



Subjective Idealism

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ABSTRACT: Vasubandhu argues that everything is mental rather than materialistic. That is, the perception or notion one conceives is simply that, an idea, and not an object that relates to the direct experience. This essay looks at Vasubandhu's model of subjective idealism and how it intertwines with Yogacara Buddhism. However, as will be seen, it is clear that if there is an eradication of all forms of intellectual capacity, then it also eliminates any state of the mind.

Keywords: vasubandhu, subjective idealism, philosophy, yogacara buddhism, buddhist, store-consciousness, mind

In his essay *Vimsatika*, Vasubandhu believes that everything is mental rather than materialistic. He states that the idea of "matter" is only an "idea" and is never itself an object of direct experience. This is the belief that the individual's mind is supreme. It is a metaphysical view holding that everything consists of the mind (Vasubandhu 354). Under this view, sensations are not produced by material objects. For instance, when I see a circle, what I really observe is the idea of that circle in my mind. The main point of this is whether that circle exists independently of the idea of it that is in my mind. According to the Yogacara Buddhist theory, the circle does not exist outside the image in my mind. This is the essence of subjective idealism.

The Yogacara Buddhist's argument for subjective idealism is that all beings, both sense-faculties and sense-objects, are nothing but the subjective manifestation of our own consciousness (Vasubandhu 354). Vasubandhu argues that the emptiness of the object as being its lack of external reality, and is purely mind dependent. At the same time, however, he asserts that the foundational mind truly exists as the substratum of the apparent reality represented in our experience. Yogacara believes that what we perceive through our senses is only a momentary glimpse of our own consciousness (Vasubandhu 355). This view holds that that which is perceived is not independent of the mind-state that perceives it. Thus, the mind and its object of attention are "one."

In a somewhat different context, another argument supporting subjective idealism is that one cannot prove the existence of the "whole" by its various "parts." Vasubandhu contends that any external object of our mind's perception cannot be considered to be one whole object, because we cannot perceive the substance of the whole apart from its parts (Vasubandhu 355- 56). Therefore, the existence of the perceived object is not any different than our consciousness of it.

One of the more obvious problems with Yogacara's mind-only argument is that it really supports the philosophy of materialism. One could argue from a materialistic viewpoint that the mental state that perceives the object could not exist without the physical object of its perception. Without having the object to perceive or the memory of the perception, the mental state would have absolutely no basis for its existence (Vasubandhu 355-56). Moreover, the mental state that Yogacara argues exists independently, is really only contained in a human brain—which certainly has a physical form. If the cognitive functions of the physical brain cease to exist, then likewise the mental state ceases. Thus, it could be argued that the mental state exists only because of the existence of the physical brain which controls its function.

To explain how the ordered world appears to us, Vasubandhu acknowledges two means of knowledge acquisition: direct perception and rational inference. He considers it very important to follow the radical epistemology that was formulated by Buddha (Vasubandhu 356- 57). The knowledge of the reality of the object is distorted by the personal perception and by subjective mental conceptualization. What is real for him is the representation-only. According to Vasubandhu, mental perception is similar to the dream experience, but that doesn't mean the negation of the objective existence of the external world (Vasubandhu 355). The main difference between the waking state and the dream state is a lack of acute awareness in the dream experience.

To further explain how the physical world appears, Vasubandhu presents one very important observation of the epistemological examination of the perception that is the difference between the direct

perception of the object, and the mental grasping of that direct perception. His analysis of perception is directed against the existence of the metaphysical subject and the belief that it is not possible to know anything purely objectively. The process of conceptualization is based on the interaction of the unconscious tendencies and the imagination created by previous experiences and those springing up from the store-consciousness (Vasubandhu 356-57). Recognition is not a projection of consciousness; it is a karmatically-determined interaction of senses and the sensible object.

Although it is not entirely clear from his writings, it appears that Vasubandhu is not espousing the idea that objective phenomenon in the external world are non-existent. Rather, the argument is that the perception of the object and the object itself cannot be separated, and are therefore both part of a stream of consciousness (Vasubandhu 357). If, however, the mental state and the external world cannot be separated, there is an analytic problem with Vasubandhu's theory. That is, how can the ordered material world appear to us at all in the mind-state? To answer this question, it makes no sense to argue that objects of the material world are only part of own "stream of consciousness" – since this assumes that phenomena exist somewhere to give rise to an "image" of the material object of our perception. This presumption thus acknowledges that the image in our mind and the consciousness of it are necessarily independent of one another. Therefore, Vasubandhu's theory of mind-only idealism is flawed since his analysis presumes the existence of material objects outside the mental state of being, and fails to account for the nature of their existence.

Yogacara's subjective idealism is aimed at the elimination of the objective world and the "wisdom" that distinguishes the things found in the material world (Vasubandhu 359). Under this view, when both are extinguished, what remains is the "state" of mind-only. One of the primary difficulties with this position is that it wants to eliminate the mental conditioning process of discrimination (Vasubandhu 358) and the mental wisdom used to distinguish various phenomena in order to reach the perfect state of mind. However, such a perfect state of mind--devoid of objectivity and "wisdom"--can only be achieved through this dual elimination process. Thus, if the object of Vasubandhu's subjective idealism is the attainment of nirvana--where only the mind exists--then his methodology is flawed in that he purports to eliminate the existence of "wisdom" to achieve that goal. While it appears that Yogacara argues there are various levels of wisdom (relative knowledge to perfect wisdom), it is clear that if we eradicate all forms of intellectual capacity we have likewise eliminated any state of the mind (Vasubandhu 359). And without any form or state of mind, there can be no basis for the position that only the mind exists. In essence, what Vasubandhu's metaphysical theory does is to analyze the misdirection of materialism by showing that all objectivity is only a product of mental ideas. The problem is that Vasubandhu takes this analysis to a dogmatic realm (Buddhism) based upon the elimination of the same mental states that led him to such perfected wisdom. In the end, Vasubandhu cannot describe his own state of mental perfection other than to call it "the law of the Great Buddha" (Vasubandhu 359).

Works Cited

Vasubandhu. *The Vimsatika and Trimsika. Introduction to World Philosophies*, edited by Eliot Deutsch, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1997, pp. 354-359.