

Yogācāra: Impressions-Only and the Denial of Physical Objects

We saw in the last chapter that the most philosophically important of the new Mahāyāna ideas is the doctrine of emptiness. The Yogācāra school represents one way of trying to make sense of that doctrine. It does this by developing a theory that denies the existence of external objects. In this chapter we will examine that theory, and the arguments that Yogācārin philosophers gave to support it. Then we will look at how the resulting view might be connected to the claim that all things are empty, and what all this might have to do with attaining nirvāna.

8.1

Yogācāra is one of the two chief schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is not, however, the earlier of the two. The ideas that became the basis of Madhyamaka, the other major school, began appearing in sūtras perhaps as early as late in the first century BCE. And these ideas received their first philosophical formulation, in the work of Madhyamaka's founder Nāgārjuna, in about the mid-second century CE. By contrast, the sūtras that first express distinctively Yogācāra ideas seem to have appeared no earlier than the second century CE. And the founders of the school, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, are generally dated around the middle of the fourth century CE. Why, then, are we discussing Yogācāra before Madhyamaka? (Madhyamaka will be the subject of Chapter 9.) In large part this is because Yogācāra philosophy represents an extension of the Abhidharma project that we investigated in Chapter 6. It is true that some elements of Yogācāra developed in reaction to ideas of the earlier Madhyamaka school. So we will have to say something about Madhyamaka in order to understand certain facets of the Yogācāra project. But for the most part, once we have understood what Abhidharma is all about, we will have little problem seeing what Yogācārin philosophers are up to.

This is not surprising if, as the tradition maintains, the Vasubandhu who co-founded the school is the same person we encountered in Chapter 6 as the author of *Abhidharmakośa* and its commentary. The tradition holds that Vasubandhu was converted from his Abhidharma views to the Yogācāra by his brother Asaṅga. Some modern scholars believe that there were actually two distinct Vasubandhus, one the author of the *Abhidharmakośa* and the other the Yogācārin.¹ What is clear is that the

¹Many scholars also dispute the historical existence of the third traditional founder of Yogācāra, Maitreya.

Vasubandhu whose works we will be examining is very much at home in the Abhidharma problematic. What Vasubandhu will do is use a set of questions that had already arisen within Abhidharma to argue for one simple (though seemingly radical) change in the overall Abhidharma picture: that instead of the five *skandhas* there are actually just four, there being no *rūpa* or corporeality.

The name of this school, ‘Yogācāra’, literally means ‘the practice of yoga’. But the school goes by several other names as well: ‘Vijñānavāda’, ‘Cittamātra’ and ‘Vijñaptimātra’. The first of these means ‘the doctrine of consciousness’ (the fifth of the five *skandhas*), the second means ‘consciousness only’ (*citta* and *vijñāna* are synonyms), and the third means ‘impressions-only’. (We will come shortly to what a *vijñapti* or ‘impression’ might be.) Now the ‘-only’ in the last two names suggests that this school holds that nothing exists other than mental things. It suggests, in other words, that Yogācāra is a form of idealism.² And that is indeed the central claim of Yogācāra. But what does this have to do with ‘the practice of yoga’? What seems likely is that Yogācāra metaphysics grew out of speculation concerning the content of yoga or meditation. Here it is important that the higher stages of meditation involve focused awareness of purely mental objects. Since meditation is recognized as playing a key role in attaining enlightenment, perhaps it seemed to some meditation-masters that the ignorance that must be overcome to attain nirvāna has to do with our belief in things existing independent of consciousness, physical things. Perhaps they thought that if we could come to see the world as only impressions, then the temporary surcease from suffering that is attained in meditational trance states could be extended to our daily lives.

Our job, though, is not to speculate about the historical origins of the impressions-only doctrine. What we want to know is what reason there might be to believe it. How could anyone possibly accept such a bizarre view? Isn’t it simply obvious that there are rocks and trees, houses and cars, the earth, the sun? And what about us, how could we exist without bodies and brains? Perhaps by now we have come to accept that ultimately there are no such things as trees and cars, bodies and brains. These are, after all, wholes made up of parts. But what about the ultimate parts that a conceptual fiction like a tree is made of, the *rūpa dharmas*? Surely they must exist if the mind is going to perform its constructive activity of collecting them together to form aggregates? (See Chapter 4.) Surely it’s obvious that there is *something* out there that we are aware of when we have sensory experience?

The first thing to be said in response to these (perfectly legitimate) questions is that

²In philosophy ‘idealism’ names the metaphysical claim that nothing exists that is independent of the mind. The best-known Western proponent of this view is the eighteenth-century British philosopher George Berkeley. But sometimes the rather different position of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel is also called ‘idealist’. To differentiate these, views like Berkeley’s are called subjective idealism, while the Hegelian variety is referred to as ‘absolute idealism’. But since we won’t be concerned with Hegelian idealism at all here, I shall use ‘idealism’ to mean just the Berkeleyan variety of subjective idealism.

Yogācārins like Vasubandhu will pick up where the Sautrāntikas left off. Recall (from Chapter 6) that Sautrāntikas developed the view of sense perception called ‘representationalism’. This is the view that what we are directly aware of in waking sensory experience is not the external object, but rather a mental image that resembles the object and is caused by sense-object contact. Since our waking awareness of a mental image is typically the result of such contact, we are usually justified in inferring the existence of an external object that is like the image. We may then say that we are indirectly aware of an external object, something physical that exists independently of the mind. So in veridical sensory experience – experience that is not the result of distorting factors like defective senses or hallucination – we do perceive physical things. But notice that this is only indirect. We are never directly aware of the external object that we think we perceive. It is always something whose existence we only infer. What an impressions-only theorist like Vasubandhu wants to know is what reason we have to trust this inference. They will claim that when we examine it in detail, it will turn out to deserve no credence.

The ‘impression’ in ‘impressions-only’ is like what the representationalist calls a representation: a mental image that is the intentional object in our sensory cognitions. The impressions-only theorist is an idealist, while the representationalist is a realist (someone who affirms the existence of external objects). They disagree in their ontological views. But they agree about what it is we are directly aware of in our sensory experience. It is important to be clear about this at the very outset. Common sense – not just ours but probably that of every culture – is realist in its metaphysics. Here common sense sides with the representationalist. But common sense strongly disagrees with representationalism about how it is that we cognize the external objects that both parties believe exist. The common-sense view is direct realism – the view that in waking sensory experience we are directly aware of the external object. It is because most people hold this view that they think it is easy to show that there are physical objects: all we need to do is look. When Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century British lexicographer, heard of Berkeley’s idealism, he reportedly kicked a stone and said ‘I refute it *thus*’. But if you have understood the arguments that support representationalism, you will understand why it is not so easy. No doubt Dr Johnson had sensory experiences that he interpreted as the kicking of a stone – an external object. But were those sensory experiences a matter of direct awareness of a stone? If representationalism is correct then they were not. All Dr Johnson was directly aware of were mental images. The representationalist holds that these images were caused by the sense-object contact between Dr Johnson’s foot and the stone. But to know that the stone exists we would have to show that the experience was caused in this way. Just having the experience is never enough.

This is where Vasubandhu begins his argument for impressions-only. The text we are about to examine is called *Vimśatikā* (‘20-versed’), which is the first part of a two-part work the overall title of which is *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, or ‘The Proof that There Are Only Impressions’. *Vimśatikā* begins as follows:

1. This [world] is nothing but impressions, since it manifests itself as an unreal object,
Just like the case of those with cataracts seeing unreal hairs in the moon and the like.

When someone with cataracts looks at the moon, they have the experience of seeing the moon as covered with hairs. Their sensory experience is just like what someone with normal vision sees when they look at a head of hair that's been blown about by the wind. So from the content of their sensory experience, the person with cataracts would say they see hairs on the moon. But there are no hairs on the moon, so it can't be true that that is what they are seeing. They are seeing something, though; there really is something that they are aware of. No one ever has the experience of seeing a round square or the son of a barren woman. If what they are aware of is not an external object (hairs on the moon), what is it? What it seems we have to say at this point is that they are aware of a mental image. Vasubandhu agrees, but he calls it an impression, and adds that it manifests itself as an external object when there is actually no such thing outside the mind. This is what he means when he says that the person with cataracts is aware of an impression that 'manifests itself as an unreal object'. What they are aware of is just an impression: it's not a physical object, nor is it a representation of a physical object. But the impression presents itself to the person with cataracts as if it were an external object. So unless they knew better they'd be just like Dr Johnson: they'd say, 'Of course there are hairs on the moon, I can see them!'

So much for Vasubandhu's example of hairs on the moon. He says there are many others like this one, and we can imagine the sort of thing he has in mind: the yellow color that someone with jaundice sees when looking at a white shell, the snake we see in the yard at dusk when looking at the garden hose, etc. But notice what else he is saying: that the whole world of our sensory experience is like this. That is, he is arguing:

The content of a sensory experience presents itself as an external object when no such object exists.

Anything presenting itself as an external object when no such object exists is only an impression, like the hairs on the moon seen by one with cataracts.

∴ the contents of sensory experience are only impressions.

So what he is saying is that when we have sensory experiences, what we are aware of are just mental images (with this the representationalist would agree), and these mental images are not representations of external objects. Why not? The hairs seen by the cataract sufferer are not representations, since there aren't any such hairs in the external world. And all our sensory experiences are just like that: they seem to be presenting something that's really in the external world when there isn't any such thing.

8.2

But how does Vasubandhu know that there aren't any external physical objects? Isn't that what he was supposed to be trying to prove? At this point we may suspect that Vasubandhu has begged the question. What he's actually done, though, is laid down a challenge for the representationalist realist opponent: what evidence is there that the images we are aware of in sensory experience are caused by contact with external objects? Vasubandhu recognizes that the argument he gave in v.1 won't convince a realist. He gave the argument in order to stimulate the opponent to raise objections against the impressions-only theory. Here he is simply following the standard format for Indian philosophical works: state your own position and briefly indicate the evidence in its favor, then allow the opponent to raise objections and see if you can successfully defend your theory in response to them.

The objections that the opponent is about to give are all meant to be reasons why we should believe our sensory experience – the mental images we are aware of in perception – are caused by physical objects. Before looking at the ones the opponent gives, it might be useful for you to stop and see what reasons you can think of to support the claim that there are physical objects. (Remember that 'Because I can see them!' doesn't count.)

Here it is said [by the opponent]:

2. If an impression is devoid of external object, then it should be without spatial and temporal determination,
It should be without determination in the mental stream [of the perceiver] and it should not have efficacy.

