'gyur ro zhes phyogs snga'i 'dod pa bkod pa ste | (i) rang snang ba zhes pa 'dzin rnam dang | yul du snang ba zhes pa gzung rnam dang | yul gyi rnam par gyur pa'i gzung rnam de nyid 'dzin rnam gyi yul du bshad pas 'dzin rnam gyis gzung rnam myong ba rang rig gi don du bshad do || des na rang rig ces pa ni 'dzin rnam yan gar ba ste (ii) gzhan rig gi shes pa thams cad kyi steng na rang nyid gsal tsam dang rig tsam pa phyi rol gyi yul la ltos med du kha nang kho nar phyogs shing yul yul can gyi gnyis snang thams cad log pa zhig la 'jog go ||*. (Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.7-14; numerals added)

> As it is said in [Bhāvaviveka's] *Tarkajvālā*:
>
> "According to the Cittamātrin, consciousness has a twofold appearance. It appears to itself and it appears as the object. The consciousness which appears as the object-having taken

8 This passage appears in *TJ*, the commentary on *Madhyamakahṛdayakārikā* and serves as part of the introduction to *Madhyamakahṛdayakārikā* 5.20. See Hoornaert 2000, 84 for the Tibetan text; see Hoornaert 2000, 101-2 for the English translation. Moreover, for speculations on the possible textual sources of the position presented in the *TJ*, see Yamaguchi's and Hoornaert's thoughts as reported in Hoornaert 2000, 102 fn. 1. One more helpful annotation Hoornaert provides is about the Yogācāra doctrine of consciousness appearing as subject and object: "at least prior to Dignāga, the doctrine of duality was taught as a purely *soteriological* doctrine and was not concerned with epistemological issues. The purpose of the doctrine was not to explain how perceptual cognitions originate, what their object is, how their object is cognized, and so forth. The purpose was to explain what defilement (*saṃkleśa*) is, how it originates and how it can be eliminated" (Hoornaert 2000, 102 fn. 1; italics added). Along these lines, Kellner further comments on two different meanings of 'appearance', claiming that "The soteriological purpose of the doctrine of duality yields a specific connotation for the idea that there is an appearance (*ābhāsa*) of duality: duality is an appearance, but it is not real; it can and should be overcome on the path to liberation. This amounts to using the predicate 'appear' as it is used in sentences of the kind 'it appears to be the case that *p* (but it is not)', where appearance *connotes falsehood*. However, a second usage of 'appearance' is also generally present in Yogācāra literature, when for instance texts speak of a 'subject-appearance' or an 'object-appearance'. This usage of 'appearance' corresponds to [...] a descriptive phenomenological usage, where the verb 'to appear' *simply informs how things present themselves* to a cognizing subject" (Kellner 2010, 209; italics added). Concerning in particular Dignāga's usage of the term, see Kellner 2010, 209, where she suggests that in *PS* 1.10 Dignāga conveys a certain degree of falsehood in the separation of the three aspects of cognition, whereas in *PS* 1.11 the two distinct appearances are mentioned in a non-soteriological, descriptive way.

> on the aspect of an external object-becomes an object for the consciousness which appears to itself". Thus is set forth the position of the *pūrvapakṣa*.
>
> (i) That which is spoken of as appearing to itself is the subjective aspect. That which is spoken of as appearing as the object is the objective aspect. That very objective aspect which has taken on the aspect of the object is explained as the object of the subjective aspect. Therefore, the experience of the objective aspect by the subjective aspect is explained as the meaning of 'self-awareness'. Thus what is called self-awareness is a separate subjective aspect.
>
> (ii) Accompanying all the consciousnesses that are aware of others there is also a mere luminosity, a mere awareness, of its own nature, turned solely inwards, without dependence on the external object, and [here] all the dual-appearances of object and subject are posited as a mistake. (Williams 1998, 4-5; square brackets and numerals in the original)[9]

Williams presents this Tibetan passage as a kind of conceptual manifesto and aims to demonstrate both the lack of clarity in the sources that employ the term *rang rig* in multiple, often ambiguous ways, and the necessity of distinguishing between its possible interpretations, namely those corresponding to what he identifies as reflective and reflexive self-awareness. In fact, he remarks: "This ambiguity can be seen reflected in a *convenient* explanation given by the dGe-lugs lama Thub bstan chos kyi grags pa" (Williams 1998, 4; italics added).

9 In the Author's translation: "As it is said in the *Tarkajvālā*: 'According to the Cittamātrins, consciousness appears as two: namely, its *appearing as itself*, and its *appearing as the object*. The consciousness appearing as the object, having taken on the aspect of an external object, becomes the object of the consciousness that is its appearing as itself'. The opponent's stance is thus presented. (i) Its 'appearing as itself' is the apprehending aspect. Its 'appearing as the object' is the apprehended aspect. That very apprehended aspect which has taken on the aspect of the object is explained to be the object of the apprehending aspect. Therefore, the experience of the apprehended aspect by the apprehending aspect is explained to be the meaning of self-awareness. Thus, 'self-awareness' is an independent apprehending aspect; (ii) accompanying every consciousness that is an other-cognition there is a mere self-luminosity, a mere self-awareness, directed solely inward, independent of external objects, and [here] all the dualistic appearances of object and subject are posited as erroneous" (italics added). When comparing this version with Williams's translation (1998, 4-5), particular attention should be paid to his choices in translating key terms. For instance, *rang snang ba* is rendered as 'appearing to itself'. However, in the *TJ*, the phrase actually appears as *rang du snang ba*, which might be more appropriately read in parallel with *yul du snang ba*. In this light, the former could be understood as 'appearing as itself' (possibly interpreting rang as referring to the appearance itself, indicating the appearing of the appearing of the object), while the latter would then be 'appearing as the object'. Furthermore, Williams translates the pair *'dzin rnam* and *gzung rnam* as 'subjective aspect' and 'objective aspect', respectively.

One might question whether this ambiguity is in fact present. This, in turn, raises the question of why the passage just quoted and translated is considered a 'convenient' explanation, especially since Williams does not explicitly clarify this point in his work. It appears to be 'convenient' insofar as, from Williams's perspective, Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa provides a description of *rang rig* that seemingly encompasses both of the two types Williams identifies. This raises the further question: is the bifurcation introduced by Williams in fact an extrinsic interpretive move, imposed upon a passage that exhibits no explicit need or recognition of such a differentiation? As will be argued below, a careful reading of the Tibetan source makes it highly doubtful that the author himself intended or endorsed such a distinction. The more plausible hypothesis is that Williams selects this particular passage because it lends itself to an interpretive strategy that allows him to draw out two distinct categories of *rang rig* even though such a division is not articulated by Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa himself. If this is the case, then Williams's interpretation must be understood as an extrinsic intervention. His distinction becomes representative of two major tendencies he identifies within the broader Tibetan exegesis of *rang rig*, but without any conscious alignment – so to speak – on the part of the Tibetan author. By choosing this quotation as emblematic of the ambiguity surrounding the term, Williams aims to uncover and make explicit two conceptual strands that he believes are present in the text.[10]

Dividing the Tibetan passage cited above (Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.7-14) into two paragraphs, one for each type of *rang rig*, is not entirely convincing. As will be argued below, the excerpt seems to express just one description of *rang rig* while the division into two different accounts seems to be unwarranted.

To begin with, Williams identifies a clear-cut division between the two accounts at a particular point in the passage, and this presents a first problematic aspect. If two genuinely distinct meanings were intended, this difference would have been more clearly emphasized by the Tibetan author – which is not the case. On the contrary, linguistically speaking, the point where Williams locates the shift from one paragraph to the other is immediately after the following phrase: "*des na rang rig ces pa ni 'dzin rnam yan gar ba ste*" ("Thus, 'self-awareness' is a separate apprehending aspect"). The semi-final particle *ste*, which generally functions as a connective

10 Most importantly, it should be noted that the corresponding passage in *sTong thun chen mo* (Cabezón 1992, 345-6) does not present a clear thematization of this distinction.

or explanatory element,[11] is rendered by Williams with a period, to mark the point where the paragraph on the second type of *rang rig* begins – something that is not grammatically supported among the accepted uses of this particle.[12] This is the first problematic point: either a weakness of his reading or an intentional intervention in the meaning of the text.

