

VASUBANDHU
(4th Century AD)

TWENTY VERSES ON CONSCIOUSNESS-ONLY
(Vimsatika-Karika)¹

Reality as Consciousness-Only

Yogacara² Thesis: In Mahayana philosophy . . . , [reality is] viewed as being consciousness-only Mind (*citta*), thought (*manas*), consciousness (*chit*), and perception (*pratyaksa*) are synonyms. The word "mind" (*citta*) includes mental states and mental activities in its meaning. The word "only" is intended to deny the existence of any external objects of consciousness. We recognize, of course, that "mental representations seem to be correlated with external (non-mental) objects; but this may be no different from situations in which people with vision disorders 'see' hairs, moons, and other things that are 'not there.'" [Verse 1]

Objection: "If there is perception and consciousness without any corresponding external object, any idea could arise at any time or in any place, different minds could contain ideas of different objects at the same time and place, and objects could function in unexpected ways." [Verse 2]

In other words, (1) if the perception of an object arises without any object existing external to the mind, why is it that it arises only in certain places and not everywhere; and even in those places, why is it that it arises only sometimes and not all the time? (2) And why is it that it arises in the minds of all who are present at that particular time and in that particular place and not just in the mind of one, just as the appearance of hair, etc., arises in the minds of those afflicted by an optical disorder, and not in the minds of others? (3) Why is it that the hair, bees, etc., seen by those suffering from an optical disorder do not perform the functions of hair, bees, etc., while the hair, bees, etc., seen by those not so afflicted do perform the functions of hair, etc.? Food, drink, clothes, poison, weapons, etc., that are seen in a dream don't perform the functions of food, drink, etc., while food, drink, etc., experienced in the waking state do perform them. An illusory town does not perform the functions of a town because of its non-existence, while an existing town does perform such functions. If external objects do not exist, these facts of experience cannot be accounted for.

Yogacara Reply: "Even in dreams, certain ideas arise only in certain places and at certain times." [Verse 3a] That is, in a dream, even without external objects of consciousness, only certain things are seen — for example, bees, gardens, women, men, etc. — and these only in certain places and not everywhere. And even there in those places, they are to be seen only sometimes and not all the time. In this way, even without an external object of perception or thought, a particular idea may arise only in certain places at certain times.

¹Rendition and editing by George Cronk. © 1998. Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses on Consciousness-Only [Vimsatika]* (together with their commentary [*Karika*], which is also by Vasubandhu) were originally composed in Sanskrit. The following are two standard English translations of the work: *The Twenty Verses and Their Commentary*, in *Seven Works of Vasubandhu*, trans. and ed. Stefan Anacker (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1984), pp. 157-179; and *A Treatise in Twenty Stanzas and its Explanation*, in *A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience*, trans. and ed. Thomas A. Kochumuttom (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1982), pp. 260-275.

²*Yogacara (Yogochara)* ("application of Yoga"), also known as *Vijñānavāda* ("the way of consciousness"), is the school of philosophy to which Vasubandhu belonged. The central Yogacara doctrine is that reality is "consciousness-only" (a form of metaphysical idealism).

"And in hellish states, all the condemned spirits (*pretas*) perceive the same river of pus and other hellish scenes." [Verse 3b] A "pus-river" is a river filled with pus [as well as urine and feces] All the condemned spirits (*pretas*) experiencing a hellish state as punishment for the bad lives they have led see the same river filled with pus, urine, and feces, guarded by men holding clubs or swords Thus, even without actually existing external objects, different minds can experience the same things.

"All those in hell perceive the same hell-guardians and other hellish phenomena [rivers of pus, ravenous dogs and crows, moving mountains, etc.], and they also experience the same torments." [Verse 4b] All this, even though the hellish guards, rivers, dogs, etc., do not actually exist, which means that the torments suffered in hell (like hell itself) are psychological in nature and not based on objects existing external to the mind.¹

Furthermore, "in dreams, what is experienced can function just as it does in the waking state, as is illustrated in the case of nocturnal emissions of semen." [Verse 4a] Even without a couple's actually having sexual intercourse, a man dreaming of sexual intercourse may have an orgasm and release his semen

By these various examples, it is clear (1) that the mind may have only certain ideas at certain times and in certain places; (2) that different minds may experience the same things; and (3) that things experienced may function in expected ways — *all in the absence of external objects*.

Objection: Why do you say that the things experienced in hellish states do not exist?

