CHAPTER 6:

THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE: THE VARIED INTERPRETATIONS OF THE VIJÑAPTIMĀTRATĀŚIDDHI
CHAPTER 6

THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE: THE VARIED INTERPRETATIONS OF THE VIJṆAPTĪMĀTRATĀSIDDHI

6.1 Introduction

The text Vijñaptīmātratāsiddhi (hereafter VMS) has undergone a variety of interpretations by a number of scholars, both in ancient as well as modern period. From its early reading as an authoritative source on idealism, it has come to be variously seen as presenting a critical realist epistemological position, a treatise on phenomenology, and even as emphasizing a middle path between realism and idealism. This chapter tries to critically analyze these diverse hermeneutical trends in context of the VMS.

In this chapter, I have attempted to present and analyze the various forms of hermeneutics that the VMS has so far been subjected to. In the first part of the chapter, I have given certain preliminaries to the chapter. These include an analysis of the nomenclature of the text and certain remarks about reading Indian philosophical texts on Western paradigms. The second part of the chapter deals with the early idealist readings of the VMS in the twentieth century. For this study I have considered the work of A. K. Chatterjee (1962) as most suitable and hence examined it in detail. I have tried to analyze the possible reasons for such an idealistic interpretation of the text and have attempted to understand the grounds on which such readings were offered. In the third part, I have analysed the works of two modern Buddhist scholars who have challenged these idealist interpretations of the VMS, namely Thomas Kochumuttom (1982) and Steven Anacker (1984). After that I have focused on the recent readings of the VMS as a phenomenology, this time chiefly through the work of Dan Lusthaus (2002). In the last part, some very recent readings of the text which are again offering an idealist interpretation of the VMS are presented. A short but inspiring article by Sean Butler (2010) forms the central point of focus for this part. My aim in this chapter in doing this critical survey of hermeneutics is not to pick the best or the only right reading of the text at the expense of claiming the wrongness of the others. Instead, my whole effort is to make the reader aware of the fact none of these ‘readings’ of the VMS lack in offering strong arguments while claiming their particular interpretation as providing the best
possible interpretation of the VMS. Would that mean that there is a hermeneutical deadlock such that the true import of the text and the intention of its author can never be gauged? Can all these interpretations be taken as true? Or are all of them missing on something essential? The concluding part of the chapter tries to answer these important questions.

6.2 Vijnaptimatratasiddhi: Nomenclature

A very important but largely unnoticed fact about the VMS is that the title of the book Vijnaptimatratasiddhi (Thesis on perception-only) suggests the text to be a classic case of thoroughgoing idealism. Interestingly, such titling of the text cannot be attributed to Vasubandhu himself. Vasubandhu had written the two texts separately - one under the title Vimshatikā (Twenty verses) and the other as Trimsikā (Thirty verses). This style of designating a text by the number of kārikās was not uncommon in the Indian philosophical tradition. Interestingly most scholars who named their texts in such a manner would add their main thesis, in case they were presenting one, with such quantification, for instance, the Śnyatāsaptati (Seventy Verses on Emptiness) of Nāgārjuna, or the Parmārthasaptati (Seventy Verses on Reality) of Vasubandhu himself. Vasubandhu, however does not seem interested in presenting a thesis in his two texts (where he is just describing the dynamics of consciousness) and hence simply calls them Vimśatikā and Trimsikā respectively. Although it is true that at the beginning of Vimśatikā he uses the word Vijnaptimatrata, yet if he really believed that he was presenting an ontological or metaphysical theory about the nature of the world, he would have himself named it Vijnaptimatratasiddhi or something like that. However, for reasons unknown to us, he simply terms these texts as the Twenty verses and the Thirty verses.

The combination of these two texts together and putting them under the label Vijnaptimātrata-siddhi was actually done by some commentators who discovered and subsequently translated and worked on this text. Among the earliest such tendencies, we can see Hsuan Tsang’s translation of the Trimsikā which he named as Cheng Weishi Lun, translatable as ‘the doctrine of consciousness-only’. Thus Vasubandhu’s thirty verses were comprehended as being thirty verses on ‘Consciousness only’ and the seeds of idealism in interpreting Vasubandhu’s thought were sown.
In 1925, when Sylvain Levi published the combined text of *Vimśatikā* and *Trimśikā* after their rediscovery, he labeled the pair collectively as *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*. Most subsequent scholars have been comfortable to call the collection of these two texts as *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* since then. The acceptance and use of this nomenclature is no doubt a good exercise in order to incorporate the two texts (*Vimśatikā* and *Trimśikā*) into a neat philosophical structure. However, it must never be forgotten that Vasubandhu himself never used the term *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* to refer to these texts. Although I agree with Anacker who notes that these two texts, along with the *TriŚvabhāvaNirdeśa* seem to be forming a specific structure\(^98\), however to simply club the two texts together and then take them as a thesis - be it of idealism or realism - is too harsh on part of the casual reader to attribute to Vasubandhu.