The second issue concerns the phrase *'dzin rnam yan gar ba*, as it constitutes the final section of the paragraph Williams associates with the reflective model. Williams feels the need to explain this phrase, commenting on its meaning and implications, and stating that, in the subject-object reflective model,

> the subjective aspect and the objective aspect are not literally and in all respects the same, nor are they experienced as the same, even if they occur in the same consciousness continuum. This point is made quite strongly in referring to a separate (*yan gar ba*) subjective aspect. (Williams 1998, 7-8)

Soon after that, he remarks that there is "a subject(ive aspect) aware of a conceptually (and also phenomenologically?) different object(ive aspect)" (9).

So now, to shed more light on the phrase *yan gar ba* in this passage, it could be useful to compare it with the textual source from which Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa draws inspiration. Commenting on the same quotation from the *TJ* that Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa discusses, mKhas-grub-je's *sTong thun chen mo* (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 418.6-19.3) holds some relevant clues regarding this occurrence of the expression *yan gar ba*. Immediately after the quotation from the *TJ*, mKhas-grub-rje comments as follows:

> *rang snang ba zhes pa 'dzin rnam dang | yul du snang ba zhes pa gzung rnam dang | yul gyi rnam par gyur pa'i gzung rnam de nyid 'dzin rnam gyi yul du bshad pas 'dzin rnam gyis gzung rnam myong ba rang rig gi don du bshad pa yin no || des na mdo sems gnyis kyi*

11 For a detailed explanation of the range of applications of this particle, see Hahn 2002, 104-7. To summarize, this particle has the following principal functions: introductive (to provide an explanation of the preceding sentence); temporal (to indicate that the next verbal action follows it in time – but only when the particle is used after a verbal stem); causal (to indicate that the preceding sentence is a cause for the following one); adversative or restrictive (with a contrasting function or a restrictive one); modal (to qualify the manner in which the following verbal action is carried out); coordinating (to express the type of connection a semi-colon punctuation mark might convey); and finalizing (only when it is not followed by any other clause).

12 Reading the particle *ste* as having an adversative or restrictive function might have been behind Williams's choice; however, the text as a whole does not seem to corroborate this option.

> *lugs la shes pa yin na kho rang gi ngo bor gyur pa'i 'dzin rnam de kha nang kho na la ltas pa gnyis snang thams cad dang bral zhing | kho rang gis kho rang rig pa yin la | des kho rang rig pa dang gzung rnam rig pa gnyi ga yang yul gang gi'ang rnam pa 'char ba la gtan nas mi ltos pa'i 'dzin rnam yan gar bar 'dod pa yin te* |. (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 418.6-19.3)

A translation of the above quotation reveals the following picture – very similar to the one in Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's text:

> Its 'own appearance' is the apprehending aspect, the 'appearance as the object' is the apprehended aspect, and that very apprehended aspect, which has taken on the aspect of the object, is explained to constitute the object of the apprehending aspect. Thus, the experience of the apprehended aspect by the apprehending aspect is explained as the meaning of self-awareness. In the Sautrāntika and Cittamātra systems, it is asserted that every consciousness possesses an apprehending aspect which turns out to be of [that consciousness's] own nature. This aspect is oriented solely inwards, devoid of any dual(istic) appearances and, by virtue of cognizing itself, it cognizes both itself and the apprehended aspect. It is an independent (*yan gar ba*) apprehending aspect, free from dependence on the appearance of the aspect of any object whatsoever.[13]

mKhas-grub-rje does not mention 'self-luminosity' (*rang gsal*). Aside from this omission, all the other elements found in Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa are also present here, though arranged in a different order. In mKhas-grub-rje's passage, the phrase *yan gar ba* occurs together with and next to the elements that, according to Williams's reading, would refer to the second type of *rang rig*. However, as noted above, in relation to Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's text, Williams assumes that the phrase *yan gar ba* still belongs to the first type. For Williams, it serves as a description of the subjective aspect (understood as *rang rig*) as 'different' from its objective counterpart (understood as cognition), thus implying a dualistic account of *rang rig*. On the other hand, in mKhas-grub-rje's version, it is clear that the term *yan gar ba* should be read as 'independent', since *rang rig* is not depending on the appearance of the aspect of any object and, therefore, remains without dependence on any object, in so far as there is one. This leads to a different point: in the passage quoted above, the qualifications of the apprehending aspect as "independent", "oriented

13 Cf. Cabezón's translation (1992, 346).

solely inwards",[14] and "cogniz[ing] itself" all seem to address the self-referential or independent character of cognition itself, rather than implying any ontological separation between self-cognition and cognition. Simply put, any cognition, *qua* self-cognizant, does not have to depend on its specific object(-appearance) and is not affected by the way the object(-appearance) is. After all, every cognition has a self-luminosity that does not 'care' about the object of the cognition. Thus, in mKhas-grub-rje's excerpt, what seems to be at stake is the independent or self-referential character of cognition itself, rather than the difference between *rang rig* and its *gzung rnam* – as Williams claims.[15] In other words, the distinction made by both Tibetan scholars between the two aspects (the subjective and the objective) is not intended to suggest any form of subject-object dualism between them: rather, it appears to serve as an analytical device to describe the reflexive and non-dual nature of cognition. Therefore, it is not fully obvious how and why Williams reads the reflective model into Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's passage.

Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's (1990, 752.7-14) passage forms a single, coherent description of the notion of *rang rig*, incorporating various expressions that all point toward a unified reflexive account. If this *yan gar ba* subjective aspect truly existed, it would entail the collapse of any distinction between knower and known, ultimately leading to an untenable and absurd conclusion. Indeed, just a few pages after the excerpt quoted above, mKhas-grub-rje (1972, 421.6) expresses the core of the general dGe-lugs criticism against *rang rig*:

> No matter how extensively one reflects on the independent (*yan gar ba*), inward-directed apprehending aspect, not even the slightest conceptual image of distinct isolates (*ldog pa*) for what is cognized (*rig bya*) and what cognizes (*rig byed*) arises.[16]

14 For some specific expressions that appear in Tibetan accounts of self-awareness, like those in consideration, and their relation with classical Indian *pramāṇa* theory, see Yiannopoulos (2012, 155), who comments: "'Mere awareness' and 'mere luminosity' are more or less accurate glosses, but 'turned solely inwards' (*nang kho nar phyogs*) is a fatal mischaracterization". This comment hints at the fact that talking about an inward direction implies an outer direction and therefore dualism, whereas dualism is not present in the *pramāṇa* theory. If applied to the two passages at stake in these pages, Yiannopoulos's reflection would perhaps support the idea that the expression *nang kho nar phyogs* retains a dualistic *substratum*.

15 Cf. the description of *rang rig* offered by Tshong-kha-pa (2009, 363.4-5), for instance: "*rang rig ni shes pa thams cad kha nang lta la rig bya dang rig byed tha dad par snang ba nub pa'i 'dzin rnam yan gar ba yin*" (Self-awareness is the inward orientation of all consciousnesses and the independent apprehending aspect in which the appearances of 'what is cognized' and 'what cognizes' as distinct subside).

16 mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 421.6: "*kha nang ltas kyi 'dzin rnam yan gar ba de la rtog pas ji tsam yid gtad kyang rig bya dang rig byed kyi ldog pa so so'i spyi 'char rgyu cung zad kyang med*".

As a consequence, the objects of the actions and their doers (*bya byed*) would become the same (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 422). For the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas, the reasons for refuting *rang rig* are self-referentiality, a non-dependence on the object of the cognition, a lack of proper duality, and a lack of dependence-on-other. This refutation seems to provide further evidence that the model of *rang rig* refuted by them is reflexive.

