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The Debate of Idealism in Vasubandhu's Yogācāra: With an Introspection of Phenomenology

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Abstract:

History of philosophy in India is characterized by two great and profound oppositions: on one hand, the opposition between substantialism and phenomenology, and, on the other hand, the opposition between realism and idealism. This paper titled "The Debate of Idealism in Vasubanhu's Yogācāra School: with an Introspection of Phenomenology", would try to bring out the arguments to the question of -whether Vasubandhu be regarded as an "idealist" or not- with some aspects of Phenomenology of Husserl and conclude with some critical appreciation.

Key words: *Cittamātra,* Idealism, Phenomenology, *svabhāva, Tathāta, Triṃśikā-kārikā, Viṃśatikā Kārikā Vijñapti Matratā. Vipāka- Vijñāna*

Vasubandhu and Idealism:

Vasubandhu is one of the most prominent figures in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India. To Vasubandhu, dogmatic reliance on any one method never exists, and there may be even within one work multiple and constantly unfolding outlooks on a particular range of problems. (Stefan Anacker, 1). This is why it is easy to misunderstand the purpose of his writings if only some works are considered.

To call a view idealist it is sufficient merely that it hold that everything is dependent upon mind- a mind, or many minds. Idealists hold that the natures or forms of things are mind-dependent. Idealism says that -ideas, or minds, are in one way or other behind, or prior to, all forms of existence. From another point, 'idealism', may be defined as any of a group of philosophical doctrines that share the monistic view that material objects and the external

world do not exist in reality independently of the human mind or constructs of ideas or that the real is of the nature of thought or that the object of external perception consists of ideas.

Given the definition of idealism, now the question arises as – is Vasubandhu, the author of the *Twenty Verses* and the *Thirty Verses*, and the *Three Natures Exposition*, a metaphysical idealist? At first it seems sensible that he is. The evident purpose of the Twenty Verses is to suggest the idealistic thesis that whatever aspects of the world appear to be independent of mind, they are better explained as mental constructions. This means to say that Vasubandhu is not only an idealist in the sense that he believes that everything in experience is dependent upon mind, but he also believes that everything simply is mind.[1] This is the radical "mind-only" (Cittamātra) position that he believes is necessitated by adherence to a Mahayana worldview.

There are two levels to Vasubandhu's "idealism". The first level points to an analysis of what appears in perception- everything that we ordinarily ascribe existence in the world-such as a self or an object- is actually only mental. The second level points to the causal story that brings about such appearances. It is mental causation that brings about our mental experiences. It is the second level, then that confirms Vasubandhu as an idealist. Not only the reality that we inhabit, but also the causal supports upon which such a reality depends, are only mental. In addition to a causal idealism, Vasubandhu's is a universal, ontological idealism.

Behind these two levels, there is an important sense to say that Vasubandhu is not really an idealist. Vasubandhu believes that whatever can be stated in language is only conventional, and therefore, from an ultimate perspective, it is mistaken. Ultimate reality is an inconceivable "thusness" (Tathāta) that is perceived and known only by enlightened beings. The idea of "mind" is just as mistaken as are ordinary "external objects". Therefore, Vasubandhu is an idealist, but only in the realm of conventions. Thus he affirms ineffability.

Level 1	Experience	False Appearances(self, objects, concepts)	Idealism
Level 2	Causality	Storehouse Consciousness (produces consciousness)	Idealism
Level 3	Ultimate Reality	Only Buddha know (Tathāta)	Ineffability

Fig: Levels of analysis of Vasubandhu

Vasubandhu may be an idealist, in the strict sense, but he is not what 20th century religious studies textbooks call a "mystic philosopher". His work does not take the direct examination of "experience" as its theme, but, rather, it draws upon scripture and rational argumentation for its critiques of the available accounts of reality.

Questions Raised by Realists against Idealists:

The "idealist" statement invited immediate objections from realists:

(1) If perception occurs without referring to an external object, then there could be no determination of space and time. But then why does the perception of a certain thing occur only at a specific time and place, not anytime and anywhere? If perception arises from the consciousness without referring to any external object, then one could perceive, for instance, a table anywhere and anytime. But, in fact, consciousness is not thus arbitrary. Therefore, the existence of an external object is necessarily required for the occurrence of perception.