It would be unfair to imagine that after all the years of Buddhist practice and intellectual labor - from writing the *Abhidharmakośa* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* to his conversion into the Mahāyāna and subsequently his Mahāyāna writings - all Vasubandhu would do at the end of his life (if we accept the contention of Anacker that it is among Vasubandhu’s last works) was to propose an all encompassing thesis establishing a particular view of metaphysics. In fact, the entire philosophy of *Vimśatikā* and *Trimśikā* is compatible with Vasubandhu’s overall philosophical standpoint which he offers in some of his other works. As Anacker observes in the introduction to *Vimśatikā*, citing a verse from the *Mahayānasamgrahabhāṣya*\(^99\)

> The main point here is not that consciousness unilaterally creates all forms in the universe, as has been supposed by Dharmpāla and Hsuan Tsang, but rather that an object of consciousness is internal and the external stimuli are only inferable.

>(Anacker, 2005, p.159)

Interestingly, even the name which gives the Yogācāra school an idealistic projection seems to be coming from sources not inside the school. Dan Lusthaus considers the name

\(^{98}\)“It (*The Twenty Verses*), The Thirty Verses and The Teaching of the Three Own-Beings seem to belong together. The implications of one lead to the revelations of the next.” (Anacker, 2005, p.159)

Vijñānavāda as coming from external sources rather than from within the Yogācāra tradition itself.  

My contention in the above paragraphs was to show that the very debate of realism and idealism can fade away if we consider the fact that Vasubandhu never used the term Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi to refer to the Viṃśatikā and the Trīṃśikā. Names like the Cheng Weishi Lun (Hsuan Tsang) and Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi (Levi) - both meaning a thesis on ‘perception-only’ or ‘consciousness-only’ and hence portraying the text as an exposition of metaphysical idealism - have been applied by scholars other than Vasubandhu to label his philosophy in the Viṃśatikā and the Trīṃśikā. Since the manuscripts were found together, so when Levi published them he gave a collective name to them; hence we must never forget that when we are dealing with this text we are not dealing with VMS but only with the Viṃśatikā and the Trīṃśikā. It is only if we begin from such presuppositionless premises that we can hope to understand the true import of the philosophy of Vasubandhu as presented in these two texts.

Before I start giving an analysis of VMS’s hermeneutical history in the modern period, I would like to present a brief comparison of ancient Indian philosophy with philosophy as we understand it to be in present day academic discourse. This brief comparison, with which most serious scholars of philosophy would be familiar, will help us reflect upon the manner in which many ancient Indian philosophical texts (like the VMS) are analysed through the gaze of the Western schema of philosophy, and how such gaze, otherwise helpful in a rational and critical analysis of any philosophical text, can sometimes become an obstruction in manifesting certain aspects of these ancient texts.

6.3 East and West: The Divergence

Ancient Indian philosophy, unlike modern Western philosophy, was more than a purely rational enquiry into the nature of the world and encompassed within itself shades of spirituality,

---

100 “The label Vijñanavada (consciousness school) was applied to the epistemological and ontological positions of the Yogācāra School and the Buddhist logic tradition in the polemical debate literature of their medieval Indian opponents. These Buddhist and non-Buddhist disputation used the term Vijñanavada to emphasize the Yogācāra assertion that external objects do not exist, but consciousness does, thus inviting an idealist interpretation that these opponents (especially the realist schools, such as Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā and Sautrāntika) refuted at great length.” Lusthaus, D. in Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Vol.2 (2004, p.884).
mysticism and theology with notions like *karma*, rebirth and *moksa* being an indispensable part of its worldview. As a result, in spite of there being many convergences, there are certain irreducible points of differences between Indian and Western philosophies. Although a comparative mode of understanding Indian philosophies in terms of Western ones (or vice-versa) is a good exercise in that it makes one understand new philosophical schemas in terms of the old familiar ones, what such a comparative analysis always hinders is the recognition of certain fundamental points of divergence between Indian and Western philosophy. Unless one understands certain peculiar aspects of Indian philosophy, one can never do justice to a complete understanding of any good Indian philosophical text. Given below are some of the major points of difference between the Indian and Western schools of philosophy.

The concept of “Liberation” (*mokṣa*) in one form or other is a hallmark of almost all major Indian philosophical schools (except the Cārvāka). Considered the summum bonum of life, it is an important part of the overall worldview of the Indian schools and a study of philosophy is usually undertaken only in so far as it would help one to achieve the state of liberation. In other words, philosophy can be understood as a theoretical backup for understanding the world in which one exists and from which one is supposed to get liberation. Such a notion of liberation is missing in the Western tradition where philosophy has mostly been a secular discipline, especially after the time of Enlightenment when it was clearly demarcated from religion.

The law of “*karma*” and the notion of rebirth are two other notions that are presupposed by most schools of Indian philosophy. In simple terms, the law of *karma* means that the action that an individual performs would certainly bear fruit in the future. Thus kind and meritorious actions would be kindly and meritoriously rewarded and unkind and bad actions would similarly bear unkind and bad results. Another important notion related to that of a karmic worldview is the notion of rebirth. According to it, the individual person does not actually die after her physical death but is reborn into a new life which she gets according to the karmas of her previously lived life. This endless cycle continues unless one is able to attain *mokṣa* and get out of this cycle. Both these notions are without doubt absent in the Western philosophical tradition.
In traditions like AdvaitaVedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism, the ultimate nature of reality is said to be beyond the “limits of discursive thought and language”. For modern western philosophy, especially after the advent of Analytic philosophy and Logical Positivism, such assertions about reality would be considered no more than nonsensical utterances.