Yogacara Reply: Because . . . of the hell-guardians. It seems [from what is said about hell in our sacred traditions] that the guards, who inflict torments upon the condemned spirits, do not suffer the torments of hell themselves (for example, the horrible burning sensation of standing on a ground made of red-hot iron). Either the guards are themselves sinners who deserve the punishments of hell, or they are not. If they are, then there is no reason why they should be serving in hell as tormentors of condemned spirits; and if they are not themselves condemned spirits, then there is no reason why they should be there at all along with those who deserve to be there. [It makes more sense to think of the hell-guardians and the other things experienced in hell as mental images in the minds of the condemned.]

Perception and its Objects: No Self / No Thing

Objection: But the Buddha himself taught that there are twelve foundations of knowledge (*ayatanas*), namely, the six senses² and their objects. If, according to the Buddha, consciousness arises through the senses in response to objects external to the senses, how can reality be consciousness-only?

Yogacara Reply: "That teaching of the Buddha was only for neophytes [that is, new converts just beginning their study of Buddhism]. In other words, it is an exoteric (publicly presented) teaching, but it has an esoteric (hidden or secret) meaning" [Verse 8]

After all, the Buddha often stated that there are, in fact, no living and conscious beings and no self (*anatta*), but only events and their causes. The inner or hidden (esoteric) meaning of his teachings on the twelve *ayatanas* is expressed in the following verse:

¹In the original text of the *Twenty Verses*, this paragraph follows Vasubandhu's presentation and discussion of Verse 4a.

²In addition to the five physical senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, Indian thinkers consider mental perception (thinking) to be a form of sensation.

"Both subjectivity (*atman*) and objectivity (*dharma*) arise from the unconscious (the *alaya-vijñāna* = the domain of 'seed-consciousness').¹ Perception [for example, vision] arises from a seed [in the unconscious] and gives rise to an apparent object [for example, color]" [Verse 9]

And why did the Buddha present his teaching this way? Why did he present it in an exoteric form rather than simply revealing outright its esoteric meaning? The answer is as follows: "In this way, the disciples are gradually initiated into an understanding of the insubstantiality of self and of the insubstantiality of objects, that is, self and objects as constructed in ordinary experience." [Verse 10]

The six levels of perception² are only representations (appearances) of consciousness that arise out of the unconscious (the *alaya-vijñāna*). Once a disciple, through his study of the Dharma [the teachings of the Buddha], realizes that there is, in fact, no seer, no hearer, no smeller, no taster, no toucher, and no thinker, he will enter into an understanding of the insubstantiality of self. And when he learns that the objects of perception are also representations (appearances) of consciousness-only, and that there are, in fact, no experienced entities that have the characteristics of external objectivity,³ then the disciple will enter into an understanding of the insubstantiality of [experienced] objects.

However, as the last phrase of Verse 10 indicates, we must distinguish between reality [self and objects] as constructed by ordinary consciousness (especially the imagination) and reality as it is in itself, in its "suchness" (*tathata*). Beyond the ordinary (constructed) self [ego] and its subject-object duality, there is an ineffable (*anābhilāpya*) transcendent Self (in which the duality of subject and object does not arise), which is known by the Buddha and other enlightened ones. It is the constructed self and its constructed objects that are insubstantial, merely transformations and representations of consciousness [The ineffable (true) Self is substantial (*dravyatah*), that is, "really real."] ⁴

Atomism and Experience

Objection: But how do we really know that the Buddha intended an esoteric meaning when he spoke of the senses and their objects? Are there not external, really existing elements [that is, atoms] . . . that, when joined together into aggregations, form the objects perceived through the senses? [Didn't the Buddha recognize the underlying atomic structure of the objective material world?]⁵

Yogacara Reply: [The Buddha could not have accepted the atomic theory.] "The existence of atoms cannot be proved because an object of perception is never a unified entity [that is, a whole without parts], nor is it several distinct atoms, nor is it even an aggregation of atoms." [Verse 11]

What does this mean? Take an object of perceptual experience. Is it ever a unified entity [a whole without parts] . . . ?⁶ Is it ever a group of distinct and separate atoms? Is it ever an aggregation of atoms? It can never be a unified entity because it is impossible to experience a whole independently of its parts [that is, all objects of perception are

¹For Yogacara philosophy, the *alaya-vijñāna* ("storehouse consciousness") is the underlying consciousness of all that exists. It is the fundamental essence out of which all things arise. It is a storehouse of experiences of all individual lives and contains the "seeds" of every mental construction (perceptions, ideas, etc.).

²Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking.

³That is, there is no experience of "things in themselves."

⁴Is the true Self pure consciousness?

⁵Atomism was a metaphysical-cosmological theory supported by several schools of classical Indian philosophy. The leading atomistic schools were Vaisheshika (a philosophy associated with Hinduism) and Vaibhashika (a Buddhist school of philosophy).