What does this mean? If an impression of color-and-shape etc., occurs in the absence of any external object such as color-and shape etc., it is not arisen from the external object color-and shape etc.; then why does it occur at a certain place, not everywhere? And why, it occurring at that place, does it occur at a certain time, not always? And why does it occur in the mental streams of all who are there at that time and place, not just in that of one alone, just as the appearance of hairs and the like in the mental streams of those with cataracts does not occur [in the streams] of others? The hairs, insects, and the like seen by those with cataracts do not produce effects; it is not the case that things other than these are not productive. The food, drink, garments, poison, etc., seen in sleep do not produce the effects of food, etc; and it is not the case that these do not ordinarily produce effects. It is because of its unreality that the city of the Gandhārvas gives rise to no effects; it is not the case that other cities are unproductive [of effects]. Thus in the absence of an external object, spatial and temporal determination, determination of mental stream, and efficacy are unexplained.

Though there are four reasons here, we could combine the first (spatial determination) and the second (temporal determination) into one, spatio-temporal determinacy. The idea is that our waking sensory experience conforms to certain rule-like patterns. Only at certain determinate places and times do we have certain

kinds of experiences. We are not aware of the smell of bread baking unless we are in the kitchen; and even there, it's only when the bread is in the oven (or just come out) that we have the experience. Why is this thought of as evidence for the existence of physical objects? The thought here is that a realist can explain these facts about our experience but an idealist cannot. The realist will say that our sensory experience exhibits spatio-temporal determinacy because it depends on contact with external objects that are located in different parts of space. And since it takes time for our bodies to move from one region of space where one object is located to another, we can also explain why there's usually a time gap between my deciding to go to the pool and the experience of smelling the chlorinated water. The realist doesn't see how the impressions-only theorist can explain these features of our experience though.

A word should be said here about how to formulate objections. The opponent has put the objection from spatial determinacy as the claim that sensory experiences only occur 'at a certain place'. This is a question-begging way of stating the objection. As an impressions-only theorist, Vasubandhu denies the existence of spatial locations. Only physical objects can have spatial location. When the opponent says that our experiences have spatial determinacy, they are in effect assuming what they set out to prove, that there are external objects. There is something to this objection though; it just needs to be reformulated in a way that doesn't beg the question.

To do this we need to remind ourselves of what the realist and the idealist agree on. Both sides accept the view that sensory experience consists in immediate awareness of mental images. So it must be that we construct our conception of space from features of those images. Consider, for instance, the visual experiences we have when we say we are in the kitchen. While we are accustomed to describing these experiences in terms of physical objects (seeing the sink beside the stove, etc.), we can instead describe them as the awareness of images of certain colors and shapes (yellow and oval, white and rectangular, etc.). We can then describe these color-and-shape images as bearing different relations to one another in the visual field (above, to the left of, etc.) Of course the visual field itself changes over time, so we will need some way to keep track of these changes. But we can do this once we notice that certain features regularly recur. For instance, after the yellow oval patch disappears from the left edge of the visual field, a similar patch may emerge on the right. (This is the sort of experience we actually have when we say we have turned a complete clockwise revolution.) What we can do, in short, is construct a purely phenomenal language, one that captures all the features we ordinarily describe in spatial terms, but does so just in terms of the features of pure phenomena – what we are immediately aware of in sensory experience. The objection from spatio-temporal determinacy could then be put in that language. Such a language might be cumbersome and awkward to use. But if we want to object to Vasubandhu's argument, we need to be sure we're not just assuming that an external world exists. We need to put our objection in neutral terms, terms that both we and our opponent can accept as an unbiased description of the evidence. Stating the objection from spatio-temporal determinacy in a purely phenomenal language would be a way to do that.

The next realist objection brings up what we might call intersubjective agreement: the fact that under similar circumstances different perceivers (different mental streams) have similar sensory experiences. This is not true of those experiences that we all agree are only impressions – such as seeing hairs on the moon or seeing the shell as yellow. So, the realist will say, there must be some difference between those cases and normal sensory experience that explains why there is only intersubjective agreement with the latter. And the only explanation the realist can see is that normal sensory experiences are caused by things that are publicly observable and hence exist independently of mental streams. So explaining this feature of our experience requires us to suppose that there are physical objects.

The final objection concerns something called efficacy. It also involves comparing experiences that are acknowledged to be only impressions with normal sensory experience. Here the difference is that the latter have effects that the former do not. When I ‘see’ the snake in the garden at twilight, I do not subsequently have the experience of feeling a snakebite, whereas if I had a similar visual experience under better lighting conditions I might. The waking experience of eating a large meal is followed by the feeling of fullness, whereas a similar dream experience is not. (This objection also needs to be carefully formulated in a purely phenomenal language in order to avoid question-begging. The realist can’t simply say that we only feel full after we eat ‘real food’.)

Are there other objections that could be raised against Vasubandhu’s argument? One common response to any form of idealism is that if it were true then sensory experience would be just like imagination. This comes up because the idealist denies that sensory experiences are caused by things existing independently of our minds or mental streams. So the images we are aware of in sensory experience must be somehow created by the mind. And this makes sensory experience seem just like imagination. When we daydream about winning the lottery or being with someone we find attractive, it is desires in our mental stream that determine which images appear. Sensory experience is not like that. While we may have some control over our perceptions – we can always close our eyes or hold our nose or walk away – it is obviously nowhere near as complete as the control we have over the contents of our imaginings. Now the objection from efficacy could be construed as making a similar point. But we might want to count the objection from imagination as a separate challenge for the impressions-only theorist: ‘Isn’t this equivalent to saying (absurdly) that we make it all up?’

8.3

Now that we have clarified the sorts of objections that a sophisticated realist might raise, it is time to let the impressions-only theorist respond. There are two things you need to know in order to understand Vasubandhu’s replies in the following section. The first has to do with the *pretas*, those miserable creatures whose diet consists of

feces, urine, pus and blood. One might wonder why it is that a *preta* is unable to drink anything but urine, pus and blood. The Buddhist realist answers that where we see a river full of water, *pretas* see a flow of vile liquids. And this is not because the *preta* lives on some other world where all rivers are polluted. This is because a *preta*'s karma causes it to see and taste urine, pus and blood when we would see and taste water. The second point concerns those who are consigned to hell. As retribution for their evil deeds, these beings are subjected to constant torture by various demons. But how did the demons get there? Remember that all sentient beings are subject to karma and rebirth, so if the demons who torture the inhabitants of hell are sentient beings, their status must also be the result of karma. But this struck Buddhists as decidedly odd. Presumably someone confined to hell for a lifetime must have done serious evil in their past life, yet the demons do not suffer. So it became the orthodoxy that the demons are not sentient beings after all. Instead they are constructed by the karma of the *pretas* – a sort of mass hallucination if you like. The same device helps explain other odd things about hell, such as the fact that it sometimes rains fire. It is not as if the laws of physics are different in hell; instead it is karma that makes things appear to work so differently. In answering the realist's objections, Vasubandhu will use these two points in the Buddhist realist conception of how karma works.

[We reply:] These are not at all unexplained.

3. Spatial determination, etc., are established as in dreams; again as with *pretas*

Is determination of mental stream [explained], for they all see rivers of pus, etc.

How is it established by analogy with sleep? In sleep, in the absence of an external object, there are seen an insect, a grove, a woman, a man, etc., but only at a determinate place, not everywhere. And being just at that place, they are seen just at a particular time, not always. Thus are spatial and temporal determination established without an external object. And how is determination of mental stream established by analogy with *pretas*? Rivers of pus are rivers full of pus, the word being a compound like 'ghee-pot'. *Pretas*, who are descended as the result of similar karma, all see a river full of pus; it is not just one *preta* alone [who sees the river of pus]. As it is filled with pus, so it is filled with urine, excrement, etc., and they are guarded by persons bearing sticks and swords – this is what is indicated by the word 'etc.'. Thus is determination of mental stream explained though the object of impressions be unreal.

4. There is production of an effect as with wet dreams; or as in hell

All see the guardians of hell, etc., and there is affliction from them.

It should be understood that the production of effects is proven by analogy with wet dreams. Just as in sleep, without sexual intercourse there are wet dreams marked by emission of semen. In this way, by means of such examples, are the four [objections] of spatial and temporal determination, etc., to be answered. Again, it should be understood as proven 'as in hell, all ...' How is it established? 'Seeing the guardians of hell, and suffering afflictions from them.' Just as it is granted that the inhabitants of the hells see the guardians of hell at determinate

times and places. By 'etc.' is meant that they also see dogs, crows, mountains of iron and the like coming and going about. And this is seen by all of them, not just by one. And it is established that these things cause that affliction, though the guardians of hell etc. be unreal, because of the efficacy of the result of equivalent deeds [in a prior life]. Thus should it be understood that the four [objections] may be answered in other ways as well.

[Objection:] But why is it not allowed that the guardians of hell, dogs, and crows are real?

[Reply:] Because they cannot have earned it; since they do not experience suffering as [the *pretas* do], they cannot have earned habitation in hell. [If the guardians were real and hence suffered,] there would be no telling one from another among those suffering – 'these are the inhabitants of hell, those are their guardians'. And if among those suffering there were similarity [of guardians and inhabitants] in shape, strength, and weight, then there would be no fear [of the guardians, etc.]. And how would those [guardians], themselves unable to endure the suffering of burning while on the same ground made of burning iron, cause others to suffer there? And how is it possible that those who are not [determined by karma to be] inhabitants of hell are in hell?

[Objection:] But for that matter how is it possible for animals to attain heaven? By the same token, [if there can be animals in heaven] it should be possible for there to be different species of animals and *pretas* as guardians, etc., in the hells.

[Reply:]

5. While animals can attain heaven, not so hell,

Since they do not experience suffering, it not being produced as it is with the *pretas*.

Those animals who attain rebirth in heaven are beings who there experience the pleasures produced therein because [in their past life they performed] deeds capable of producing the pleasures belonging to that realm. But the guardians of hell, etc., do not in the same way experience the suffering of hell. Thus is it that such birth [in hell] is not attained by animals, though it is by *pretas*.

[Objection:] The inhabitants of hell have perceptions of guardians, etc.; it is by means of their karma that there arise in hell different elements with distinct color-and-shape, weight, and strength. Then when these various elements are transformed and are seen performing such actions as scattering the hands, etc., fear arises [in the *pretas*]. Similarly they [are transformed into] mountains in the form of the Meṣa demon which fly back and forth, and thickets of iron-thorn trees whose thorns point upward and downward. But this does not mean that these things are not real.