The phenomenal world which we inhabit and experience is asserted to be the product of Māyā or Avidyā (for Advaita and Buddhist schools respectively) whose nature is differently described in these traditions. This unreal world is ultimately to be transcended - through the dawn of right knowledge - to enter into the real mode of being (variously called Parmārthika, Samvrtti or Parinispanna). Such condemnation of the phenomenal would be absolutely unacceptable to most modern Western thinkers for whom the only true object of philosophical discourse is the phenomenal world of our situatedness and nothing else.

My minimum contention here is that these presuppositions of Indian philosophies are accepted by all forms of Buddhism (including the Yogācāra) as fundamental to their pursuits - intellectual or spiritual - and hence form a cornerstone of their philosophical discourse. Their distance from Western notions of a thoroughly rational and empirical brand of philosophy would always make a comparative exercise between the two a difficult task to perform.

However, many a times these differences are overlooked and there occur attempts to establish a sort of isomorphic relation between Indian and Western philosophies. We believe that many readings of the Yogācāra in general and Vasubandhu in particular have tried to understand the tradition without properly focusing on notions and concepts which cannot be properly accommodated and understood by means of Western philosophical categories. It is in this background that various readings of Vasubandhu, especially the early ones, can be made sense of.

6.4 The Hermeneutical journey of the Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi

The first half of the 20th century was a time of resurrection of ancient Indian philosophy. Traditional Indian thought was trying to re-assert itself and the world was slowly coming to know about the rich philosophical tradition that was a part of ancient Indian civilization. It was

101 Adi Saṅkara in the Advaita tradition and Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu in the Mahāyāna are the major scholars who held such a view about the nature of ultimate reality.
in this period that many of the ancient Indian texts were being translated into English and other foreign languages and the world was getting acquainted with the glorious past of Indian philosophy. In this atmosphere there was always an implicit attempt on part of many authors to make the Western reader understand Indian philosophy in terms of notions already familiar to the Western philosophical mind. Thus it was not surprising that the categories of realism and idealism - categories that had actually churned the dialectic of Western thought from Berkeley in the 18th century to Russell and Moore in early 20th century\(^\text{102}\) were used to introduce the ancient Indian schools. Due to this reason, philosophies of India which had any sort of idealistic flavor were presented in terms of idealism and were compared to the Western idealisms of Berkeley, Hegel or Bradley. The non-dual philosophy of Śaṅkara was (and still is) one such system which was constantly compared with the Western idealists. In the same spirit the earliest presentations of the Yogācāra philosophy were done in terms of idealism, a notion which most Western philosophy scholars were already familiar with. Further, these were the times when the Yogācāra texts were translated into European languages for the very first time and as such there were not many critical and philosophical reflections on the material. Since the text of the *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* seemed on the first glance to favor a theory of idealism, and because a very general understanding of Buddhism considered Mahāyāna as an idealist tradition in comparison to the realist Theravāda, it was no wonder that the early interpretations of the *VMS* viewed it in the light of Western idealism.

### 6.4.1 The Idealist readings of the *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*

Considering the factors discussed in the last section, it was no wonder that some of the earliest commentators saw the Yogācāra School as presenting a theory of metaphysical idealism. Thus the initial commentaries on the *VMS* understood it primarily as presenting a philosophical system akin to Hegel or Berkeley which is what it looked from a general perspective without the aid of any rigorous philosophical exercise.

\(^{102}\) The history as well as progression of the modern Western philosophy can be understood in terms of a debate between an idealist and a realist interpretation of the world. Thus philosophers as diverse as Berkeley, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Bradley, Nietzsche, Russell and Moore were engaged with this debate in some way or the other through their works.
We can observe this thoroughly idealistic interpretation of the VMS by some of the noted scholars of Indian philosophy in the following observations by them:

The object, as willed and projected out of consciousness, is therefore in and through the latter and nothing apart from that. This is idealism par excellence. (Murti, 1960, p.316)

As a ground of this Ālayavijñāna, we have the pure consciousness called the vijñaptimātra, which is beyond all experiences, transcendent and pure consciousness. (Dasgupta, 1969, p.119)

Vasubandhu refuted materialism and defended idealism on both epistemological and metaphysical grounds. (Matilal, 1974, p.141)

One very important text that gave a detailed exposition of Yogācāra as an idealist philosophy was A. K. Chatterjee’s *The Yogācāra Idealism* (1962). In this book Chatterjee presented Yogācāra as a form of idealism and gave a detailed exposition of it, comparing and contrasting it with the Western idealisms of Berkeley, Hegel and Gentile (Chatterjee, 1960, pp. 204-229). This book helped a great deal in establishing the Yogācāra School as well as Vasubandhu’s philosophy as a system of idealism. Chatterjee presented a detailed analysis of the Yogācāra tradition from historical as well as epistemological and metaphysical viewpoints. Although Chatterjee made sure to remark that the Yogācāra system was different from the brands of Western idealisms that we know today, (Chatterjee, 1962, pp. 204, 221) he nevertheless remained firm in his conviction that the Yogācāra system as a whole presented a thesis of idealism. Chatterjee’s clear statement is that for the Yogācārins, consciousness is the sole reality and the empirical world, according to the Yogācāra, ultimately reduces to the vibrations in consciousness (1962, p.45).

