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IS VASUBANDHU AN IDEALIST? WITH REFERENCE TO THE TEXT “VIJNAPATIMATRATASIDDHI”

Aamir Riyaz

Associate Professor

Aligarh Muslim University

Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

Regarding the issue that whether Vasubandhu is an idealist or not, there are differing opinions. Some claim that he is an idealist and others claim that he is not. To make sense of those texts one does not have to assume that consciousness or idea is the final mode of existence, not that ultimately there is only one being. On the contrary - it is quite possible and at some point, even easier, for one to make sense of them assuming that consciousness or idea is not the final mode of existence and that there is a plurality of being, even in the state of *mokṣa*. On this point to make one's position more explicit, one can disagree with the other interpreter of Vasubandhu. This paper will show that some other interpretation of Vasubandhu in past may have been wrong. It does not mean that others are totally unacceptable.

The *yogācāra* system has always been invariably interpreted by all commentators and historians as an idealism of one kind or another. This is the basic point on which some thinker explicitly disagrees with the past interpreters. There is no reason whatsoever why the *yogācāra* system, especially as it is found in Vasubandhu's writing should be described as idealism. Vasubandhu spares no effort in making it clear that reality as such (*yathā-bhūta*) cannot be described at all in terms of consciousness. Then how is it that the *yogācāra* system came to be regarded as an idealism? The basic reason for this seems to be a gross understanding, and the consequent misinterpretation, of the phrase *viññāptimatratā*; *prajñāptimatratā* and *cittamatratā*. By the way, as I have already pointed out, for Vasubandhu, these three phrases are synonymous with each other, and therefore, interchangeable. They are commonly translated as follows: -

Vijnaptimatratā/prajñāptimatratā = Mere consciousness/representation only

Cittamatratā = mind only

Linguistically, these renderings are sufficiently justified indeed. But as to what is described as *viññāptimatratā/prajñāptimatratā/cittamatratā*, most of interpreters seems to have been misled. They have mistaken these phrases for description of the final mode of existence. The following are some instances of these mistakes:

A.K. Chatterjee, in the introduction of his *Reading on yogācāra Buddhism* says, “*Parinispanna* is the absolute – the undefiled, non-different, non-dual consciousness (*viññāptimatratā*)”.¹ Again, in his *Yogācāra idealism* he says, “once this idea of objectivity is eradicated, all the three *viññāna* revert to the pristine purity of *viññāptimatratā*.”² T. Steherbatsky says, “there is a transcendent absolute reality of the pure spirit (*viññāptimatratā*), Hegel's absolute idea”.³ Dr. C.D. Sharma in his “A critical survey of Indian philosophy” says, “Reality, says the *Trimsatika*, is pure consciousness. This reality on account of this (its) inherent power suffers threefold modification --- Behind these three modifications is the permanent background of eternal and unchanging pure consciousness (*Viññāna* or *Viññāptimatratā*)”.⁴

P.T. Raju in his *Idealistic thought of India* says, “This *viññāptimatratā* is some supra-mundane consciousness beyond mind and picturing thought. It is the pure element called ‘Dharma’, Dharmadhātu of Buddha and is the same as the Dharmakaya”.⁵ S.N. Dasgupta in his *Buddhist idealism* says, ‘As a ground of this *a-layaviññāna* we have the pure consciousness called *viññāptimatratā*, which is beyond all experiences transcendent and pure consciousness, pure bliss, eternal unchangeable and unthinkable. It is this one pure being as pure consciousness and pure bliss, eternal and unchangeable like the Brahman of the Vedānta, that forms the ultimate ground and ultimate essence of all appearances’.⁶

All the above quoted passages clearly show that their authors almost unanimously accept *viññāptimatratā* or *prajñāptimatratā* or *cittamatratā* as the *yogācārin's* description of the absolute, undefiled, undifferentiated, non-dual, etc.

