What is Really Real?
Jonathan Gold’s Paving the Great Way

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Most accounts of Vasubandhu’s philosophy present Vasubandhu’s view as accepting mind as a substantially existing entity. Jonathan Gold presents an argument that this is not true. He argues that, according to Vasubandhu, the phenomenal world, the totality of appearances, is mental, but it is a constructed reality. Thus, it too is emptiness, beyond conception.

Key words: ultimate reality; cause and effect; free will; the self

Jonathan Gold’s Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu’s Unifying Buddhist Philosophy is an excellent introduction to the thought of a great Buddhist thinker. Hitherto most accounts of Vasubandhu have linked him with later idealist views that argue for the reality of mind as a substantially existing entity that encompasses everything. Gold presents an argument that this is not true. He argues that, according to Vasubandhu, the phenomenal world, the totality of appearances, is mental, but it is a constructed reality. Ultimate reality is emptiness that is beyond all duality, beyond all labels, beyond conception.

If this is correct, Vasubandhu should be considered a Madhyāmaka philosopher. He began his career as an opponent of the Mahāyāna, but his Mahāyāna brother, Asanga, old and near death, sent Vasubandhu some Mahāyāna scriptures and some of his own students to instruct him. He then became an advocate of Mahāyāna, and accepted Mahāyāna scriptures as legitimate. In addition, Paramārtha’s Chinese biography identifies Vasubandhu as Mahāyāna, but not yogācāra. Early in his account of Vasubandhu, Gold mentions that in Vasubandhu’s age, yogācāra simply meant the practice of yoga, and did not yet refer to a particular philosophical school that identified ultimate reality with mind.

In the first chapter, Gold explains the difficulties involved in ascertaining the historical facts about this fourth-century thinker. What is important to Gold is the philosophical narrative detailing his progression from early Buddhist schools to the Mahāyāna. Chapter two reveals the complexity of Vasubandhu’s early thought, which often placed him in conflict with various early schools, the four Sarvāstivādin schools in particular. The Sarvāstivādin believed that things exist in all of the three times—past, present and future—because Buddha knows them, and what Buddha knows must be real. Vasubandhu finds this to be in conflict with the generally held Buddhist view of impermanence, that since all things are in flux, there is nothing to grasp.

In chapter three, Gold attacks the difficult problem of how Buddhists can accept rebirth while denying the existence of a self. Vasubandhu likens rebirth to a flame that is passed from one candle wick to another. As with the flame, there is no single body but only a continuum. Gold goes on to argue that Vasubandhu always remained a Madhyāmaka, for his assertion that appearance and
mind were non-different does not imply that mind was a substantially existing entity. This is important, because the generally accepted view in both Theravada and Madhyāmaka Buddhism is that there are no substantially existing entities.

Vasubandhu addresses the difficult problem of how Buddhists can account for rebirth even though there is no substantially existing self:

As an analogy, Vasubandhu speaks of how a flame, which is in fact made of countless momentary explosions, and which may be passed from one candle to the next, in fact appears as a single, ongoing ‘light.’ In the same way, the countless momentary ‘defilements,’ which have originated out of previous actions and defilements, continue and move on to a new set of aggregates with the appearance of a single, ongoing ‘intermediate body.’ Thus there is no ‘intermediate body,’ but there is a continuum of entities that may be said to ‘transmigrate,’ in the sense that, joined together conceptually across time, the continuum is said to be in different bodies at different times. […] The self is imposed upon the aggregates, and the aggregates are thus only figuratively referred to, collectively, as an agent acting in time (62).

Vasubandhu also likens the illusory appearance of a continuous, enduring self to a line of ants looking like a line when there are only individual ants (200). Gold appeals to an analogy from his own experience to illustrate this. On holiday in Kenya, he awakened to see a straight red line on the ceiling that had not been there before. But, he discovered, it was not a painted line, but only a kind of dropping from the ants that produced a scent that attracted the next ant that then followed the same path. There is no intention involved. Similarly, one might think of this as a model for “agentless action” (201).

Gold’s argument echoes the view held by the late Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche, a Vajrayana teacher who established a Padmasambhava Buddhist center in the twentieth century, which is in contrast with most summaries of Buddhist philosophy, where Vasubandhu is said to be a founder of the Yogācāra school that held that all of reality was mind, and that mind had substantial existence. It is this view that was the subject of attack by Śāntideva in his Bodhicaryāvatāra.

Vasubandhu’s form of the non-separability of mind and appearance would not fall under Śāntideva’s attack, because he does not claim that mind has substantial existence. It is beyond conception and only can be spoken of conventionally. Madhyāmika philosophers distinguish between what is real conventionally, and what is ultimately real. This is similar to Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal.

