[add Vasubandhu's passage from V-Y about dependent arising

What would Yogācāra look like if we took those important passages as our hermeneutic?

The bottom line is that dependently arisen historical conditions/conventional, contingent 'truths' are incompatible with what is ahistorical/'timeless'. To ignore this seems to me to be a serious oversight.

Recovering Yogācāra from the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems

Abstract

The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Tenet System, with its commitment to ahistorical 'systems', interprets classical Yogācāra as a form of idealism, in which 'mind' substantially 'exists,' while objects are non-existent. As many scholars have pointed out, this is inconsistent with the historical record. Rather than simply critiquing that interpretation, this paper shows where it goes off track, re-examines classical Yogacara texts from a different perspective, and suggests how this interpretation helps Yogācāra teachings engage contemporary issues more constructively. Bookended by broader historiographical issues, our interpretation focuses on how early Indian Buddhists recommended reading Buddhist texts—their own hermeneutics. Specifically, we draw on passages from the Buddha, Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra*, that prioritize framing analyses of mind in terms of dependent arising (the Dependent Nature in Yogācāra terms). If we follow their directives and interpret classical Yogacara texts accordingly, then the idealist interpretation—that Yogācārins assert that 'mind' is substantially existent—found in the Indo-Tibetan Tenet System is untenable.

> Let us say that [the Buddha's word] is that which is *not discordant*
> with what exists in the *sūtra*s that teach the four noble truths,
> with [a notion of *vinaya*] as the disciplining of the afflictions,
> and with a notion of *reality as dependent origination*.
> (Vasubandhu. *Vyakyāyukti*)[1]

Introduction: What's the Problem?

We need all the help we can get in this conflicted, troubled world of ours, all the compassion, insight and inspiration expressed over the centuries in our inherited cultural, intellectual, and spiritual traditions. This is one of the great benefits of literate traditions: they preserve records of people's experiences in other times and places, ready at hand for later generations to draw on for inspiration and guidance. But this presents its own challenges: as times and circumstances change, people's perspectives change. As old forms cease to inspire, they are reformulated to respond to new conditions. But the very *presence* of the historical record—the inherited texts, traditions, and institutions persisting into the present—can always be wielded as a reproachful witness, challenging such innovations: "*Our* time-honored texts and practices are authentic, *your* new ones are spurious innovations."

Those who wish to justify these innovations—and this process occurs in all literate traditions I am familiar with—devise elaborate methods for reconciling the apparent contradictions between past and present formulations. This creates disagreements, of course, between those who, for example, reject the Mahāyāna *sūtras* as the authentic word of the Buddha (*buddhavācanā*) and those who justify the newer teachings as ways of recovering the 'real' meaning, the hidden 'intent,' of the earlier traditions, which were typically too established to be discarded *in toto*. Instead, the older texts had to be 'superseded' in some way, as when the New Testament is said to supersede the Old Testament that 'prefigured' it, or when the Vedānta texts called the Upanishads are said to fulfill or 'complete' (*anta*) the Vedas that preceded them. These new interpretations do not so much change the words of the text, as they do the larger framework within which those words are understood.[2] And this fundamentally alters the way later generations understand their own earlier traditions.

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[1] Cabezon, (1992, 232) (emphasis added).
[2] David Kugel. *How to Read the Bible*. Biblical scholar, David Kugel argues that these interpretative principles had become mainstream by as early as 5th c. BCE: 1) The text is cryptic; A does not mean A. 2) The text is relevant for today. 3) The text is wholly consistent with itself. 4) The text is wholly divinely inspired.

In the history of Indian Buddhism, this has had two, arguably equivocal, results. First, it fostered a sense of hierarchy between traditions, as when Nāgārjuna explained the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness, as taught in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* (PPS), by equating it with the traditional idea of dependent arising, and then claimed that emptiness was the higher, definitive truth that superseded the lower, conventional truth of the earlier Abhidharma traditions.[3] The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* (*The Discourse that Explicates the* [Buddha's] *Implicit Intent*), composed several centuries after the PPS according to modern scholars, took this one step further. Framing this sequence in terms of the three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma, the *Sūtra* claimed that *its* doctrines superseded the earlier two, and that the 3rd Turning was even more definitive than the 2nd, on the grounds that the 'intent' of emptiness needed to be clarified to prevent it from being misinterpreted as nihilism.

This was not the end of the story, of course. As Mahāyāna Buddhism developed in India (and elsewhere), the same issues ensued: newer texts and formulations arose claiming to supersede the previous ones, reframing earlier Mahāyāna teachings in light of their own, newer doctrines. The attempt to sort out these developments gave rise to the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems of later Indian Buddhism, which then deeply influenced Tibetan Buddhism and, in recent times, Western ways of understanding the history and teachings of Indian Buddhism.[4]

Unfortunately, the successive reinterpretation of older teachings works at *cross-purposes* with the one of the benefits of literate traditions: preserving records of people's past experiences as spiritual and intellectual resources for later generations. 'Unfortunate' because older traditions are not simply superseded; all too often they are also either denigrated outright[5] or else treated as mere stepping-stones to the 'higher' teachings that succeeded them. Intentionally or not, this often discourages people from trying to understand past traditions on their own terms, or, worse, to learn much about them.

The second equivocal effect is closely related to the first. In traditional Asia, these systems were typically framed in *ahistorical* terms. In most Mahāyāna traditions it is widely accepted that Shakyamūni Buddha himself taught *all* the discourses (*sūtra*) during his own lifetime in 5th c. BCE India. This conviction created deep and persisting problems. The *Mahāyāna sūtras*—rightly called *vaipulya*, 'extensive, lengthy'—contained many mutually contradictory doctrines: phenomena are both real and unreal, empty and non-empty, dual and non-dual, and so on. The assumption that the Buddha taught all of them deterred Buddhists from seeing these differences—as historically-minded scholars would—as divergent but skillful responses in different times and places to changing circumstances. In other words, it prevented them from seeing these teachings as creatively responding

[3] The distinction between ultimate and conventional truths or teachings has a long and important history in Buddhist thought. Jayatilleke (1963: 361–8) discusses the earliest meanings of ultimate (*paramattha*) and conventional (*sammuti*) discourse and their relation to definitive teachings (*nītattha*) and interpretive, indirect teachings (*neyyattha*). He cautions, though, that they are "nowhere contrasted in the Canon" (p. 366), and are used only to refer to a "distinction of subject matter and not a distinction of two kinds of truth" (p. 368).
[4] There are many such texts, e.g., Gyamtso 2016; Hopkins, 2003; Newland, 2009. We should acknowledge that some Yogācāra ideas, especially those connected with the idea of Buddha-nature, have often been considered even 'higher' than Madhyamaka. Tellingly, those ideas are dissociated from what is called *citta-mātra*.
[5] Such as the term 'Hīnayāna', the inferior, lower, small, vehicle.

to their own historical contexts. Instead, later systematizers sought to reconcile these contradictions with various *ahistorical* explanations. As John Makransky notes, these explanations usually "linked the apparent inconsistencies in the scriptural collections to the Buddha's *underlying intention* and *skillful means*." (Makransky, 2008, 121, emphasis added).

This approach set the agenda for generations of Asian Buddhist scholars, who labored for many centuries to "determine Shakyamuni Buddha's one final intention in an exclusive, absolutized paradigm" (Makransky, 2008,130), a paradigm that—by explaining the Buddha's all-knowing, yet ever-varying, *skillful intent*—could put each and every teaching into its appropriate place. These are systems of great sophistication and dedicated scholarship, no doubt.[6] But modern Buddhists have to ask: are these systems still as skillful, still as relevant in our current circumstances? In short, are the 'tenets' still tenable?

In sum, in the absence of an *historical* appreciation of the evolution of Buddhist traditions, these ahistorical, hierarchical approaches have not only sidelined the 'lower' schools but have also obscured the historical circumstances in which they arose—thereby obscuring how they may have *skillfully addressed issues* in their own context and may well again in ours. Nowhere, in my estimation, is this as regrettable as the interpretation of classical Yogācāra in the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems, a situation this essay seeks to clarify and rectify.[7] But first let's make these abstract analyses more concrete.

Dismembering and Re-membering Yogācāra Texts

At a conference not long ago, I had an exchange with a colleague about two verses in Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*, a text considered by many to be the *classicus locus* of Yogācāra as 'idealism.' The *Twenty Verses* is a short text, just ten pages in Sanskrit, and is presented as a dialogue between a non-Mahāyāna 'realist' and Vasubandhu the Mahāyānist. On the face of it, one would think there would be a high level of coherence over the course of these ten pages, especially in a text written by one of the great masters of Indian Buddhist philosophy.[9]

The first few sentences declare that everything, including cognitive objects (*artha*), are merely perceptions or representations (*vijñapti-mātra*), a term that is then equated with other terms for mind: *citta* (mind/heart), *manas* (thought), and *vijñāna* (cognitive awareness). If you read only this paragraph, you might interpret it ontologically, as stating that objects do not 'exist' at all, that they are nothing but mind, which does 'exist.' This is the classic idealist interpretation.[10] Many scholars, traditional and modern, interpret it in just that way.

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[6] See Appendix I for a comparative synopsis of Historicism, the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems, and the Chinese *pan jiao* systems.
[7] This essay brings together many points from my recent *Making Sense of Mind-Only* (Wisdom, 2023).
[9] This contrasts sharply with the heterogeneity we find in much longer texts, such as the *Yogācārabhūmi*, which was likely compiled over long periods of time (think of the difference between a term paper and an edited volume).
[10] See Appendix II for a short discussion of Realism, Idealism and Yogācāra.

But things are not so simple. Just a few pages later, verse 10 and its accompanying explanation state that the idea that cognitive objects (*artha*) are mere percepts (*vijñapti-mātra*) is intended as an *introduction* to the selflessness of *dharmas*, the central Mahāyāna notion that all phenomena—all *dharmas*—are empty of any intrinsic nature. The text then goes on to say, in good Mahāyāna fashion, that this does not negate the existence of *dharmas in toto*, it only denies that they have any inherent characteristics.[11]

In other words, it seems as if verse 10 *directly contradicts* the idealistic interpretation of the first paragraph. So, we must ask: is the first paragraph a *carte blanche* denial of the 'external world,' of all *dharmas* whatsoever, as the idealist interpretation claims—or is this verse simply denying, as Mahāyānists do, that *dharmas* such as objects (*artha*) possess their own ultimate characteristics (the position that Vasubandhu's non-Mahāyānist opponent presumably defends)? In other words, should we take the first paragraph as a contextless, stand-alone proposition about the nature of reality, disregarding verse 10? Or should also we take into consideration verse 10, just a few pages later, which presents *vijñapti-mātra* as a *corrective* to our tendency to take the contents of our cognitive processes as ultimately real?

When I brought this up, I was told in no uncertain terms that the first paragraph was a 'Yogācārin' reading and that verse 10 was a 'Mādhyamikan' one. In other words, my colleague argued that we should take two passages in this very short, logically organized text by a master philosopher out of their *textual context* and interpret them based on extra-textual criteria, that is, on systems of interpretation that were only developed centuries after Vasubandhu's lifetime.

Of course, he is not alone in this. Another Buddhist philosopher, who focuses on Nāgārjuna, admitted to me that in all the discussions he'd read about the *Twenty Verses* and Yogācāra as idealism, he had never seen any mention of verse 10—a verse one would think would provoke serious thinking about the meaning of *vijñapti-mātra* in the first paragraph.

Having long since abandoned the Tenet Systems as a useful guide to understanding Indian Buddhism historically, I was initially taken aback by these statements. But they—and the widespread interpretation of Yogācāra as idealism they rest upon—usefully provoked the considerations leading to this essay.

Historicism and Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems

This vignette illustrates perspectives enshrined in the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems, one that arguably fundamentally alters, and thereby obscures, the insights these traditions provided in relation to their own time and place. How, then, might we better understand this perspective and thereby approach classical Indian Yogācāra teachings in a more holistic fashion, to resuscitate its deep insights into the human condition and recuperate their relevance for our own times?

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[11] Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* (*ad* verse 10d). (Dunne, trans., n.d.). See passages and discussion in the section below: '*Vijñapti-mātra* as an Introduction to the Selflessness of Dharmas.'

First, let's consider two distinct ways of organizing Indian Buddhist teachings. Each has its own rationales, its strengths and weaknesses, advantages and limitations.[12]

Modern scholarship typically aspires to examine developments in religious traditions *historically*. This method brackets questions of religious 'truth,' but demands a high degree of empirical verification and scholarly consensus about what happened when, where, and, more problematically, why. This approach, however, tends to *deconstruct* any given phenomenon into endlessly evolving historical processes, in which everything is a moving target and any notion of a 'school,' a 'text,' or even an 'author,' is just a convenient designation, a label we superimpose onto ever-evolving events and agents. But to avoid wandering aimlessly in a trackless expanse of disparate details, even historians are compelled to re-construct their own, historically based, narratives.

By contrast, the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems are deeply *ahistorical*, in that it assumes that all Mahāyāna *sūtra*s were taught by the Buddha during his lifetime, and that the doctrines developed by later writers could be appropriately allocated to specific 'systems,' largely independent of their historical context. This approach, like the historical one, *deconstructs* the coherence of texts and authors in the sense that different passages of the same text or author could be said to represent the views of different systems, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, Sautrāntika, and so on. Like any skillful teacher, these texts can communicate at multiple levels, simultaneously reaching different audiences.