Thus, it is difficult to accept the legitimacy of Williams's use of this very passage as a foundation for introducing the major topic of his book – namely, the two distinct categories for understanding self-awareness. In addition, it must be noted that although Williams does distinguish between these two models, in one passage he also acknowledges that one can collapse into the other, thus weakening the rigidity of the distinction and possibly reflecting a reconsideration of it. This is what Williams claims about the relationship between the two models and the possibility for either one to be reduced into the other:

> It should also be clear, however, that although I am arguing self-awareness (i) is different from self-awareness (ii), I do not wish to maintain that the one cannot be reduced to the other through a combination of (sometimes debatable) presuppositions and inference. Quite the reverse. It might be argued, for example, that in the case of self-awareness (i), since for Cittamātra there is no external reality causing the aspect of blue when the eye-consciousness takes on the aspect of blue, it follows that in reality the eye-consciousness cannot take on the aspect of blue. Thus when the subjective aspect experiences the objective aspect, pure awareness experiences pure awareness. If this is the case, there is no longer any differentiation into subjective and objective aspects. Therefore, if we have consciousness at all we must be left simply with self-reflective consciousness with absolutely no differentiation into subject and object – that is, it would seem, self-awareness (ii).
>
> One could also argue for the reverse […]. Śāntarakṣita wants to argue that […] it is not possible in reality for consciousness to contact insentient objects. Thus in knowing an object, consciousness must really be apprehending itself in the form of the object. Therefore, from the reflexive nature of consciousness as its uniquely defining quality one moves to an epistemology where consciousness apprehends itself in the form of the object. That is, one moves from self-awareness (ii) to self-awareness (i). (Williams 1998, 32-4)

Ram-Prasad observes, even more strongly, what Williams points out in the above quote:

> I am indebted to Paul Williams here for his acute remark that there are two types of self-awareness here: one is the cognition of the object which turns out actually to be part of cognition itself; and the other is the constitutive cognition of its own occurrence. But, as he points out, the former collapses into the latter, regardless of whether that is what Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla intended or not. Since the objectual aspect of a cognition is itself part of consciousness, to be aware of that aspect is to be aware of the fact of consciousness itself. (Ram-Prasad 2007, 69 fn. 31)

Returning to the term 'ambiguity' used by Williams (1998, 4) in reference to the 'lack of clarity' in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition between two models for understanding *rang rig*, one might speculate that the core issue actually lies in the relationship among the structural aspects of cognition itself, that is, in the 'tension' between them. It might be seen as an ambiguity in the sense that self-awareness can be conceptually described as composed of two aspects, yet no bya-byed relationship can be distinguished, since both aspects share the same nature. Alternatively, it could be viewed as an ambiguity insofar as *rang rig* is non-dualistic, and yet is often described as a cognition being aware of itself while remaining dualistically open to the other – being the self-awareness of a cognition which, in turn, is a cognition of something else. However, rather than a true doctrinal ambiguity, these instances could be seen as subtle analytical nuances of a fundamentally non-dual phenomenon, nuances that require careful and precise analysis and that have historically presented a challenge for dGe-lugs interpreters.[17]

In this light, and with reference to the classificatory attempt made by Williams in his manifesto, one might question whether the reflective model of self-awareness can, in fact, be identified as an explicitly and evidently doctrinally endorsed view within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Williams himself does not appear to share this concern: he asserts that this model stems primarily from Dignāga and the Yogācāra tradition. However, as shown (§ 3.1), such an intentional model is not mapped out clearly in Dignāga's account, and, therefore, this claim appears to be unfounded.

In any case, it is perhaps not difficult to fall into a dualistic misunderstanding when trying to grasp how *rang rig* operates.

17 The usual way the later dGe-lugs exegesis describes the relation between mind and its *svasaṃvedana* is in terms of *ngo bo gcig ldog pa tha dad* 'one nature, different isolates'. As they are the same entity, whatever is the one is necessarily the other, and there is no instance of one that is not also the other. They are not different consciousnesses. However, being different isolates, they are different for and separable by thought. For a detailed analysis on isolates as they are seen by Phur-bu-lcog Byams-pa-rgya-mtsho, see Perdue 1992, 411-80. See Williams 1998, 8 fn. 9, for his understanding of this exegesis in light of what he identifies as the reflective model of *rang rig*.

One possible example of the misunderstanding that conceives the notion of *rang rig* as reflective – implying a simultaneous intentional dualism within the two aspects of any cognition – can be traced to a thesis presented precisely in the *TJ*, specifically in the section from which, as previously noted, both Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa and mKhas-grub-rje cite a passage. Although this *TJ* excerpt claims to represent the Cittamātra view, it does not present it faithfully;[18] rather, it formulates a position in which the two aspects of cognition are held to arise simultaneously and to possess distinct entities. There is no scholarly consensus regarding the actual source of the theory presented in this *TJ* passage; it is clear, however, that it does not correspond either to Dignāga's view or to the general Cittamātra perspective. Since the sources of the position expressed in this *TJ* passage are unclear, it is doubtful whether it actually represents any coherently endorsed tenets. Interestingly, though, the quotation that both Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa and mKhas-grub-rje take from the *TJ* constitutes only a small portion of that thesis – specifically, a part that is compatible with and taken by them to represent the common presentation of Cittamātra *rang rig*, in which the two aspects of cognition are not regarded as possessing different entities. It is possible, in any case, that the Indo-Tibetan tradition may have, in some cases, given rise to misunderstandings of the non-duality of *rang rig*, stemming from its analytical elaboration into two aspects. If so, this could lend some support to the ambiguity noted by Williams. However, such ambiguity is not as evident – nor as strongly emphasized or systematically linked to the main Buddhist tenets in doxographical terms – as Williams suggests. Thus, it seems that his reflective model, rather than representing a tenet or a proper standpoint on the issue, instead gives voice to the possible (and perhaps frequent, in the subsequent tradition) risk of wrongly interpreting it by positing a non-dual mental phenomenon in a dualistic framework.

In conclusion, the analytical division of cognition into two aspects, the apprehending and the apprehended, does not seem to imply an interpretation of *rang rig* that aligns, even partially, with Williams's reflective model, at least based on the passages from the two renowned dGe-lugs authors examined here. As argued above, it is clear that their understanding of *rang rig* corresponds to the reflexive model, that is, to a fully non-dualistic form of self-awareness. This, in fact, is precisely the reason why *rang rig* is refuted by these authors: adhering to the Prāsaṅgika perspective, they reject the notion of non-dual awareness, as it would imply independence from the object and, consequently, intrinsic existence. In other words, the very fact

18 For the Tibetan text, see Hoornaert 2000, 84; for the English translation, see Hoornaert 2000, 101-2.

that *rang rig* is refuted by the dGe-lugs authors serves as a clear, albeit indirect, confirmation that their interpretation follows the model that Williams identifies as reflexive. At the same time, the method of analyzing *rang rig* by dividing it into two aspects has undoubtedly led to misunderstandings. As previously discussed, this didactic strategy, as employed in the dGe-lugs context, may perhaps be understood as a way of setting the ground for the refutation of self-awareness according to the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka standpoint – that is, as the first step toward refuting *rang rig*, since it exposes the absurd consequences that follow from collapsing the distinction between knower and known, agent and action. This tendency is exemplified in the previously cited passage from the *TJ*, and continues to generate confusion, as evidenced in Williams's exegesis.

4.1.2 Further Considerations on the Two Models

The global impact and resonance of Williams's identification of the two categories of interpretation of *svasaṃvedana* within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition is well attested in more recent Buddhist studies literature. The two models outlined by Williams, which purportedly emerge from the complexity of the Indian tradition and are subsequently traced within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as well, have become the principal categories of interpretation of self-awareness in most subsequent studies on the topic.[19] If his study represents the initial attempt in a series of increasingly detailed mappings of the ways in which the Buddhist tradition has conceptualized self-awareness, then it is worth examining and comparing some of the developments that followed – some more narrowly focused on the Indian Buddhist epistemologists, others broader in scope, extending to include other Buddhist authors as well as figures from European phenomenology and analytic philosophy. It will be interesting to observe how the exegesis of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist sources diverges from case to case – an evident sign that the debate on these texts remains open. Such divergences likely reflect and are shaped by the ongoing philosophical discourse on these topics in contemporary thought.

This discussion begins with the reflective model of self-awareness. This constitutes one of the most debated notions in the field – particularly in relation to its affirmation within the Indian Buddhist epistemological tradition and its subsequent developments. In this regard, it is worth revisiting Kellner (2010, 226). Although

19 In Arnold's words, for instance: "It has […] been widely noted, at least since Paul Williams's 1998 *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness*, that there are basically two main ways to understand this doctrine" (Arnold 2010, 324).

she does not provide a classificatory framework, Kellner offers a particularly insightful observation that helps to illuminate the difficulties involved in delineating a reflective model – and, more crucially, in attributing such a model to Dignāga. In her commentary on Williams's work, she underscores that the structure of reflective *svasaṃvedana* – or, as she terms it, 'intentional self-awareness' – is identified by Williams on the basis of a Tibetan commentary concerning the view of the two appearances in the *TJ*, and is rooted, therefore, in a post-Dignāga source.