I shall recall the instances in Vasubandhu's writing where the three phrases occur:

(i) The first obvious instance of *viññāptimatratā* in MuK.1.7 and its commentary by Vasubandhu:

Depending upon perception, there arises non-perception, and depending upon non-perception, there arises non-perception.⁷



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Depending upon the perception that there are mere representation and consciousness, there arises the non-perception of knowable things. Depending upon the non-perception of knowable things there arises the non-perception of the mere-representation of consciousness. First of all, one must realise the fact that whatever is experienced as an object, is mere representation of consciousness. This is, indeed, a fact that has already been established by stanza 1.4 which says that all objective categories are just appearances of consciousness.⁸ The same stanza clearly says also that there is no perceivable object.⁹ If there is no perceivable object, what else, then, is experienced by the ordinary people as object? They are all, as stanza 1.5, says, that imagination of the unreal or as stanza 1.8 says, 'appearances of an unreal object'. This imagination of the unreal, the present stanza calls this, *vijñāpti*, the representation of consciousness and stating this idea it recounts the whole process of realization once again.

That the perception of object is all representation of consciousness is an appropriate introduction to the treatise called *Vimśatika* and its use of the phrase *vijñāptimātra*. By saying that the perception of the six-fold object is all representation of consciousness, Vasubandhu is registering his strong objection to the correspondence theory of knowledge; according to which there is invariably one-to-one correspondence between concept and extra-mental object. Against this Vasubandhu argues that the perception of object is representation of consciousness in the sense that they are by and large determined by one's psychological disposition especially one's idiosyncrasy for subject-object distinction, the seed of which are already stored up in consciousness called *ālayavijñāna*. This is the general thesis of *Vimśatika*, and consequently its opening stanza:

This is mere representation of consciousness,
Because of the unreal appearances of object.¹⁰

Which means the perception of the six-fold object is mere representation of consciousness. In other words, in perception one's psychological disposition, especially the idiosyncrasy for subject – object distinction makes the object (*artha*) appear in a way in which it does not really exist (*asat*). Thus, the way an object is perceived is mere representation of consciousness. This applies to all epistemological experiences. For example: Vasubandhu later in the same treatise explains, 'Memory' in terms of '*Vijñāpti*'.

It has (already) been said:

"That there is a representation of consciousness
Which appears as that (namely the respective object)".¹²
From it (i.e., from representation of consciousness)
Does the memory arise.¹³

Here, Vasubandhu is saying that memory is not necessarily a recall to past experience of a real object, but is a recall to one of the past representations of consciousness.

Another term that is decisive in interpreting Vasubandhu's writing is certainly *vijñāna*, which is consistently translated as 'consciousness'. The discussion so far has shown that a 'representation of consciousness' refers to no external mental thing – but to the contents of one's *samsaric* experiences and that, therefore, the theory of mere representation of consciousness cannot be interpreted in idealistic term. Then the natural question is what status does Vasubandhu ascribe to consciousness itself. If he were an idealist, then for him – the term 'consciousness' would be the most adequate description of the things as such. And in fact that is how many people in the past have understood this term in Vasubandhu's writing.¹⁴ For them consequently – the phrase *vijñānada* – meaning idealism – would adequately describe Vasubandhu's view of reality. The fact, however is that Vasubandhu himself has never used this phrase to describe his system of thought. The common usage of this phrase to describe Vasubandhu's system may be, therefore, taken as a clear example of the general tendency to read the western idealism into his writing.