As we have seen, this approach entails taking select passages out of context—'con-text' in the sense of what accompanies the text—and treating them not as integral parts of a specific composition but as parts of a particular 'system.' This is both a *decontextualization*, like the historical approach, and a *recontextualization* based on its place within one Tenet System or another. Their doctrinal coherence lies in the *system*, not in the text.[13] In this way, the Tenet Systems assume and reinforce a kind of timelessness—the meaning of a passage is determined not by the historical circumstances of its composition but by its purported position in an ahistorical system.

A Methodological Middle Way?

Unfortunately, picking texts apart in this way—reading this or that passage in terms of this or that 'system'—makes it harder to understand the development of Indian Buddhism in its own historical circumstances. This is not merely a methodological issue best left to scholars, but one that affects how anyone in the modern world approaches Buddhist traditions—or any religious tradition for that matter. Do we ignore history altogether, as if the 'timeless truths' of religious traditions do *not* arise in dependence on their own historical context—which would ironically make them not dependently arisen? But if we take historical perspectives into account, what do we do with the radically deconstructive implications of historicism? To what extent are we even justified in talking about a 'Buddhist tradition,' or a 'Yogācāra tradition'?

[12] See Appendix I.

[13] A contemporary analogy would be assessing how 'truly conservative' the policies of a given politician may be, which would have to be based on an implicit or explicit set of idealized 'conservative principles.'

To put this more constructively: what might we learn by *reconstructing* Yogācāra's basic ideas in relation both to their historical context and to *each other*, rather than by radically deconstructing them through historical analyses on the one hand or the Tenet Systems on the other?

For starters, we can benefit by simply acknowledging, within their historical context, the specific concerns and contents of key Yogācāra writings, noting that Vasubandhu's and Asaṅga's (4-5th c. CE) compositions usually evinced a close relationship between 1) the philosophical and psychological analyses presented in the early sections of their compositions, 2) the contemplative practices relying on those analyses in the middle sections, and 3) the fruits of cultivating that path, typically presented at the end of their treatises.

Specifically, these teachings reveal their deepest existential import when we recognize the crucial relationship between what Yogācārins call the Three Natures: we *falsely imagine* that the world is populated by unchanging entities and characteristics; these false appearances arise due to our *dependently arisen*, constructive cognitive processes, most of which arise both unconsciously and collectively; but by recognizing that these are *just products* of our interactive cognitive processes, we can see through these appearances and realize their *real nature*, their ineffable Thusness.

These three 'natures' constitute a restatement of the problem of mis-knowledge, an analysis of its causes, and the methods and results of ending them. The center of these is the Dependent Nature, the dependent arising of our cognitive processes. These are the very processes that give rise to both mis-knowledge—the illusions that blind and bind us—as well as the methods for seeing through them. And when all this is said and done, bodhisattvas can close the curtain on the Magic Show of Buddhist teachings, having led beings to the other shore. That is, the Three Natures present a practical path to liberation, not an ontological view to hold onto.

To illustrate all this, we will proceed by reconstructing a historical understanding of Yogācāra, focused on dependent arising as its organizing rubric. This mode of analysis originated with the Buddha, was considered his core teaching by both Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, and placed front and center in classical Yogācāra in the guise of the Dependent Nature—which is *word-for-word* the formula of dependent arising. This historical understanding presents a very different picture of the depth and breadth of Yogācāra teaching than is usually found in the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems.

Dependent Arising as Paradigmatic Buddhist Syntax

Although dependent arising is widely recognized as the central teaching of the Buddha, it is easy to overlook its deeper implications. Its basic formulation and central importance are clear enough:

> When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.
> When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases (MN 79.8).
> One who sees dependent arising sees the dhamma, one who sees the dhamma sees dependent arising. (MN I191)

In this view, we can best understand causal relations—how things come to be—by analyzing

the conditions on which they *depend* and the patterns of interaction out of which they *arise*—their dependent arising. This way of describing patterns of causality does not require, indeed, actively eschews, independent agents; it is thus an 'agentless' syntax.

We are familiar with such formulations in certain contexts. Scientific explanations typically explain patterns of causal interaction that occur without agency or intentionality: natural 'laws' operate *by themselves*. We see this not only in physics and chemistry, with relatively simple elements and few variables, but also in more complex systems such as ecology, evolution and economics, in which intricate networks arise through the accumulative results of repeated patterns of interaction.[14] And, of course, such expressions are highly valued in cultures inspired by Buddhist modes of thinking (Japan's *Zenrin kushū*: "the grass grows by itself.")

Arguably, this agentless syntax is the paradigmatic mode of expression in classical Indian Buddhism.[15] An early text, the *Questions of Milinda*, suggests how closely this follows from analyses in terms of dependent arising:

> Because of the eye and visual form, visual consciousness arises. Co-arising with that are contact, feeling, perception, volition, one-pointedness, the life-principle, attention. Thus these things are produced from a condition and there is no *experiencer* found here. [III, vi]. (Mendis, 1993, 50).

The great Theravāda scholastic, Buddhaghosa (roughly contemporaneous with Vasubandhu), makes a similar point, noting that while there is no ultimate 'experiencer' or agent, we may still speak of such agents out of convenience, as a mode of 'common usage.'

> He sees no doer over and above the doing, no experiencer of the result over and above the occurrence of the result. But he sees clearly with right understanding that the wise say 'doer' when there is doing and 'experiencer' (Pāli. *patisaṃvedako*) when there is experiencing simply as a mode of common usage (*vohāra*). *Visuddhimagga* (XIX, 19)

This is not, of course, the way most of us think and talk most of the time. Despite the diversity of grammars in the world's languages, for practical reasons they tend to emphasize the

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[14] This is the basic sense of *saṃskārā*, karmic formations. Edgerton describes *saṃskārā* (Pāli, *saṅkhārā*) as "predispositions, the effect of past deeds and experience as conditioning a new state," as both "conditionings [and] conditioned states" (BHSD 542); Collins (1982, 202) similarly describes *saṅkhārā* as "both the activity which constructs temporal reality [*loka*] and the temporal reality thus constructed." Note its relation to 'temporal reality' (*loka*).

[15] The Sanskritist, Edwin Gerow, argues that there are two broad trends in classical Indian thought that, from a grammatical point of view, articulate two diametrically opposed orientations—one based on causal models that reject agents altogether, such as Buddhism, and those, such as Śaivism, that equally extoll agency. These orientations are reflected in their respective syntactical paradigms, philosophical assumptions, and corresponding theological ramifications. Truly, Gerow observes, echoing Wittgenstein: "we speak our philosophies along with our grammars" (1982, 116). See related sections in Waldron (2006), 'On Selves and Selfless Discourse.'

actions of agents: *I* am writing an essay, *she* went to the market, etc.[16] This way of thinking and talking so strongly—and subtly—reinforces the centrality of independent agents that many people find it difficult to imagine any other way of thinking. Thus we impute agency and intentionality to natural phenomena, talking about molecules that 'want' to bind, the sun that 'wants' to shine, and storms that 'seek' to punish sinners; in short, we anthropomorphize. At the more abstract level, many religious and philosophical traditions consider agency, and its accompanying intentionality, to be the most fundamental *reality* (note 15, above). This is central to the argument by design in theistic traditions: if something shows signs of complexity, *aka* design, then—axiomatically—there *must* be a Designer. Few people recognize the argument's implicit dependency on a particular grammatical model.

The problem with such 'common usage'—especially when it is constantly reinforced by everyday grammatical paradigms—is that it subtly strengthens our deeply intuitive sense that we are independent agents acting upon independent objects 'out there' in the world,[17] as if the one could be ultimately isolated from the other, as if beings were truly separate from their environments.[18] This expresses, in Buddhist terms, a deep-seated ignorance about how the world works, about how causally embedded we all are—the very ignorance, Buddhists argue, that instigates actions aimed at protecting and promoting such 'selves' at the expense of the very things we depend on, which in turn gives rise a vicious circle of action, results, and reactions that reinforces itself with each iteration—it give rise, that is, to the emotional and cognitive habits that bind us, in short, to samsara.

Accordingly, the Buddha advocates that we take our usually 'unfit' sentences—phrased in terms of apparently independent agents acting upon apparently independent objects[19]—and reformulate it in terms of the syntax of dependent arising:

> "Who, now, Lord, is it who craves?" "Not a fit question," said the Exalted One.
> "I am *not saying someone craves*. If I were saying so, the question would be a fit one. But I am not saying so.
> And [since] I [am] not saying so, were anyone to ask thus: '*Conditioned now by what, Lord, is craving?*' this would be a *fit* question.
> And the fit answer there would be: 'Conditioned by feeling is craving'" (SN 12.12).

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[16] This is especially pronounced in English, which not only capitalizes the first-person pronoun, I, but also expresses events that happen to people—such as headaches or hunger—in the first-person (*I have* a headache, *I am* hungry), where many other languages express such events in the dative case (hunger happens to me).

[17] Wittgenstein's philosophical analysis is surprisingly similar, as Stern observes: "In the *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein . . . maintains that the subject-predicate grammar of our everyday language has such a firm grip on us that we are usually quite unaware of its influence." (Stern, 1995], 79–80).

[18] In his *Descartes' Baby*, Bloom (2005) argues that, however untenable it may be from scientific points of view, we are nevertheless innately dualists, reflecting at the dispositional level what is philosophically expressed as Cartesian dualism. This lingering, intuitive dualism led philosopher Daniel Dennett to suggest that we subtly and implicitly inhabit a Cartesian Theatre, an image of ourselves sitting inside our minds watching the world 'out there.

[19] A perfect example of this is how Bertrand Russell defines "the mental act of apprehending the thing:" "There is on the one hand the thing of which we are aware. . . . and on the other hand the actual awareness itself, the mental act of apprehending the thing." (Russell, 1959, 65).

This approach suggests that we take our ordinary ways of talking and transpose them into the agentless syntax of dependent arising, which helps decenter our sense of self and all its emotional entanglements.[20] This sounds easy enough, but it is constantly contravened by our innate tendency to revert to an active syntax focused on agents and intentions ("those molecules *want* to bond"). As a consequence, we unreflectively turn even Buddhist agentless syntax into 'unfit' formulations, such as, Vasubandhu will later complain: "The eye sees and consciousness discerns."

One advantage of rephrasing ordinary statements in terms of phenomena that arise and cease in dependence on specific conditions is that this avoids the two extremes of existence and non-existence, as expressed in the famous *Kaccānagotta Sutta*:

> This world, Kaccāna, for the most part, depends upon a duality—upon the idea of existence and the idea of nonexistence.
> But for one who sees *the origin of the world* as it really is with correct wisdom, there is *no idea of nonexistence* in regard to the world.
> And for one who sees the *cessation of the world* as it really is with correct wisdom, there is *no idea of existence* in regard to the world…
> "All exists": Kaccāna, this is one extreme.
> "All does not exist": this is the second extreme. (SN 12.15).

The great Mahāyāna teacher, Nāgārjuna, famously endorses[21] this crucial teaching in his seminal text, *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*; MMK):

> To "say it is" is to grasp for *permanence*. To say "it is not" is to adopt the view of *nihilism*…
> Therefore, a wise person does not say "exists" or "does not exist" (MMK, 15.10).

We should note that these two extremes—permanence or eternalism, and nihilism or non-existence—are *exactly* what the Yogācārins are commonly accused of asserting: that mind ultimately 'exists,' while objects are ultimately 'non-existent.' Our thesis is that, quite to the contrary, Yogācārins avoid the two extremes precisely by analyzing our cognitive processes in terms of the syntax of dependent arising. This, however, must be demonstrated in some detail.[22]

Dependent Arising of our Cognitive Processes sub

We will therefore outline how our cognitive processes are analyzed in terms of dependent arising in early Buddhist texts and then show how these analyses are not only replicated in classical Yogācāra texts, they are also—echoing the Buddha's advice—explicitly recommended as a more accurate or, better, *less misleading* way of understanding how cognitive processes and their

[20] This is the basic rationale for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.
[21] Nāgārjuna explains, "whoever sees dependent arising also sees suffering and its arising and its cessation as well as the path". *MMK*, XXIV.40.
[22] Much of the next section is culled from my recent introduction to Yogācāra, *Making Sense of Mind-Only*. One motivation for writing this essay was to bring all the relevant points from the book into a single, focused argument.

correlative objects appear. Though for many readers, the teaching of dependent arising may seem basic, its deeper implications are, as the Buddha often declared: "profound, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, sublime, beyond the scope of mere reasoning, subtle" (MN 26). And without an understanding of these early teachings, it is all too easy to misinterpret Yogācāra teachings.

"Dependent arising" means, roughly, that things occur—they 'arise'—in dynamic relationships. And though we refer to 'things,' these are just convenient designations, shorthand devices to save us from describing the multitude of conditions that constitute and support them. That is, we *provisionally designate* parts of mutually reinforcing, interactive processes as if they were distinct, such as the terms 'river' and 'river-bed.' Unfortunately, this reinforces our predispositions to think that we can truly characterize phenomena as if they existed *in*dependently of their causal and semantic *inter*dependence. In the perspective of dependent arising, however, as in ecology, causal efficacy arises from the *pattern of interaction* as a whole, not from any single component of it. The grass may 'grow by itself' in the sense that there is no underlying, singular agent determining its growth, but it does not grow independently of sun, soil, or seed.[23] When we depart from this approach, when attempt to identify apparently independent 'things' apart from their dynamic, relational contexts, and try to define what they are, in and of themselves—then we are reifying them, inviting all the problems that essentialism entails.