> One should note […] that Dignāga's exposition of means and result does not unequivocally indicate that self-awareness here is nothing but intentional self-awareness – in fact, if one reads it unrelated to any subsequent tradition, one finds little in terms of explicit statements that point to intentional self-awareness. (Kellner 2010, 227)

Thus, Kellner draws her conclusions:

> Clearly, Williams' two kinds of self-awareness cannot be neatly mapped onto the different areas or contexts of Dignāga's presentation. (Kellner 2010, 228)

In fact, the intentional structure does not seem to do justice to the disclosure of one's own experiences to oneself, that is, what *svasaṃvedana* consists of, and this model cannot be clearly traced in Dignāga. The same point about Williams's 'self-awareness (i)' is also made clear by Yiannopoulos (2012, 154-5) in relation to the Indian Buddhist tradition: for him, the concept of 'self-awareness (i)' is inaccurate regarding the views of Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla as none of these theorists ever proposed it.

Among the most significant classificatory contributions to the topic, Duckworth's (2015, 207) study stands out. His analysis encompasses both Indo-Tibetan Buddhist and European philosophical perspectives. He identifies three distinct models of *svasaṃvedana*, notably including a reflective model which, he argues, is not explicitly addressed within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions. This first model, labeled "awareness of a self", is presented not as a doctrinal stance endorsed by these traditions – indeed, it is explicitly rejected – but, rather, according to some interpretations (including that of Tsong-kha-pa), as a view that may nonetheless be implicitly operative within the latter two models of self-awareness. The second type is "first-personal access to experience". This implies "being aware as an experiential subject when aware of something" in a manner characteristic of modern phenomenology. The third model is

a form of self-awareness that not only describes subjective experience but also encompasses "the structure of reality" (Duckworth 2015, 207) and, as Duckworth presents it, follows the accounts of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. It constitutes "the way that the mind presents itself in the phenomenal features (*ākāra*) of an object and a subject" (208).

According to this view,

> everything, subjects and objects, arise in and as awareness. In this interpretation, experiential reality is nothing but awareness; the world is irreducibly singular (or rather, non-dual) even though it presents itself as a duality of subjects and objects. (208)

For the sake of clarity, Duckworth provides a chart:

> Reflective self-awareness (object-directed; ontological):
> – SA-1: Awareness of self.
> – SA-2: Awareness of subject.
> Prereflective (reflexive) self-awareness (phenomenological):
> – SA-2: Awareness as subject (apprehender-aspect); subjective feel of a cognition.
> – SA-3: Awareness as structure of experience (apprehender-apprehended).
> Notice that SA-2 pivots between egological (SA-1) and ecological (SA-3). (Duckworth 2015, 208)

In particular, without dwelling further on the first type of self-awareness – the reflective type – which has perhaps already been sufficiently addressed through Williams's exegesis, it is worth noting that the second meaning, namely, the subjective feel of a cognition, can be conceived as a minimal self: the most basic sense of being a subject of experience. This perspective on self-awareness is reflected in the phenomenological tradition and is embraced by Buddhist thinkers such as Śāntarakṣita and Śākya-mchog-ldan (Duckworth 2015, 209). Regarding the third meaning of self-awareness, Duckworth explains that it can be identified with the self as universe, or a boundless self, "an all-embracing unity, the source and substance of everything" (208). This third type, in Yogācāra:

> is not only prereflective, but also resembles the substance of Spinoza's dual-aspect monism. Like Spinoza, who used thought and extension as examples of *attributes* of substance, Dignāga […] and Dharmakīrti […] outlined subjective and objective features of self-awareness. […] Self-awareness in this case is thus both the means and content of knowledge, similar to Spinoza's notion of substance […]. Spinoza also supported the case that subjects and objects only appear to be distinct but in fact are not by following

> the principle that unlike things cannot be causally related,[20] like Dharmakīrti. (Duckworth 2015, 209; italics in the original)

Watson's (2010, 315) classification pertains and is limited to the work of the Indian Buddhist epistemologists. In his account, the model of *svasaṃvedana* is explicitly intentional in structure and is outlined as three-fold: (i) "the subject-pole of a cognition perceiving the object-pole", (ii) "the subject-pole perceiving itself" or "cognition perceiving its subject-pole", and (iii) "cognition's perception of both the subject-pole and the object-pole". Following Watson, the first model might be derived from Dignāga's *PS* 1.10 and may also be found in Dharmakīrti's account; the second might be derived from *PS* 1.11-12, related to the memory argument and, therefore, the context of memory in which consciousness cognizes its own apprehending aspect; and the third from *PS* 1.9a – the very passage previously examined in detail thanks to Kellner's work (2010).

For his part, in a highly detailed and comprehensive study, MacKenzie (2007, 40 ff.) distinguishes three theses concerning the notion of self-awareness, each applicable to both Indian and non-Indian perspectives. Each of MacKenzie's three models, however, possesses specific nuances and facets, allowing for various ways in which the models interrelate and intertwine, thus suggesting a spectrum of positions between intentionality and the phenomenology of experience.

- The Self-Awareness Thesis: if a subject is aware of an object, then the subject is also aware of being aware of that object;
- The Reflection Thesis: self-awareness is the product of a second-order awareness taking a distinct, first-order awareness as its intentional object;
- The Reflexivity Thesis: conscious states simultaneously disclose both the object of consciousness and (aspects of) the conscious state itself. (MacKenzie 2007, 40)

According to MacKenzie, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and Śāntarakṣita are "Buddhist reflexivists", much like most of the major thinkers in the European phenomenological tradition, including Sartre, for whom reflexivity becomes the centerpiece of the entire philosophical system (MacKenzie 2007, 40). Moreover, in one of his most recent works, MacKenzie (2024) refines and reaffirms the reflexivity model in terms of 'dual-aspect reflexivism', a notion that will be revisited (§ 7.2.1) in the context of contemporary reinterpretations of the richness of contemplative traditions, particularly as they engage

20 Here the reference is Spinoza's *Ethics* (Scholium to Proposition 10; Spinoza 2002, 221).

with current debates on widely discussed topics. Self-awareness is thus conceived as the most basic apprehension of the two facets of a cognitive event, with self-awareness, the object-aspect, and the subject-aspect all constituting features of a single occurrence. One possible hypothesis for understanding dual-aspect reflexivism, in its phenomenal character, is that, in some respects, it may straddle SA-2 and SA-3, to use Duckworth's terminology.

As seen in the classificatory examples mentioned above, contemporary scholarship has interpreted the reflective model in various ways, most often with reference to two distinct orders of consciousness. However, there is no consensus as to whether it should be regarded as a significant and autonomous type of self-awareness, nor regarding the authors to whom such a model can be reliably attributed. These divergences and ongoing debates clearly demonstrate how much scholarly attention this area continues to merit: the topic remains philosophically fertile and deeply promising in its implications.

4.2 Reflexivity and Luminosity of the Mind: Photism in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism

The next step in this reflection moves from the issue of the reflexivity of awareness, discussed thus far, to opening the discourse to another perspective – one already suggested by certain analogies encountered along the way such as the lamp or fire. The entire discourse, in fact, leads naturally to the topic of the luminosity of mind, given that the reflexivity of mind is "no different from the property of 'luminosity' [of mind]" (Kapstein 2000, 106). Since the notion of mind's luminosity is pervasive throughout the Indo-Tibetan tradition, while remaining far from homogeneous, the aim here is to outline its principal meanings and trace the key stages of its development, linking it to the concept of reflexivity. This offers an alternative yet complementary perspective on the same theme, one that may serve as a valuable lens through which to investigate further the nature of self-awareness.