Vasubandhu replied that in the case of dream a perception does occur at a specific time and place, though this does not correspond to any external object. For example, I had a dream that in the morning I saw Mr. Wang on the corner of a street. In this case time and space are determined even when Mr. Wang is nonexistent.

(2) Realists raised another question: If perception occurs without corresponding to an external object, why is it that many persons present at the specific time and space are able to have the same perception of something? In other words, if the perception depends on the consciousness only and not on the external object at all, then that specific perception could not be manifest to all observers who are present at the same time and place. But this is not the

case, for all drivers can see the red light when they stop in front of the traffic light. If this is true, then there must exist a real red light corresponding to the driver's perception.

Vasubandhu replied that common perceptions can occur without referring to an external object because observers share the same structure of consciousness. Vasubandhu gave an example of hell and hungry ghosts (which was popular and suitable for his contemporaries), saying that all hungry ghosts living in hell see the pushriver and the hell-guardians that in fact are nonexistent since they fall into hell because of the maturation (*Vipāka-)* of the same deeds (*karma*). According to the Buddhist tradition, the world of life-and-death is constituted by the experiences of those who share the same kind of *karma* in the past. Thus the structure of individual consciousness is supported by a common past. The Yogācāra coined a technical term, *Vipāka- Vijñāna* (maturation-consciousness) to designate this underlying structure of consciousness which results from the maturation of past deeds.

(3) The most striking criticism from realists is the problem of efficacy. If perception in the waking state is the same as that in a dream, so that all perceptions do not correspond to external objects, then why does the thing perceived in the waking state have efficacy whereas that in a dream does not? For instance, the poison and knife in a dream do not possess the function of killing, while in the waking state they do (Lin Chen Kuo, 3).

In response to this criticism, Vasubandhu did not deny the efficacy of things and actions, but argued that efficacy is exactly prompted by perception-only without necessarily relying on an external object as its cause. A good example is a wet dream in which sexual excitement can be aroused by a sex partner who in fact is nonexistent.

Up to this point, Vasubandhu defended his position quite satisfactorily by arguing that the three pillars of realism, i.e., determination of time and space, indetermination of observers, and efficacy, cannot prove the existence of external objects because they occur also in situations in which no external object exists. Vasubandhu admitted the above three conditions of experience. However, he did not accept the realist's theory, but argued that what is experienced or perceived is perception-only (*Vijñapti Matratā).*

Yogācāra Idealism:

Yogācāra Buddhism as a distinct and important school first attracted the attention of Western scholars early in the Twentieth century (Dan Lusthaus). The alternative names of this school, Cittamātra (consciousness only) and

Vijñapti Matratā (impression-only), hint at one of its most fundamental ideas: the view that nothing outside of the mind exists, and that things that do not appear mental to us, are just cleverly disguised kinds of mental phenomena. The enormity and complexity of Yogācāra has posed a daunting, but rewarding challenge to the Western scholars who have attempted to tackle it.

Phenomenology and Buddhism both take the whys and how of human experience as their starting and concluding points. Both focus on similar epistemological issues, such as perception, sensation, cognition, noetic construction, embodied conditioning, and the overcoming of embodied ways of seeing the world. Both propose, through methodic investigation of the way we cognize, to resolve the most fundamental human dilemmas and problems.

Buddhist phenomenology reached its peak in the Yogācāra School. Yogācārins examined the structure and function of cognition from epistemological, logical, psychological, ethical, and esoteric perspectives, and they saw that it was precisely in the realm of cognition that the key problematic diagnosed by Buddhist thought was situated. That problematic is the karmic economy driven by appropriational habits.

Technically speaking, the label 'idealism' is too vague to be meaningful. In its broadest usage, the term 'idealism' includes everything other than or opposed to materialism, 'materialism' being the belief that matter is the most fundamental reality lying behind everything.. In the West, the label 'idealism' has been used commonly to highlight three positions or commitments:

1) The mind or some super-mental, non-material entity or force *creates* all that exists. This is *metaphysical idealism.*

2) The ultimate ground of all that is or can be conceived is the cognizing subject, such that the subjective self is the one epistemological non-reducible factor. This is a different form of metaphysical idealism, closer to *epistemological idealism.*

3) *Critical epistemological idealism*, as opposed to metaphysical idealism, need not insist on metaphysical or ontological implications, but merely claims that the cognizer shapes his/her experience to such an extent that s/he will never be able to extricate what s/he brings to an experience from what is other to the cognizer. Like can only know like, so what is truly other is essentially and decisively unknowable precisely because it is other, foreign, alien, inscrutable (Dan Lusthaus, 23).