The formulations of dependent arising, by contrast, identify *patterns* of interaction that reoccur and tend to give rise to regular results. This is clearly expressed in the Buddha's analysis of cognition. As the Buddha observed, "Apart from conditions there is no arising of cognitive awareness" (MN I 258). More specifically, the standard formula below states that cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*)[24] arises when something impinges on one of the sense faculties or mind. The second passage places cognitive awareness square in the middle between these two:

> Dependent upon the eye and visible form, visual cognitive awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact." (SN 12.44).
> The six internal sense spheres are one end, the six external ones are the other, cognitive awareness is in the middle (AN 3.61)

In these analyses, cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*) is not a *faculty* that actively cognizes objects; it is process that *occurs* depending upon specific conditions. To interpret *vijñāna* as an *act* of cognition rather than an *occurrence* of awareness (like the difference between watching and seeing), would be an 'unfit' sentence that contravenes the agentless syntax of dependent arising.

A number of implications follow from this mode of analysis. Specific forms of cognitive awareness only arise when appropriate stimuli impinge on their respective faculties. This involves stimuli that not only change from moment to moment, like a spark, but that also stand out from their

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[23] See Lewontin (2000), *The Triple Helix: Genes, Organism, Environment*, for a similar critique of genetic determinism.

[24] The term *vijñāna* is often translated as *consciousness*. This is reasonable when the term refers to the presence and continuity of sentience throughout one's lifetime and into the next, in the traditional Buddhist worldview. In the context of analyzing cognitive processes, however, *cognitive awareness* is more accurate since it denotes its integral relationship with cognitive objects.

surrounding context. We are not, for example, usually aware of the hum of a refrigerator or florescent lamp until it stops, nor do we recognize a perfectly camouflaged bug until it moves. Even distinct visible objects fade into a blur if we keep our eyes perfectly still. The arising of cognitive awareness thus depends upon shifting *temporal and contextual distinctions*. Indeed, this analysis precludes the very idea of a stimuli existing *by itself*. It is inescapably a relational and dynamic notion.[25]

Moreover, stimuli and faculties are necessarily *correlative* with each other. This is because it is the responsive structure of our sense faculties that determines what *kind* of stimuli, what kind of objects, can appear in our cognitive domains (*gocara*). That is, they determine what counts as *visible* objects, *audible* sounds, *tangible* things, and so forth—and these vary, of course, from species to species. Faculties and their respective objects are thus necessarily defined *in relation to each other*, not as wholly independent entities but as inseparable components of a larger pattern of interaction, that is, their dependent arising.

What we become aware of (or, using 'unfit' syntax, what we *cognize*) is therefore neither an exact reflection of a purely objective reality, as realists contend—because our cognitive 'objects' are necessarily mediated and formed by our faculties. Nor are such 'objects' unilateral projections of "mind," as idealists assert—because 'subjects' also arise relationally, inseparable from their surrounding environment.[26] Much as the cognitive scientist, Georg Lakoff, put it, cognitive awareness is "a function of the world and our biology interacting" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, 24)—a relation that is implicit in the very expression "visible object." Analysis in terms of dependent arising assiduously avoids these two extremes.

It also entails a robust constructivist model of perception. That is, the objects we are consciously aware of are already *pre-formed*, not only by the distinctions our cognitive faculties are structured to respond to, but also by the cognitive processes that bring discrete stimuli together—that is, by re-cognition or perception (*saṃjñā*; literally: 'knowing together;' in some contexts it means 'sign' or 'notion'). This refers both to *sensory* processes, in which stimuli occurring, for example, at the level of retina cells are brought together in the visual cortex; and to processes at the *mental* or semantic level, insofar as signs and notions are indispensable for ordinary human perception.[27] The Buddha thus declared that cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*) and re-cognition (*saṃjñā*) are "conjoined, not disjoined, and it is impossible to separate each of these from the other in order to describe the difference between

[25] Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, 1976, 1130) defines stimulus as "a thing that evokes a specific functional reaction in an organ or tissue."

[26] As neuroscientist, Christine Skarda (1999, 80) cautions, while "all perceived features and objects are the products not the causes of perceptual processing... rejection of naive realism does not imply.... a form of subjectivism, for it does not claim that the percept is merely subjective. Subjectivism [also] violates the principle.... that all phenomena (whether physical or mental) are inexorably embedded in a causal network of reality."

[27] According to Skarda (1999, 85), even putatively "pure sensations" depend upon the elementary schemas that constitute the responsive structure of the sense organs. These receptor neurons "isolate their triggering stimuli," which are then contrasted with each other by "post-receptor" neurons that "deal with the phenomenal event occurring within the sense organ *at one remove*, as it were," eventually giving rise to the perceived features we consciously experience.

them" (MN 43.9).[28]

These two are so inseparable, according to the Pāli scholar, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2007, 14), that "all percepts *as such* are to be regarded as mere signs (*saññā, nimitta*)." That is, if all our consciously perceived objects are *already* constructs, with distinctive features (signs and notions), then we cannot definitively distinguish our perceptions from their apparent 'objects,' because, at least experientially, we cannot tease them apart. We cannot ordinarily get outside of our faculties to see 'reality' just as it is. What we experience then is inescapably mediated, relative, and dependent on conditions. Or so the Buddha taught.

These points together—that our cognitive objects are correlative with the responsive structures of our sense faculties, and that all our perceptions are *always already* constructs—suggests that our 'worlds' are also relative—or, more precisely, *correlative*—with our specific modes of embodiment. As the Buddha declared:

> In this fathom-long body, with its perception and thoughts, I proclaim the world to be, likewise the origin of the world and the cessation of the world, likewise the method leading to the cessation of the world (AN 4.45).

We should note that this sense of the term 'world' (*loka*) is close to the philosopher Edmund Husserl's notion of 'lived world' (*lebensvelt*), and contrasts sharply with the realist view that imagines that we have ultimately true, objective knowledge of the world. Rather, in the early Buddhist view beings live in distinct species-specific worlds that vary depending on the responsive structures of their faculties.[29]

This introduces a temporal dimension to the arising of the world (*loka*): our "world" comes about in relation to our dynamic cognitive processes. This, too, is expressed in terms of the formula of dependent arising:

> With contact as condition, feeling [arises] . . craving . . grasping . . becoming . . birth; with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. This, monks, is the origin of the world (*loka*)."

The clear conclusion to all this is that while the map may not be the territory—our cognitive processes do not ultimately perceive reality 'as it truly is'—our *experienced world* is unavoidably a mapped world.

At this point, we might be tempted to revert to our usual agentive syntax—phrasing things in terms of independent agents acting upon an independent world—and ask questions like: Who does this mapping? Who sees objects? Are the objects of perception truly 'out there' or not? If not, then

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[28] This agrees with the observation of neurologist Oliver Sacks (2004, 85) that "whether it is color or motion, a double process of breaking down and building up, or decomposition and recomposition—whatever one likes to call it—seems to be unavoidable."

[29] See, for example, Ed Yong (2022), *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us*.

wouldn't that mean that 'mind' *creates* the 'world'? These are the kinds of issues that people often imagine Yogācārins discussing.

But they are not, following the Buddha's wise counsel, 'fit questions.'[30] Objects are neither 'existent' nor 'non-existent,' and 'mind' is not an agent. In the early Buddhist formulations, mental awareness, like other forms of cognitive awareness, *occurs* when specific conditions are present.[31] Mental awareness no more actively *cognizes* thoughts than sensory awareness actively perceives objects, since neither of them are agents nor, strictly speaking, actions. There is no underlying 'experiencer' or agent as subject or actor. These are just dependently arisen phenomena that occur with specific causes and conditions.

Instead of defaulting to our usual 'unfit' agentive syntax, which invites reification of selves and objects, the Buddha advise us to utilize—for these purposes at least—the syntax of dependent arising: Under what conditions does the perception of apparently independent objects/worlds arise? Under what conditions do apparently independent subjects arise?

As we shall see, Yogācāra analyses of mind effectively replicate all of these early teachings, but with the major innovation that they apply these modes of analysis to cognitive processes that operate outside of our immediate awareness—centered, of course, on their signature concept of store-house consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). But before Yogācārins arrived on the scene around the 2-3rd c. CE, two crucial developments occurred in Indian Buddhism that both largely determined the issues they addressed and configured the way they addressed them: Abhidharma and early Mahāyāna.

From Abhidharma to Mahāyāna: from Fixed Categories to the Minds that Impute Them

The Abhidharma traditions (beginning ca. 2nd c. BCE) aimed to systematize the Buddha's multifarious teachings, in part by more precisely defining the salient characteristic of each of its concepts and components, now called *dharmas*, and delineating the complex interrelationships between them. While having clear and stable definitions facilitated more consistent and robust analyses—the reason why textbooks like these are widely still used in Buddhist seminaries—it also created its own set of problems, deeply influencing how later Indian Buddhist traditions developed.

Specifically, the attempt to ultimately define the salient characteristic of each *dharma*, what it is *in itself*—couched in terms of its own-being (*svabhāva*) or its own-characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*)—seemed to contradict the basic orientation of dependent arising, which sees all phenomena, even *dharmas*, as inextricably involved in interactive processes. Why was this a problem?

First, this mode of analysis tends to treat *dharma*s, unlike other kinds of stimuli, as if they existed independently of our awareness of them, as if they were just 'out there' waiting to be observed. It also treats *dharma*s, unlike other kinds of stimuli, as if they were *not* correlative with one's faculties,

[30] Sue Hamilton puts this nicely: "[S]tating that in seeking to know what you *are,* or even whether or not you *are*, you are missing the solution to the problem of cyclic continuity. . . . *That* you are is neither *the* question nor *in* question: you need to forget even the issue of self-hood and understand instead how you work in a dependently originated world of experience" (Hamilton, 2000, 23).
[31] "In dependence on the mind and mental phenomena, mental awareness arises" SN 35.93.

and could therefore be defined independently of them. Moreover, also unlike other kinds of stimuli, it tends to treat *dharma*s as if they were agents that actively 'do' things, rather than de*sign*ating—giving names or signs to—functions or processes that dependently arise.

In his classic compendium, the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu, the soon-to-be-Mahāyānist, makes just these criticisms, echoing the Buddha's warning about 'unfit' formulations:

> The *sūtra* teaches: "By reason of the organ of sight and of visible matter there arises the visual consciousness;" there is not there either an organ that sees, or visible matter that is seen; there is not there *any action* of seeing, *nor any agent* that sees; this is only a play of cause and effect. In the light of [common] practice, one speaks, metaphorically, of this process: "The eye sees, and the consciousness discerns." But *one should not cling to these metaphors* (ad 1.42d, in Pruden 1988, 118; emphasis added).

To cling to the "metaphors" of agents, actions and objects—as if consciousness were an agent that acts rather than an awareness that occurs—would miss the most radical feature of dependent arising: its rejection of independent agents and objects. The most systematic presentations of Yogācāra doctrines we will examine below, some by Vasubandhu himself, closely follow this advice.

The early Mahāyāna philosopher, Nāgārjuna (ca. 1st c.CE), made similar points. He argued that the very notion that *dharmas* have their own unchanging characteristics is problematic, since *dharmas* are inextricably involved in interactive processes, that is, they dependently arise and depend on designations. *Dharmas* are thus necessarily *empty* of unchanging characteristics. He famously equates emptiness with dependent arising in this seminal verse:

> Whatever is dependently arisen is explained to be emptiness.
> That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way (MMK 24.18).

Note how this verse alludes to the role our minds play in this: even emptiness is just a dependent designation (*prajñapti*).

This passage also alludes to the larger role of dependent designation in Nāgārjuna's work. What *counts* as an object or *dharma* depends not only on our constructive cognitive processes, but also on being *designated as* this or that *dharma* (*de-sign-ate* means 'apply a sign to'). In other words, the notion of dependent designation already implies a correlation between our faculties, our cognitive and especially semantic processes, and their objects—a correlation that is obscured in the process of defining what *dharmas* are 'in themselves.'[32]

Nāgārjuna's verse thus reaffirms the powerful role these constructive processes play in determining the contours of our 'worlds,' much as we saw in the early teachings. This is eloquently acknowledged by the Dalai Lama's commentary on Nāgārjuna's MMK 24.18:

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[32] This echoes Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's analysis of perception in the Pāli texts: "all percepts *as such* are to be regarded as mere signs, *saññā, nimitta*," in which the apparent objects of perception, with their signs or marks (*nimitta*), are inseparable from the constructive processes of apperception (*saññā*) (2007, 14).

> Dependent designation, then, means that things exist by way of being labeled upon a suitable basis or through worldly convention. In other words, they are *dependent* on their designation *by the mind* conceiving them, because all phenomena in the final analysis are conceptual labels applied on aggregations of certain bases. *Their identity cannot be separated from the conceptual mind that labels them*. (Gyatso, 2009, 102; emphasis added)

This is a fascinating interpretation, not the least because it so closely parallels the cogent definition of idealism offered by Jonathan Gold: "To call a view idealist it is sufficient merely that it holds that everything is *dependent upon mind*" (Gold, 2015b; emphasis added). Does this make the Dalai Lama an 'idealist'?

Nomenclature aside, we should note that these passages reaffirm the *inter*dependence of our perceptual objects and their respective faculties. They reaffirm the correlation between apparent objects and the concepts and labels that inform and structure our perceptual processes—echoing the relation between 'world' (*loka*) and 'mind' in the Pāli texts.