It is conceived that for Vasubandhu the term *vijnaptimatra* especially as it occurs in the text, stands for what "Mind" and "mental" would mean in the west; or to use the traditional Buddhist term Vasubandhu's use of the term *vijñāna* covers the entire range of *citta* and *acitta* and nothing else. Referring to the traditional analysis of an individual into *nāma* and *rūpa*-standing respectively for the psychic and physical make-up of an individual – the former alone comes under the term *vijñāna* – the latter does not. That is what Vasubandhu describes as consciousness or transformation of it is not the whole individual, let alone the whole reality – as an idealist would have it – but only in psychic make-up. It is true that the term *vijñāna* used by Vasubandhu has received a much wider meaning that it had in early Buddhism. In the latter case, for example, *vijñāna* was only one of the five aggregates (*skhandas*) into which the entire psycho-physical phenomena were analysed – the other four aggregates being *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *samijñā* and *samskāras*. But according to Vasubandhu's analysis, the name *vijñāna* will go also for *vedana*, *samijñā* and *samskāra*, all of them having a psychic content – but definitely not for *rūpa* – the physical make-up of phenomena. If so, Vasubandhu's use of term *vijñāna* far from implying an ontological idealism, is only an explanation of the psyche.



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Perhaps one of the most important texts in this regard is *Trimśika*. The central point of this text is that whatever comes under the *nāma* of atman and dharma is all transformation of *vijñāna*.¹⁵ It will not be surprising if a casual reader understands this statement as meaning that *vijñāna* is the underlying substance of all phenomena – psychic as well as physical. But in the first place – the terms *ātman* and dharma here do not mean ‘self’ and ‘thing’ respectively as they are in early Buddhism but concepts/ experiences of subjectivity and objectivity respectively. This interpretation of the term atman and dharma in the present context would not have been conclusive without a reference to an exhaustive list of the transformation of *vijñāna* – enumerated by Vasubandhu himself. What is enlightened about this is that all the items of it, without exception, come under psychological/epistemological category, and none of them is in an ontological category. In other words what Vasubandhu calls the transformation of consciousness are only what was traditionally called *citta* and *acitta* (mind and its derivatives). What Vasubandhu hold to be transformation of consciousness is not the entire phenomena as an idealist would have it, but only the psychic part of it. Thus, his theory of transformation of consciousness too, does not imply an ontological idealism, but is only an analysis of the psyche.

The distinction between the ineffable and imagined nature of things seems to have received little attention from the *yogācāra* system. Vasubandhu refers to the distinction between ineffable and the imagined nature of the things in *Vimsatika-Vṛtti* – which have been paraphrased as follows: -

‘The ignorant imagine the dharmas to be in the nature of *grāhya*, *grāhaka* etc. Those dharmas are non-substantial with reference to that imagined nature (*tena parikalpitenā ātmanā*), not with reference to their ineffable nature (*natu anabhitapyenā ātmanā*) which is object of the knowledge of the enlightened ones alone’.¹⁶

‘The ineffable nature of minds is known to the enlightened ones (*buddhānām gocarah*) – while the ordinary people are ignorant of it. Therefore, the ordinary people’s knowledge of minds has got to be unreal. They can only fancy unreal appearances (*vitatha pratibhasatayā*), because their idiosyncrasy for subject-object distinction has not yet been destroyed’.¹⁷

The first of these two passages distinguish the ineffable and imagined nature of dharmas while the second distinguishes between the ineffable and imagined nature of minds. In both the cases the imagined nature (*parikalpita ātma*) is characterised by the subject-object duality, which the ignorant ones impose on things; and the ineffable nature, which is beyond the limit of the ordinary experiences, is said to be the object of the enlightened ones. Thus, these two passages clearly show that Vasubandhu did recognize a realm of reality which is not only independent of the thinking mind, but also is beyond the reach of *Saṃsāric*-empirical knowledge. This admission of reality as independent of consciousness is one of the strongest cases for believing that Vasubandhu was not an idealist. The distinction between the ineffable and the imagined natures of things far from sounding idealistic reminds us of Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena.

Now, we can consider the possibility of a pluralistic conception of reality within the *yogācāra* system. The argument for an interpretation of this *yogācāra* texts in terms of pluralism are not many, nor quite positive. Therefore, all the claim is that there is a clear possibility of such an interpretation. First of all, the traditional understanding that the *yogācāra* system is monistic seem to have followed from the assumption that it is idealistic – as the history of philosophy has its monism has been more often than not a corollary of idealism. If so, once the *yogācāra* texts are proved to be open to interpretation in terms of realism, it immediately calls for a reviewing of their traditional understanding in terms of monism-too.