[Reply:]

6. If you allow the possibility of elements being produced by the karma of the inhabitants of hell,

Why do you not instead allow the transformation of consciousness?

Why not thus allow that it is just their consciousness that has been transformed by their karma? Why, instead, invent [material] elements [produced by karma]? Moreover,

7. You suppose that the effect is someplace other than where the karmic trace is.

What reason is there for not saying that it is precisely where the trace is?

It is supposed that there is the production there [in hell] of elements in such a manner by means of the karma of the inhabitants of hell; and these are transformed. Their karmic traces are contained in the mental streams [of the inhabitants], they are nowhere else. And its effect is just where the trace is – why not allow that it is thus a transformation of consciousness? What reason is there for supposing that its effect is where the trace is not?

As Vasubandhu says in introducing v.3, his strategy will be to show that the phenomena of spatio-temporal determinacy, etc., can be explained without supposing that there are physical objects. One way he seeks to do this is to show that there are cases of mere impressions which exhibit the features that the opponent thinks prove the existence of external things. Dreams, for instance, can exhibit spatio-temporal determinacy as well as efficacy. When we see something in a dream, it is at a particular place and time in that dream, not always and everywhere.³ Some dreams also have the same sorts of effects as do waking sensory experience of the same kind. Both a vivid erotic dream and an equally intense erotic experience had while awake, for instance, might be followed by the experience of feeling wet bedding. But we all agree that what we are aware of in dreams are only impressions: while they present themselves as external, they are entirely mental in both nature and cause. So the fact that waking sensory experiences have the properties of spatio-temporal determinacy and efficacy does not show that these must be caused by physical objects.

Does this really answer the objections from determinacy and efficacy? There is a sense in which this is a successful response. The realist opponent claimed that spatio-temporal determinacy and efficacy were features that proved our waking sensory experiences were external in origin. So all Vasubandhu needs to do is find cases that have those features but that the opponent would acknowledge are only impressions. But we may not be satisfied by this response. Why not? Well, most dreams lack efficacy. And the spatio-temporal determinacy of our dreams seems different from that of waking sensory experience. It would be nice to have some explanation of these differences. The dream examples don't satisfy our need for an explanation of the features of waking sensory experience.

Vasubandhu tries to address that need with his examples of *pretas* and inhabitants of hell. Intersubjective agreement and efficacy are to be accounted for not by supposing we are all seeing and feeling the same publicly observable object, but rather by the similarity in our karma. How does that work? Well, suppose we had been born as dogs rather than humans. In that case we would now be having very different sensory experiences. Our hearing and sense of smell would be much more

³You might think that nothing in a dream could have spatial determinacy, since the dream is 'all in the mind', that is, the things we 'see' in a dream have no spatial location. But consider the fact that a dream can be described in a purely phenomenal language. And recall what was said above about putting the objection from spatial determinacy in such a language. The fact that the contents of a dream can be described in the same language shows that dreams can also exhibit spatial determinacy.

acute, for instance, and our color vision less refined. If we believed it is karma that determines the situation into which we are born, then we would say it is due to our (good) karma that we have the kind of color experiences we do. And notice the word 'we'. You and I and most other humans share common features of our visual experience because (presumably) we have similar good karma. So here is a start toward addressing our need for a real explanation.

But does this work? Suppose we are together in one room. Since we are humans, we will have similar visual experiences. Had we been born as dogs we would be having certain smell experiences instead. But that, we might think, is just because as humans we were born with certain kinds of sense organs; had we been born as dogs we'd have different sensory apparatuses. And this explanation of the difference still requires us to suppose that there is a single physical environment that those sense organs are operating on. It's because the carpet is blue that we all see blue (but dogs don't, since they are color-blind). What Vasubandhu needs is a non-realist way of explaining what generates the experiences. And this is what the example of the inhabitants of hell is meant to give. All these creatures share similar (singularly bad) karma. Because of that karma, they all have similar experiences of seeing demons and the like. But these demons are themselves just the product of the karma of the inhabitants. Now the realist Buddhists who first came up with this theory about the demons no doubt thought of the demons as physical objects (assemblies of 'elements') that were somehow produced by the karma of the sufferers. But, Vasubandhu asks, why suppose that the demons exist outside the mental streams of the inhabitants? Karma is, after all, something mental. It is the desire or volition behind an action that causes the karmic fruit to eventually be produced. If the karmic seed is in the mental stream, wouldn't it be 'lighter' to suppose its fruit is there too? When the inhabitants of hell all see a demon, they are experiencing a kind of collective hallucination.

What Vasubandhu is saying, then, is this. The desires that motivated our past actions produced karmic seeds. These seeds, like all existents, are momentary. But typically when a seed goes out of existence it causes a similar seed to come into existence in that mental stream. Karmic causal laws specify the conditions under which a seed will ripen and bear fruit. The fruit of a karmic seed is an impression – a mental image that presents itself as an external object. Since the same karmic causal laws govern all mental streams, similar karma will lead to similar sensory experiences. The uniformity of the karmic causal laws will likewise account for spatio-temporal determinacy: the seed that causes the seeing of a rose image will only ripen after certain other experiences, such as the ones we interpret as 'walking into the garden' experiences. We can also use karmic causal laws to explain efficacy. The desire that produces a dream of eating is simply not strong enough to produce the karmic fruit of a feeling of fullness; the desire that leads to a waking experience of eating is. We can even explain the fact that waking sensory experience is not under our control in the same way that imagination is. If it is our past desires that cause our present experience, then since we can't change the past, it's no wonder that we have

little direct control over the nature of our present perceptions. Thus all the features of our sensory experience can be accounted for by the hypothesis that they are impressions caused by karmic seeds in accordance with causal laws.

So what? Perhaps you are thinking that Vasubandhu is perfectly welcome to his explanation of sensory experience, but you prefer your own. Even if we accepted karma (and we will come to that question shortly), still we would just have two competing explanations of experience: the impressions-only explanation in terms of karmic seeds and karmic causal laws, and our familiar explanation in terms of sensory interaction with physical objects in an external world. Why reject the familiar model that everyone else accepts in favor of some weird alternative? But Vasubandhu has one more card to play. Remember the question he asks in v.6: Why invent material elements? This might have struck you as a strange question, but it is legitimate. In the debate between the representationalist realist and the impressions-only theorist, physical objects are indeed unobservable entities that are posited by the realist in order to make their theory work. They are unobservable because all we are ever directly aware of are mental images (what the realist calls representations). Physical objects are never directly observed, they can only be inferred from the nature of what we do directly observe, *viz.* the mental images that make up our sensory experience. And the inference that leads to our belief in physical objects is just the one that the realist explanation is based on: because our experiences have such-and-such features, they must be caused by external objects. If the representationalist is right about how our belief in an external world is formed, then physical objects are indeed unobservable entities that are posited on the basis of a certain theory. And now Vasubandhu can employ our old friend, the Principle of Lightness:

Principle of Lightness: Given two competing theories each of which is equally good at explaining and predicting the relevant phenomena, choose the lighter theory, that is, the theory that posits the least number of unobservable entities.

This is what is behind Vasubandhu's question, Why invent (that is, posit) material elements? The impressions-only theory and the representationalist realist theory both offer explanations of the same set of phenomena, our sensory experience. They agree on what the observables are: mental entities, including mental images but also such things as desires and feelings. They also agree that karma plays a role in explaining our experience. The realist theory, though, has an additional posit: physical objects, things that are in principle unobservable. If the two theories are equally good at helping us predict the future course of our sensory experience, then by lightness the impressions-only theory is preferable.

Notice, by the way, that this is not an argument from skepticism about the external world. Those who have studied modern Western philosophy might expect that Vasubandhu would argue like this: 'We can't prove that physical objects do exist. (How could we conclusively prove this if we can never be directly aware of them?)

For all we know we might be in a completely closed system of virtual reality.) So we have no reason to say they do exist. Therefore we ought to conclude that they don't exist.' But his 'argument from lightness' is actually quite different from this skeptical argument. It isn't skepticism about the external world that he thinks gives support to impressions-only. It's the principle of lightness. The idea behind that principle is that when we posit superfluous entities, this is most likely to be the mind superimposing its interests on the world. Vasubandhu's argument is not based on epistemological considerations (skepticism is an epistemological position), but on considerations that are strictly metaphysical.

Does the argument work? Here is one of those places where it does seem to make a difference whether or not one accepts the theory of karma and rebirth. Vasubandhu's explanation of sensory experience requires that there be karmic seeds and karmic causal laws. So if we have little or no reason to accept that idea, then it might seem that his argument from lightness won't work. Are there any alternatives that a modern impressions-only theorist might use instead? Berkeley used God to account for the regularities in our sensory experience. According to Berkeley, sensory images (Berkeley called them 'ideas') are caused to occur in our minds by another more powerful mind, that of God. And the orderly patterns in which these ideas occur in us are testimony to God's concern for our welfare. But such an explanation would not appeal to a Buddhist. For Berkeley's minds (ours and God's) are thinking substances – just the sort of thing the Buddhist theory of *anātman* denies.

Might a modern Buddhist adapt Vasubandhu's basic idea to a culture skeptical about karma? Perhaps. We might be able to make sense of the idea that mere impressions are caused by past desires. Consider the famous hand-washing scene in Act 1 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Why does Lady Macbeth see blood on her hands when neither her husband nor we in the audience see any such thing? Clearly because of the guilt she feels due to the part she played in getting her husband to commit murder. So at least in this case we can understand how a desire might serve as cause of a later impression. So there must be at least some causal laws connecting past desires with present impressions by way of triggering conditions. And perhaps such causal laws might play a larger role than we suspect in our experience – leading not just to what we call hallucinations but to more ordinary kinds of experiences as well. Then similarities among the past desires of distinct mental streams could also explain intersubjective agreement. These are the sorts of things a modern impressions-only theorist might say to try to make Vasubandhu's argument from lightness work. Would it then succeed? This is a question we will have to come back to later. For there is at least one more twist to the argument, having to do with the question how we tell whether two competing explanations are 'equally good'. That twist won't come out till we reach v.18 and the notion of 'mutual determination of mental streams'.