This then becomes the point of departure for the next stage of Indian Buddhist thought: if "all phenomena in the *final* analysis are conceptual labels… [whose] identity cannot be separated from the conceptual mind that labels them," then we need to deeply investigate exactly how this 'conceptual mind' is structured and how it operates. We also need to ask a question related to Buddhist practice: why is it so hard to follow the advice of the Buddha, Nāgārjuna, and Vasubandhu, and *stop* imputing independent entities and essences onto dependently arisen phenomenon? Both of these topics are directly addressed by the Three Nature Theory in classical Indian Yogācāra.

Yogācāra Analyses of Mind: The Unconscious Construction of our Collective Worlds

Our main thesis is that we can avoid misinterpreting Yogācāra teachings as idealism if we recognize how much Yogācāra teachings replicate early Buddhist modes of analyzing our cognitive processes, especially the agentless syntax of dependent arising.

But Yogācāra Buddhists were also Mahāyānists and this introduces another dimension to their understanding of how mind works. The most important of these is expressed in a telling passage in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* (2nd or 3rd c.CE), the first 'Yogācāra' *sūtra.*[33]

> What lacks a specific defining characteristic is unborn.
> What is unborn is unceasing.
> What is unborn and unceasing is primordially in the state of peace.
> What is primordially in the state of peace is naturally in the state of *nirvāṇa*.
> For what is naturally in the state of *nirvāṇa*,
> there is nothing in the slightest that passes into the state of *nirvāṇa* (7.8).[34]

[33] We draw on the excellent online translation of the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* by the Buddhavācana Translation Group (BTG).
[34] This passage is also found in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*. Lamotte (1935, 193).

This passage expresses the idea that the Ground of our being is the primordially peaceful state of *nirvāṇa*. The basic Problem is that, due to ignorance and attachment (which are dependently arisen phenomena) we don't realize this. We can overcome these by practicing the Path, by recognizing that we are *always, already* in the primordially peaceful state of *nirvāṇa*. This new Mahāyāna worldview is profoundly different from what we find in early Buddhism. It arguably marks the beginning of the non-dual paradigm known as the Ground-based Path in later forms of Indian, Tibetan and East Asian Buddhism.

It also roughly parallels classical Yogācāra's famous Three Nature Theory. The Falsely Imagined Nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) refers to the essences, the own-being (*svabhāva*) or own-characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa*), that we impute, as it were, onto the ongoing flux of phenomena—the problem identified by Nāgārjuna and the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* a few centuries earlier. These imputations arise due to dependently arisen cognitive processes—now called the Dependent Nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*) and which is *word for word* the formula of dependent arising.

The Dependent Nature—*aka* dependent arising—is central to our interpretation of Yogācāra, because its provides the theoretical framework as well as many of the technical terms by which Yogācārins analyze how we habitually, almost automatically, and mostly unconsciously impute essences onto the flux of phenomena.[35] In the systematic texts we will be examining, Yogācārins use the traditional syntax of dependent arising to explain how the structuring influences of unconscious cognitive processes, particularly the impressions (*vāsanā*) of language, help *pre-form* the shape in which our conscious perceptions and collective realities (*bhājana-loka*) appear. These are the same *samsaric* processes, tainted by afflictions and driven by desire, that we seek to stop and/or transform by realizing their empty nature, their Thusness (*tathata*), their Real Nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*).

These points are clearly illustrated in sections of the *Yogācārabhūmi* (2nd – 4th c. CE) and the chapter on *citta* (mind/heart), *manas* (thought), and *vijñāna* (cognitive awareness) in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*. These texts also introduce the idea of the store-house consciousness: Briefly, the store-house consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) has two distinct roles in Yogācāra analyses of mind, reflecting its complex historical genealogy.[36] 1) It refers both to an individual's ongoing stream of sentience (*citta-santāna*) that, driven by karmic actions, persists from one lifetime to the next 'carrying' their bundle of affective predispositions and karmic potentialities; and 2) it refers a set of subliminal cognitive processes that underlie, structure and pre-form all conscious awareness. It is also often misleadingly said to "produce the world"—an unfit formulation, of course.

In these texts, as with *vijñāna* in the early teachings, the store-house consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) is said to dependently arise in the middle, as it were, of two conditions: by the 'inner appropriation' on the one hand, and 'outer' objective supports, on the other. Moreover, the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* states that these analyses do not refer to ultimately real phenomena. They are heuristic devices, skillful means used by bodhisattvas to help us realize that phenomena as we ordinarily experience them do not refer to reality "as it is," but rather are complex products of our

[35] Or, in the agentless syntax of dependent arising: the conditions by which such imputations *occur*.
[36] For more detailed accounts of this complex concept, especially insofar as it was formulated in response to its historical background and context, see Waldron (2003; 2013).

constructive cognitive processes. To call them 'mere perceptions' (*vijñapti-mātra*), as we shall see, is therefore not an ontological statement about the nature of reality, but a way to counteract our underlying predispositions to reify objects by recognizing that "we are all just prisoners of our own devices." That is, *vijñapti-mātra* is a doorway to seeing the ultimate Thusness of all phenomena, which in Mahāyāna is *always, already* there.

An evocative passage in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* (5. 2) introduces *ālaya-vijñāna*'s 'inner appropriation':

> The subliminal mind with all the potentialities (*sarvabījakam cittam*; a synonym of *ālaya-vijñāna*) congeals, grows, develops, and increases *dependent* on two conditions:
> (1) the material sense-faculties and
> (2) our tendencies toward run-away associations based on characteristics, names, and preconceptions in everyday use.[37]

This passage is noteworthy in several respects. First, couched in the syntax of dependent arising, it outlines the 'inner' conditions for the arising of *ālaya-vijñāna*, a set of cognitive processes that are also described as subliminal or 'subtle' (*sūkṣma*). These conditioning influences include the very signs, marks and concepts that we are predisposed to *falsely imagine* are reality itself. Note that many of them are collective and social: names, characteristics and preconceptions of everyday speech.

The *Sūtra* goes on to explain how these 'inner' conditions both support and pre-form how we consciously experience the world around us. That is, we are able to recognize objects (*saṃjṇā*) because, through repeated exposure that 'fattens the seeds' (*bīja-paripuṣṭi*), we have *already learned* their names, signs and concepts; in modern terms, they have become neurologically embedded. What this passage is doing, in effect, is fleshing out in some detail the underlying, and mostly nonconscious, conditions that enable ordinary conscious perception to occur—while still being expressed in the syntax of dependent arising. This analysis will be augmented in later passages (8.37.1) that specify the 'external' conditions for *ālaya-vijñāna* to arise, that is, its correlative 'object' of perception: "the unconscious perception of the stable common world," a topic we will examine presently.

These inner and outer conditions—with *ālaya-vijñāna* in the middle—are described in more detail in a section of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, a text traditionally attributed to Asaṇga.[38] This section, dubbed '*Ālaya* Treatise,' analyzes the Yogācāra model of mind not only in terms of the syntax of dependent arising, but also utilizing a wide array of Abhidharma terminology.

> *Ālaya-vijñāna* arises with two supports:
> 1) the perception (*vijñapti*) of the *inner* appropriation (*upādāna*); and
> 2) the perception of the *external*, shared world whose aspects are not clearly discerned (**bahirdhā apariccinnākāra-bhājana-vijñapti*). (*Ālaya Treatise*. D. 3b7–4a3; H. 580a2–12).

[37] My translation. The text is no longer extant in Sanskrit. This passage has been reconstructed as: *sarvabījaka-citta*; *nimitta-nāma-vikalpa-vyavahāra-prapañca-vāsanā-upādāna*.
[38] See Kragh, 2013, for an end-depth study of this encyclopedic text.

Echoing the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, the *Yogācārabhūmi* explains that this "'inner appropriation' consists of the material sense faculties along with their bases, as well as the *predispositions* toward attachment to *imagined natures*," while the 'external' condition refers to

> the continuous, uninterrupted perception (*vijñapti*) of the continuity of the shared world (*bhājana-loka*) *based on that very ālaya-vijñāna* that has inner appropriation as its support (*Ālaya Treatise*. D. 3b7–4a3).

In other words, like *vijñāna* in the early teachings, our perception of the shared world (*bhājana-loka*) whose "aspects are not clearly discerned" is *correlative* with the 'inner conditions' of the subtle *ālaya-vijñāna* as outlined above.

This analysis replicates at the nonconscious level the same pattern we saw in the early Buddhist formulation of dependent arising: that what we experience as objects and as worlds (*loka*) are *correlative* with the structuring influences of our faculties and forms of consciousness, only now this explicitly includes names, concepts, and signs, and the preconceptions and run-away associations in everyday use—in short, much of what we have become socialized and acculturated into. As a result, we tend to consciously experience what we have already *implicitly* learned. We do not always recognize these acculturating influences, of course, because, at the deepest psychological levels, we are "predisposed toward attachment" to the falsely imagined entities and essences with which we populate our collective cultural worlds. (There is an incipient critical social theory in these texts.)[39]

Tellingly, the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* ends the chapter by declaring that one is not "skilled in the secrets of *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*" simply by understanding these analyses, but rather by seeing them as they are "in accordance with truth" (*yathābhūtam*), that is, as empty and conventional.

Reading Yogācāra Upside Down: Methodological Reification

These passages go a long way to answering the *cognitive* question left hanging by Nāgārjuna's logical analyses: why, despite the incisive power of Buddhist deconstructive analyses, do we continue to impute (*samāropa*) essences? The Yogācāra answer: the reason we see things in terms of imagined entities and their characteristics (the Imagined Nature)—and *not* in terms of dependent arising—is because we have deeply entrenched, and physiologically embedded, *predispositions* (*vāsanā*) to impute essences.[40] These predispositions inform and instigate other cognitive processes (*a là* the Dependent Nature), which, Yogācārins recognize, are mostly *not conscious*. That is, we cannot observe these processes at work. Accordingly, we tend to experience the shared 'external' world as if it were *given* rather than constructed.

Ironically, though, these deeply embedded tendencies to reify phenomena also color how we understand Yogācāra doctrines, as the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* presciently points out. The *Sūtra* warns against the tendency to take the reified essences of the Imaginary Nature as the *framework* for interpreting the Dependent and Real Natures—the way things dependently arise and how they

[39] See Aviv, 2020; Li, 2022; Makeham, 2014; Zu, 2025.
[40] As we saw in *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* 5.2.

ultimately are, respectively. This warning is necessary, the *Sūtra* warns, because sentient beings are predisposed to:

> *superimpose* (*samāropa*) an imaginary essence onto the dependent nature and the real nature, and because they *designate* the dependent nature and the real nature in terms of the characteristics of an imaginary essence… On this basis, *they wrongly conceive the dependent nature and the real nature in terms of the characteristics of an imaginary essence*." (7.10)

We can take this passage as a *methodological* directive, akin to the Buddha's unease about 'unfit' questions and Vasubandhu's caution against clinging to metaphors. If we ask: "*who* craves?" or "*what* exists: minds or objects?" instead of "under what conditions does craving or imagined essences arise?", then we would be *framing* these questions in terms of the Imagined Nature, that is, we would be "superimposing an imaginary essence onto the dependent nature" and then "*conceiving* the Dependent Nature in terms of the characteristics of an imaginary essence."

But if we follow these directives, we ought to do the exact opposite. We ought to take the 'unfit' patterns of ordinary speech, expressed in terms of unchanging essences and independent entities—the Imagined Nature—and transpose them into the syntax of the Dependent Nature (*aka* dependent arising, with its focus on dynamic interrelationships). And we should do this, not because Yogācārins think that dependent arising is an 'ultimately true' map or representation of reality, but because it is more *skillful*: talking in terms of *in*dependent subjects and objects *invites reification*.[41] Focusing on their *inter*dependence not only helps remedy those reifying tendencies, but also helps us conceive of a more robust middle way between realism and idealism—the basic insight of dependent arising. agnostic

We can now trace a clear line between the Buddha's critique of unfit questions, Vasubandhu's admonitions about clinging to metaphors, and the *Sūtra*'s warning against interpreting dependent arising in terms of imagined essences. These directives give us some *Yogācāra* guidelines for interpreting the wide variety of statements seen in both Yogācāra and other Buddhist sources. Let's see how this might apply to some Yogācāra texts.

An Example

Right after this section of the *Ālaya* Treaties of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, which focuses on how *ālaya-vijñāna* arises (*pravṛtti*), there is a short section that describes how *ālaya-vijñāna* ceases (*nivṛtti*). In both these sections, the processes associated with *ālaya-vijñāna* represent the continuity of an individual mind stream coursing through samsara, with all its accumulated karmic potentialities and afflictive predispositions, while the cessation or radical transformation of these processes is tantamount to liberation.

It is tempting to reify the diverse collection of processes and accumulations associated with

[41] Without qualification, asking what the object is 'on its own side' strips it away from the interactive relationships at the heart of dependent arising and, like most forms of realism, is arguably halfway to searching for its essence. See Skarda (1999, 80, note *26 above).