In initially examining how consciousness is understood within the broader context of Indian philosophy, it is helpful to consider how Ram-Prasad introduces its luminosity in terms of the "phenomenal feel of consciousness" (Ram-Prasad 2007, 53). He proceeds by offering further elements of luminosity from the Indian perspective:

> Luminosity is the rendering of an event as subjective. It is that by which there is an occurrence, which it is like something to undergo. The subjective is *the having of experience* (*anubhava*). Luminosity is the Indian metaphor for phenomenality, the undergoing by

> the subject of something else (its object). The philosophers are agreed on all sides that consciousness is *phenomenological*; it is luminous. The debate is over the constitution of the phenomenality of consciousness. The debate is about what it is for there to be subjectivity. (Ram-Prasad 2007, 54; italics added)

Ram-Prasad stresses an understanding of luminosity in terms of the phenomenal experience that a 'subject' undergoes, but, as MacKenzie (2017) points out by shedding light on the 'transcendental' role of reflexivity, not all Indian philosophers would link phenomenality to subjectivity. In fact, from the Buddhist viewpoint, if experiences present themselves to a subject, that subject is none other than consciousness itself. Therefore, the necessary condition of any phenomenal appearance is the luminosity of mind – that is, for those strands of Buddhism that assert reflexive awareness, *svasaṃvedana* – since it is the condition for any object-directed intentionality and any phenomenal appearance. Conscious states exist only in so far as they are experienced, so they presuppose a subjective point of view within which they take place. This basic and minimal first-person point of view is luminosity, and it is in this sense that luminosity comes to be seen as transcendental (MacKenzie 2017). In other words, the mental event is itself the subject of experience, the minimal unit of what is perceived as the space and time of experiential events, that is, the insubstantial, luminous and transparent scenery or horizon of their manifestation.[21]

In Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, there has always been a great importance attached to light in all its various manifestations, metaphorical understandings and phenomenological forms. Thus, what might be called 'photism' is a fundamental trait running through the tradition, encompassing many different philosophical understandings of light or luminosity in relation to the mind. Within the broad domain of photism, however, it is essential to establish from the very outset a fundamental distinction that is linguistic in nature or, more precisely, semantic.

The concept of luminosity utilized when talking about self-awareness is conveyed by the term *prakāśa*(*tā*) (SKT; TIB *gsal* [*ba*]). This notion of

21 For further thoughts on the spatial and temporal dimensions of consciousness, see the "Abhidharmic Problematic" in Waldron (2003, 54-7). A few words might be helpful here to summarize the tension identified by Waldron and later discussed by MacKenzie (2011) regarding self-awareness. In Buddhist accounts of consciousness, the 'synchronic' analysis of discrete and momentary mental processes might be seen as challenging its overarching soteriological framework, particularly the 'diachronic' dimension of continuity over time and the path toward liberation. In relation to these two dimensions, *svasaṃvedana* could be understood as both an intrinsic part of the internal structure of a mental event and a crucial element in enabling the diachronic function of memory, at least within certain strands of Buddhist thought.

luminosity is exemplified by the metaphor of the lamp, which, in Indian Buddhism, originates in the Mahāsāṃghika philosophical tradition. It illustrates the idea that, just as a lamp illuminates itself while casting light on other objects, so too does the mind illuminate itself as it apprehends phenomena. Casey (2016) observes that, within Yogācāra and Madhyamaka views, luminosity is associated with emptiness, ultimate reality and the "illumination (*prakāśatā*) of the mind that makes apparent objects of awareness". *Prakāśatā*, therefore, denotes the feature or function of mind that renders objects of awareness manifest. It is the conceptual cornerstone of reflexive self-awareness, in which consciousness becomes present to itself in the very act of presenting or disclosing its object. Thus, the two terms *paraprakāśa* and *svaprakāśa* refer to other- and self-luminosity, respectively. On the other hand, with regard to the significance and function of light, a closely related notion is that of 'luminosity', expressed by the term *prabhāsvara*(*tā*) (SKT; TIB *'od gsal* [*ba*]), representing the underlying idea behind the notion of the purity of mind. This is a concept marked by multiple layers of meaning, encompassing soteriological, epistemological, ontological and physiological dimensions. Despite the distinct philosophical ideas they express, the two terms share semantic affinities, particularly within the Tibetan tradition. As a result, several scholars have translated both with the English term 'luminosity', a choice that has often led contemporary readers to conflate them as if they were interchangeable.

Having drawn this initial distinction, the following discussion will offer several clarifications within the broad framework of *prabhāsvaratā*. The aim will be to unpack the diverse aspects and iterations of this rich and expansive notion. In the final part of this section, the two concepts of *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā* will be revisited, with particular attention to their noteworthy points of intersection in the Tibetan tradition. The analysis will highlight the connections between these two conceptions of the mind's luminosity, elucidating their areas of convergence.

4.2.1 The Doctrinal Developments of the Notion of the Mind's Luminosity (SKT *Prabhāsvaratā*; TIB *'Od gsal ba*)

While the concept of the luminosity of mind as *prabhāsvaratā* is pervasive in the Śrāvakayāna, Pāramitāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, it is by no means homogeneous. Thus, the intention here is to sketch briefly the main steps of its development within these three main branches of the tradition. Tracing this conceptual trajectory from early to later doctrines contributes to a deeper understanding of what *prabhāsvaratā* entails and what its implications are. It also provides the basis for a meaningful comparison between its

characteristics and significance and those associated with the notion of luminosity as *prakāśatā*.

With regard to the secondary literature on the topic, it is worth noting that, despite the central role of the concept of luminosity in Buddhist thought and practice, relatively little academic research has been dedicated explicitly to this theme. To date, with few exceptions,[22] no comprehensive or systematic study has examined the term across the full range of major Buddhist traditions. Most informative references remain embedded in footnotes or passing remarks within works whose primary focus lies elsewhere. Moreover, the majority of available scholarly discussions on luminosity are framed from the perspective of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

Originally, the concept of the luminosity of mind (SKT *prabhāsvara*[*tā*]; TIB *'od gsal* [*ba*])[23] appears to refer to the purity of mind. Thanks to Franco (2000), who analyzed the few extant

22 For a cross-cultural philosophical study of the notion of the luminosity of the mind within both Indian and Chinese traditions, see Berger 2015. For a critical and comparative study of the notion of the luminous mind in Pāli discourse, see Anālayo 2017. As for Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Casey introduces the topic as follows: "In the context of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, the term is commonly translated as 'clear light' or 'radiant light', both of which are literal renderings from the Tibetan [*'od gsal*], while in the context of East Asian Buddhism it is commonly translated simply as 'purity'. Other common English translations include 'radiance', 'inner radiance', 'brightness', and 'luminous clarity'. Although luminosity is interpreted differently according to the various Buddhist traditions, it is most often employed to describe the mind's inherent characteristic of purity that lacks defilements such as afflictive emotions (*kleśa*)" (Casey 2016). A remarkable inquiry on the luminosity of mind is the chapter "La luminosité naturelle de la Pensée" in Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 409-54. Many further references are cited there. Among these, it is worth mentioning those referring to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Skorupski (2012) offers a complete overview of the notion of luminosity among the Early Buddhist, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, covering the most popular quotations from primary sources that describe the notion of luminosity in the Indo-Tibetan tradition. Primarily focusing on Dharmakīrti's interpretation of the notion of a naturally luminous mind, Jackson (1990) provides one among the few studies solely dedicated to an overview of the notion of luminosity in Buddhism. Another useful source is Harvey [1995] 2004, 166-79. Lamotte ([1976] 2011, lxxii–lxxx) briefly describes the luminosity of mind when presenting the concept of mind in Buddhist philosophy. Wangchuk (2007, 206-10) devotes a few pages of his monograph to the question of how the luminosity of mind comes to be regarded as *bodhicitta* and thereby offers a useful summary of the historical development of the concept of the luminous mind. For further information on the pre-Mahāyāna development of the concept, see Takasaki 1966, 34 fn. 57, and Rahder 1966, 420. Buswell and Lopez (2014, 653-4) have composed two short entries that give an accurate and concise introduction to the notion of luminosity in Buddhism. As for the importance of luminosity according to the general Tibetan understandings, cf. Tucci 1980, 63-7; Kalu Rinpoche 1997, 15-25; Kapstein 2004. Moreover, Casey (2015) devotes a paper to ignorance and luminosity in early bKa'-brgyud bsRe-ba literature, where she explains the non-duality of the two on the basis of their true state, that is, the true nature of mind which is luminosity.

23 Nevertheless, the Sanskrit does not always correspond to this Tibetan rendering: sometimes *prabhāsvara* is, problematically, translated as *gsal ba*, creating another source of confusion between it and *prakāśa*. See, for instance, Fukuda, Ishihama 1989, no. 450, s.v. "prabhāsvarā".

fragments of what is considered the earliest philosophical manuscript in Sanskrit, the so-called *Spitzer Manuscript*, there is evidence of some intricate arguments for and against the concept of the natural luminosity of mind among pre-Mahāyāna schools. The issue appears to have held considerable significance for them, as evidenced by the fact that an entire chapter of the manuscript is dedicated to the controversy surrounding the luminosity of mind and its relationship to cognitive-emotional defilements (TIB *kleśa*).