In the preface to the book, Chatterjee gives a brief comparison of the Yogācāra school with the philosophies of Sautrāntika, Madhyamaka and Advaitaas well as with Kantian thought and then asserts that among all these it is the Yogācāra which best exemplifies an idealist form of
metaphysics (Chatterjee, 1962, p. x). Further, Chatterjee takes Vasubandhu to be the central figure of the Yogācāra tradition (1962, p.36) and recognizes VMS as the central text of Yogācāra idealism (1962, p.vii). While discussing Vasubandhu, he cites Buddhist historian Buston who regards Vasubandhu as having written eight texts on idealism. He then notes that VMS is an explicit statement on the Yogācāra idealism. (1962, p.38)

In the opening paragraph of Chapter 7 of the book, Chatterjee writes a sort of summary of the preceding chapters. This paragraph explicitly brings to light his views about the philosophy of Yogācāra. He writes

…it is proved that the object is nothing apart from the consciousness of it. The subjective alone is real. The blue is a form of consciousness, and as such is real. Its externality is only the mode of its appearance. It appears to be out there, possessing independence and self existence; that however is only the way in which consciousness projects its contents. The subjective is governed by its own laws; it is independent of the object.

(1962, p.126)

Through this book, therefore, A. K. Chatterjee established Yogācāra as a distinct brand of Indian idealism and set the tone for the criticisms that were to follow from such an idealistic reading of Vījnānapratītāsiddhi.

6.4.2 The Realist readings of the Vījnānapratītāsiddhi

In the second half of the 20th century, with the discovery and translation of more and more Buddhist texts, it was evident that philosophers of the Buddhist tradition, like Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Dignāga or Dharmakīrti had more to offer to serious philosophical discourse than was previously assumed. With the texts becoming easily available, the scholars were made available a more holistic picture of the Buddhist philosophical thought. In view of the doctrines found in the early Theravāda texts as well as the direct teachings of the Buddha, it became plain that neither the Buddha nor the earliest forms of Buddhism seemed to have any idealistic notion
of reality. The theory of “the two Vasubandhus” was also losing ground. Further, there was the fact of Vasubandhu’s life as a Sautrāntika realist in his early years. Finally it was significant that the school of Buddhist logic that came into being after Vasubandhu also subscribed to realism. In view of all this, the theory of Vasubandhu as a metaphysical idealist started getting questioned.

It was at this time that scholars like Steven Anacker and Thomas Kochumuttom challenged the long-held assumptions of scholars who took Vasubandhu to be an idealist. Their rigorous study of Vasubandhu’s works showed the range and depth of this Buddhist genius who had compiled a wide variety of works on many aspects of philosophy. This led to a renewed interest in Vasubandhu’s works. Steven Anacker in his Seven Works of Vasubandhu (1984/2005) refrained from accepting the commonly accepted idealist readings of the VMS. However it was with the publication of Thomas Kochumuttom’s A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience (1982) that scholars started to take seriously the notion that Vasubandhu could be read as a realist. In this book, Kochumuttom considered other works of Vasubandhu in addition to devoting two chapters to the VMS, one each to Viṃśatikā and Trīṃśikā. He thoroughly analyzed each and every verse of the text and advanced strong arguments to show that the philosophy of Vasubandhu should be called realism and not idealism. In the subsequent paragraphs, I have presented some major arguments of both these scholars against any idealist interpretation of the VMS.

Although Anacker was not as forcefully assertive as Kochumuttom, he nevertheless implicitly ascribed a realist position to Vasubandhu. For Anacker, Vasubandhu’s misinterpretation as an idealist philosopher relied mainly on the earliest interpretations of his work by scholars such as Hsuan Tsang and Sthirmati, who somehow missed the central theme of Vasubandhu’s works and took relatively less important aspects of his philosophy as central to his thought.

103 Refer to footnote 80 of this thesis.
104 The school of Buddhist logic that followed after Vasubandhu was committed to a kind of realism. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, two major philosophers of this school accepted the existence of the ‘real’ svalaṃśanas (own marks) which were independent of the cognition that cognized them.
105 In addition to the Viṃśatikā and the Trīṃśikā, Kochumuttom analysed the Madhyānta-Vibhāga-Kārika Bhaṣya and the Tri Svabhāva Nirdesā of Vasubandhu.
106 “And then there is the standard discussion of Vasubandhu as an idealist philosopher, which rests mainly on the interpretations of Hsuan Tsang, who seems to have been most impressed by the preliminary portions of works, rather than their conclusions. Even Vasubandhu’s most conscientious commentators, such as Sthirmati, seem often to
Anacker points out this misinterpretation of Vasubandhu in the introduction to his *Vimśatikā-karika (Vṛtti)*. Here Anacker claims that Vasubandhu’s commentators like Dharmapala and Hsuan Tsang read a little too much in the philosophy of Vasubandhu and ended up taking Vasubandhu to be a metaphysical idealist. For Anacker, such an interpretation was unwarranted.\(^{107}\)

However, the most forceful arguments which rejected Vasubandhu’s idealist status while presenting at the same time an explicitly realist reading of the *VMS* came from Thomas Kochumuttom (1982). Kochumuttom argued strongly that it makes better sense to read Vasubandhu as a realist rather than as an idealist.\(^{108}\)

Kochumuttom makes his intentions very clear and sets the tone for rest of the book when he starts the very first chapter with these words.