ālaya-vijñāna, as if its mere name, its dependent designation, represented an actual, singular entity.[42] Indeed, some passages in the *Nivṛtti* Portion sound remarkably like this, almost inviting us to reify *ālaya-vijñāna* as the unilateral progenitor of the phenomenal world—*a là* idealism:

> [*Ālaya-vijñāna*] is the root of the coming-about (*nirvṛtti*) of the animate world (*sattva-loka*) because it is what brings forth (*utpadaka*) the sense-faculties with their material bases and [six forms of] cognitive awareness.
> It also is the root of the coming-about of the shared world (*bhajana-loka*), because it is what brings forth the shared world…
> In this way, one should understand that *alaya-vijñana* is the root of all that is defiled, by being that which creates (*nirvataka*) the animate and shared worlds. (H. 581a24–b4; D. 7a1–5; P. 1020a13–18; Waldron, 2003, 186)

If we do not heed the abovementioned admonishments against reification by the Buddha, Vasubandhu, and the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, we could easily take these formulations at face value. After all, the text seems to straightforwardly state that the 'mind' (e.g., *ālaya-vijñāna*) accumulates all karmic energies and, seemingly by itself, actively and unilaterally 'creates' the animate world of sentient beings and our inanimate, shared world (*bhājana-loka*).[43]

But to sustain that interpretation we would have to prioritize the agentive, 'unfit' syntax explicitly and/or implicitly critiqued by the Buddha, Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu and the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*; we would need to ignore the entire *Pravṛtti Portion* that preceded this section in the *Yogācārabhūmi*, with its systematic analyses of how *ālaya-vijñāna arises* in *dependence* on various internal and external conditions. Not to mention the texts that state that all these phenomena, especially karmic seeds and their 'storage,' are *metaphors*, that only exist nominally (*prajñapti-sat*), not ultimately.[44] And we would need to ignore the fact that the term 'world' (*loka*)—from the Buddha's discourses to Abhidharma and beyond—has long been associated with the totality of sentient beings'

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[42] Though this would hardly be justified by the detailed analyses we have just seen, not to mention that this is *explicitly* rejected in the *Ālaya Treatise* itself: "*Ālaya-vijñāna* should be understood as momentary regarding [its] objects, and though it continuously arises in a stream of instants, it is *neither* singular (*ekatva*) nor eternal." See Waldron (2003, 180; D 4038, 4a5: *gcig pa nyid ni ma yin no*). The last phrase, "nor eternal," appears only in Xuanzang's Chinese (T 1579.30.580a18): 非一非 常).

[43] Even a cursory glance at nearly any version of the Tenet System demonstrates that this is the usual way of characterizing Yogācāra. "Its followers say that all phenomena are merely mind (Skt. *vijñaptimātra*)—the all-ground consciousness manifesting as environment, objects and the physical body, as a result of habitual tendencies stored within the all-ground. https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Chittamatra
"'Mind-only'; a term used in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* to describe the notion that the external world of the senses does not exist independently of the mind and that all phenomena are mere projections of consciousness. Because this doctrine is espoused by the Yogācāra, that school is sometimes referred to as *cittamātra*." *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 195.

[44] Vasubandhu's commentary on the *Abhidharma-kośa* not only equates seeds and imprints with a kind of power, but also calls them dependent designations (*prajñapti*) *(ad* AKBh II 36 1981, 219: *śakti bījaṃ vāsanā iti eka ayam arthaḥ . . . śaktiviśeṣa eva bījam. na bījaṃ nāma kiñcit asti, prajñaptisattvāt*) "Capability, seed, and imprint have the same sense. The seed is a specific capability. . . . It doesn't really exist at all, because it is nominally existent." See Tzohar (2018) for an in-depth study on Yogācāra theories of metaphor (*upacāra*).

karmic actions,[45] and is therefore widely seen as *correlative* with our cognitive processes;[46] and particularly that in classical Yogācāra our "perception (*vijñapti*) of the shared world is *based upon that very ālaya-vijñāna* that has inner appropriation as its support"—replicating the very patterns of dependent arising first formulated in the early Pāli texts.

In short, the idealistic interpretation of Yogācāra that says mind 'creates the world' does exactly what the Vasubandhu and the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* warn against: it takes metaphors and dependent designations as primary and substantive, and analyses of cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*) in terms of dependent arising as secondary. We might even say, in the spirit of *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* 7.10, that the idealist interpretation is *itself* an example of superimposing the reified essences of the Imagined Nature onto the dependent arising of the Dependent Nature, and then claiming that that view represents classical Yogācāra doctrines (exemplifying both senses of the term *samāropa*). It is hard not to see this as a *systemic misreading*, an inversion (*viparyāsa*) of the *Sūtra*'s stated priorities.[47]

A Yogācāra Hermeneutics

All this highlights the need to clarify the difference between 'fit' and 'unfit' questions, between reading texts in terms of the imagined entities of the Imagined Nature and agentless analyses of our cognitive processes in the Dependent Nature. We need, in other words, a Yogācāra *hermeneutics*, one that reflects a self-conscious awareness of the deep predispositions to reification that all readers bring to Buddhist texts, and that at the same time points the way free from them. My late friend and colleague, John Keenan, has succinctly summarized how the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* formulates this problem and its remedy:

> Having understood the explicit intention of the Blessed One that all scripture is to be interpreted in terms of the *meta-doctrine* of emptiness, one is then capable of understanding scriptural language itself, *without being led astray* by the propensity of the imagined nature toward language.
> To do this one must realize through concentration that [perceptual] *images* refer to no real things, but are only constructions of consciousness. *Language* does not refer to real things 'out there' in a real world, but to conscious constructs, either [left] unrecognized and imagined to be objectively 'out there,' or recognized as empty of any essential referent.[48]

To avoid misinterpretation, let's apply our cautionary remarks to these statements themselves. First, we might think that phrases like "only constructions of consciousness" can refer to only to what we call 'constructions,' as if these occurred *in*dependently of the dynamic relationships analyzed in dependent

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[45] The Dalai Lama (2005, 92) argues in his *Universe in a Single Atom* that the nature of a particular universe is relative to the karma of the beings that will eventually inhabit it: "even the laws of physics are entangled with the karma of the sentient beings that will arise in that universe."

[46] Vasubandhu: "It is said that the world (*loka*) in its variety arises from action. It is because of the latent tendencies that actions accumulate; without the latent tendencies they are not capable of giving rise to a new existence. Thus the latent tendencies should be known as the root of existence" (AKBh *ad* 5.1a)

[47] If not also of more traditional Buddhist perspectives: "One who sees dependent arising sees the *dhamma*, one who sees the *dhamma* sees dependent arising" (MN I191).

[48] Keenan (1997, 30). Note that this passage mentions the referent of both images and language.

arising, as if constructions were free-floating phenomena unconnected to any stimuli. After all, if they are *only* conscious constructions, then they could just as readily appear as a flower or a truck. But that interpretation would ignore how much these 'constructions' are said to depend on *both* our faculties and their respective stimuli; it would be treating 'constructions' apart from their *relational*, dynamic context. It would, in effect, be superimposing an imagined entity onto dependently arisen processes.

Still, one might object, doesn't this express the very solipsistic, and hence idealistic, nature of our perceptions that our interpretation is rejecting? Not necessarily. The conclusion that we cannot establish a definitive one-to-one relationship between stimuli and perceived object—that we cannot ordinarily get beyond our sensory or even linguistic constructs to see 'reality as it is'—does not entail that there is *no* relationship between them whatsoever. It's just that we cannot definitively separate putatively 'independent' objects from our perceptions of them to declare what they are 'in themselves.' Strictly speaking, that remains ineffable.

Nāgārjuna addressed similar concerns in regard to conventional discourse: words and concepts are meaningful and function in relation to each other and to the people who use them, not because they fully correspond to some truly 'objective,' external reality. The Yogācārins are making a similar point about our cognitive processes: our perceptions occur in dependence on a multitude of supporting conditions, and even if we cannot show that they correspond exactly to some external 'reality,' this does not entail that they are wholly separate from external stimuli; they are reliable enough to provide shared, practical knowledge. This is not a case of all or nothing, complete objectivity or complete subjectivity. There is a middle way between these extremes—it's called dependent arising.

Admittedly, it is easier to accept this in relation to language and culture, where the idea that meaning is constructed is fairly easy to grasp (even if unwelcome by many). But it is harder, and more unnerving, to see and accept this in our sensorial experience, whose stability and predictability we depend on every moment of our lives. This is why altered states of consciousness, however induced, are so deeply disturbing for most people, even if liberating for others. For many people, therefore, a deep dive into the cognitive science of perception provides an easier and more accessible entry to the many doors of perception in this world.[49]

This is this role, in my understanding, of the Yogācāra idea of mere perception. It is a method for *seeing* the apparent entities of the Imagined Nature for what they are: mere perceptions inseparable from the dependent arising of our interactive cognitive processes. But again, since this interpretation runs so counter to the received tradition regarding *vijñapti-mātra*, we must look at it in some detail.

Vijñapti-mātra as an Introduction to the Selflessness of Dharmas

After setting up the problem of ignorance in terms of the Three Nature Theory, the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* introduces the concept of 'mere perception' (*vijñapti-mātra*) as a remedy to taking the products of our interactive cognitive processes as if they were truly objective representations of reality itself. The *Sūtra* provides some analogies to help us realize that our perceptions are just that: merely perceptions. And then, this work accomplished, it abandons this proverbial raft on other shore.

[49] Yong (2022). Hoffman (2000).

In his *Twenty Verses*, Vasubandhu will later characterize this critical concept as an "introduction to the selflessness of dharmas"—a quintessentially Mahāyāna idea, we might note.

The *Sūtra* has emphasized how important it is to transform how we see the world: from imagining essences and entities *a là* the Imagined Nature to the dependently arisen phenomena analyzed in terms of the Dependent Nature. This involves, at bottom, understanding dependent arising: recognizing, first through analysis and then through direct realization, that our faculties, their correlative objects, and our awareness of them are not ultimately separable, but *together* constitute the perceptual process. However, they ordinarily appear *as if* they were separate, independent phenomena. These appearances, to repeat, occur supported and informed by constructive cognitive processes that are mostly unconscious. This is why we are so easily fooled: we can't see the underlying processes that give rise to appearances. But by contemplating phenomena such as mirages flickering on a highway or pixels flashing on a screen, we can *infer* how inseparable these apparently independent 'objects' are from our cognitive processes. And with practice, tradition holds, we can eventually come to directly see them all as mere perceptions, mere appearances. And this insight into the dependent arising—the emptiness—of appearances is profoundly liberating.

While it may not *seem* as if our perceptual objects are products of interactive cognitive processes, since they seem so independent and permanent—still there when we look at them again—a few thought exercises help to undermine these assumptions. The *Sūtra* gives two examples for considering how *inseparable* our perceptual objects are from our cognitive processes. A reflection in a mirror *appears* to be different from the object in front of it, but it does not occur independently of that initial object (8.7). Similarly, we know from cognitive science that all visual phenomena are products of the dynamic interaction between light waves, the reflective properties of 'objects,' and the visual faculties of the living beings who experience them—not of any of them individually.[50]

The images we conjure in our mind's eye during meditation on the teachings makes this even more obvious. While these images *appear* to be independent of our initial exposure to them (8.9)—as if they were stand-alone images like (we imagine) our everyday perceptions are—they do not occur independently of the processes supporting them, such as memory, and so on. We can even watch ourselves directing these images at will. Considering this carefully, we come to see that they are all just appearances, just perceptions, that occur in relation to one cognitive domain or another. Put differently, we never know them *apart from* the dependent arising of our cognitive processes. They are thus—by definition—conventional and empty. In the *Sūtra*, these contemplations eventually lead practitioners to abandon *all* the signs or marks (*nimitta*) of Buddhist practice, even the signs of *vijñāptimātra* and of the ultimate itself.[51] Realizing this, the *Sūtra* states, we gradually direct our attention toward their true reality, toward Thusness, empty and resplendent.

[50] Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 24).

[51] "The signs of the selflessness of persons and of phenomena, the sign of mere perception, and the sign of the ultimate through which one comprehends the thusness of characteristics—these are eliminated" by different types of emptiness. (8.29.8)

The point then is that all these concepts—*citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*, as well as *vijñapti-mātra*—are seen as empty, relative and conventional, *not* substantially existent, as the Tenet Systems claims.

Roughly one hundred years later, Vasubandhu takes up the topic of *vijñapti-mātra* in his short treatise, the *Twenty Verses* (*Viṃśatika*)—the text discussed in the vignette above. The *Twenty Verses* takes the form of a dialogue between a non-Mahāyāna 'realist' and Vasubandhu, the Mahāyānist. In verse 10 and his comments on it, Vasubandhu says that *vijñapti-mātra* was taught as an introduction to the central Mahāyāna doctrine of the selflessness of dharmas, and that it only rejects the ultimate *characteristics* of dharmas, their *conceptually constructed essence*, not *dharmas* altogether. Nevertheless, this text has long been considered the *locus classicus* of the idealist interpretation of Yogācāra.

In a way, it is not hard to see why. Vasubandhu starts off, provocatively, by stating that "everything in the three realms is *vijñapti-mātra*," [52] and then proceeds to equate *vijñapti* with *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*, stating that the term 'mere' (*mātra*) is meant to exclude the category of *artha*, understood here as referring to our cognitive objects.[53] These passages have long been interpreted as claiming that 'mind' is ultimately existent, while objects are non-existent—in short, the two extremes.

Were these the only relevant passages in this concise text, again, just ten pages in Sanskrit, and were they understood as timeless, stand-alone propositions about the nature of phenomena—divorced from all the Yogācāra doctrines that contextualize them, not to mention the rest of the text itself—then that interpretation might make sense, despite its dubious assumptions.[54] This was certainly the understanding of most later Indian writers, both Hindu and Buddhist, and one that is strongly represented in Tenet Systems to this day. But we need to read on.