Anālayo (2017) argues that in the earliest layers of the discourses, the image of luminosity appears in relation to gold which, when heated, worked, and refined, becomes soft, workable, and luminous. This metaphor is used to illustrate the quality of equanimity when it is fully cultivated in the mind of the practitioner. Thus, in the early discourses attributed to the Buddha, luminosity is presented only as a simile, not as a defining characteristic of equanimity itself. Over time, however, a gradual doctrinal shift can be observed in the Pāli discourses. As Anālayo (2017) notes, luminosity begins to be directly associated with equanimity, and eventually it comes to describe the mind itself as luminous prior to the advent of defilements. This marks a transition from viewing the cultivation of the mind as a process of purification to one of recognizing its original purity. Moreover, in early Buddhist thought, "consciousness is something that is receptively aware, not something that actively illuminates" (Anālayo 2017, 17 fn. 26). Hence, in the early tradition, luminosity is not part of a general definition of the functions of consciousness. The conception of the mind as originally pure and luminous, and merely obscured by adventitious defilements, reflects a later stage of textual and doctrinal development.

Now, that said, going into further detail: among the pre-Mahāyāna schools that refer to a luminous *citta*, the Vibhajyavāda school, which is closely related to the Theravāda tradition, maintains that the root or fundamental nature of mind (SKT *mūla-bhāva*) is *prabhāsvara* – translated as 'brightly shining' by Harvey ([1995] 2004, 144), and as 'pure' by Bareau (1955, 175 th. 23).[24] The Mahāsāṃghikas assert that the own-nature (*svabhāva*) of mind is *prabhāsvara* (67-8 th. 44) while the Dharmaguptaka school maintains that this luminosity constitutes the nature (*bhāva*) of mind (194 th. 6). The Vaibhāṣika school takes a markedly different stance, rejecting the idea that the mind is naturally luminous. Instead, it holds that the mind is originally tainted by defilements and must be purified by abandoning them gradually (147 th. 80). Thus, while the aforementioned schools concur in affirming that the mind, once

24 Note that Bareau translates *prabhāsvara* as 'pure' (Bareau 1955, 175 th. 23) or "fondamentalement pure" (Bareau 1955, 147 th. 80).

purified, is luminous, they differ in their views concerning its original condition. The central point of contention lies in whether the mind is primordially luminous and subsequently obscured by defilements before being purified or whether it is originally defiled and attains luminosity only through a process of purification. In general, and taking into account Anālayo's (2017) observations about the earliest discourses, the growing tendency within early Buddhist doctrines to use the term *prabhāsvara* reflects an effort to convey that, since defilements can be completely removed from the mind, awakening is indeed possible. In this way, the luminosity of the mind functions as a doctrinal safeguard for the coherence and viability of the entire Buddhist soteriological project. Among the various Pāli sources on the topic, the well-known *Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.6 states:

> O Bhikṣu, cette Pensée est lumineuse (*pabhassaram*). Tantôt elle est affectée par les Affects adventices, et le profane qui l'ignore ne la connaît pas telle qu'elle est; par conséquent, je dis que le profane qui l'ignore n'a pas la cultivation de la Pensée. Et tantôt elle est libre des Affects adventices, et l'Auditeur Saint qui en a eu communication la connaît telle qu'elle est; par conséquent, je dis que l'Auditeur Saint qui en a eu communication a la cultivation de la Pensée. (Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 411)[25]

It seems that the fundamental understanding of the statement that mind is by nature luminous is that consciousness is fundamentally unpolluted or, at least, unpollutable. The Saṃyuttanikāya contains important passages, later quoted in the Ratnagotravibhāga, that explore the relationship between the defilement and the purification of the mind. These passages articulate the present condition of sentient beings in terms of the extent to which their minds are defiled or purified, thereby offering a framework for understanding their existential state (Lamotte [1976] 2011, lxxiv).

In this context, Shih's (2009) analysis of the notion that the mind is pure by nature is particularly noteworthy. This idea has prompted extensive discussion within the Abhidharma literature, as, in certain instances, it appears to contradict the foundational Buddhist principle of impermanence. If the mind possesses an unchanging nature, whether pure or impure, such a view would seem to violate the understanding that all conditioned phenomena are subject

25 *Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.6 (Morris, Hardy, [1885-1900] 1999-2013, 1: 10): "*pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ | taṃ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ | tam assutavā puthujjano yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti | tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa cittabhāvanā natthī ti vadāmī ti | pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ | taṃ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttaṃ | taṃ sutvā ariyasāvakō yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti | tasmā sutavato ariyasāvakassa cittabhāvanā atthī ti vadāmī ti |*".

to change. Moreover, this notion may also be seen as conflicting with another core Buddhist doctrine, namely the selflessness of phenomena, as it could be interpreted as implying the existence of a fixed self. Shih demonstrates that, within the Abhidharma literature, perceptive responses were developed to address these objections. By examining the context of key statements in the Pāli canon concerning the primordial luminosity of mind and the adventitious nature of its cognitive and emotional defilements, Shih clarifies that such assertions serve primarily as exhortations aimed at encouraging monks to cultivate and discipline their minds. By acknowledging that the original nature of mind is pure, practitioners are moved to eliminate the defilements from their mind and restore its luminosity. Shih concludes that:

> Unlike the Mahāyāna theory of *tathāgatagarbha*, which claims that the innately pure mind possesses all the virtues of the Buddha and that the revelation of this mind is the attainment of the Buddhahood, statements in the Pāli texts only emphasize the knowledge of the innate purity of the mind as a prerequisite step in the cultivation of the mind and the restoration of the purity of the mind is not the end of religious practice. […] the tranquil, luminous, and pliable mind is only the basis for further religious practices. (Shih 2009, 168)[26]

Moreover, in comparing Abhidharma sources with Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna perspectives, Skorupski calls attention to another significant dimension of the pre-Mahāyāna understanding of the luminosity of mind:

> While the Abhidharma sources largely analyzed the character of consciousness in terms of its ethical qualities, the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna pay more attention to the innate propensities of consciousness. In its innermost condition, the consciousness is understood as being pure or luminous irrespective of the ethical qualities that it may acquire. Considered in its innate condition, it is said to abide in a state of non-duality, but when it is defiled, it arises and functions in the form of duality. Its appearance in a dual form is attributed to ignorance (*avidyā*) as the main source of

26 One more understanding of the luminosity of mind in early Buddhism is suggested by Tan (2004), who takes inspiration from Harvey's above-mentioned work for listing various key references to the luminosity of mind in the early canon. Tan (2004, 45) concludes his inquiry by stating that: "In early Buddhism, the 'radiant mind' (*pabhassara citta*) refers neither to an absolutely pure state of mind nor to spiritual liberation, but is the dhyanic mind that is radiant on account of not being disturbed or influenced by external stimuli".

> defiled or erroneous misconceptions. The ultimate goal is not just the purification of consciousness from discursive misconceptions, but also the attainment of omniscience by awakening its pristine potentialities. (Skorupski 2012, 51)

In the Pāramitāyāna tradition, several scriptures describe the nature of mind as luminously pure. These include the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, a text from around the first centuries BC or AD, in which it is stated: "C'est que cette Pensée [*citta*] est en fait non-Pensée, et la nature de la Pensée est lumineuse" (Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 413).[27] The uncovered luminous *citta* turns out to be

> the ideal springboard from which to attain awakening, such that it can be seen as a kind of enlightenment-potential. Appropriately, one strand of Mahāyāna thought identifies the brightly shining *citta* with the *tathāgata-garbha*. (Harvey [1995] 2004, 175)

A valuable contribution to a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist conception of the luminosity of mind can be found in Almogi's reflections. These examine the doctrine of momentary luminosity by contrast with the notion of non-momentary luminosity:

> [Luminosity of mind] has been conceived by most schools of conservative Buddhism and by later Mahāyāna traditions, such as Yogācāra, simply as referring to one 'moment' of a pure mind (which is momentary by nature) – one replacing a previous 'moment' of a defiled mind after the latter has ceased. Therefore, 'pure mind' in such systems has no connotations of unconditionedness or eternality, unlike the term *prakṛtiprabhāsvaracitta* of the Tathāgatagarbha tradition. (Almogi 2009, 140-1 fn. 4)

To account for the later emergence of two distinct doctrines – that of momentary luminosity of mind and that of non-momentary luminosity – Wangchuk proposes that the concept of luminosity evolved to include not only conditioned, momentary manifestations but also an unconditioned and non-momentary dimension:

> It will thus perhaps be necessary to classify the luminosity of the mind under two types, namely, one that is conditioned (or momentary) and one that is unconditioned (or not momentary). […] I hypothesise that the extension of the idea of [conditioned] luminosity […] to that of [unconditioned] luminosity […] is connected

27 *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 1 (Mitra 1887-88, 19): "*tac cittam acittaṃ prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvāra* ||". For references and further studies on this passage, see Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 413; Harvey [1995] 2004, 175.