As the present work intends to argue, these idealistic positions are thoroughly inappropriate for Yogācāra. Rather than claiming that a cosmic mind creates the universe, they assert, on the contrary, that one only comes to see things as they actually become by 'abandoning' or destroying the mind. Rather than holding the self or subject as non-reducible, their project aims precisely at the deconstruction and overthrowing of the cognitive conditions that give rise to the delusion of self-hood. *For* Yogācāra *'mind' is the problem, not the solution.* Yogācārins treat the term vijñaptimātra as an epistemic caution, not an ontological pronouncement. Having suspended the ontological query that leads either to idealism or materialism, they instead are interested in uncovering why we generate and attach to such positions in the first place. Insofar as either position might lead to attachment, Yogācāra clearly and forthrightly rejects both of them.

Phenomenology:

Phenomenology is defined as the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed towards something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.

Yogācāra is Buddhist phenomenology (Dan Lusthaus, 29). The term 'phenomenology' already appeared in the works of Kant and Hegel, but it is the system developed by Edmund Husserl, along with elaborations by his German and French disciples, that generally receives the name Phenomenology in philosophic circles today.

Husserl's Phenomenology:

Edmund Husserl, founder of the phenomenological movement, employs the term 'phenomenology' in its etymological sense as the activity of giving an account (logos) of the way things appear (*phainomenon*). Hence, a phenomenology of time attempts to account for the way things appear to us as temporal or how we experience time.

Phenomenology maintains that consciousness, in its very nature as activity, is intentional. In its care for the interest in the world, consciousness transcends itself and attends to the world by a myriad of intentional acts, e.g. perceiving, remembering, imagining, willing, judging, etc.- hence, Husserl claims that intentional consciousness is correlated (i.e. co-related) to the world.

By 'idealism' Husserl meant the region of ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., in other words, the total spectrum of conscious experience as it is constituted and present to us. 'Transcendental Idealism' thus signifies an investigation of those conditions through which we experience and think that are not readily apparent while we are experiencing and thinking. Husserl's philosophy, therefore, strove to be 'presuppositionless.' Yogācāra shares Husserl's concern with epistemic questions, namely the search for the cognitive roots of knowledge (and ignorance), as should any Buddhist. Husserl labeled his philosophy 'Transcendental Idealism' based on ontological commitments not shared by Yogācāra.

Conclusion:

In the Buddhist tradition, Vasubandhu always enjoyed a pre-eminent position as the systematizer of Yogācāra *(*David J Kalupahana 126). Even if Maitreya and Vasubandhu were to be called Vijñānavādins, there seems to be no justifiable reason for considering them to be idealists advocating some form of an Absolute like the Hindu Brahman. Such an interpretation could emerge only if the yogic method they were advocating as Yogācārins were to be equated with that of the Brahmanical schools. It is this wrong equation, along with the hidden premise that a philosophy interpreting the way of yoga should necessarily involve a denial of the objective world of experience that has solidified the view that Vijñānavāda is 'idealism'. (David J. Kalupahana, 127)

In Vijñapti Matratāsiddhi, Vasubandhu focusses only on consciousness, which is exclusive of the external world. This means that he is only suspending it, and not denying it. It has two parts- Viṃśatikā Kārikā - which has 20 parts, and Triṃśikā-kārikā, which has 30 verses.

To the question of Vasubandhu being an idealist- there are arguments which support that he is, and there are some which says he is not as discussed in the above paragraphs. For the Buddhist, external reality exists, but not in a way which can be usefully articulated from the soteriological point of view. The mind similarly exists, though the precise nature of its form of existence is likewise problematic. Vasubandhu, having abandoned the realist metaphysics, could not proceed to adopt those of the idealists either (David J Kalupahana, 127).

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