My minimum contention is that the Yogācāra writings, especially those under discussion, are open to interpretation in terms of realistic pluralism. Here I am obviously disagreeing with those who describe the Yogācāra system as absolute idealism, as spiritual monism, as idealism par excellence or as metaphysical idealism. (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.1)

Thus setting the stage, Kochumuttom goes on to reiterate his claim in a number of passages in the book. His main contention is that the theory *vijñapti-mātratā* just meant that the world as it appears to the unenlightened minds is a mere representation of consciousness and it does not in any way imply that the world is mind-only or that it presents a theory of idealism (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.5). Further, Kochumuttom is so convinced about the status of

---

\(^{107}\) “Perhaps no work of Vasubandhu has been more consistently misunderstood than the Twenty verses. It has frequently been used as an authoritative source for opinions that are in fact not even there. The main point here is not that consciousness unilaterally creates all forms in the universe, as has been supposed by Dharmapāla and Hsuan tsang, but rather that an object of consciousness is internal and the external stimuli are only inferable.” (Anacker, 2005, p.2)

\(^{108}\) “But I maintain that the entire system, when understood in terms of realistic pluralism, makes better sense and that, therefore, even those passages which apparently support idealistic monism, have to be interpreted in accordance with realistic pluralism.” (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.1)
Vasubandhu as a non-idealist that he asserts that Sthiramati, the renowned Buddhist scholar and perhaps the earliest commentator on *Trīṣṇīkā*, has misinterpreted Vasubandhu if he is really suggesting that Vasubandhu is an idealist (1982, p.7).

Another important point Kochumuttom raises in his study of Vasubandhu is that Buddhism since its inception has been a realist and pluralist system which talks about a multiplicity of beings and the existence of matter, mind and force (1982, p.17). He believes that Yogācāra retains this realistic-pluralistic conception of the world (1982, p.17). Another argument he employs is that the school of Dignāga and Dhamakīrti that evolved from Vasubandhu’s school was a realist school and hence Vasubandhu also has to be considered a realist (1982, p.26).

When he separately analyzes the texts *Trīṣṇīkā* and *Vimśatikā*, Kochumuttom comes out with similar conclusions. In the introduction to the *Trīṣṇīkā* he asserts that unlike the traditionally accepted position, the *Trīṣṇīkā* does not describe the process of evolution of the world from consciousness and instead the text only describes the dynamics of an individual consciousness (1982, p.127).

In the introduction to the *Vimśatikā*, he similarly argues that the traditional interpretation of the text as a refutation of realism is mistaken. Instead it is a refutation of the correspondence theory of knowledge. Thus before the end of the twentieth century, these two scholars had made sure that there was a growing interest in the philosophy of Vasubandhu and the traditional simplistic reading of VMS as a text presenting a theory of idealism was no longer satisfactory. All this led many scholars to revisit Vasubandhu and very soon another novel interpretation of Vasubandhu and the VMS came into circulation in the philosophical arena. This was neither realist nor idealist but a phenomenological interpretation of the text.

### 6.4.3 *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*: Phenomenological Perspectives

In the recent past, there has been another interpretation which goes beyond the realist-idealist dichotomy and views the Yogācāra and hence Vasubandhu as simply offering a phenomenology

---

109 “But I am suggesting that far from providing answers to realism it provides answers to the realistic theory of knowledge, which says that there is one to one correspondence between concepts and extra-mental objects…in short, *Vimśatikā* is polemics not against realism, but against the realistic theory of knowledge.” (Kochumuttom, 1982, p.164)
of experience. For scholars holding such a view, it is phenomenology which most closely approximates Vasubandhu’s philosophy in terms of a Western philosophical school. Some prominent philosophers who have read the VMS as a phenomenological text are Dan Lusthaus (2002), J.N. Mohanty (2009) and Saam Trivedi (2005). These authors have argued that if indeed one wants to fit the VMS into a Western category of philosophy, the best option to pick is neither realism nor idealism but phenomenology. For Mohanty, there is much in common between Husserl’s phenomenology and the Yogācāra philosophy of Vasubandhu. Trivedi argues, on the other hand, that an idealist misreading of the VMS has occurred because Vasubandhu is being read out of context and the historicity of the text is not taken care of. However, the most comprehensive and elaborate case in favor of a phenomenological reading of the VMS is built in Lusthaus.