As it is indicated earlier – there is nowhere in the text a statement to the effect that the *yogācārins* believed in monism. On the contrary, there are a few passages which are difficult to understand without presupposing a belief in the plurality of beings. Such is the case, for example, with the passage dealing with the problem of knowing other minds. Moreover, an assumption of pluralism, instead of rendering any part of the text difficult is to understand, makes the entire text more intelligible.

It is remarkable that a recent study of Vasubandhu by Dr. Stefan Anacker has come up with the conclusion as follows: -

It has been assumed that since the store-consciousness is held responsible for the other consciousness and the manner in which they perceived Vasubandhu’s *yogācāra* represents a form of idealist philosophy. The peculiar idea of Dharmapāla and Hsuang-Tsang which focussed philosophical attention on the store-conscious, has done much to support this view. However, when one reads the *yogācāra* work of Vasubandhu, one can easily see that the notion of the “*yogācāra* idealism” is thoroughly misleading in his case.

Rather than pointing towards an idealistic system, the theory of the store consciousness is used for totally different purpose by Vasubandhu. It is the recognition that one’s ordinary mental and psychic impression are constructed i.e., altered and seemingly statasized by our consciousness – complexes that makes the actual main point of the *Trimsatika*. “Cognition-only” involves primarily the doctrine of the three natures of reality and their interrelationships.¹⁸



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Some scholars have maintained that according to the *Vijñāptimatratā* or *cittamātra* philosophy in the *yogācāra* system – the mind or consciousness is the only reality, the ultimate reality. It must be categorically stated at the very outset that this is wrong, a serious mistake, and that it is against all fundamental teachings, whether *Theravādata* or *Mahayāna*. Both *Madhyamika* and the *yogācāras* were all presenting the same old theories of *nairatmya*, *sunyata-tathata* and *pratityasamutpāda* in different terms.

The sunyata philosophy elaborated by Nagarjuna and the *citta mātra* philosophy developed by Asanga and Vasubandhu are not contradictory, but complementary to each other. These two systems known as *Madhyamika* or *yogācāra* or *vijñāna* explain and expound in different ways with different argument, the very same doctrine of *nairatmya*, *sunyata* and *pratityasamutpāda*, but are not a philosophy of their own which can properly be called Nagarjuna's or Asanga's or Vasubandhu's philosophy. It can only be said that they are their explanation – argument and theories – postulated to prove and establish the canonical teaching of *sunyata – cittamātra* or *nairatmya*. If any difference of opinions exists, these arise only with regard to the argument and theories designed to establish the old fundamental canonical teaching, but not with regard to the teaching itself.¹⁹

Consequently, we would not consider the *yogācāra* system to be an idealism any more than the early Buddhism is. If so, the answer to the question whether the *yogācāra* system is an idealism or realism, would depend upon whether the early Buddhism was an idealism or realism.

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8. Arthasattva-ātma-vijñapti-pratibhasam prajayati vijñanam.
9. Nasti-ca-asya-vijñānasya arthah.
10. Vi-mātram-eva-etāt-asad-artha-avabhāsanat. VIM.I
11. Sad-vidhasya-visayasya-Upalabdhi
12. Yatha tad-ābhāsa=yathā-arthā-ābhāsa. See vim.vr.17.
13. Uktam-tatha-tād-ābhāsa-vijnaptih Smarakamtatah (Vim. 17)
14. For example, P.T. Raju, op.cit. p. 270, referring to Vasubandhu's Vijñāpatimatratasiddhi says, "As everything originate from Vijñāna, the latter must be taken as substantially existing, that is, existing like the substance of Spinoza"; and Prof. Smarist in his "Doctrine and argument in Indian philosophy", p. 57, says "but the psychological interest of the yoga-practitioner (including Vasubandhu) led them to describe the absolute in term of the consciousness".
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