8.4

We will now skip over verses 8–10 (to which we will return later), and examine a second major argument for impressions-only, presented in verses 11–15. Here Vasubandhu goes on the attack, seeking to show that the hypothesis that there are physical objects is incoherent. He begins with a new objection: even the Buddha holds that there are physical objects. The Buddha spoke often of such things as the *āyatana*s of color-and-shape, etc. That suggests he believed there are physical objects that cause our experiences of seeing colors and shapes, smelling odors, etc. Of course Vasubandhu has his own theory about why the Buddha said such things. (We'll come to it later.) But the opponent wants to know why we shouldn't just accept the most obvious explanation: the Buddha said these things because he was a realist. Now this isn't a serious objection to impressions-only, unless you already believe that the Buddha's testimony is authoritative on questions concerning the ultimate nature of reality. So this is not a philosophically interesting objection. But what Vasubandhu has to say in response is philosophically interesting. What Vasubandhu will do is look at two different theories concerning the nature of *rūpa dharmas*: atomism and the property-particulars theory. (See Chapter 6 for these two theories.) In verses 11–14 he will try to show that atomism could not explain our sensory experience, and in verse 15 he will argue that the property-particulars theory couldn't either. So if we're right to think that only *dharmas* can be ultimately real, it will turn out that neither of the available realist theories can be correct.

[Reply: We should not take the Buddha to have been referring to physical objects] because,

11. That [*āyatana*] is not one, nor is the intentional object a plurality made up of atoms,

Neither do they aggregate, since the atom is unproven.

What is meant by this? If the *āyatana* of color-and-shape etc. were respectively the intentional objects of impressions of color-and-shape, etc., then they would be individuals, like the 'whole' posited by the Vaiśeṣikas, or they would be pluralities made up of atoms, or they would themselves be the aggregates of atoms. But the intentional object is not an individual, since one never apprehends a whole which is distinct from its parts. Neither is it a plurality, since one does not apprehend atoms individually. Nor, finally, do the aggregates [of atoms] become the intentional object of perception, since there is no establishing that the atom is an individual real.

Why is it not established? Because,

12ab. The atom must have six parts, for it joins simultaneously with six others. The atom will have six parts if it joins simultaneously with six atoms from six sides, since it is impossible that where one is another should be.

12cd. [Otherwise] it would be a mass having the size of one atom, because all six would be in the same place.

Or else the space [occupied by] one atom is that of all six. Then because all are in the same place, they would all together be a mass the size of one atom; then

because of lack of mutual separation, no mass whatever would be visible.

[The opponent:] The atoms do not at all unite, since they are partless. Hence the fault does not arise as a consequence [of our position]. Aggregates, however, do join. So say the Vaibhāṣikas of Kashmir.

They should be replied to as follows: The aggregate of atoms is not an object distinct from those [atoms].

13. If the atoms do not join, then with respect to their aggregates, of what is there this [joining]?

It cannot be shown that their joining does not take place because of their partlessness.

Suppose that the aggregated things do not join with one another. Then it should be pointed out that it is not right to deny joining on the grounds of the partlessness of the atoms, since one could not then acknowledge the joining of the aggregate, even though it has parts. Thus it does not follow that the atom is a distinct substance. Moreover, regardless of whether one allows that atoms join or not,

14. There is no individuality of that which can be divided into distinct spatial parts.

On the opposite assumption, why is there shade and obstruction? If the mass is not distinct, these two do not characterize it.

In other words, if there are distinct spatial parts of the atom such as the east part, the upper part, etc., then how should there be any individuality of an atom with such a nature?

If each atom has no distinct spatial parts, then how is it that upon the appearance of the sun, in one place there is shade, in another there is sunlight? There would be no place at which it is different from where the sunlight is. And how can there be obstructing of one atom by another if distinct spatial parts are not posited? The atom has no other parts whatever where, by having come there, it could be resisted by another. Then as has been said [above], in the absence of resistance, the entire aggregate would be the size of an atom, since all would occupy the same place.

[Objection:] Why not say this, that shade and obstruction pertain to the mass, not to the atom?

[Reply:] What mass could possibly be posited as distinct from the atoms yet characterized by these two [shade and obstruction]? None, and thus it is said, 'If the mass is not something distinct, these two do not characterize it.' That is, if the mass is not posited as something distinct from the atoms, then these two will not characterize it.

[Objection:] The atom, the aggregate, and the like, are fabricated constructions, what is the point of considering them when the characteristics of color-and-shape cannot be denied?

[Reply:] What, then, are their characteristics?

[The opponent:] The property of being the intentional object of vision, etc., and blueness, etc.

[Reply:] That is precisely what is being deliberated upon, whether what is taken to be the intentional object of vision, etc., is a single substance or a plurality.

[The opponent:] What do you say?

[Reply:] The fault involved in plurality has already been indicated.

15. If it [the intentional object] were an individual, there would not occur (1) going progressively, (2) simultaneously grasping and not grasping, (3) the appearing together of distinct things, and (4) the not seeing of minute things.

(1) If we were accordingly to suppose that the intentional object of vision is not a plurality, but one undivided substance, then there would not be such a thing as going progressively across the ground, that is, walking. For with a single step one should have traversed all at once. (2) Again it would be impossible for one simultaneously to grasp the near part of something and not grasp the far part. Grasping and not grasping of one and the same thing at one time cannot be. (3) Nor can there be the occurrence of a plurality of distinct things, e.g., elephants or horses, in distinct places. Since the one is just where the other is, how can it be thought that the two are distinct? Alternatively, since an empty space is apprehended between two things, how can that which is both occupied and not occupied by them be considered to be one? (4) Nor should there be invisibility of tiny aquatic animals which are the same color as gross ones, if it is supposed that distinctness of substance is determined only by difference in characteristics, not in other ways [such as quantity, position, time, etc.].

Thus necessarily, distinction [among substances] requires the positing of atoms. And that [atom] cannot be proven to be an individual existent. That being unproven, the objectness of the [supposed] intentional objects of sight, etc., namely color-and-shape, etc., is unproven; thus it is shown that impressions alone exist.

In v.11 Vasubandhu mentions three things an atomist might say about how atoms contribute to our sensory experience. The first is that the intentional object of perception is a whole existing over and above its atomic parts, and the second is that the intentional object of perception is the individual atoms themselves. Vasubandhu dismisses them for the obvious reasons that the whole is unreal, and individual atoms are too small to detect with the senses. But the third is something new: atoms combine to form aggregates, and in an aggregate the individual atoms are able to do something collectively that they are unable to do on their own. The idea is roughly like this: if a single snowflake fell on you it probably wouldn't register, but if enough snowflakes are stuck together to make a snowball, you'd probably feel them when they struck. The key thing here is that the aggregate is not supposed to be a whole existing over and above the parts. That's why the atomist realist calls it an 'aggregate': as a way of making clear that we're really just talking about all those individual atoms (which are the only ultimately real physical things the atomist recognizes). The 'aggregates of atoms' option is supposed to combine the benefits of the 'one whole' option (something big enough to see and feel) and the 'pluralities of atoms' option (real atoms to act as causes), while inheriting the defects of neither.

Now we might wonder whether this view is really distinct from the one that says the object of perception is the whole. But Vasubandhu is willing to set that question aside, since he sees a more pressing difficulty. How exactly do the atoms come

together to make an aggregate that is larger than any of its constituent atoms? As you may recall, Ābhidharmikas discussed a number of possible approaches to this problem. Vasubandhu argues that none of them will work. The argument begins with v.12, where he considers what appear to be the basic options the atomist has. To understand what he is saying, you need to understand that the standard model of an aggregate of atoms has it consisting of seven atoms: one in the middle, one in each of the four cardinal directions (north, south, etc.), and one each above and below. We might imagine other configurations of atoms making up an aggregate, but the number doesn't matter. What does matter is the question how we get something bigger when atoms come together. And what Vasubandhu is saying in v.12 is that this can only occur if the individual atom has some finite size. If the atom has no size – if it is a mere geometrical point, something with no length, breadth or height – then putting other atoms together with a central atom to form an aggregate will not result in anything bigger than our original atom. This is his point in v.12cd: if the central atom has no size, then where the one to the east touches it must be the same place as where the one to the west touches it. So those three atoms will be no bigger than the one we started with. The atoms must have some size if aggregates are to be big enough to detect with our senses. But, he says in v.12ab and again in v.14ab, if an atom has size then it must be a whole made of parts. So then the atom would not be a real entity.

Why must the atom have parts? Imagine three atoms, the first one M in the middle, a second one L touching it on its left side M_L , and a third one R touching M on its right side M_R . Now if the three atoms together are going to be bigger than M , M_L and M_R must be on two different sides of M . So there must be some distance inside M to separate these two sides. The interior of M must, that is, contain distinct spatial regions, the region adjoining M_L , and the region adjoining M_R . And Vasubandhu is saying these distinct spatial regions inside the atom count as parts.

We might find this last claim dubious. We could agree with Vasubandhu that it is hard to imagine that atoms have no size whatever, that they are mere geometrical points. But isn't an atom something with a size so small that it can't be divided up into anything smaller? (Remember that by 'atom' we here mean something genuinely indivisible, and not what we (mistakenly) call by that name today.) We can grant that the atom must contain distinct spatial regions within itself: one bordering the left side, another bordering the right side, etc. But since these spatial regions cannot be physically separated from one another, why should they be called parts? Wasn't it Vasubandhu himself (speaking as a Sautrāntikas) who said that the test of something's being ultimately real is that it cannot be broken up like a pot can be broken? (See Chapter 6.) Why should our ability to mentally distinguish among the different regions of the atom show that the atom has parts and so isn't ultimately real if the atom is something truly indivisible?

Vasubandhu will answer that the true test of something's being ultimately real is that it not borrow its nature from other things. This is what he meant when he said in *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* that we reach the *dharmas* when we reach something that not only cannot be broken up like a pot can be broken, but also cannot be conceptually

analyzed. Something showing qualitative complexity, such as a complicated mental state, might be physically indivisible simply because it isn't a physical object and so doesn't have any spatial size. It can nonetheless be analyzed into distinct components. And this shows that it borrows its properties from those components; it is a whole made of parts and so not ultimately real. Vasubandhu is now saying this applies to the atom as well. Even if it cannot be split up into parts, insofar as it contains distinct spatial regions it borrows its nature from its components. When we rule out the atom as a mere point, we commit ourselves to saying that having a certain (very small) size is the intrinsic nature of an atom. But that nature turns out to be borrowed from the (smaller) sizes of the spatial regions making it up. So an atom could not be a *dharma*.