Only a few pages later, in and around verse 10, Vasubandhu says that *vijñapti-mātra* was taught as an introduction to the selflessness of dharmas (*dharma-nairātmya-praveśa*) and then states that while such perceptions (*vijñapti*) "arise with the appearance of form, there is no *dharma* whatsoever that actually has the characteristic of material form, etc. (*rūpādi-lakṣaṇa*)." This is a fairly standard Mahāyāna denial of the ultimate characteristics of *dharmas*, pointedly directed toward Vasubandhu's non-Mahāyāna interlocuter, who would have held that dharmas do indeed have essences or intrinsic characteristics—for the very good reason, he insists, that the Buddha *himself* used such terms as 'material form,' etc.

Vasubandhu now makes a characteristic *hermeneutical* move, whose justification we will revisit in the next section. Echoing the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, he argues:

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[52] We will be citing the unpublished translations by John Dunne and by Jonathan Gold et al., modifying terms and phrases for consistency.

[53] *Artha* has many overlapping meanings in Sanskrit. As well as cognitive object, it can also mean aim, purpose, motive, reason, wealth, concern, sense, meaning, and referent.

[54] 'Dubious' because, as with other formulations, the concept of 'cognitive construction' (*vijñapti*) is itself just another designation, that is, a shorthand reference to broader patterns of interaction.

> The Blessed One stated with a certain *intention* the existence of the sensory domains, such as material form, for the sake of those *who needed to be instructed* by that kind of idea (v. 8).

That is, the Buddha spoke in terms of objects and faculties, and so on, so that people could come to "understand the selflessness of persons," that persons are not singular, unitary, unchanging entities, but are constituted by numerous interactive processes, such as the sensory domains, material forms, and so on (v.10a).

But just because the Buddha referred to discrete *dharmas*, Vasubandhu the Mahāyānist is quick to add, this does not mean that the *dharmas* of form, and so on, are ultimately real in the Abhidharmic sense. To avoid this misconception, Vasubandhu argues, the Buddha introduced the idea of *vijñapti-mātra*, in order to "bring people to understand the selflessness of *dharmas*" (v. 10c). It is "through the determination that all *dharmas* are just perceptions [that] one comes to understand that all *dharmas* are without essence" (*ad* v. 10d). This interpretation of the purpose of *vijñapti-mātra* is contradicts the idealist interpretation based exclusively on the first few passages.

Perhaps to pre-empt continued misunderstanding, Vasubandhu then carefully circumscribes the object of negation, avoiding the extreme of non-existence:

> It is not the case that one begins to understand the essencelessness of *dharmas* by thinking, "*dharmas* do not exist in any way at all." Rather:
>
> > *Dharmas* are essenceless in terms of their conceptually constructed essence (*kalpitātmanā*). (v. 10d)

Just to be sure, he quickly reiterates what *dharmas are* empty of:

> Childish people conceptually construct a nature for *dharmas*, such as the nature of being an object or subject; those *dharmas* are essenceless with regard to that conceptually constructed essence. (*ad* v.10d.)

What Vasubandhu is avoiding here are the two extremes, those of existence and non-existence. The characteristics of *dharmas* (such as *artha*) do not exist in an ultimate sense, they have no ultimate essence. But neither are they ultimately non-existent, because the phenomena they refer to have conventional efficacy: illusions do arise, they do affect us, and we do act upon them accordingly. And we can best understand these various processes and their consequences—the content of traditional Buddhist teachings—by recognizing that they are inseparable from the larger patterns of interaction so carefully delineated by generations of Buddhists in terms of dependent arising.

This is the gist of the multiple arguments and analogies in other parts of the *Twenty Verses*: we can't make sense of our experiential worlds (*loka*, *bhājana-loka*) in all their diverse, dynamic processes, by relying on notions of independent entities or essences, mental or material. Without recognizing the crucial *constructive* role of our cognitive processes in dynamic patterns of interaction, we cannot make sense of such phenomena as:

1) The coherence and causal efficacy of dream images, despite lacking 'external' stimuli (ex.: wet dreams).
2) The radically diverse perceptions people have of apparently similar phenomena, due to visual defects or the radically different faculties different species possess (ex.: rivers of pus and nectar).
3) The commonality of species-specific life-worlds (*bhājana-loka*), whose shared characteristics depend on similar faculties developed over time from similar past actions (ex.: hell beings).[55]
4) The perception of apparently 'whole' objects, which cannot be accounted for solely by material phenomena such as atoms, which are discrete and imperceptible.

All these common phenomena are better explained, Vasubandhu avers, by recognizing that each apparently independent entity is an inseparable component of larger patterns of interaction, whose appearance and identity are always constructs, dependent designations, brought about by complex causes and conditions. *This* is the shift from the Imagined Nature of essences and entities to the Dependent Nature of patterns of causal interaction, and eventually to the ineffable insight into Thusness.

Far from arguing *for* the two extremes—the existence of 'mind' and the non-existence of objects—as the Tenet Systems would have it, Vasubandhu is arguing *in favor* of standard Mahāyāna themes: the emptiness of persons and dharmas; the distinction between ultimate and conventional truths; and, as we shall presently see, the pragmatic, remedial function of Buddhist doctrines such as *vijñapti-mātra*.

Vijñapti-mātra is Just Another *Vijñapti*

Just as the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* (7.10) anticipated that people would interpret the Dependent Nature in terms of the Imagined Nature—that is, in terms of essences or independent entities—Vasubandhu's interlocutor accuses him of reifying the notion of mere perception, of claiming that *vijñapti-mātra* is a true representation, a true picture of reality, as if *vijñapti-mātra* itself were—unlike everything else—not a conventional *dharma*, a dependent designation, but an ultimately existent one. Vasubandhu counters this by declaring that "even a mere *vijñapti* is essenceless in terms of the essence that is conceptually constructed by other *vijñapti*" (ad v. 10d). Echoing Nāgārjuna's point that emptiness is also empty, lest it be the sole exception to the idea that all *dharmas* are empty, so too, Vasubandhu argues that the notion of "mere perception" is itself just another perception, just another *vijñapti*, lest it be the sole exception to the idea that all *dharmas* are mere perceptions.

The idea of mere perception in the *Twenty Verses*, then, as in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, is *not* used to declare 'what truly exists (or not),' but to help us recognize the dependently arisen, that is, the empty, nature of our cognitive experiences. And, here too, after this remedy has done its work one lets go of the very idea of *vijñapti-mātra.* The notion of "mere perception," therefore, is not a "real" *dharma* with an essence, but a critical concept to clarify the *lack* of essence, the dependent arising, the appearance, of all *dharmas* whatsoever. Or so says the *Sūtra* and Vasubandhu.

[55] I have treated commonalities with this view and processes of evolution at greater length in Waldron (2003b).

Vasubandhu: History or Reality *as* Dependent Arising?

Let's recall the vignette at the start of this paper. Two of my esteemed colleagues were confident that the *Twenty Verses* advocated idealism, based on its first paragraph alone and without reference to how Vasubandhu quickly contradicts that interpretation in verse 10 and his commentary on it. Any straightforward reading of this short text from *start to finish* would seem to present a fairly standard set of Mahāyāna arguments against the notion that *dharmas* have unchanging essences. Vasubandhu's main innovation is that, rather than focusing on the own-being of *dharmas*, with its logical and ontological orientation, he focuses the own-characteristics of *dharmas*, with an emphasis on our cognitive processes.

Nevertheless—as a matter of *methodology*—this text been radically dismembered, its passages plucked out of their historical and textual context and allocated to different, ahistorical categories, where its teachings are, arguably, systemically altered. This raises a number of important questions. How did Indian Buddhism get to this point? How does this approach differ from modern, critical historical scholarship? And, perhaps more importantly, what do we *lose* by dismantling complex but coherent doctrinal systems and distributing their parts to disparate, anachronistically constructed, tenet systems? Or more positively: how might our historical reinterpretation of Yogācāra render it relevant to our own circumstances?

While a definitive account of the development of the Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems remains to be written, we do know that as Buddhist sectarianism developed in the centuries following classical Yogācāra (3-5th c CE) people who identified as Mādhyamikans increasingly departed from the more traditional focus on cognitive questions—how do illusions dependently arise?—and began to focus more on ontological questions—what substantially exists?[56] This is a subtle but important shift in focus. If one thinks the most important doctrinal questions concern what 'truly exists'—with ontology as the primary interpretative framework—rather than what dependently arises, then phrases like "everything in the three realms *is* mere perception" or "there *are* no independent objects" will naturally be interpreted ontologically,[57] as meaning that mind and mind alone 'exists' while objects

[56] Considering the Kaccānagotta Sutta's warning, one might wonder why Indian Buddhists were even asking about 'what truly exists.' The usual response is because we are deluded about entities, such as selves and *dharmas*. But this already implies—echoing the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*'s point about emptiness—that the *intent* of teaching about 'existence' needs to be interpreted in terms of its role on the path to liberation and is, therefore, on its terms at any rate, not definitive.

[57] One also has to wonder if a focus on ontology isn't already halfway to essentialism. Havelock (1983, 14) provides some interesting observations regarding a similar transition in Greek culture from a situational ethos at the beginning of philosophy to an increasing emphasis on unchanging ontological categories, together with the grammatical transformations that both expressed and reinforced it: "From the standpoint of a sophisticated philosophical language, such as was available to Aristotle, what was lacking [in previous eras] was a set of commonplace but abstract terms which by their interrelations could describe the physical world conceptually; terms such as space, void, matter, body, element, motion, immobility, change, permanence, substratum, quantity, quality, dimension, unit, and the like. Aside altogether from the coinage of abstract nouns, the conceptual task also required the *elimination of verbs of doing and acting and happening, one may even say, of living and dying*, in favor of a syntax which states permanent relationships between conceptual terms

do not, and therefore everything we perceive *are* purely mental phenomena, not interactive, dependently arisen ones. As mentioned above, new interpretations do not so much change the *words* of the text as they do the larger framework within which those words are understood. And *this* then becomes the locus of controversy. As Keenan (1997, 21) astutely observes, "in the history of Mahāyāna thinking, the most crucial arguments occur not over issues within a shared context of meaning, but precisely over shifts in that context itself." Simply put, one interprets ideas depending on what *questions* you think they are answering.

From this point of view, the assumptions enshrined in the Tenet Systems almost demand that we decontextualize and dissociate the passages at the start of the *Twenty Verses* from those that clarify them in and around verse 10, encouraging us to read these early passages as *stand-alone propositions about reality*, rather than as integral parts of a unified composition that soon after presents *vijñapti-mātra* as a *remedy* for our tendencies to imagine that *dharmas*, such as cognitive objects, have their own characteristics. In this way, what began as a critical concept in classical Yogācāra texts gets reified in later interpretations into a 'view': whatever 'exists' is merely a perception, hence "everything is Mind." This is a significant reinterpretation of classical Yogācāra. But it does follow a certain logic: insofar as every decontextualization is, explicitly or implicitly, a recontextualization, then extracting classical Yogācāra teachings from their historical context is *exactly* what enables it to be subsumed—to be recontextualized—into the ahistorical edifice of the Tenet Systems.

Several eminent scholars argue that, ironically, it was Vasubandhu himself who first articulated the rationale for this. Vasubandhu directly addresses the tension, between using historical criteria to authenticate the Buddha's teachings and the seemingly timeless truths of those teachings, in a short text devoted to the "proper interpretation" (*vyākhyāyukti*) of Buddhist texts.[58] He is concerned here with establishing criteria for determining what is or is not the 'authentic' word of the Buddha (*buddhavācanā*), in large part to defend controversial Mahāyāna teachings such as emptiness. The key criterion he proposes is that such teachings "accord with reality," which he effectively equates with dependent arising. As in the *Twenty Verses* (*vimśatikā*), this discussion is artfully presented as a debate with a non-Mahāyānist, who initially rejects the newer Mahāyāna teachings.

At first, Vasubandhu's opponent attempts to define the true *buddhavācanā* as equivalent to the extant collections of the various schools at the time. Vasubandhu rejects this criterion, arguing, first, that these collections are incomplete and indefinite—since many discourses known only by their titles had already been lost, and Buddhists disagreed amongst themselves about which discourses were authentic—and second, that the extant discourses were in any case full of inconsistent, contradictory

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systematically. For this purpose, the required linguistic mechanism was furnished by *the timeless present of the verb to be*—the copula of analytic statement. The angles *are* equal to two right angles. *They are not born that way or become or are made so*." [emphasis added] This latter phrase is parallel to Nāgārjuna definition of essence in MMK 15.2: "How could it be appropriate for a fabricated essence to come to be? Essence itself is not artificial and does not depend on another." (MMK 15.1–2)

[58] I will be drawing primarily on Jose Cabezon insightful article on this text (1992), who cites Kapstein (1989). I have also benefitted from Gold (2015). This discussion neither is, nor intends to be, a comprehensive treatment of this important text. For more on Indian Buddhist commentarial traditions, see Nance 2012.

statements, which needed to be reconciled in some fashion. In short, Vasubandhu argues that the extant texts *by themselves* are insufficient for determining what is the true *buddhavācanā*.