Lusthaus offers a host of arguments in support of his position. Firstly the Yogācāra believes in the existence of other minds, which clearly takes it away from idealism. Secondly, in Yogācāra, mind is not the ultimate reality (as it is considered in most idealist systems), but is itself the source of all miseries and has to be transcended in order to attain a state of liberation. However, the most important point that lies at the heart of Lusthaus’ criticism is that Yogācāra epistemology is wrongly taken as ontology and it is on the basis of this mistake that the Yogācārins are being termed as idealists. In the preface to his book, he makes clear his project when he talks about the proximity of Yogācāra to Western phenomenology. He states,

Granted Western phenomenology is not identical to Yogācāra, but its models and concepts provide the closest form of Western philosophy we currently have. When looking at something unfamiliar, one tends to notice those aspects reminiscent of things familiar while overlooking other aspects that one’s prior experience (or lack of experience) has not prepared one to notice. Phenomenology affords us some sensitivity with which to notice aspects of Yogācāra that otherwise we might overlook. Perhaps, when Western philosophy progresses further, new approaches will emerge that will bring us even closer.” (Lusthaus, 2002, p.vii)
Lusthaus not only argues for Yogācāra writings to be considered Buddhist phenomenology, he also asserts that Buddhist philosophy as a whole can be taken as a phenomenology. Since the Abhidhamma period, Buddhist philosophers have focused on the notion of Dhammās which are nothing but the factors of experience. Due to such a concern with the phenomena of experience, Buddhism can safely be called Buddhist phenomenology. He argues that such a concern with phenomenology reached its zenith with the Yogācāra School, which took Buddhist phenomenology to new heights.\footnote{To that end, Buddhism has focused on the issues of cognition, psychology, epistemology, soterics and ethics. Dhammās are factors of experience, or the phenomena which constitute experience. Therefore the investigations of dhammās can be called “Buddhist phenomenology”... Buddhist phenomenology reached its peak in the Yogācāra school.” (Lusthaus, 2002, p.4)}

Lusthaus denies that the phrase vijñaptimātra is an idealist statement which means that only consciousness is real. It only means that an unenlightened mind can in no way overcome this transcendental condition of experience. Such a mind can never see things as they are, but only the projections of its own consciousness.\footnote{“Thus the key Yogācāra phrase vijñapti-mātra does not mean (as is often touted in scholarly literature) that ‘consciousness alone exists’ but rather that ‘all our efforts to get beyond ourselves are nothing but projections of our consciousness’. ”(Lusthaus, 2002, p.6)}

One of Lusthaus’s strongest arguments is that instead of offering an ontological explanation of the world, what the Yogācāra texts - and specifically the Cheng Weishi Lun - offer is exactly the opposite. That is, by making us understand in depth the phenomenology of experience, Yogācāra writers like Vasubandhu actually make us aware of the process whereby we impose our conceptual categories on the incessantly flowing and impermanent sense data that we perceive, which results in the construction of substantial entities like persons, objects and different ontologies based on these conceptual substances. To understand this network of conceptual construction is actually the true purport of all Yogācāra texts, according to Lusthaus. He offers a very insightful observation on why Yogācāra thinkers like Vasubandhu are actually silent and noncommittal about taking any ontological positions and how this silence is misinterpreted by most commentators of the Yogācāra texts. In Lusthaus’ words:

Rather than offer up one more ontology, Yogācarins attempt to uncover and eliminate the predilections and proclivities (āśrava,
that compel people to generate and cling to such theoretical ontological constructions. Since, according to Yogācāra, all ontologies are epistemological constructions, to understand how cognition operates is to understand how and why people construct the ontologies to which they cling. Ontological attachment is a symptom of cognitive projection (pratibimba, parikalpita)…Such projective reductionism is the problem and symptomatic of the most basic proclivities afflicting sentient beings. That is what vijñapti-mātra means, viz., to mistake one's projections for that onto which one is projecting. …Ironically, Yogācāra's interpreters and opponents nevertheless could not resist reductively projecting metaphysical theories onto what Yogācārins did say, at once proving Yogācāra was right and at the same time making actual Yogācāra teachings that much harder to access. Interpreting their epistemological analyses as metaphysical pronouncements fundamentally misconstrues their project. (2002, p.535)

This paragraph clearly sums up the problems that any ontological view built on the foundations of the Yogācāra phenomenology would encounter. The Yogācāra writings are just a description of experience and do not offer an ontology. Hence Lusthuas wants us to get over the use of terms like realism and idealism for describing the philosophy of the Yogācāra School and simply wants to call it a phenomenology instead.

Interestingly, Lusthaus offers an explanation of the term vijñaptimātra where he understands it as a realization which exposes a deception inbuilt in the functioning of the consciousness. This deception results in making us believe for certain that the object of consciousness is somehow outside the act of consciousness. When one realizes that the objects that we thought to be situated outside of consciousness are nothing but our own conceptual constructions (vijñapti mātra), one at once comes out of this web of deceptions and realizes the
state of direct cognition (jñāna) of the world instead of an indirect and constructed cognition (vijñāna).\textsuperscript{112}

While presenting Yogācāra and Vasubandhu in light of phenomenology, Lusthaus makes sure not to completely equate the Yogācāra with Western phenomenology. Thus while he highlights the resemblance of Yogācāra to Husserl,\textsuperscript{113} he also points out certain differences between the Yogācāra and Western phenomenology. The prominent among these is the amount of importance that these two traditions give to the notion of causality. For Yogācārins, like all Buddhists, causality is a central part of their philosophy, whereas Kant and Husserl play down the notions of causality in their works. Further, notions like Karma and enlightenment, two central themes of Buddhism, are obviously totally absent in these Western thinkers. And finally the Yogācārins, unlike the Western thinkers, do not seem much bothered about the ontological status of the world. (2002, p.536)