> with the development of the notion of the historical Buddha or of any *buddha*. (Wangchuk 2007, 208)

Thus, the development of this notion in the Pāramitāyāna implies that becoming a *buddha* involves a clearing up of the defilements, with a pristine immaculate mind as the result. Therefore, although the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions place primary italics on the stimulation and maturation of the mind's pristine qualities as the path to enlightenment, they also acknowledge the necessity of purging the mind of all defilements. This dual emphasis stems from the Prajñāpāramitā and Tathāgatagarbha literature, which portray the mind as naturally luminous and inherently pure.[28] Moreover, Mahāyāna sources do not limit the attribution of luminous purity to the nature of mind alone; rather, they extend this characterization to the nature of all phenomena (Wangchuk 2007, 208). The philosophical foundation for this view lies in the ontological discourse concerning the ultimate nature of phenomena, understood to be devoid of inherent existence. A central strand within the Madhyamaka tradition emphasizes this ultimate emptiness as the very condition that enables the purification of the mind, thereby allowing it to be understood as luminous.[29]

While the notion of the luminosity of mind recurs with notable consistency across most Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature – including the Śrāvakayāna, Pāramitāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions – its interpretation is far from uniform. Differing doctrinal perspectives, ranging from ontological analyses of emptiness to soteriological frameworks of mental purification, reveal a rich and multifaceted conceptual terrain in which luminosity operates both as a descriptive construct and as a transformative dynamic.

28 For references to the topic of *tathāgatagarbha* in relation to the luminosity of mind, see for instance Skorupski's (2012, 52-3) considerations on *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*.

29 One important contribution to the topic is Jackson's (1990) essay on the doctrine of the luminosity of mind in Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. As Jackson states, "the common theme among these various contextualizations of the concept of luminous mind seems to be that it is understood as referring to the mind's ultimate nature and/or its liberated state. The context, thus, is primarily ontological and soteriological, and few or no implications are drawn for 'conventional' epistemology" (Jackson 1990, 96). Interestingly, "for Dharmakīrti the mind's luminosity has not only soteriological importance, but importance also for our understanding of the conventional operations of the mind, i.e., for precisely that epistemological enterprise to which Dharmakīrti devoted the bulk of his labors" (97). Dharmakīrti's perspective is particularly meaningful in that it provides an epistemological analysis, at the conventional level, of luminosity in terms of the correct apprehension of objects and the adventitiousness of defilements in terms of the incapacity of error to persist in a correctly cognizing mind, in so far as an error lacks a support in how things actually exist. This analysis ends up having important consequences in the soteriological dimension: precisely because mind's nature is such, an ultimate correct cognition cannot be replaced by its false contrary, and thus a liberated state is irreversible.

As Kapstein (2004) insightfully observes, Indian Buddhism exhibits a certain ambivalence in its use of light imagery, at times suggesting a tangible or even physiological experience, and, at other times, employing it in a purely metaphorical sense. This complex legacy gave rise to two distinct currents in Tibetan Buddhism. On the one hand, the emphasis in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism on visualization practices and experiential engagements with light reinforced a 'cataphatic' use of light imagery, linked to the detailed description of a multitude of luminous manifestations and aligned with the affirmative tendencies of later Indian Buddhism. On the other hand, the Tibetan Madhyamaka perspective may be seen as continuing the 'apophatic' strand, in which light functions as a metaphorical, philosophical, and deconstructive figure, pointing not to phenomena themselves but rather to the emptiness that underlies them.

In the Vajrayāna tradition, the concept of a naturally luminous mind seems to have gained even greater prominence.[30] Before the consideration of even its soteriological significance, it is worth noting that this centrality arises in a context where, in Tantric experiences, various manifestations of light – whether visualized or visionary – permeate the stages of meditation and are "used to characterize those experiences phenomenologically" (Kapstein 2004, 128). Tibetan literature is rich in diverse modes of light,[31] and addressing them would require "a fuller phenomenology to disclose its varied modalities", necessitating further research (136). However, delving too deeply into this would take these considerations beyond the scope of the present work. What is crucial to highlight in the Tantric context is that luminosity becomes intimately connected with the practitioner's experiential path. It is integrated into a structured framework of training and internalized as part of a lived process, one that is guided by the wisdom necessary for its recognition and understanding in the pursuit of Buddhahood. Rather than being treated solely as an attribute of the mind's potential, luminosity is thus encountered directly as a transformative mode of conscious experience.

According to the Tantric tradition, a profound experience of luminosity can arise only when the grosser levels of consciousness have been absorbed or dissolved – such as during sleep or at the moment of death – thereby allowing the more subtle dimension of awareness to manifest itself. Thus, a Buddhist tantric practitioner aims to train in meditation in order to be able to recognize the

30 As, for instance, in Nāropa's *Sekoddeśatīkā* (Seyfort Ruegg 1971, 466 fn. 82).

31 Light can be "dim, radiant, or effulgent; diffused, refracted or sparkling, monotonal or multicolored; internal or external; holographic or unidimensional; and so on" (Kapstein 2004, 130).

appearance of luminosity in the death process, considered as a means for attaining enlightenment. In fact, in the Tibetan tantric traditions, the explanation of consciousness as luminosity and emptiness has been adopted to elucidate the death process in particular.[32] When examining the Tibetan traditions of Phyag-rgya-chen-po (Mahāmūdra) and rDzogs-chen, one encounters an interpretation of luminosity that appears to harmonize both apophatic and cataphatic dimensions. Rather than opposing these modes, these approaches interweave them into a subtle and integrated understanding of the nature of mind and reality. In fact, looking at those traditions, Casey (2015; 2016) remarks that luminosity is also seen as synonymous with the *dharmakāya*, the *dharmadhātu*, and the fundamental nature of reality as well as with self-awareness. In particular, when considering the Mahāmudrā tradition, Marpa's direct teachers, Maitrīpa and Nāropa, describe the naturally luminous mind as that which shines forth when reflexive awareness – understood in this context as both the path and the object of purification – is freed from the stains of conceptuality (Casey 2022). Consideration of the rDzogs-chen pivotal esoteric instructions reveals that, among them, there exist the pair of *thod rgal* and *khregs chod* – the two sets of practices that Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, 2: 334-5), a contemporary rDzogs-chen master, translates as 'all-surpassing realisation' and 'cutting through resistance', respectively. In *thod rgal*, luminosity plays a crucial role in

> clarif[ing] the apparitional aspect or corporeal objects into inner radiance in a spontaneusly present manner, and so caus[ing] the cessation of apparitional reality. (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, 2: 334-5)

In particular, through this practice, the apparitional aspects of objects and consciousness of the three realms is said to dissolve in the inner radiance of five-colored light which Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, 2: 337) calls the 'natural tone of awareness'. 'Four lamps' (TIB *sgron ma bzhi*) are involved in the practice and they constitute a foundational set of contemplative instructions that gradually lead the trainee toward the recognition of *rig pa*, the innate, non-dual awareness. They are called 'lamps' because each functions as a source of illumination, metaphorically shedding light on distinct dimensions of experience and thereby disclosing the nature of both reality and mind. Taken together, they facilitate a progressive unveiling of awareness itself. The practitioner is called to follow detailed procedures of visionary steps and complex visualizations. The core of the practice is experienced through inner light:

32 For a brief overview of this topic, see Skorupski's (2012, 54-64) description and analysis of this process.

> Within the expanse of emptiness […], the essence abides through its spontaneous presence in the manner of the light which is radiant within a crystal but not externally manifest. (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, 2: 342)

In summary, as this brief survey has shown, the notion of the luminosity of mind is far from homogeneous in its application. Across the various phases of the Indo-Tibetan tradition, multiple interpretations and uses of the concept have emerged. By outlining at least some of the key developments, this study has highlighted its associations with the theme of purity, its centrality to the soteriological aim of awakening, its importance to the practitioner's lived experience, its relation to the discourse on the ultimate nature of phenomena as devoid of inherent existence, and the doctrinal debate concerning the momentary *versus* non-momentary nature of luminous mind. The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist *corpus* abounds with both apophatic and cataphatic treatments of light and luminosity. At times, it employs the imagery metaphorically; at other times, it points to direct, experiential dimensions of the path. As such, luminosity permeates the tradition across its many layers, from abstract philosophical reflection to the most refined contemplative practices.