His larger aim, therefore—his crucial move—is not to directly reconcile these multiple textual contradictions, but to articulate a set of deeper principles[59] by which one may distinguish teachings that are definitive (*nītārtha*, *nge don*) from those that have an 'ulterior motive' (*ābhiprāyika*, *dgongs pa can*), that is, that need to be interpreted.[60]

Vasubandhu first presents his own criteria:

> Let us say that what is commensurate with the *sūtra*,[61] what appears in the *Vinaya,*
> and what does *not contradict reality* is the Buddha's word,
> for these are the reliable teachings of the Great One.
> (P.124g, D.106b). (Cabezon, 1992, 231; emphasis added)

After some back and forth in which Vasubandhu repeatedly rejects, on the grounds mentioned above, his opponent's insistent reliance on the extant textual collections alone, Vasubandhu finally has his opponent spell out more specifically what "not contradicting reality" means:

> Let us say that (the Buddha's word) is that which is *not discordant*
> with what exists in the *sūtra*s that teach the four noble truths,
> with (a notion of *vinaya*) as the disciplining of the afflictions,
> and with a notion of *reality as dependent origination*.
> (P124b, D.107a). (Cabezon, 1992, 232; emphasis added)

Cabezon notes that Vasubandhu not only accepts these criteria for the authentic word of the Buddha, but also "hastens to add that the Mahāyāna is quite compatible" with them (1992, 232).

In this passage, Vasubandhu is spelling out the criteria by which Buddhists could distinguish which of the various teachings were authentic *buddhavācanā*. He is also establishing a distinction between that which "accords with reality"—effectively equated with dependent arising and what is 'definitive'—and other kinds of passages that have an 'ulterior motive' that needs to be interpreted, a strategy we saw in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* and Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*.

We can see here, in its rudiments, a fundamental tension between what we would call the historical record—epitomized in the extant *sūtra* and *vinaya*—and the criteria of what "accords with reality." Both José Cabezon and Matthew Kapstein trace the 'ahistorical' nature they say characterizes later Indo-Tibetan Buddhism to this tension and indeed to this text. Kapstein identifies Vasubandhu's work as "the form of Indian scholasticism that gave rise to the *ahistorical* characterizations of the

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[59] See Gold (2015, 213-17f).
[60] *Ibid*. 227. Obviously, this resembles the dichotomy between what is definitive (*nītārtha*) or interpretive (*neyārtha*), upon which much of Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems rely, even though, as Cabezon notes (1992, 239, n. 24), Vasubandhu does not use this latter term.
[61] I have abbreviated *sūtrānta* to *sūtra* for readers who are more conversant with the latter.

Buddha's word."[62] Cabezon (1992, 234) further argues that the view "espoused by early Mahāyāna scholastics such as Vasubandhu, looks *only to ahistorical* elements, where *accordance with reality* is the ultimate and final criterion" for determining the authentic *buddhavācanā*.[63] In other words, both these illustrious scholars see the criteria of "accordance with reality" as effectively—or perhaps, incipiently—*ahistorical*. Does this suggest that doctrines are *not* historically contingent?

We need to consider what this might mean. First and most obviously, the basic reference points for Vasubandhu's criteria of authenticity—the *sūtra* and *vinaya* texts as well as the notion of dependent arising—are part and parcel of Buddhist 'history.' Where else would they find these common references if not from teachings passed down orally from teacher to disciple and disseminated across the breadth of India and beyond—that is, from the very things that constitute Buddhist history?

What Vasubandhu is rejecting is the idea that the content of these texts, and these texts alone, are sufficient to *determine* what "accords with reality." So while the *sūtra* and *vinaya* and "the notion of reality as dependent origination" represent teachings that obviously constitute part of the 'historical record,' to what extent they "accord with reality" is a different kind of question altogether. To answer that question, one must bring in other kinds of criteria, such as conceptual consistency, completeness, correspondence to experience, etc.[64] This is the starting point, then, of the extremely sophisticated and varied systems of interpretation developed over many centuries in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism.[65]

But there's the catch, one that is widely recognized in Mahāyāna teachings: these latter criteria throw us back, once again, into the empirical, conventional world, where the question of what "accords with reality" has to be hashed out amongst conventional beings using conventional language—regardless of its ultimate source[66]—and so is *necessarily* expressed in historically contingent terms. As Jonathan Gold astutely notes:

> For Vasubandhu, an intelligent and lively analysis of the nature of reality—a reasoning about what appears to be causing what—must be part of any proper analysis of scripture. For that reason, the meaning of the dharma is always going to be subject to dispute, and thoroughly embedded within the realm of conventions. (Gold, 2015, 230).[67]

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[62] Kapstein (1989, 224), cited in Cabezon (1992, 234).
[63] Emphasis added. We should acknowledge that these articles were written more than thirty years ago. My esteemed colleagues might have different views today.
[64] See Gold (2015, 213-17f).
[65] It also suggests why the Tenet Systems tends to prioritize the study of *śāstras* over *sutras*, quite the opposite of the Chinese approach. See Appendix I.
[66] This should not be interpreted as denying the possibility of direct insight into reality 'as it is.' The point is that any *expression* of that insight will necessarily be conventional insofar as it depends on contingent modes of expression.
[67] As Garfield (1995, 200n67; emphasis added) similarly points out, our conventional categories "reflect our needs, our biological, psychological, perceptual, and social characteristics, as well as our languages and customs. *Given these constraints and conventions*, there are indeed facts of the matter regarding empirical claims and regarding the meanings of words. But there is no transcendent standpoint, Nāgārjuna would insist, from which these conventions and constraints can be seen as justified."

Or, so at least the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* argues. For most Mahāyānists, 'reality' is ultimately ineffable. There is no privileged discourse that ultimately, exclusively, expresses reality just "as it is." *All* doctrines, no matter what they refer to, are necessarily conventional. But, as Nāgārjuna recognized, there is no other way to *point* to the ultimate.[68] Hence, we should be cautious about making a hard and fast distinction between 'history' and what 'accords with reality,' between, in other words, conventional truths and ways of expressing ultimate truths. Whatever they may ostensibly refer to—as fingers pointing to the moon or rafts to the other shore—doctrines do not escape the radical contingency of human language.

This is perhaps why *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* forefronts not the *content* of Buddhist teachings—which, properly interpreted, it claims, all have the flavor (*rasa*) of emptiness—but focuses[69] instead on whatever is skillful, whatever leads away from reification, away from the superimpositions (*samāropa*) represented in the Imagined Nature and *toward* the view of dependent arising articulated in the Dependent Nature, toward, that is, a deeper understanding of our dependently arisen propensities to reify phenomena—all the while acknowledging that even these analyses are simply skillful means, dependent designations (*prajñapti*) to be abandoned further on down the road.[70] This perspective accords with the abovementioned distinctions between formulations that are 'fit' and 'unfit,' between dharma discourse and metaphors, between the Imagined and Dependent Natures—while assiduously avoiding their reification.

Classical Yogācāra, then, is hardly a form of idealism in which mind ultimately 'exists' but objects do not. Rather, it reflects the articulation in the early Mahāyāna era of ever-widening, ever-deepening understandings of dependent arising, newly expressed, as ever, to meet the challenges of new times and places. It is by recontextualizing these teachings within their own historical circumstances that the deeper insights and practices of classical Yogācāra may be recovered from the impoverished role they have been delegated to in traditional Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems. It behooves us, then, to briefly look at what has long been overlooked.[71]

Conclusion: Recuperating Yogācāra

[68] "Without a foundation in customary discourse (*vyavahāra*) the ultimate truth cannot be taught. Without understanding the ultimate truth, liberation is not achieved. (MMK 24.10)

[69] Adumbrating perhaps what is later articulated in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (IX, 43)(Cabezon, 1992, 232).

[70] *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, 1.4; 1.5: "Noble son, the noble ones are thus completely and perfectly awakened to inexpressible [reality] through their sublime gnosis and vision of this object, but in order to lead [others] to the perfect realization of this very inexpressible nature of phenomena, they label this object with the terms conditioned and unconditioned." https://84000.co/translation/toh106#UT22084-049-001-chapter-1

[71] Over the years, and up to just yesterday, countless Western Buddhists trained in the Tenet Systems have responded to this interpretation of Yogācāra with surprise and confusion: surprised that the tradition contains such insightful analyses of mind, which are *not* idealistic, and confused why they have never heard about them before.

Why does this matter? The short answer—our opening statement—is that we need all the help we can get in this era a radical change and deconstruction, in which, as Marx so presciently put it: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."

Multiple Buddhist traditions, especially Mahāyāna ones, have been down this road before. Its rich history across the centuries is now newly, and nearly universally, accessible as a "historical resource…a record of diverse cultural adaptations of Buddha Dharma" that Buddhist communities across Asia have found transformative and liberating.[72] We cannot afford, and have no need, to shunt aside these accumulated insights in the name of a seemingly timeless, ahistorical construct that, ironically, also arose in its own specific time and place and—to be clear—still possesses in its proper context its own cogency and power. But other contemporary Buddhists, outside of that context, need to freshly assess what is skillful and appropriate *here and now*.[73]

This is not to say that history has the last word, for it too is a conventional discourse, dependent on limited information, constrained by entrenched agendas, and driven by pre-existing, often unstated, assumptions. And it can be relentlessly deconstructive: any historical 'fact' can always be reduced to ever smaller ones, *ad infinitum*, leaving us adrift in a haphazard collection of 'unique particulars,' an endless ocean with nary a compass or raft to carry us to the other shore.

At some point, if we are to achieve any kind of coherence—historical, narrative, logical, psychological or theological—then our collective bent toward deconstruction will have to be balanced by some kind of reconstruction. And for this we not only need conventional categories, we need *skillful* ones, categories appropriate to our own time and place, relevant to our current circumstances. We need to ask, which provisional categories help us make better sense of which problems? What kinds of reconstruction do we need in this post-everything age of ours? And what can Buddhist and classical Yogācāra teachings contribute to ameliorating our collective ignorance, malfeasance, and misery?

I suggest that the basic orientation of dependent arising provides multiple, cascading levels of insight that we can profitably use to address major problems in our own day. Not because it adheres to some Buddhist or even Yogācāra dogma, but because the perspective of dependent arising is the least 'discordant with reality' (in the sense of it being the most explanatory, least contradictory, and least conducive to reification); and second, closely related to the first, because it is more skillful in our own time and place. How so?

The simplest reason is that Buddhism in general, and classical Yogācāra in particular, provide a robust theoretical and practical framework for analyzing how suffering comes about through reifying (essentializing) the life processes upon which we depend and then clinging to these reifications as if they were objectively real and reliable sources of happiness. By showing how these reifications arise in dependence on our interactive, constructive cognitive processes, these analyses also suggest how to free

[72] Makransky (2008, 127f).

[73] As John Makransky has so eloquently put it, we need to step away from former "exclusive paradigms" in order to "uncover alternative models for systematic practice and thought already found effective by others, elements of which, taking new expression, may speak to the conditions of our current place and time" (2008, 130).

ourselves from these falsely imagined constructions, help us to more deeply examine and understand their causal relations, and thereby more effectively ameliorate that suffering. It is critical analysis in service of liberation.

More specifically—though all but absent in the Tenet Systems' version of *citta-mātra*—classical Yogācāra provides the conceptual tools for analyzing our deeper psychological processes, first at the individual level and then at the social, cultural and political levels. The bridge between these is, as we have seen, the correlative relationship between our faculties and dispositions, the persisting, underlying awareness called *ālaya-vijñāna*, and our collective, yet subliminal sense of our shared reality (*bhājana-loka*).[74]

What do these analyses provide? It gives us robust tools for analyzing the dynamic constructive processes whereby we collectively, but mostly unconsciously, build our social and cultural worlds, worlds that we—also mostly unconsciously—cling to, appropriate (*upādāna*), and identify with. Yogācāra teachings gives us, in short, powerful conceptual and contemplative tools for critical cultural and social psychological analyses.

This is no small matter. Creating, organizing, and maintaining our collective worlds is one of the salient features of human life and society. Everybody is born into one or another social and cultural world, and is socialized and acculturated sufficiently for these worlds to seem as if they are given, rather than constructed. This is the magic sleight of hand that keeps us blindly enchanted with the products of our own creation. We cling to and identify with these constructs, thinking "I am this and I am that" (*kliṣṭa-manas*),[75] even—or maybe especially—at the unconscious level. As the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* (V.2) points out, many of the very things we are predisposed (*vāsanā*) to reify (*vikalpa*), cling to (*upādāna*) and obsess over (*prapaña*), are precisely social and cultural categories: names (*nama*), characteristics (*nimitta*), everyday speech (*vyavahāra*), etc. Our most important affective and cognitive processes 'dependently arise' informed and influenced by these various, underlying influences. And as the field of social psychology clearly demonstrates, it is nearly impossible to fully separate the individual from the social.

Moreover, critical analyses in terms of complex interdependent processes avoid the persistent problems created by essentialism, by attempting to discern something's 'true nature.' This is especially useful for analyzing how ethnic and racial conflicts arise through the processes of reifying and categorizing people into groups, based on imagined common characteristics, and then identifying with one's own group while rejecting others. We are so accustomed to thinking in essentialist terms that even our proposed solutions to such conflicts are typically framed as zero-sum games between truly distinct groups, thereby *reinforcing* rather than critiquing the very notion of independent identities. This approach also undercuts the deeper efforts necessary to discern, analyze and overcome the *more basic*

[74] The insights these analyses provide unfortunately become unavailable when Yogācāra's emphasis on dependent arising (refashioned as the Dependent Nature) is ignored and replaced, as often happens, by reified notions of consciousness, which are then—by design—quickly dismissed.