One of the most interesting arguments that Gold finds in Vasubandhu is against the Sarvāstivādinś. Here Vasubandhu employs an argument that has a decidedly linguistic ring. Vasubandhu explains why Buddha, in order to counter the mistaken denial of causality, seemed to have asserted that past and future entities exist:

Now he [Buddha] combines a linguistic rule that justifies his correction, and accounts for his opponents misunderstanding; the reason you think he is asserting past and future entities when he is not, is that there is an irregularity with the word ‘is’ (āsti). The word itself also seems to imply an entity when no such entity is really meant. We ordinarily say there is an extinguished light but this does not require us to believe that there remains something that accounts for the extinguished light that ‘is’ (42). [For example, we say ‘Unicorns are white’ without implying there are unicorns.]
Although past entities do not exist, it is acceptable to view them as experiential objects because we experience them as memories. “Vasubandhu’s point is that although (for instance) thinking of a unicorn will not make that unicorn real, the unicorn in our imagination appears as a real unicorn” (50). So it is with the past. This reminds me of Kamalaśīla’s (Śāntakṣita’s foremost student who taught in Tibet in the eighth century) argument in the Pañjikā against the Sarvāstvādīn who believed that the future must exist since known by the Buddha. Kamalaśīla argued that although the past and future do not exist, because of the Buddha’s wisdom, the past, present and future arise in the Buddha’s awareness in the present as in a dream. Thus, Buddha could know the future in the present without actually perceiving it.

Gold warns that for Vasubandhu causality is not real but is what we use to judge what we consider to be real. “[…] Because causality is at the center of all conceptual constructions, the determination of the real is dependent upon causality and therefore, all of reality—including talk about ultimate reality—is a conceptual construction” (124).

This of course does not imply that the aggregates are ultimately real but only conventionally real. Ucīna refers to an unreal entity. When we refer to entities, this is āpāāna or figurative reference. Gold sees this as consistent with the Buddha’s admonition “not be attached to the popular etymology, nor accept the world’s word meaning” […] “Suppose I say, ‘That boy is a lion!’ There are many potential interpretations of this sentence. What is not at issue though—what sets us in search of a figurative meaning in the first place—is the clear fact that the boy is not literally a lion; there is no lion there” (78).

In chapter four Gold gives Vasubandhu’s explanation of why the Buddha seems to assert entities, by claiming that the Theravada views interpret Buddha too literally, and that much of what Buddha said was for the benefit of his students—skillful means to help them on the path.

In chapter five, Gold explains the reasoning behind Vasubandhu’s shift from the early Sautrāntika Buddhist school to the Mahāyāna. The Vaibhāsika early school was what one might term “naive realism.” When one perceives a chair, for example, what one perceives is really a chair composed of atoms. The view of the Sautrāntika is more complex. For them, when one perceives what one takes to be a chair, what one sees is an appearance caused by atoms interacting with the eye organ, and one characterizes it as a chair. In contrast, Vasubandhu argues that the existence of material particles, and thus of objects composed of them, is an impossibility. This argument centers around mereological considerations. An object must be composed of smaller objects which are indivisible. But if so, these indivisible objects cannot have sides. If they did, they would be divisible. But objects without sides cannot combine to form larger objects.

Vasubandhu replies to the argument that objects must be real or they could not produce physical effects with the counterexample of a wet dream, in which “an evident physical result is produced by an imagined physical encounter with a nonexistent lover” (141).

Gold understands Vasubandhu’s view as follows. Given that the external world must be only mind, sensory experiences must produce only an illusory world, a figment of our imagination. The self/other distinction is equally illusory. Perception, like conceptualization, is only a matter of the mind generating “dual” images. As counterintuitive as this sounds, it may be clarified by analogy to a multiplayer virtual reality game:

In a shared virtual reality experience, the first thing the computer system must be able to track is where objectively everything is (where the various players are, where the castle with the hidden jewels is, where the dragon is hiding etc.). Then when any new player logs in, the
system can place that player somewhere in the multidimensional world. At that point, the computer must generate a sensory perspective for that individual. Immediately that person experiences herself existing in a world of a certain kind, with certain abilities to move around, and fight, and so forth. But this is only a trick of the software. The world is unreal, and so is the player’s subjective perspective on that world (154).

But this does not undermine our ability to use conventional, constructed reality to function in our daily lives. For Vasubandhu the whole world is only this constructed appearance, and this applies as well to our own subjective awareness (134). This point introduces what I think is the most important issue, the non-dual nature of mind and its objects, and the avoidance of nihilism resulting from the rejection of veridical perception.

What has all this to do with suffering, the elimination of which is the central concern of Buddhism? Vasubandhu argues that when we are no longer burdened with duality, we are free of grasping, grasper, and the grasped. This is the attainment of liberation (170). Gold addresses this aspect of Vasubandhu’s thought in chapter six.