4.2.2 The Convergence of *Gsal ba* and *'Od gsal ba*

Having briefly explored the rich notion of *prabhāsvaratā* and its subsequent doctrinal developments, attention now turns to the convergence and interplay of *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā*, which together give rise to a comprehensive account of the luminosity of mind within the Tibetan context. As will be shown, their intersections reveal and disclose other important aspects of consciousness, such as those of the phenomenality, subjectivity and unity of experience.

To begin, it is worth noting that *prakāśatā* appears to correspond to the understanding of luminosity as expressed in the traditional Tibetan Buddhist definition of the nature of mind as *gsal zhing rig pa* – that is, 'clear' (or luminous, or illuminating) and 'cognizant'. This formulation is widespread in Tibetan literature, and it is along these lines that a contemporary dGe-lugs scholar asserts:

> The definition of mind is that which is clarity and cognizes. In this definition, 'clarity' refers to the nature of mind, and 'cognizes' to the function of mind. Mind is clarity because it always lacks form and because it possesses the actual power to perceive objects. Mind cognizes because its function is to know or perceive objects. (Geshe Kelsang Gyatso 1993, 16)

Thus, there are two claims being made in terms of 'clarity' (*gsal ba*): the feature of being different from matter and that of being able to perceive whatever appears to it. To further clarify the definition of mind as *gsal zhing rig pa*, a particularly relevant passage can be found in a recent Tibetan compendium dedicated to consciousness and related themes. The text states:

> *gsal zhing rig pa shes pa'i ngo bor 'jog cing | 'di'i gsal ba ni shes pa'i ngo bo dang rig pa ni shes pa'i byed las so | de yang gsal ba zhes pa la (i) thogs reg can gyi bem po'i rang bzhin las 'das pas ngo bo gsal ba | (ii) me long du gzugs brnyan 'char ba bzhin shes pa la'ang yul bzang ngan dang bde sdug sogs phyi nang gi yul ci yang 'char du rung bas yul gsal ba dang | (iii) yang rang gi ngo bo la chags sogs nyon mongs pa'i dri mas bslad pa ma zhugs pas rang bzhin gsal ba'am 'od gsal ba ste go don du ma gsungs* |. (Kuntue Committee 2014, 2: 4.8-14)
>
> It is established that being luminous and cognizant is the essential nature of consciousness. Here, being luminous refers to the essential nature of consciousness, and being cognizant refers to the function of consciousness. Furthermore, many meanings are taught regarding 'being luminous': (i) the essential nature is luminous, as it is beyond the nature of tangible matter; (ii) the object is luminous, since, just as a reflection appears in a mirror, in consciousness too any type of external or internal objects – positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant, etc. – can appear; (iii) furthermore, the nature is luminous insofar as the contamination of defilements, such as attachment and others, does not enter in its essential nature.

Here, three meanings of *gsal ba* are outlined. The first pertains to the essential nature, or entity (*ngo bo*), of mind, and is particularly crucial when considering how to differentiate matter from consciousness, the latter being free from obstructive contact. This understanding of the term recalls Śāntarakṣita's view on the distinctive features of consciousness (§ 5.2). The second meaning relates to the object (*yul*) of mind: here, clarity is conceived of as what makes consciousness suitable to let internal or external objects appear to it. The third interpretation of clarity concerns the nature (*rang bzhin*) of mind, conceived as fundamentally undefiled by contaminations. In this layered explanation of *gsal ba* within the definition of mind, the third sense, which corresponds to *'od gsal ba* (*prabhāsvara*), is presented

alongside the second, which aligns with *gsal ba* (*prakāśa*).[33] Thus, this contemporary account of the luminosity of consciousness, particularly significant as it aims to serve as a compendium of Tibetan Buddhist thought, bears witness to the integration of the principal meanings examined thus far, reflecting how Tibetan philosophy has brought together diverse dimensions in which the themes of consciousness and luminosity intertwine.

Tucci's (1980, 63-7) illuminating account of photism in Buddhism contributes significantly to the present discussion by shedding light on the proximity between the two principal notions of the luminosity of mind. First, Tucci clearly states (1980, 64) that *'od gsal ba*, "light", has to be distinguished from *gsal ba*, "luminosity", which is "the capacity to emit light from the mind".[34] In an evocative passage on this point, on the one hand he states that "in the cognitive process (*shes pa*) luminosity and cognition belong essentially to each other" (Tucci 1980, 64), and, on the other, he claims that

> when the light (*'od gsal*) is not […] affected by defilements, and emerges in its natural purity, it is not a characteristic sign but an essential quality of the *sems*. (64)

In this context, Tucci appears to point to two distinct yet interconnected dimensions. The first pertains to the cognitive process, in which luminosity is associated with the activity of both self-cognizing and cognizing what is other. The second relates to the natural purity of the undefiled mind, in which the intrinsic light of consciousness is able to shine forth. Tucci thus seems to reveal a connection between these two forms of luminosity (TIB *gsal ba* and *'od gsal ba*; SKT *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā*), suggesting a deeper link between epistemology and soteriology. That is, he tends toward

33 One could distinguish between reflexivity (*svasaṃvedana*) and luminosity understood as the illuminating ability of mind because, as Williams points out, "as a conventional truth, in order for its [the mind's] nature to be luminosity it would seem that it should conventionally be reflexive, i.e. there should be *svasaṃvedana* conventionally […]. On the other hand it would not be incoherent for a dGe-lugs-pa to reply that he grants the conventional existence of luminosity but denies that this is *svasaṃvedana*, since one cannot speak of self-awareness where there is no subject-object relationship" (1998, 26 fn. 10).

34 Tucci remarks that, as for the Sa-skya view on the topic, luminosity is the "characteristic sign" (TIB *mtshan nyid*) of the mind, voidness is the "essence of mind", and these two aspects coincide in "transcendent consciousness" (TIB *ye shes*) and "flow together" (TIB *zung 'jug*) (Tucci 1980, 65). On the other hand, in the dGe-lugs view, luminosity is "the actual essence of *sems*", and a "characteristic sign of the cognitive faculty" (TIB *shes pa*) (66). Since his presentation is extremely concise, there is not sufficient material to understand why Tucci so strongly distinguishes *sems*, defined by him as "an energy of thought" (63) and "mental energy but also light" (64), from *shes pa*, "the cognitive faculty" (66).

a relationship between the dynamics of cognition, on the one hand, and the non-defilement or intrinsic purity of mind, together with its emptiness, on the other.

Once again, it is clear that the various aspects of photism that have emerged in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism are far from uniform in their interpretation and interconnection, spanning from early Buddhism in India to its later developments in Tibet. Nevertheless, the different philosophical understandings of consciousness's luminosity remain interrelated. Moreover, in light of the considerations outlined above, *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā* themselves may be seen as conceptually converging, as their respective meanings – one emphasizing the cognitive function of illumination, the other the intrinsic purity of consciousness – begin to overlap and mutually inform one another within the broader framework of Buddhist thought. In fact, purity of mind is its being devoid of defilements and stains, that is, of that which blocks, obstructs or twists the nature or activity of consciousness. Once cleansed, the mind is pure, and, therefore, its cognizant nature gains unimpeded and proper access to its objects. Thus, being pure, it is free to let its other- and self-cognizant activities fully unfold as an unrestrained cognizant luminosity. From this perspective, the two notions of the luminosity of mind reveal their link.

The deep link between mind and its luminosity – and, therefore, its reflexivity – reveals an account of consciousness that is quite dynamic and multi-faceted. The epistemological process, through which cognition allows appearances to arise and illuminates both other objects and itself, discloses the phenomenal and reflexive horizon of one's subjective experiences. This self- and other-illuminating process is also at the basis of one's ability to understand and penetrate reality and, hence, of one's ability to reach the soteriological goal. The luminosity of mind in terms of its purity converges with the soteriological trajectory of Buddhist practice. Luminosity also shows a deep link with emptiness, since in many strands of the tradition, the luminous nature of all phenomena is considered to be the ontological discourse on their ultimate nature, which is devoid of inherent existence. In sum, the Buddhist framework of the reflexivity of mind, combined with the concept of *prabhāsvaratā* as the purity of mind, carries profound implications; together, the two main notions of luminosity create what has been called the vast and encompassing dimension of photism that characterizes Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.