⁶An absolutely unified entity, a whole without parts, would be indivisible. It would *be* an atom (in a sense), and atoms are imperceptible.

experienced as things that have, and are divisible into, parts]. Nor can an object of perception be experienced as a group of distinct and separate atoms because individual atoms cannot be perceived at all. And, finally, an object of perception cannot be experienced as an aggregation of atoms because such an aggregation would be composed of single atoms, each one of which is absolutely imperceptible [and an aggregation of imperceptibles is no more perceptible than its individual components].¹

[And there are further logical problems with atomism. Take the idea of an atomic aggregation. How is such an aggregation formed?]

"One atom joined to six others would have six sides [for the other six to attach themselves to]. Or do the other six atoms occupy the same place [space] as the first? Wouldn't the seven then be one [that is, wouldn't there be just one atom instead of seven]?" [Verse 12]

If there is a conjunction of one atom with six others, then the one atom must have six sides [as stated above], and six sides are six parts. But an atom, by definition, is indivisible; it can have no parts. Thus, on this alternative, an atom is not an atom — an outright contradiction!

Or do all seven atoms occupy one and the same location? But then wouldn't the aggregation be only one atom [because two or more material entities cannot occupy the same space], which would mean that the aggregation is not really an aggregation? Isn't this another contradiction?

Furthermore, some atomists² argue that, since an atom has no parts, it is impossible for atoms to join together into aggregations. And yet, these same atomists claim that aggregations of atoms can join with other aggregations to form larger aggregations. "But if atoms cannot aggregate in the first place because they have no parts, how can there be any atomic aggregations to subsequently aggregate with one another . . . ?" [Verse 13]

Now, atoms either have parts or they don't. "Whatever has parts cannot be a unity [that is, cannot be indivisible]." [Verse 14a] If one atom can be "in front of" or "behind" or "over" or "beneath" another atom, then that other atom must have a front, back, top, and bottom — that is, it must have parts and thus be divisible, in which case it is not an atom [which is a contradiction].³

"But if atoms have no parts, how can they be subject to overshadowing or concealment?" [Verse 14b] If an atom has no parts, that is, if it is absolutely indivisible, then it cannot have spatial extension or location.⁴ And then, assuming that the world is composed of such unextended atoms, how could there be sunlight in one place and shadow in another at sunrise? If an atom has no parts, then it cannot be lighted on one side and shadowed on the other because it has no sides at all. It is therefore impossible for one atom to overshadow or conceal another [because it is impossible for something to stand "in front of" or "behind" or "on top of" or "under" something else that has no front, back, top, or bottom] It also follows that — if atoms have no parts, are absolutely indivisible, and have no spatial extension or location — the entire aggregation of atoms is actually a single atom because they are all located in the same place at the same time!⁵

¹The atomistic philosophers that Vasubandhu has in mind in this paragraph are the Vaisheshikas, who held that objects of perception are, in fact, composites of atoms, but that atoms in isolation are not only imperceptible, but *absolutely* imperceptible.

²The Kasimira Vaibhashikas (a Buddhist philosophical school).

³If an atom has parts and is thus extended in space, it cannot be a unity (cannot be indivisible), and then it cannot be an atom.

⁴Perhaps what Vasubandhu means here is that since space is infinitely divisible, whatever is located in space must also be infinitely divisible, and therefore something that is absolutely indivisible cannot be located or extended in space.

⁵But doesn't this mean that the "place" where all atoms are located is "no place" and that the "time" in which they are all located is "no time"?

Objection: Why can't we say that it is *aggregations* of atoms (not individual atoms) that are subject to overshadowing and concealment?

Yogacara Reply: But do you then agree that an aggregation of atoms is something [metaphysically] different from the atoms themselves?

Objection: No, we can't go along with that.

Yogacara Reply: "It cannot be argued that aggregations of atoms are subject to overshadowing and concealment unless the aggregations are admitted to be [metaphysically] different from the atoms that make them up." [Verse 14c]

If there is no essential difference between atoms and aggregations of atoms, then such aggregations are no more subject to overshadowing and concealment than are the atoms themselves¹

Monism and Experience

Question: [We have been examining atomism, which presents a pluralistic view of reality. What about the view that reality is an absolute and indivisible unity (metaphysical monism)?]