[75] "The [afflicted] mind whose mode is conceiving "I-making" and the conceit "I am" always arises and functions simultaneously with *ālayavijñāna* in states both with and without conscious mental activity. It has the mode of taking *ālayavijñāna* as its object and conceiving it as "I am [this]" and "[this is] I." (*Ālaya Treatise*. (4.b)A.1. (a).) Waldron (2003, 182f).

processes of group formation, identification, and projection, the very processes that give rise to ethnic and racial discrimination in the first place.[76]

We see such dynamics at the global level as well. Our 'imagined communities,' as Benedict Anderson (1983) poetically puts it, are populated by strangers who *imagine* they belong to a single nation (from *natal*, 'birth group'). And they imagine they possess special characteristics which demarcate them off from 'others,' from those who deviate from their own righteous norms. These "collective representations," in Durkheim's terms—all the names, characteristics, preconceptions, and obsessions that constitute the *ālaya-vijñāna—bhājana-loka* nexus—occur below our conscious awareness, always ready to flare up when triggered by appropriate stimuli (*paryavasthānīya dharma*), stimuli that are always—we repeat—*correlative* with our multiple, underlying predispositions.

It can be extremely liberating, Buddhists and psychologists agree, for us to recognize how much of our collective constructions—our social and cultural norms—are just that: collective agreements passed on and reinforced from one generation to the next. Neither God-given, nor totally arbitrary; not unchanging essences, but persisting sets of conditions, each with their own histories, structures, and institutions, ongoing processes that are nevertheless, as Buddhists are wont to remind us, impermanent and without essence. Luckily, *this* means they can be transformed, since "whatever is subject to origination is subject to cessation." (SN 46.11)

As this entire discussion demonstrates, Yogācāra Buddhists share common modes of analysis with contemporary social scientists and humanists: they both seek to understand patterns of interaction and how things arise in dependence on causes and conditions, rather than to keep reifying processes into entities. We can all share the *liberating* effects such understanding facilitates.[77]

[76] See Waldron (2003b); Mounk (2023), *The Identity Trap*.

[77] This is not merely hypothetical. Yogācāra Buddhist ideas were deeply influential in the early 21st century, in one of China's first robust responses to the onslaught of colonialism at the cultural, intellectual and religious levels. See the ground-breaking work of Aviv, Eyal. 2020; Li, Jingjing. 2022; Makeham, John. 2014; Zu, Jessica. 2025.

Abbreviations

AKBh *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*. S. D. Shastri (ed.) (1981), Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati Series (this edition includes the commentary (*vyākhyā*) by Yaśomitra; L. de La Vallée Poussin (trans.)(1971), *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises; L. Pruden (trans.) (1988), *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press. Cited by chapter, verse, and page number.

Ālaya Treatise
A section of the *Yogācārabhūmi-Viniścayasaṃgrahaṇī* comprised of the "Proof Portion" and the "Pravṛtti Nivṛtti Portion." The "Proof Portion" is in substantial agreement with passages in Yaśomitra's *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya* (Xuanzang's Chinese: T 1606.31.701b4–702a5. Tibetan: P 5554, shi 12a2–13b5; D 4053, li 9b7–11a5). "Pravṛtti Nivṛtti Portion" is found in Xuanzang's Chinese: 1579.30.579c23–582a28; Tibetan: P 5539, zi 4a5–11a8; D 4038, zhi 3b4–9b3. It is also translated in Waldron, 2003, 178-189, from which our translations are drawn.

AN *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. Cited by *nipāta* and *sutta* numbers. For PTS edition, see Morris, Hardy, and Hunt 1885–1910. Translated n Bodhi 2012 and in Woodward and Hare 1932–36. Translations are Bhikkhu Bodhi's unless otherwise specified, modified for terminological consistency.

BHSD *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*. F. Edgerton (1953; rep. 1985), Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co.

BTG The recent online translation of the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* by the Buddhavācana Translation Group (BTG, 2020), https://read.84000.co/translation/toh106.html. We cite chapter and section, modifying its terminology and syntax for consistency.

DN *Dīgha-nikāya*. Cited by volume and page number of PTS Pāli edition edited by T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter (1890–1911). Translated in Walshe 1995.

MMK *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) of *Nāgārjuna*, cited by chapter and verse. For English translations, see Garfield 1995 and Siderits and Katsura 2013.

MN *Majjhima-nikāya*, cited by *sutta* and section numbers. Translated in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995 and in Horner 1954–59. Translations are from Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi unless otherwise specified, modified for terminological consistency.

SN *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, cited by *saṃyutta* and *sutta* number. Edition edited by Léon Feer, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–98). English translations in Bodhi 2000 and Rhys-Davids and Woodward 1917–30. Translations are Bhikkhu Bodhi's unless otherwise specified, modified for terminological consistency.

Visuddhimagga
The Path of Purification by Buddhaghosa. Ñāṇamoli (trans.) (1976), Berkeley: Shambala. Cited by chapter and paragraph.

Viṃśatikā
Twenty Verses of Vasubandhu, cited by verse number. For Sanskrit edition, see Lévi 1925. Chinese translation by Xuanzang: T 1590. Tibetan: D 4057. English translations in Cook 2006, Dunne n.d., and Gold et al. n.d.

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Appendix I. Historicism, Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems and Chinese *Panjiao*

Historicism is a modern, Western-originated approach to examining the past. It is the view that "everything in the human world has to be understood within its specific social-historical context." This perspective helps to counteract "our natural tendency to hypostasize social-historical phenomena, as if they have an identity independent of their context" (Beiser 2007)—a view strikingly similar to Buddhist critiques of reification, we might add. This approach recognizes that everything is in process, that is, impermanent, and their identities as independent phenomena are established by marking off boundaries, that is, by designating where it starts and ends (e.g. when feudalism ended and capitalism began).

Consequently, historicism deconstructs the apparent unity of texts, persons, traditions, etc., on the grounds that what appear to be 'wholes' are just 'constructs,' a snapshot in time, and any claim to the contrary is suspect *in principle*. This approach radically contextualizes—and often illuminates—the world's religious traditions, by challenging the authority of traditions, the integrity of texts and their putative authors, and even the very idea of a coherent 'system.' At its worst, it breaks everything down into momentary particulars (much like Abhidharma), leaving us bereft of persuasive, workable narratives tying things together. This is one reason historians generate—more or less intentionally—their own historical narratives. Their analytic deconstruction is, ideally, in the service of a higher reconstruction.

Buddhists in India occupied a vastly different cultural landscape. Within a few centuries of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, they faced a bewildering array of Buddhist teachings. To make sense of all this, they distinguished between what they considered primary and definitive and what was secondary and conventional: what most effectively or directly articulates or leads one to liberation was considered primary, while other teachings were considered merely conventional. In the classic example of a chariot, its parts are primary while the apparent 'whole,' the chariot, is secondary. This

is the first iteration of the two truths, which gave rise to multiple variations depending on the school, to eventually develop into the Tenet Systems.

The later *Indo-Tibetan Tenet Systems* organized the plethora of Indian Buddhist traditions along distinctly ahistorical criteria. It represents a grand synthesis of classical and medieval Buddhist teachings achieved by positing four coherent and distinct systems of 'tenets' based on what they considered the *definitive* teaching—typically, emptiness—and then ranking the other systems according to how much they approximate or are consistent with emptiness. Like historicism, this approach *deconstructs* the compositional integrity of texts, and even of authors, and then *reconstructs* them not to elucidate their historical development but to articulate a particular tenet 'system.' This is done by extracting select passages from relevant texts, organizing them into systematic presentations designated as this or that 'school,' and then superimposing these labels back onto those select passages (as illustrated in the vignette). This approach overrides *both* historical considerations and a more holistic treatment of the texts by emphasizing the 'system' its passages purportedly express (e.g., Verse 10 in the *Twenty Verses* expresses a Mādhyamika view, while the first paragraph and Verse 1 express a '*citta-mātra*' view). This radical de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing obviously encourages 'cherry picking' of select passages.

Chinese Buddhists took a different tact. They took the confusing stream of texts that dribbled into China over the first millennium or so of the Common Era and organized them into systems that 'classified the teachings' (*panjiao* 判教). (Keown 2003, 210). These systematizers typically considered one or another of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, such as the *Lotus* or *Avatamsaka Sūtras*, to be the most important or advanced teaching of the Buddha, based either on their understanding of when during Buddha's lifetime he taught it or on how comprehensive its teachings were. They then ranked other texts as more or less profound and comprehensive based on the degree to which they were consistent with that particular *sūtra*. While this approach treated those *sūtra*s in a more holistic fashion, assuming their doctrinal and compositional integrity, it tended to ignore their (well attested) developmental history and internal contradictions.

Appendix II. Realism, Idealism and Yogācāra

There has been much debate about whether or not Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, and Yogācāra Buddhism in particular, can be accurately characterized as 'idealism,' a term that is usually contrasted with 'realism.' These are vexing terms, inviting multiple interpretations, and their possible meanings need to be considered carefully.

At the most basic level, Buddhists see the world in terms of the three marks: everything is in process, that is, impermanent; they all lack independent essence, that is, they are not *ātman*; and most importantly, these conditions elicit anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction. This is last characteristic is what distinguishes Buddhist views from a purely materialistic analysis, such as we see in modern science. It is from start to finish concerned with understanding sentience and transforming experience. Any analysis that leaves out the fact of suffering, its causes and its amelioration, is no longer a 'Buddhist' analysis. In this specific sense, Buddhism is unavoidably concerned with what we call *subjectivity*. But this can also be said of psychology and cognitive science. Does this mean they

too are forms of idealism? If not, why not? To address these questions, we'll need to define some terms and set out a larger context.

Idealism, Realism, Dependent Arising and 'Cognitivism'

The terms, *idealism* and its usual counterpart, *realism*, come from the Western philosophical tradition and are used in various ways with various meanings. In its most common usage, *idealism* refers to positions that hold that mind and mental events are the most fundamental reality, and therefore that material objects in some fashion "depend upon mind." Idealism is typically contrasted with *realism*, which holds that those objects exist independently of the mind, and that our minds and perceptions are therefore dependent on such objects. In most usages, idealism and realism are dichotomous, opposing positions.

However, the idea that objects "depend upon mind" needs to be disambiguated. It can refer either to a strong *ontological* dependence—something simply cannot *exist* without some mind cognizing it (even if only the mind of God)—or to a weaker *epistemological* one—that whatever we *know* depends on the mind cognizing it. (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/idealism/). The stronger ontological sense of idealism is the one most stressed in Western and Indo-Tibetan Buddhist discourse. But the problem with either of these is that they both assume that we can definitively analyze objects or subjects *independently* of each other—a view that even quantum mechanics rejects. And they both miss the basic point of, and are therefore inappropriate to characterize, dependent arising.

The "two extremes" of idealism and realism are arguably avoided in the early Buddhist formula of dependent arising, which says that forms of cognitive awareness (*vijñāna*) arise *dependent* on something impinging on our sensory or mental faculties and the *meeting of the three* is contact. In this formulation, 'mind' and 'objects' depend both upon each another and on their respective faculties, and they only 'arise'—that is, occur—together. Analyses in terms of dependent arising focus more on identifying *patterns of interaction* than on defining its individual components (faculty, object, or awareness). To consider any one of these components as "truly fundamental" not only departs from the view of dependent arising, it also invites us to reify, substantialize, or essentialize them, resulting, among other things, in forms of idealism or realism.

The centrality of dependent arising is not limited to early Buddhism. It is also clearly articulated by Mahāyāna Buddhists. Nāgārjuna states in his MMK (24.18) that "Whatever is dependently arisen is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way." For their part, classical Yogācārins such as Asaṅga and Vasubandhu placed dependent arising at the center in their analyses: Yogācāra's Dependent Nature is *word for word* the formula of dependent arising. Accordingly, all of them avoid extreme objectivism or subjectivism, on the basis of logical reasoning or analysis of our cognitive processes, respectively.

This suggests a different interpretation of Yogācāra, one that is more appropriately labeled 'cognitivism' than idealism. Rather than positing propositions about timeless truths such as "everything is only mind," Yogācārins, like early Buddhists, focused on our *cognitive processes* in the broad sense that 'cognition' refers to "the mental action or *process* of acquiring knowledge and

understanding through thought, experience, and the senses… [as well as the] perception, sensation, idea, or intuition *resulting* from the process of cognition."
(https://www.lexico.com/en/deafinition/cognition).

'Cognitivism' is also a much better rendition for one of Yogācāra's other names: *vijñāna-vāda*. How so? First, *cognition* is linguistically cognate with *vijñāna*; they share the same Indo-European root "*gno/jñā*." Second, *cognitive* and *cognitivism* are not encumbered with the metaphysical connotations of *idealism* inherited from Western philosophy (though, contrary to the definition just offered, 'cognitive' in often used in a purely conceptual sense). And last, much like Buddhist analyses, investigations in cognitive science are typically couched in terms of interactive processes, of "how things come about" rather than "what they are." This latter focus invites the very kind of reifying substantialism —the essentialism—that the formula of dependent arising so neatly avoids.

I suggest, therefore, that we reinterpret classical Yogācāra in light of the time-honored Buddhist perspective of dependent arising, focusing on its analyses of our cognitive processes—asking how illusions arise in dependence on our cognitive processes—rather than anachronistically framing its positions in terms of "what does or does not exist." As we shall see, this not only reveals fresh insights into Yogācāra teachings, it also avoids what the Buddha called 'unfit' questions, questions that assume rather than challenge our tendencies to reify selves and objects.