It won't help to propose that the real *rūpa dharmas* are these smaller spatial regions that make up the atom. For exactly the same reasoning will apply to them as Vasubandhu used against the reality of the atom. Each must have a finite size, and so must be made up of yet smaller spatial regions. This process will never come to an end. This is a consequence of the infinite divisibility of space: between any two points, no matter how close, there are infinitely many distinct points.

So maybe it's time to revisit the option of saying the atom has no size at all. We saw that if the point-atoms touched they would all wind up in the same place, so no matter how many atoms made up the aggregate it would never get any bigger. But what if the atoms didn't touch? What if an aggregate were seven point-atoms each at some distance from the rest? Then the aggregate would have some finite size, and it could serve as the building-block of still larger physical objects.

In v.13 Vasubandhu points out a problem for this proposal. If we allow that the atoms in an aggregate don't touch, we must still say that one aggregate touches another. For how else are we to explain the fact that two distinct aggregates occupy different spatial locations – which we must do if adjoining aggregates are to make up larger things? When two aggregates come into contact, what is to stop the one from occupying the same space as the other? An aggregate must be able to obstruct other aggregates. You might think this is no problem, since the aggregate has size. We can distinguish between the one side of the first aggregate where a second one touches it, and the other side where the second is obstructed from going. We can do this because we agree that the aggregate is made up of distinct spatial regions between the one side and the other. It is the atom that we are supposing has no size, not the aggregate. The problem is that the aggregate is itself a mere conceptual fiction. The only really real things in this picture would have to be atoms, and only really real things can do any real work. So if one aggregate is to obstruct another, individual atoms must be obstructing other individual atoms. And Vasubandhu wants to know how this is possible if atoms are mere points.

This is the question Vasubandhu is raising in v.14cd. He cites two problems for the atomist, those of shade and obstruction, but they are really a single difficulty. In order for one thing A to obstruct another thing B, A must prevent B from moving beyond A's near side and reaching A's far side. In order for the dam to hold the water back, it

must stop the water at the upstream side; if the water reaches the downstream side of the dam then the dam has not succeeded in obstructing the water, and the water will flow past the dam. But now imagine a dam that is just one atom thick, and suppose that the atoms are mere points. Then when a water atom touches the upstream side of one of the earth atoms making up the dam, it will already have reached the downstream side of that atom. So that earth atom hasn't succeeded in obstructing the water. Adding a second layer of earth atoms to our dam won't help either, since they will be equally unable to prevent the water from reaching their downstream sides. On the hypothesis that atoms are points, no amount of atoms can ever obstruct anything. Likewise, no matter how many such atoms make up a tree, when the sun shines on the south side there should not be shade but sunlight on the north side of the tree.

At this point we might ask whether Vasubandhu has considered all the possible atomist scenarios. Perhaps he has a point about the hypothesis that the atom has size, but has he really refuted the view that atoms are mere points? Might the atomist not say that atoms need not touch in order to obstruct one another? Perhaps the atom exerts a repulsive force on other atoms, and this is what keeps them separate. This would explain how the earth atoms in the dam prevent the water atoms from flowing downstream: because of mutually repulsive forces, the water atoms never touch those earth atoms on the upstream side of the dam at all. It would also explain how the atoms making up the tree prevent the sunlight from reaching the ground to the tree's north. Vasubandhu says nothing about this hypothesis. And the idea of forces acting on particles seems like a plausible view; it is, after all, something like what modern physics tells us. So it seems Vasubandhu hasn't yet succeeded in refuting atomism.

There is, though, a reason why Vasubandhu didn't give this sort of view serious consideration. It involves what is called 'action at a distance': one object acting on another when the two are not themselves in contact and there isn't some third thing transmitting the action from the one to the other. Modern physics does posit various kinds of action at a distance, such as gravity. But this is an idea that most people have great difficulty making sense of. That's why we tend to think of gravity as a sort of invisible hand that reaches out and pulls objects down. We think of gravity this way because we find it hard to see how the earth could act on something it isn't in contact with, such as the skydiver who has just left the airplane. We thus think of gravity as a force, and we think of forces as invisible things that reach out and push or pull. Classical Indian philosophers did discuss the case of magnetism, which is a phenomenon that suggests action at a distance. There is even a dispute in Abhidharma over whether vision must touch its object for perception to take place. But when it came to phenomena such as obstruction the assumption seems to have been that contact is required.

Although this may explain why Vasubandhu did not consider the view that atoms obstruct through repulsive forces acting at a distance, we still want to know whether the view might be true. Were Vasubandhu presented with this hypothesis, what could he say to refute it? There is at least one difficulty he could point out: applying the inverse square law to the hypothesis leads to absurd results. The inverse square law

says that the force exerted by A on B is inversely proportional to the square of the distance between A and B. So if we double the distance between them, the force A exerts on B is one fourth what it was. Conversely, if we halve the distance the force is quadrupled. Now remember that space is infinitely divisible. This means that if atoms are mere points, the space between two atoms A and B may be halved infinitely many times. So as B approaches A, the force that A exerts on B will rapidly approach infinity. And this seems absurd. How could something with no size at all contain within itself more force than there should be in the universe?⁴

In v.14 a new opponent agrees with Vasubandhu that atomism will not work. Atoms and aggregates of atoms are, this opponent says, ‘mere fabricated constructions’, entities we invent as part of our efforts to make sense of the experience of putting things together and taking them apart. Atoms are, after all, in principle unobservable. So if we are to be good empiricists we should be wary of positing them, only doing so if there are no other, lighter ways of explaining the phenomena. This opponent thinks the property-particulars theory is such a way. On this theory, ordinary physical objects are bundles not of aggregates of atoms but of property-particular *rūpa dharmas*. The impartite things out of which a table is composed are not tiny indivisible ‘things’ like earth atoms (hunks of hard stuff), but rather occurrences of properties such as hardness, whiteness, smoothness, etc. Remember that these property-particulars are thought to exist whether we perceive them or not. When my vision does come in contact with the whiteness property-particular, that causes a mental image that resembles the whiteness that exists ‘out there’. And it’s because this whiteness tends to occur together with certain other sorts of property-particulars such as a certain shape, a certain smoothness, etc., that we construct the conceptual fiction of the table as a ‘thing’ that we think of as supporting all these properties. The truth is just the opposite of what we think, though: it is the really existing property-particulars that ‘support’ the fiction of the table. Now this theory of the *rūpa dharmas* has the advantage that it only mentions things we can observe: colors, shapes, textures, smells and the like. And it looks like these things might not be subject to the same divisibility problems that atoms fell victim to. Things like whiteness and smoothness are qualitatively simple – they’re the sorts of things that could only be known by acquaintance. And it just doesn’t make sense to say that a certain smoothness is made up of smaller things. What could they be, smoother smoothnesses? So perhaps this view – which sounds initially quite odd – is worth considering.

Vasubandhu presents four difficulties for the view in v.15. The commentary discusses these in terms of our ordinary ‘thing’ language, but they are better

⁴Notice that this does not refute the view that there is action at a distance. What it refutes is the combination of that view and the claim that the atom that acts is a mere point with no size. Action at a distance will work in combination with the view that the material particles have finite size. For there will then be only finitely many times one can halve the distance between the centers of the particles before they come in contact. The difficulty Vasubandhu will see here is just that an atom with size must have parts.

represented if couched in terms of a phenomenal language. (The property-particulars theorist would say the nouns of a phenomenal language are all names of *rūpa dharmas*, so this language can state the ultimate truth about the external world.) For the first objection, imagine you are having the visual experience you would interpret as standing in front of a uniformly green field: you see a certain green with a certain shape. Why is it, asks Vasubandhu, that when you have the experience we interpret as taking a step, you continue to see the same green? To bring the point home, imagine you are having the experience we would interpret as seeing a piece of green paper on the ground: you see a similarly shaped green color. In that case you would not continue to see green after having the experience we call taking a single step. What explains the difference? The two property-particulars are the same color and the same shape, so there shouldn't be any difference between them, yet there clearly is. Of course we want to say there is a difference here: the first greenness *dharma* is bigger than the second. But to say one is bigger than the other is to speak of size, and that will bring up exactly the problem the property-particulars theory was trying to avoid. For if something has size, then it is made of parts and so cannot be a *dharma*.

While the first objection involves the sense of vision, the second involves touch. Suppose you are having the experiences we call holding a banana in your hand. This will involve your seeing a certain yellow color, smelling a certain odor, and feeling a certain smoothness and a certain shape. Consider just the shape that you are aware of through touch. That shape has two ends, but at any one time you can be aware of only one and not the other. How can that be? The only plausible answer is that at any one time you are aware by touch of just one part of the banana shape. But of course to say this is to say that the shape has parts, and thus is not a *dharma*. So once again what is ostensibly a property-particular turns out not to be an ultimately real entity after all.

By now you should be able to work out on your own how the third and fourth objections go. The overall point of v.15 is clear. While the property-particulars theory of the *rūpa dharmas* seems to work in some cases, it cannot account for all our sensory experiences. There are some sensory experiences that seem to require the existence of things with size. And once we accept these, we fall back into the difficulties of infinite divisibility that beset the atomist. Is there any way around this problem? The Sautrāntikas, we might recall, deny that shape is a *dharma*. The present difficulty might help us understand why. All of Vasubandhu's objections to the property-particulars theory bring in shape in one way or another, so perhaps denying that shape is ultimately real might help the realist answer these objections. If for instance we can't say that the two greens we see have the same shape, then there is no reason to expect that our experience of the first will be just like our experience of the second. So the fact that after 'taking a single step' I still see green in the first case but not the second would not pose a problem. The question is whether it is possible to describe all of our sensory experience in a phenomenal language that does not mention shape, and so does not inadvertently bring in size. If so, then perhaps the realist can say that the object of perception is the external property-particular. This may be a possibility worth exploring. But at least initially it does not seem too

promising. It is difficult to see how we could eliminate all talk of shape from our phenomenal language and still succeed in describing all the important features of our experience. For instance we classify leaves primarily on the basis of their shapes: we call these maple leaves and those oak leaves because of their common and distinct shapes. The realist has their work cut out for them if they want to rescue the view that the object of perception is an external object in the form of a property-particular.⁵

8.5

With this we will end our exposition of Vasubandhu's second major argument. In the remainder of *Vimśatikā* he considers several more objections. We will examine just a portion of this final section:

[Objection:] It can be settled whether [the external object] is existent or non-existent by the employment of the means of knowledge. And of all the means of knowledge, it is perception which is the most important. Then if the external object is non-existent, how can there be the cognition, 'I am perceiving'?