If all is mere appearance, then what room does that leave for freedom, for moral action? Gold, with Vasubandhu suggests that one must “free oneself from one’s previous identity-constructing patterns” (202). For example, “If we are to correct our deluded perspectives, we cannot do it directly, intentionally, cognitively, by ‘convincing’ ourselves; we must change ourselves indirectly, by studying, discerning, and manipulating, incrementally, the causes of our awareness” (218).

Gold concludes that Buddha only referred to a self when necessary to support belief in karma and rebirth. Although ultimately unreal, it is important to utilize these notions when on the path. Further, it is too terrifying for most people to accept that there is really no self or agency, but only the endless grinding out of causes in the network of interdependent co-origination (216). And yet this last “thing to cling to,” causality, falls to Nāgārjuna’s critique of the coherence of the idea of cause and effect.

For Nāgārjuna, there are only two possible ways to understand cause and effect: A. Cause and effect are the same, or B. Cause and effect are different. If A, then, for example, when we eat food, we would be eating excrement, since food is the cause of excrement. If B, then the cause would precede the effect in a different time. But since the present moment is just that which cannot be divided into the past, present, and future, these being the only possibilities, causality is an incoherent concept. The present moment cannot include both the cause and the effect. To put it in traditional terms, the father (cause) and the son (effect) will never meet.

Without causality, our understanding is groundless. But this very groundlessness, the heart of Madhyāmaka emptiness, this giving up of all conceptual duality, is the ultimate path to the attainment of enlightenment. One might ask, however, for a reason for valuing this groundlessness. And if causality is not ultimately an adequate basis for continuity of phenomena, how do we account for it?

One of the most important parts of the book is the section where Gold delineates Vasubandhu’s transition from a view of appearance as a mere construction generated by cause and effect, to experience as non-dual and directly connected with the “inconceivable ultimate,” “the three natures of reality,” and the “storehouse consciousness (ālayavijñāna)” (134).1

What causes things to appear as they do is previous karma. Each consciousness appears dual but is really a “unitary causal line” (156). Each experience can be understood as having three natures. The first is fabricated conventionally, the second is causal function, and the third is the emptiness of

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1. This note is directly cited from Gold's book.
the first (149). The subject seems to be but is not really distinct from the appearing. The value of causal reasoning consists in allowing to live an ordered life, discovering what is conventionally real, and not conventionally an illusion.

For Vasubandhu the three natures are one unified reality. One must explain the three natures perspectivally. Conventionally they are dual; ultimately, they are not.

Gold wants to preserve some notion of free will in Vasubandhu’s philosophy, which is difficult because of non-self and the causal seeds of the ālaya. While conceding that we are not ultimately responsible for our actions, he says that we nevertheless are responsible for shaping our mental streams (189). I find this hard to accept, because there are causal seeds which determine whether or not we are able to succeed in this shaping. The good part about rejecting free will is to make us totally compassionate towards all helpless beings.

I cannot overemphasize the value of Gold’s presentation of Vasubandhu. It is a masterful scholarly achievement that is, as well, invaluable in understanding the Buddhist path to liberation. It places Vasubandhu in an ongoing project of unifying seemingly disparate Buddhist views such as Śāntrakṣita’s unification of the “two chariots” of Madhyāmaka and Cittamāntra. In addition, I suggest that one might utilize the concept of primordial wisdom/buddha nature as a hypothetical construct to explain all forms of awareness and phenomena. This would include temporal experience, which is ultimately illusory. Perhaps one can understand Śāntrakṣita’s “proximate ultimate” in this way. We can point to the ultimate, but we can never describe it.

In his concluding chapter, Gold mentions some striking similarities between Vasubandhu’s views and modern physics and cognitive science. Like Vasubandhu, theoretical physicists are not able to understand quanta non-observationally. Cognitive scientists today often view the self as a useful fiction. The value of apparent causality is that it enables us to understand the causal conditioning acting on us, which helps us to overcome that which causes suffering and to embrace what brings happiness, and leads to compassion for ourselves, and others, all caught in the causal net.

In conclusion, I find Gold’s presentation of Vasubandhu’s thought convincing, not just as a historical treatise, but as a real contender in the arena of debate between theories of what is real.

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1 The three natures or kayas are: Dharmaṇīkāya, the ultimate reality beyond conception, Sambhogakāya, appearances experienced by Buddhas, which emanate from the Dharmaṇīkāya, the dimension of complete enjoyment, the field of total plenitude, beyond dualistic limitations and beyond space and time. The Nirvāṇakāya emanates from the Sambhogakāya as the form body of the Buddha, the world of appearances perceived by ordinary beings. The ālaya, or storehouse consciousness, constitutes the ever-changing mental causal events that activate karma.