Although phenomenology may be regarded as the philosophy best approximating the style and method of Vasubandhu, it does not completely exhaust the full scope of Vasubandhu’s writings. As discussed above, Vasubandhu differs from conventional Western phenomenologists in some very important aspects. In addition to the aforementioned distinctions by Lusthaus, the most important difference that separates the philosophy of Western phenomenology from that of Vasubandhu, in my opinion, is the telos or the goal in anticipation of which such a phenomenological study is undertaken at the first place. Whereas Husserl commenced his phenomenological project to give an apodictic certainty to philosophical knowledge (a project undertaken by thinkers like Descartes and Kant in the past), the goal of phenomenological enquiry of Vasubandhu was primarily religious and spiritual. The phenomenological analysis undertaken by Vasubandhu was only to understand the way experience functions to perform an analysis of the mind, in order to be free from the projections it creates and hence attain the state of Nirvāṇa. In any case Lusthaus’ in-depth study of Yogācāra and Vasubandhu has shown beyond a doubt that Vasubandhu has to be understood in terms which are beyond the narrow confines of realism and idealism.

\textsuperscript{112} “Realization of viññāpti mātra exposes this trick intrinsic to consciousness’s workings, catching it in the act, so to speak, thereby eliminating it.” (Lusthaus, 2002, p.538)

\textsuperscript{113} “Recognizing those affinities Western scholars early in the twentieth century compared Yogācāra to Kant, and more recently scholars have begun to think that Husserl’s phenomenology comes even closer.” (Lusthaus, 2002, p.535)
Thus we observe that although Vasubandhu’s method can be called phenomenological, his work cannot be studied on an isomorphic basis with Western phenomenologists like Husserl or Merleau-Ponty. In any case, Lusthaus’ insightful work was accepted with great respect in philosophical circles. However, it was not long before some scholars felt that the phenomenological explanation was not the best-suited for comprehending the works of Vasubandhu.

6.4.4 Back to Idealism

Interestingly, in the last decade or so, after a full circle of the hermeneutical journey of Vasubandhu and the VMS from idealism to realism to phenomenology, there is again a turn back to the long held position of idealism. Among the new writings, Carmon Dragonetti and Fernando Tola’s *Being as Consciousness* (2004) is a prominent work which presents Yogācāra as an idealist system (2004, p.xiv). Notable Buddhist scholar Mark Siderits in his *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2007) understands VMS as putting forward an idealist thesis (2007, p.147). Most significant however is the short but powerful paper (*Idealism in Yogācāra Buddhism*, 2010) by Sean Butler wherein he emphatically argues that the non-idealist interpretations of Yogācāra (and hence the VMS) by scholars like Lusthaus (2004), Trivedi (2005) and Koller (2007)\(^\text{114}\) are all mistaken and that Yogācāra is without doubt an idealist school. In the subsequent paragraph are discussed Butler’s main arguments as presented in his paper.

Butler targets what he takes to be an implicit assumption by Lusthaus and Trivedi – the assumption that a phenomenology precludes idealism. Since Lusthaus and Trivedi have shown that Yogācāra is a phenomenology, they assume by implication that it is not an idealist philosophy. Butler argues that a philosophy can be an idealist one even if it is a phenomenology (Butler, 2010, p.39). The two are not mutually exclusive. Butler cites the example of George Berkeley and shows that Berkeley’s philosophy is a clear case of a phenomenology which ultimately reduces to a thesis of metaphysical idealism (2010, p.39). He then goes on to claim that the Yogācāra theory of “cittamātra”, if properly understood, would entail another such

---

\(^{114}\)John M Koller in his book *‘Asian Philosophies (2007)’* takes another interesting position with regard to the Yogācāra. He argues that Yogācāra is neither realism nor idealism but is rather a middle position between the two extremes of realism and idealism.
philosophy which is phenomenological but idealistic at the same time. Trivedi had made another observation wherein he cited the influence of Tibetan culture on the post-Vasubandhu Yogācāra thought to claim that Yogācāra is read out of its historical context and hence taken to be idealist. To this Butler responds that although historical contexts do matter in understanding the philosophy of a thinker, the basic structure and form of a philosophy does not change so much as to completely lose its original meaning. Butler then quotes Karl Potter who has also suggested that Yogācāra is an idealist school which is influenced by Advaita and Madhyamaka. To Lusthaus’ objection that the existence of other minds in the *Cheng Weishi Lun* precludes the possibility of its being an idealist text (since a theory of idealism necessarily implies solipsism), Butler retorts that a theory of idealism can comfortably accommodate other minds in its schema. The Absolute idealism of Hegel perfectly exemplifies an idealism which accommodates other minds (2010, p.40). Butler then refutes another common assumption held by some philosophers (he considers Lusthaus to be one among them) that idealism necessarily entails a rejection of the reality of the world. Butler responds that what idealism actually entails is not that the world does not exist, but only that it does not exist with a material foundation but with an ideal one. Thus it can be explained on the basis of ideas without requiring matter (2010, p.41). Butler also discusses the points of proximity and divergence between Yogācāra and other forms of idealism and finally asserts that although Yogācāra is different from the various forms of idealism that have existed in Western philosophy, it should nevertheless be taken as an Indian version of idealism. He writes