Yogacara Reply: "If reality were an absolute unity, there could be no gradual motion; there could be no perception and non-perception at the same time; there could be no distinctions between various beings; and there could be no non-seeing of the very subtle." [Verse 15]

If reality were an absolute unity, there would be no gradual motion from one place to another. It would be impossible to "go" or gradually arrive anywhere because one would simultaneously "be" everywhere. It would also be impossible to look at an object and see only one side of it while, at the same time, not seeing the other side of it. Moreover, there would be no distinctions or differences between elephants, horses, and various other beings, since they would all be one. All things would also be in exactly the same place, since the absolute unity of all things would make the separation of different things in space impossible. And invisible things, such as minute aquatic bacteria, would be just as visible as [mountains] [This is all contrary to actual experience.]

[It seems that monism is just as unacceptable as atomistic pluralism. They are both refuted by experience, which reveals a world grounded in consciousness-only.]

Dream States and Waking States

Objection: There is a significant difference between waking states and dream states. Everybody recognizes that objects experienced in dreams aren't real but rather mentally constructed. But this is not recognized with regard to objects experienced in waking states

Yogacara Reply: This argument won't sustain your position because "someone who isn't awake doesn't recognize the unreality of objects experienced in a dream." [Verse 17b] Only he who has awakened from a dream is able to "see through" the objects experienced while he was dreaming. In the same way, only those who have achieved enlightenment are able to discern the unreality of the world presented in what is commonly taken to be [but which really is not] the waking state. Thus, the dream experience and the so-called waking experience are similar [in that they are both superseded by a "higher consciousness"].

¹The point here seems to be as follows: Since atoms have no parts and are absolutely indivisible, they have no spatial extension; and extensionless atoms cannot form aggregations extended in space. So if there are any aggregations of atoms, they are not extended in space and thus are not "there" to be either illuminated or overshadowed.

Objection: You say that there is no essential difference between dream states and waking states in the sense that they are both possible without the existence of extra-mental objects. Why is it then that, with respect to good or bad actions, we are not morally concerned about the consequences of what we do in dreams, whereas we are morally concerned about the consequences of what we do when we are awake?

Yogacara Reply: "In the dream state, the mind is dulled by sleep and thus has little control over its actions and their consequences, whereas the mind has greater control over what happens in the waking state. Thus, the consequences of actions in the waking state must be taken with greater moral seriousness than actions in the dream state." [Verse 18b]

Interactions between Individuals

Objection: If objects of perception arise within the mind's stream of consciousness and not from actually existing external objects [as you argued above], then how can one mind be influenced by another? How, for example, could my ideas be influenced by either good or bad friends, or by my listening to either true or false teachings? Indeed, if there are no external objects, then there cannot be either friends or teachings existing outside of one's own consciousness.

Yogacara Reply: "The streams of consciousness in different minds *do* mutually influence each other." [Verse 18a] This is a matter of different consciousnesses (or minds) influencing the direction of one another; but this interaction of minds does not in any way show that there are [material] objects external to minds

Objection: If reality is consciousness-only, then bodies . . . do not exist. How, then, can sheep, for example, be killed by butchers [if neither the butchers nor the sheep have bodies]? And how can the butchers be blamed for the offense of taking life?

Yogacara Reply: "Killing is a disruption of one stream of consciousness by another stream of consciousness " [Verse 19] It is well known and attested to in many scriptural texts that the mental power of one mind can bring about changes in another mind (for example, loss of memory, demon possession, mental telepathy, the occurrence of dreams, etc.) To kill another is to fatally alter its life force and cause it to flow in a different direction

The Problem of Other Minds

Objection: If reality is consciousness-only, how is it possible for one mind to have knowledge of other minds [that is, minds other than itself]? And if there is knowledge of other minds, doesn't that refute your consciousness-only thesis?

Yogacara Reply: "The unenlightened are not only unable to know the minds of others, but they also have no knowledge of the true nature of their own minds; whereas the enlightened know their own true minds and the true minds of others. Things known to enlightened ones are unknown to the unenlightened." [Verse 21] [The *Twenty Verses* actually contains 22 verses.]

The unenlightened are bound by ignorance and are thus trapped in subject-object thinking. At the level of ordinary consciousness, we can only infer the existence of other minds on the basis of analogy with our own minds. But what is taken to be mind is not True Mind, and what they take to be self is not True Self. The enlightened have been liberated from ignorance and have transcended subject-object consciousness. They know their own minds as well as the minds of others. They have achieved true Selfhood

Conclusion

Yogacara [Vasubandhu]: The doctrine of consciousness-only is infinitely deep and subtle, and there are no limits to the wisdom it offers. "I have written this treatise on consciousness-only to the best of my ability, but I am not able to fathom all of its complexities. It can be grasped in its entirety only by the enlightened ones." [Verse 22] The fullness of the doctrine transcends logic, and it certainly transcends my comprehension. It is known fully by the enlightened ones, for they have risen above all obstacles to true knowledge.