[Reply:]

16. Perceptual cognition is just like in dreams and the like; moreover, when that [cognition] occurs,

The external object is not seen; how can it be thought that this is a case of perception?

As was explained above [v.3], even in the absence of an external object [sensory cognition can occur].

Moreover, when that [a perceptual cognition] occurs, the external object is not seen; how can it be thought that this is a case of perception? It is when the perceptual cognition occurs that one says, 'I am perceiving'. At that time, the external object is not seen, since judgment is only performed by mind-consciousness and since visual consciousness is then extinguished. How can it be said that this is a case of perception? Particularly as the external object is momentary, how much more so must its color or taste then be extinct?

[Objection:] We do not remember that which was not experienced, and this requires the experience of an external object. This is none other than seeing. Thus it is that perception pertains to color-and-shape, etc., which are its intentional object.

[Reply:] This remembering of experienced objects proves nothing, since

17. As has already been said, an impression bears the form of that [object]; memory arises from this;

⁵Another possibility that might be worth exploring is that shape is indeed a *dharmā*, but in addition there are size *dharmas*. So each occurrence of a color *dharmā* such as green is accompanied by some shape *dharmā*, such as round. But one green *dharmā* that is accompanied by a round *dharmā* might be accompanied by a 'largeness' *dharmā*, while another is accompanied by a 'smallness' *dharmā*. Whether this can be made to work is the question. One concern might be that it will end up on the seriously 'heavy' side. This approach also fails to address the difficulty at the heart of the second objection.

In sleep the unawakened one does not ascertain the absence of a visual object.

As was said before, an impression of visual consciousness bearing the form of an external object arises even without there being an external object. From just such an impression there arises a memory-dependent mental impression, a representation of that, which is constructed in the form of color-and-shape, etc. Thus from the occurrence of memory the existence of external objects does not follow.

[Objection:] If just as in sleep so in the waking state as well the impression has an intentional object without there being a real external thing, then the world should realize of its own accord the non-existence of that [external object]. But it does not. Thus it is not the case that apprehensions of external objects are all, like sleep, devoid of external objects.

[Reply:] This cannot be allowed. For those who are awake, dulled as they are by the sleep of falsely constructed repetitive [karmic] influences, do not apprehend that when they perceive an external object it is unreal, precisely as in sleep. But when, through the attainment of the transcendent, non-conceptual cognition which is the contrary of that, one [truly] awakens, then by reason of the manifestation of the purified worldly cognition which is obtained in the wake of that [transcendent cognition], one correctly apprehends the non-existence of an external object. This is the same [as the case of sleep and ordinary awakening].

[Objection:] If the impressions of beings arise bearing the representations of external objects solely because of distinctive transformations in [the beings'] own mental streams, and not because of distinct external objects, then how can it be shown that the impressions of beings are determined by association with good and bad friends, and by hearing true and false doctrines, since neither the good and bad friends nor those teachings exist [according to you]?

[Reply:]

18. There is mutual determination of impressions through reciprocal influence.

In sleep the mind is overcome by torpor; it does not have the same effect. Mutual determination of impressions occurs among all beings suitably linked by means of reciprocal influence of impressions. 'Mutual' means between one another. Accordingly the distinct impression arises in one mental stream from some distinct impression in another mental stream, not from a distinct external object.

[Objection:] If as in sleep so in the waking state as well the impression has no external object, why is it not the case that good and bad conduct have the same desirable and undesirable future [karmic] results whether one is asleep or not?

[Reply:] Because 'in sleep the mind is overcome by torpor; it [one's good and bad conduct] does not have the same effect.' It is for this reason, and not because there are real external objects.

[Objection:] If all this is just impressions, and there are no such things as bodies and voices, how is it that for instance sheep can be chased and killed by shepherds? Or if that death is not caused by them, how is it that the shepherd earns the fate of a murderer?

[Reply:]

19. Death is an alteration caused by another's distinct impression, just as
By the mental powers of demons there occur loss of memory and the like
in others.

Just as because of the mental powers of demons, etc., there occur in others such alterations as loss of memory, dreams, being seized by evil spirits, and the like. Because of the mental powers of sorcerers as well. Or again as in the case of Kātyāyana's powers causing Saraṇa to dream. Or when Vasumitra was defeated by another [in battle] because of the mental anger of a forest ascetic. In the same way through the power of a distinct impression of one person there occurs some action which harms the life-force of another, and thus death, that is, the cutting off of the stream of resembling [dharma], occurs – thus should it be known.

Notice that in v.16 Vasubandhu gives a compressed form of the time-lag argument. When we first encountered that argument (Chapter 6) it was used to support representationalism. Here Vasubandhu uses it differently. The opponent has objected that perception is the most important of our means of knowledge, and since the opponent thinks perception involves cognition of external objects, they do not see how an impressions-only theorist can agree that perception is a means of knowledge. How can an idealist be an empiricist? But this objection clearly presupposes a direct realist account of perception. The opponent only thinks impressions-only is incompatible with empiricism because they think that when we perceive, we are directly aware of external objects. Vasubandhu uses the time-lag argument to show that direct realism is false. All we are ever directly aware of in sensory experience are mental images. When we first encountered the time-lag argument, it was being assumed that physical objects exist. Given that assumption, the time-lag argument could be used to support representationalism. But once this assumption is called into question, the argument can only show that the intentional object in sensory experience is something inner or mental; it cannot be used to prove the existence of physical objects. Notice that Vasubandhu also gives an explanation of some of the differences between waking sensory experience and dream experience. Because mental acts are less forceful in sleep, the actions one performs in dreams don't have the kinds of karmic consequences that waking actions can have. He might use the same device to explain why the dream experience of eating a meal is not typically followed by the experience of fullness.

Now notice the objection that precedes v.18. By 'distinctive transformations in mental streams' the opponent means the ripening of seeds that is supposed to give rise to impressions. So the opponent is saying Vasubandhu can't explain how one person can influence another person's experiences. A 'good friend' here is someone who teaches the Dharma to others, a 'bad friend' is one who leads others astray, for instance by causing them to live lives devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasure. But the point is quite general, and can be illustrated with a much simpler example. If I greet you and shake your hand, we want to say that your sensory experiences of hearing my greeting and feeling my handshake were caused by my desires, not by your karma. So far, Vasubandhu has only mentioned one source of sensory

experience, the ripening of karmic seeds. So it looks as though his theory cannot account for the facts about those of our sensory experiences that come through interpersonal interaction.⁶

Vasubandhu responds by telling us that there are actually two sources of impressions. In addition to the ripening of karmic seeds, impressions can also be caused in a mental stream by the occurrence of a distinct impression in another suitably linked mental stream. Your experience of hearing my greeting and feeling my handshake were caused by my desire to make you feel welcome. Now this desire must have a certain strength if it is to produce this effect in you. But this is just the difference between a mere wish and an effective decision. Our two streams must also be 'suitably linked'. All this means is that the prior histories of each stream must have led to certain similarities in present experiences. We say that you won't hear my greeting and feel my handshake unless our bodies are in close proximity. Vasubandhu denies we have bodies, but he agrees that an effective desire to make you feel welcome will only produce the auditory and tactile impressions in you if our streams currently contain the sorts of similar impressions that we interpret as standing together in the same place. A similar account will explain how one person can murder another (or a shepherd can kill a sheep) if there are neither weapons nor bodies. Under suitable circumstances an effective desire can bring about the utter disruption of a distinct mental stream. (If there is rebirth, the mental stream continues under radically altered circumstances; if there is no rebirth, then the 'disruption' consists in the cessation of that mental stream.) Once again, a mere wish won't do. But we know the difference between the fleeting thought, 'I wish they were dead', and the determined volition that leads to active planning and execution. The laws governing the production of impressions are such that only the latter can lead to the serious disruption of a series of impressions.

To our ears this will sound bizarre. We think the only way one person can cause another to have experiences is through a physical medium: my lips move, your eardrums oscillate, and you hear my voice. Vasubandhu's account tells us one mind can act directly on another. This will sound to us like he is attributing special psychic powers to mental streams. And unless you believe in demons and other sorts of magical beings, this will seem quite mysterious and highly implausible.⁷ Now an idealist could go on the offensive and say that if anything is mysterious here, it is the realist's claim that something mental can bring about something physical. We suppose

⁶Indeed you might be wondering if the impressions-only theorist is not also committed to solipsism, the view that there is only one mental stream, namely your own. If there are no external objects, are there other mental streams, or is mine the only one that exists? Vasubandhu is not a solipsist, but he gives no argument for the existence of other minds. Among later Yogācārin, though, there was a debate over the existence of other minds.

⁷Vasubandhu and his audience probably did. That is why his text mentions demons and sorcerers: because they agreed that some beings have such powers, it would not have seemed quite so odd to them that all beings might. Still we do not, so it is worth asking how else this view might be defended.

it is my desire to greet you that causes my hand to extend to yours. But how does this desire, which is something mental, bring about the physical activity? We already accept that one mental event can cause another, at least in a single mental stream. My desire to solve some problem causes me to focus my awareness intently on the issue. Consequently we understand how it might be that a desire in one mental stream could cause an impression in another. For here we are at least talking about one mental event causing another mental event. But, an idealist might say, the realist's claim that mental events can cause physical ones (and vice versa) is quite incomprehensible.

An idealist might say something like this. The British idealist Berkeley did. But Vasubandhu does not. Nor to my knowledge does any other Yogācārin. The reason for this is probably that it would not occur to most Buddhists to think it odd that a mental event could cause a physical one, or vice versa. And this is because Buddhists generally understand causation as no more than invariable concomitance.⁸ The Buddha's formula of dependent origination was: 'whenever this occurs that occurs, in the absence of this there is the absence of that'. Here there is no mention of some occult power or force that brings the effect into existence; there are just the two events, cause and effect. So it will not seem odd that an event of one sort could bring about another event of a very different sort – not so long as we observe constant conjunction between the two kinds of event. It is only when we think of causation as requiring something like power to link cause and effect that mental-physical interaction might seem peculiar.⁹ What Vasubandhu could say is just that direct mental causation between distinct mental streams seems odd to us only because we are used to thinking in naive realist terms. Once we have learned to see through the realist interpretation we have superimposed on our experience of impressions, we will see that there is nothing really odd about intersubjective mental causation. For (unless we believe there really are demons and sorcerers) it will still be true that one mind can cause experiences in another only under those circumstances we would ordinarily describe as one body acting on another. While there are no bodies, there are those circumstances that common sense interprets as one body acting on another. And these are just the ones that Vasubandhu describes as mental streams 'suitably

⁸As we will see in Chapter 9, the Mādhyamika will argue not only that anything more than this is unwarranted, but even that this view of causation cannot be ultimately true.