The congruence and departures between Yogācāra and idealism are vast in number. Though I have not been able to explore the issue thoroughly here, what is important to note is that Yogācāra, though similar in many regards with the idealisms in West, must be viewed as its own form of idealism. That it is idealism can no longer be denied, yet it does not fit into our traditional Western models. This should not as Trivedi has suggested, exclude

---

115 “With the ontological claim established, we see that Trivedi, Lusthaus and any other who interpret Yogācāra as phenomenology may do so, so long as they do not mistakenly take this to mean that Yogācāra is not also idealism.” (Butler, 2010, p.40)

116 “Yogācāra, Potter reports, is an idealist Indian school influenced by Advāita and Madhyamaka, among others.” (Butler, 2010, p.38)
Yogācāra from the category of idealism, but instead be an impetus for change in the Western understanding of the term. (2010, pp.42-43)

This clearly shows that Butler is strongly in favor of an idealistic interpretation of the Yogacara and the VMS, contrary to the line of thought taken by scholars like Anacker, Kochumuttom or Lusthaus.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

As is evident from the preceding sections of this chapter, the VMS has been subjected to a number of varied interpretations right since its discovery in 1925. Yet each of these interpretations is based on strong logical arguments. Thus while A.K. Chatterjee saw this book as an epitome of Yogācāra idealism, Thomas Kochumuttom and Steven Anacker understood it to be a realist text in consonance with the spirit of early Buddhism. Dan Lusthaus found that the style and method of this work best approximated the works of the Western phenomenology. Then there were scholars like Koller who tried to steer clear of the realism-idealism debate by taking a middle position. Last but not the least, most recently there is Sean Butler who prefers the old interpretation of the Yogācāra as a case for idealism.

Thus the VMS has been variously understood by noted scholars as presenting philosophical positions as diverse as idealism, realism, phenomenology, with the hermeneutical circle taking a full rotation in the recent years, as is evident from Vasubandhu’s reinterpretation as an idealist. None of these positions is however without proper grounding and each seems to have a solid backup in strong philosophical arguments. One cannot easily claim that any of these interpretations can be conveniently picked over the others. It is a tribute to the range and depth of this aphoristic text of fifty-two verses that such different readings of it can be developed with each containing partial truth in some form of the other. Interestingly, it would be

117 The term hermeneutical circle is used here simply to emphasize the fact that the various interpretations of the VMS seem to be traversing a circular path - from idealism to realism to phenomenology to idealism again. The term is not used here in the sense of the ‘hermeneutic circle’, a notion used in the Continental tradition (by thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer) to signify several interrelationships, chief among which are the reciprocal influence of the parts and the whole of a text on each other, the text’s relationship with its historical and cultural roots, and the relationship between our understanding of the world and our self-understanding.
hard to find a single philosophical school (Yogācāra), much less a single text (VMS) which has undergone such a varied set of interpretations. In my opinion, this diversity of interpretations has something to do with the very nature of the VMS because Vasubandhu seems least interested in taking any committed philosophical position in this work. This has resulted in various scholars seeing this text with the viewpoint that seems most appropriate to each of them. In Vasubandhu’s terms, it can be said that each scholar has viewed this text with the particular seeds of vāsana that perfumes his own mind, and accordingly interpreted it in the light of his prejudices and preferences. The metaphysically noncommittal writing of Vasubandhu when operated upon by the conceptual categories of a particular writer is constructed for him in a particular way. In other words, he reads in it what his own mind projects as the true meaning of the text.

As emphasized again and again in my thesis, Vasubandhu’s primary concern in his writings, especially in the VMS, was showing a path towards liberation. There is also no doubt that for this purpose, he made use of such writing techniques and methods which can be accommodated in a philosophical structure. One thing however is sure, that providing a metaphysical theory about the true nature of the world (which is beyond the cognition of ordinary unenlightened beings) or settling metaphysical debates (about which the Buddha had warned about) were not among his priorities. It is therefore but natural that the VMS of Vasubandhu - if read as an ordinary philosophical text - can never be conclusively shown as presenting any explicit philosophical position. Further, although Buddhist masters like the Buddha himself, Nagārjuna or Vasubandhu have made unique and useful contributions to the field of philosophy, understanding them merely as philosophers and overlooking other important aspects of their personalities and overall projects of their lives would surely keep one immersed in metaphysical debates which these great thinkers never addressed (perhaps deliberately). In Vasubandhu’s case, such traditional readings ought to be substituted with a novel approach wherein he is to be understood primarily as a reviver of the Buddha’s original words and only secondarily as providing another philosophical thesis. This will not only loosen up the hermeneutical deadlocks that have cramped the VMS for interpretive space but will also help the students of Buddhism to have an in-depth understanding of what Vasubandhu really has to offer, both in terms of philosophical contributions and more importantly, in terms of reviving the essential message of the Buddha.