⁹Here is a rather different reason to be skeptical about mind-body interaction. Suppose we believed that every physical event may be explained in terms of some law of physics. And suppose we also believed that the laws of physics only mention physical events. Then we would believe that every physical event has some other physical event as its cause. Suppose we also believed that desires are mental, and not physical things (such as brain events). Then explaining the physical event of my hand reaching out to shake yours, by saying it was caused by a mental event like my desire to greet you, would be superfluous; there would already be a complete explanation of this event in terms of some physical event (such as a brain event). But this argument is based on the assumption that appropriately scientific causal laws could only link physical causes with physical effects. A Buddhist realist could say we have no special reason to believe this – unless we already believe that physical powers are required to bring about physical effects.

linked by means of reciprocal influence of impressions’.

This raises a general point. It is tempting to think that everything would be different if Vasubandhu were right and there were only impressions. What we have just seen is that in a sense, nothing would be any different. That is, our experience would go on exactly as it always had. All that would change is our interpretation of that experience. It would still be true that only under certain circumstances could I cause you to hear something I want to say to you. We now interpret this fact in terms of causal interactions of bodies with other bodies and with minds. If there are only impressions, we should interpret it in terms of direct mental causation between suitably linked mental streams. But it is exactly the same experiences to which we give these two quite different interpretations. One surprising result of this is that an impressions-only theorist could still do science. In doing science we are seeking to find those regularities that help us explain and predict the course of our experience. We are used to thinking that these are to be expressed in terms of laws about the behavior of physical objects. The impressions-only theorist will say they must instead be put in terms of laws governing the transformation of mental streams. But the data to be explained are the same in either case. They are just what can be expressed in a purely phenomenal language. The laws will take different forms, and employ different nomenclature. But they will still be laws concerning how our sensory experience goes.

There is, though, one new twist that arises from Vasubandhu’s claim concerning direct intersubjective mental causation. This requires that the causal laws the impressions-only theory uses to explain and predict our sensory experience be considerably more complicated than we initially thought. Our experience of inanimate natural objects like mountains and rivers will still involve causal laws that connect past desires with karmic seeds, which in turn ripen under appropriate conditions to produce our present impressions. But at least some of our sensory experiences of other persons will be explained in terms of causal laws linking a desire in one mental stream with an impression in a suitably linked distinct mental stream. And now consider our experience of artifacts, useful objects intentionally created by persons. An artifact like a pot is the result of a desire on the potter’s part, so the impressions-only theorist will want to explain our experience of it not in terms of karmic seeds, but in terms of a desire in a distinct mental stream (namely the potter’s). But our sensory experience of the pot isn’t confined to just those times when we are ‘suitably linked’ with that mental stream. We can continue to have pot experiences when the potter isn’t around anymore, for instance when the potter has died.¹⁰ Now the hypothesis of karmic seeds was meant to explain how something in the remote past could be the cause of a present effect when everything is momentary.

¹⁰If you believe in rebirth, you could say that that potter’s mental stream continues all the same. So desires in that series could still be the cause of our pot-experiences. But suppose it were an enlightened potter whose pot we are seeing. The mental stream of an enlightened person ceases upon their death, so there is still a problem.

The idea was that the cause produced a seed, which produced another seed, etc., in an unbroken series, until conditions bring about the ripening of a seed to produce an impression. And this makes sense when the remote cause and the seed series and the impression all belong to the same mental stream. But it isn't clear how the seeds hypothesis could work in the case of our experience of artifacts. The seeds couldn't be in the potter's mental stream, since we can have pot-experiences after that stream has ceased. So did the potter's pot-making desire cause seeds in the mental streams of those who now see the pot? Suppose the pot I see now was made ten years ago. Then the potter's desire would have caused a seed in 'my' mental stream ten years ago, and that seed would have been replicated in an unbroken series up to the present, when I finally have the experiences that count as the ripening conditions (such as the experience we call walking into a ceramics gallery). But how did the potter's desire 'know' to plant a seed in my mental stream? Did it already 'know' that in ten years I would be interested in ceramics? Or is it rather that the potter's desire causes seeds in every mental stream, and only those mental streams with the right experiences ever have that series of seeds ripen to produce a pot-impression? In that case there are going to be an awfully large number of seeds in each mental stream. Things get even more complicated when someone decides to smash the pot. That means that seeds in some mental series that would otherwise have ripened to produce pot impressions now are not going to. How is that to be explained?

The point here is not that the impressions-only theorist could not explain all these facts about our experience of artifacts. Where there are genuine regularities in our experience, they can always explain them using causal laws that connect only mental events. The point is rather that in order to do so, they will need to make the causal laws of their theory extremely complex. At a certain point the realist opponent might say it is no longer clear that the impressions-only theory is just as good as the realist theory at explaining and predicting our sensory experience. One thing we ask of our theories is that they employ relatively simple and straightforward laws. And it may no longer be clear that the impressions-only theory does this. Might this be a way for the realist to respond to Vasubandhu's argument from lightness? This could be worth exploring. Suppose, though, that it worked. Would this be a vindication of common sense? Notice that then one would in effect be saying that we should believe physical objects exist only because this theory gives the simplest way to make sense of the patterns in our experience. This might be a way to defend realism, but it would leave us a long way from the direct realism of common sense.

8.6

We will end our examination of Vasubandhu's arguments for impressions-only here. There is still the question what the soteriological point of all this is supposed to be. Why should coming to believe that there are no physical objects, only impressions in a mental stream, help us overcome suffering and attain nirvāna? It is sometimes

thought that the point must be to eliminate objects of attachment and clinging. The idea is that we would stop suffering if we no longer believed there are material things. But this cannot be right. Suppose I coveted a shiny new sports car. Learning that there are only impressions need not eliminate my craving. For even if the car doesn't exist as something independent of my mental stream, there are still the impressions that we (wrongly) interpret as, for instance, driving the car. I can still desire to have those impressions. And given the way the causal laws seem to work, I can only have those impressions if I first have the impressions we interpret as handing the salesperson a large amount of money. Once again, the truth of impressions-only would not change the nature of our experience, only how we interpret it. So if the point of the theory were to make us less 'materialistic' in the sense of desiring material things, it wouldn't work.

In the part of *Viṃśatikā* that we skipped over, Vasubandhu tells us what the point actually is. This part of the text begins with the opponent asking Vasubandhu why, if there are no physical objects, the Buddha talked about the *āyatana*s or sense-spheres, such as the visual sphere of color-and-shape. Vasubandhu replies that the Buddha was using his expedient pedagogical methods (*upāya*) and giving a teaching that works on two distinct levels depending on the audience. For ordinary followers this is a way of making the point that the *skandhas* are devoid of self.¹¹ But for the more advanced, this teaching may be interpreted in such a way as to make the point that all *dharmas* lack a falsely imputed essence. Understood on the first level, the Buddha is teaching that the person is devoid of self or essence, on the second, that *dharmas* are devoid of intrinsic nature (they are empty). So the first represents the Abhidharma understanding of the Dharma, the second represents the Mahāyāna understanding. Here is how he puts it:

10. Thus there is the intimation that the person is devoid of self; again, in another way,

The teaching is the intimation that *dharmas* are devoid of essence, by way of a falsely constructed essence.

Teaching this, it is intimated that the person is devoid of self. 'From the two [types of *āyatana*, object and sense] the six [types of consciousness] are produced, but there is no one thing that is the seer, [hearer, smeller, taster, feeler,] thinker' – knowing this, those who are to be instructed in the teaching of the selflessness of the person enter into the selflessness of the person. 'In another way' – namely by means of the teaching of impressions only. How does this intimate the essencelessness of *dharmas*? Knowing that this representation of color-and-shape, etc., arises only as an impression, that is, that no *dharma* bears the defining characteristic of color-and-shape, etc., then what [essence] exists?

[Objection:] If indeed no *dharma* exists anywhere, then this 'impressions only' does not exist either. How is it established?

¹¹Namely by showing that consciousness must be impermanent. The doctrine of the twelve *āyatana*s was central to the Buddha's argument that consciousness must be radically impermanent. See Chapter 3.

[Reply:] It is not the case that the essencelessness of *dharmas* is intimated by saying that no *dharma* exists anywhere. However, what is falsely constructed by the ignorant – such as the intrinsic nature of *dharmas*, what is to be grasped and the grasper, etc. – by means of that imagined essence [of impressions] their essencelessness [is intimated]; but this is not done by means of that inexpressible essence which is the object of cognition of the Buddhas. Since the essencelessness of impressions-only as well is intimated by means of a constructed essence of another impression, the essencelessness of all *dharmas* is intimated by the establishment of impressions-only, not by the denial of their existence.

As Yogācārins understand it, the distinctive Mahāyāna teaching that all *dharmas* are empty is to be understood as the claim that they all lack the intrinsic natures that we wrongly superimpose on them. In the case of *rūpa dharmas*, Vasubandhu holds, this falsely imputed nature includes being external. Why would it be important to overcome this false superimposition? When we wrongly imagine there to be external objects we are led to think in terms of the duality of ‘grasped and grasper’, of what is ‘out there’ and what is ‘in here’ – in short, of external world and self. Coming to see that there is no external world is a means, Vasubandhu thinks, of overcoming a very subtle way of believing in an ‘I’.

The eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant sought to refute Berkeley’s subjective idealism, claiming that we must suppose there are physical objects existing independent of our consciousness. His argument was that without the notion of something permanent and mind-independent (that is, an objective world of physical objects), we could never arrive at our concept of an ‘I’ that is the subject of different experiential contents. In short, there can be no sense of subjectivity or the ‘in here’ without a sense of objectivity as the ‘out there’. Vasubandhu would agree, but he and Kant draw diametrically opposed conclusions. Kant thinks that since we must believe in an enduring subject of consciousness, we must also believe that there are physical objects. Vasubandhu instead thinks that once we see why physical objects can’t exist we will lose all temptation to think there is a true ‘me’ within. There are really just impressions, but we superimpose on these the false constructions of object and subject. Seeing this will free us from the false conception of an ‘I’.¹²

This point is made in a commentary on the other part of Vasubandhu’s *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, the *Triṃśikā* (‘30-versed’). For this text, which is more soteriological and less philosophical in its orientation than *Triṃśikā*, we no longer have Vasubandhu’s commentary on the verses. But here is how the later commentator Sthiramati explains a point Vasubandhu makes in v.28:

¹²Note that this does not constitute an argument for the Yogācāra view. To say that the impressions-only theory helps eliminate suffering is not to give a reason why one should believe it. The belief that there is a large balance in my checking account might alleviate my suffering over my financial situation, but that’s no reason to believe it is true. All we are doing at this point is asking what soteriological significance impressions-only would have if it were true; we are not now inquiring into its truth.

‘Because there is no grasping in the absence of what is to be grasped’. There is a grasper if there is something to be grasped, but not in the absence of what is to be grasped. Where there is no thing to be grasped, the absence of a grasper also follows, there is not just the absence of the thing to be grasped. Thus there arises the extra-mundane non-conceptual cognition that is alike without object and without cognizer.

But why would the resulting cognition be ‘non-conceptual’? And what did Vasubandhu (in the commentary on *Vimśatikā* v.10 that we were just examining) mean by an ‘inexpressible essence’ that is cognized by the enlightened? Are we brushing up against the mystical here? Are we being told to take on faith what only yogins can actually know through their faculty of non-rational intuition?

Perhaps not. At this point in *Triṃśikā*, Vasubandhu has just explained the Yogācāra doctrine of *trīsvabhāva*, the doctrine that there are three intrinsic natures, each with its own type of emptiness. This represents the Yogācāra interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness. Remember that this doctrine – that all *dharma*s are empty of intrinsic nature – is supposed to be definitive of Mahāyāna, and Yogācāra is a Mahāyāna school. But if we take the teaching of emptiness literally, then given what *dharma*s are supposed to be (namely, things with intrinsic nature), it seems to rule out their very existence. And this is something of an embarrassment for Yogācāra, which claims that there are ultimately real things in the form of impressions. The doctrine of *trīsvabhāva*, of three natures and three kinds of emptiness, is their way of trying to reconcile the impressions-only doctrine with the teaching of emptiness. The *trīsvabhāva* or three intrinsic natures are the imagined (*parikalpita*) intrinsic nature, the dependent (*paratantra*) intrinsic nature, and the perfected (*pariniṣpanna*) intrinsic nature. Let us look at how these are explained in Vasubandhu’s verses (and Sthiramati’s commentary). First he says what each of the three natures is, then he will explain in what sense each of them can be said to be empty.

20. Whatever is discriminated by means of whatever concept,
That is the imagined intrinsic nature; it is not real.

He says ‘by whatever concept’ to show the infinity of concepts available through the distinction between what is internal and what are discriminated as external things ... Whatever thing is the object of conceptualization and thus is not real due to lack of existence, just that thing is what has the imagined intrinsic nature; it does not have intrinsic nature since it is due to causes and conditions. For [if it did have intrinsic nature and so were real] then there would be a multiplicity of mutually contradictory concepts [such as ‘having size’ and ‘having no size’] applicable to a single thing and its absence. [But a concept applies to a real thing only if it corresponds to the intrinsic nature of that thing.] And it is not possible for there to be a multiplicity of mutually contradictory intrinsic natures with respect to a single thing or its absence.

- 21ab. Dependent intrinsic nature is the concepts that originate in dependence
on conditions.

The meaning is that whatever is governed by distinct causes and conditions originates depending on something distinct.

21cd. The perfected is whatever there is of that [dependent] that is forever devoid of the prior [imagined].

There being a concept, the imagined intrinsic nature has the nature of [the duality of] grasped and grasper. The imagined intrinsic nature is called 'imagined' because, there being a concept, an unreal grasped-grasper (subject-object) nature is constructed. The perfected intrinsic nature is whatever of the dependent is forever and always free of that grasped-grasper [dichotomy].

22ab. Hence it [the perfected] is not just simply identical with that [dependent], it is neither distinct from that nor is it non-distinct.

The perfected is the dependent's being forever free of the intrinsic nature of the imagined. And that nature of being free is not correctly said to be either distinct or non-distinct [from the dependent nature].

22cd. It [the perfected] should be declared to be just like impermanence, etc., [the dependent] is not seen when that [perfected] is not seen.

[The perfected is like impermanence:] Just as impermanence, suffering and non-self are not distinct from the predispositions etc., nor are they non-distinct. If impermanence were distinct from the predispositions, then the predispositions would be permanent. But if they were non-distinct then the predispositions would be of such a nature as to be annihilated, like impermanence ... When it – the perfected intrinsic nature – is not seen, that – the dependent intrinsic nature – is not seen. If the perfected intrinsic nature, which is to be apprehended through an extra-mundane non-conceptual cognition, is not seen, understood, witnessed, then the dependent is not grasped through that cognition, since this purified worldly cognition is obtained as a consequence of that.

23. With respect to the threefold intrinsic nature there is a threefold lack of intrinsic nature,

The lack of intrinsic nature has been taught with respect to all *dharmas* collectively.

24. First there is being devoid of its very defining characteristic; next there is its not having a nature through itself, finally there is [the ultimate] lack of intrinsic nature.

25ab. That is the ultimate truth of *dharmas*, for that is also thusness.

The first is the imagined intrinsic nature, this is devoid of intrinsic nature just by its defining characteristic, for its defining characteristic is imputed, as is the defining characteristic of *rūpa* to *rūpa*, that of experience to feeling, etc. Thus since it lacks its own form, like the sky-flower, it is devoid of its very own-form. The next is the dependent intrinsic nature. With respect to it the nature is not through itself, as with a magical apparition, since it arises in dependence on other conditions. Hence since its origination is not in accordance with how it is manifested, with respect to it there is said to be the lack of intrinsic nature through origination. 'That is the ultimate truth of *dharmas*, for that is also thusness'. The meaning of that is that it is the ultimate extra-mundane cognition because nothing exceeds it. Or the *pariniṣpanna* intrinsic nature is said to be the ultimate truth because like space it is everywhere homogeneous and pure. Since the perfected intrinsic nature is the ultimate nature of all *dharmas* that are dependent by nature,

the perfected intrinsic nature is the ultimate emptiness, for it has as its intrinsic nature the absence of the perfected. [Triṃś. 20–25]

We may think of the *trīsvabhāva* as three different ways in which reality can be experienced. Each type of emptiness then represents a form of misinterpretation that must be stripped away from that way of taking our experience. The imagined represents the common-sense way of understanding the world: thinking of it as involving objects, each with their own natures, being grasped by a conscious subject. The subject-object dichotomy that structures this interpretation of experience requires the use of concepts. When I think of my experience as that of feeling a hot coffee cup, this requires applying the concept of a physical object to one aspect of the experience, and the concept of a feeling (as a subjective state, a state of ‘me’) to another aspect. But if impressions-only is correct, these are misattributions. We wrongly impute distinctive natures to our experiences when we think of them in this way. To realize this is to see experience in the dependent way, as just the flow of impressions dependent on prior causes and conditions. The dependent is what is left when we strip away from the imagined what is wrongly imputed through our use of concepts and the subject-object dichotomy. But to the extent that we are thinking of it at all – even if only as the non-dual flow of impressions-only – we are still conceptualizing it. So if, as the Mahāyāna *sūtras* seem to hold, conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*) is the most fundamental expression of ignorance, then there remains something to be stripped away from the dependent. Thus we arrive at the perfected mode of taking our experience, which is just pure seeing without any attempt at conceptualization or interpretation. Now this is also empty, but only of itself as an interpretation. That is, this mode of cognition is devoid of all concepts, and so is empty of being of the nature of the perfected. About it nothing can be said or thought, it is just pure immediacy. Notice though that this is not to be understood as the experience of some different realm. The perfected and the dependent are not ontologically distinct; the former is just the latter stripped of what it is actually empty of. This is important because an enlightened person could not live for long totally immersed in the perfected mode of cognition. To get around in the world one must employ concepts. The dependent represents for Yogācāra a kind of ‘purified worldly cognition’ in which an enlightened person can use ordinary concepts while recognizing them for what they truly are – the products of ignorance.

This sheds some light on what Vasubandhu meant when he said in *Viṃśatikā* v.10 that the teaching of impressions-only intimates the emptiness of all *dharmas* without lapsing into the nihilism of saying that no *dharmas* whatever exist. He was contrasting his Yogācāra interpretation of emptiness with that of Madhyamaka. The Yogācāra *trīsvabhāva* reading is to be preferred, he thinks, because it leaves in place some underlying nature – some thing-ness (*dharmatā*) or thus-ness (*tathatā*) – as the ground on which ignorance has superimposed its false constructions. But why exactly is what is left ‘inexpressible’, why must all conceptualization be transcended? In his comments on *Triṃśikā* v.20, Sthiramati seems to be saying that

concepts could apply to real things only if those things had the natures expressed by the concepts. So the concept ‘color’ could apply to real *dharmas* only if there were real things that had the nature of being colored. But, he says, since each real thing is the product of many causes and conditions, there would have to be as many different (and often mutually incompatible) concepts applicable to a given real thing as there are causes and conditions for its existing. And in that case a given thing would have a multiplicity of distinct intrinsic natures. That is clearly impossible. Only a conceptual fiction could have a complex nature, and what we are looking for is the ultimately real. So if the reasoning is sound here, we can see why ultimately real things would have to be beyond conceptualization and thus inexpressible in nature. But it is still not entirely clear why anything that was in any way conceptualizable would have to have a complex nature. A full account of this point will have to wait until Chapter 10.

Further Reading

Two recent discussions of Yogācāra that give a different account of its relation to Madhyamaka than the interpretation given here are Ian Charles Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), and Gadjin M. Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra*, ed. and trans. L.S. Kawamura (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991).

For an account of the Nyāya response to impressions-only see Chapter 7 of B.K. Matilal, *Perception: An essay on classical Indian theories of perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See also Joel Feldman, ‘Vasubandhu’s Illusion Argument and the Parasitism of Illusion upon Veridical Experience’, *Philosophy East and West* 55 (2005): 529–41.

For the classic Western formulation of idealism see George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. A good treatment of Berkeley’s overall system is found in the relevant portion of Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

For the origins and development of the doctrine of karmic seeds and the related theory of ‘storehouse consciousness’ (*ālaya-vijñāna*) see Lambert Schmithausen, *Ālayavijñāna: on the origin and the early development of a central concept of Yogācāra philosophy* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1987).