Shared Perceptions, Constructed Realities: Vasubandhu's Idealist Philosophy and Intersubjectivity

Gelila Chang
Florida, USA

Abstract

In Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses on Consciousness Only*, Vasubandhu argues against the belief that external reality is an indispensable factor of the world and human existence. Instead, he proposes the other side of the coin, according to which objects are assumed to exist exclusively in the perceiver's mind. Among the three main objections addressed by Vasubandhu, this paper focuses on the issue of intersubjectivity: how multiple individuals can perceive the same object if there are no external, mind-independent objects. This paper, with reference to the specific examples of *Twenty Verses* and real-life circumstances, argues in favor of Vasubandhu's idealist solution to intersubjectivity. By comparing Vasubandhu's mind-only position with a realist perspective, the paper highlights how Vasubandhu's explanation, grounded in the role of collective mental imprints and consciousness, offers a more coherent and plausible account of perception. In contrast to the realist assumption of an objective external reality, Vasubandhu's interpretation reveals a deeper understanding of how perceptions can be shaped by the mind, ultimately presenting a more compelling alternative to the realist view.

1. Introduction

In Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses on Consciousness Only* (*Vimsatika*), he articulates the idealist or mind-only (Yogacara) position, asserting that external, mind-independent objects are unnecessary to explain our experiences. He posits that all experiences are manifestations of the mind. By contrast, the realist holds that external objects exist, independently of our perceptions of them. In *Twenty Verses*, Vasubandhu addresses three main objections to his mind-only theory: 1) Why objects seem restricted in space and time, 2) Intersubjectivity, and 3) How can actions be effective if everything is mental representation.

In this paper I focus on Vasubandhu's response to the problem of intersubjectivity to defend the idealist, mind-only position as a plausible alternative to the realist account. Specifically, by emphasizing the role of collective mental imprints, Vasubandhu shows the mind-only position offers a coherent explanation for shared, intersubjective experiences without invoking mind-independent objects. First, I outline the realist's objection to Vasubandhu and his response, next I bring in additional examples, including the case of mass hallucinations. I end by replying to further objections.

2. Vasubandhu's Basic Argument

In *Twenty Verses*, the objection is raised that if external objects do not exist, then intersubjectivity cannot be explained. How can different individuals experience the *same* things (including each other) if there are no external objects? For the realist, shared perceptions among individuals are best explained by the existence of external objects that exist independently of anyone's mind. In everyday life, different people consistently report the same thing. For example, multiple people can look at a tree and agree on its shape, color, and location. Alternatively, if one person says, "The sky is blue," and another person agrees, it indicates that both are perceiving the same external sky. This consistent mutual verification supports the existence of external objects that different minds are perceiving similarly.

In response, Vasubandhu describes a scenario involving ghosts who all perceive a river filled with pus. This perception is shared among the ghosts, meaning they all see the same thing. However, in this case, the reason for this shared perception is that the ghosts are experiencing similar karmic ripening. Their past actions and mental states have led to a situation where they collectively perceive this river of pus. But this river of pus need not, and does not, exist externally. It is not a physical figure that can be found in the physical world. Instead, it is a figure within the minds of the ghosts. Vasubandhu applies this scenario to human perception: just as the ghosts' shared perception of the river of pus is a result of their collective mental state, Vasubandhu argues humans can have shared perceptions of objects because their minds are in similar states or have undergone similar karmic influences. This explanation implies that external, mind-independent

objects are *not necessary* for explaining shared human perceptions. Per Vasubandhu's argument, the consistency and agreement in perceptions among individuals can be explained by shared cognitive frameworks or similar mental processes, rather than by the existence of an objective, external reality.

3. Mass Hallucinations

In what follows, I will attempt

Some real life examples supported Vasubandhu's view, for example the Phantom limb pain (PLP). PLP refers to ongoing painful sensations that seem to be coming from the part of the limb that is no longer there. The limb is gone, but the pain is real.(Amputee) One of the best known physicians of the Civil War era was Silas Weir Mitchell. In an article from 1866 in Atlantic Monthly, Mitchell described a neurological examination of a theoretical soldier who had lost all four limbs in a battle. In describing patients with missing limbs, he was one of the first to offer a description of phantom limbs, the perception that an amputated limb was still intact: "Where the leg, for instance, has been lost, they feel as if the foot was present, but as though the leg were shortened. If the thigh has been taken off, there seems to them to be a foot at the knee; if the arm, a hand seems to be at the elbow, or attached to the stump itself" (Mitchell, 1866). This phenomenon supports Vasubandhu's claim that external, mind-independent objects are not necessary to account for our experiences. In the case of Mitchell, there is no external limb present, yet the patient's mind constructs a very real and tangible experience of it. This could prove that—The sensations are entirely generated by the mind. However, an objection to this claim might be that the sensation is caused by the fact that there was once a physical arm present, one could argue that the memory of the limb and its associated neural pathways contribute to the sensation of pain, giving credence to the idea that physicality is what is truly real for us, even if the physical thing is now gone. To respond to this objection, we should recognize that the sensation of pain(especially in the case of wounded by war) for those patients arises without any current external stimulus, which ultimately suggests that the experience is internally generated by the mind. In the case of phantom limb pain, the mind can continue to generate sensory experiences even after the object no longer physically exists. This implies that the mind is not completely passively receiving input from external environments but is also actively constructing sensory experiences from itself. The absence of the external limb does not prevent the brain from creating the perception of pain or the sensation of an intact limb. This is consistent with what Vasubandhu's mind-only position supports: The mind, rather than external objects, is the primary source of our perceptual experiences.

Additionally, the occurrence of phantom limb pain in congenital amputees—individuals born without a limb—further supports Vasubandhu's argument. According to the National Library of medicine, a study of phantom limbs in people with congenital limb deficiency. This

study provides a statistic that at least 20% of the congenitally limb-deficient subjects have experienced phantom limbs pain. The phantoms are detailed and can be described in terms of size, shape, position, movement and temporal properties(R Melzack, 1997). These individuals can experience sensations in a limb they never physically possessed, highlighting that the mind alone is capable of generating these experiences. This phenomenon challenges the notion that physicality is the primary basis for our experiences and supports the view that our perceptions and sensations can arise purely from the mind's constructs. From the perspective of perception, even if a limb is missing or has never existed, the brain still generates signals that create the illusion of the limb's presence. These signals do not come from the external world but are "constructed" by the brain based on memories of the limb and past sensory experiences. This suggests that a person's senses are less under the influence of physical reality and more the result of the mind's imagination through psychological expectations and previous memories. This phenomenon demonstrates that human experiences and sensations can be entirely generated by internal mental processes, without relying on external physical objects. This aligns with Vasubandhu's Yogacara (mind-only) theory, which posits that our perceptions and experiences fundamentally arise from the workings of the mind, rather than the existence of an external world.

Furthermore, an example that supports Vasubandhu's view is the Rubber Hand Illusion. In this experiment, a person's real hand is hidden from view, and a rubber hand is placed in front of them. When both the real hand and the rubber hand are stroked simultaneously, the person begins to feel as if the rubber hand is their own. This illusion demonstrates how the mind can create a sense of ownership and reality for something that is not actually part of the external world. The rubber hand illusion highlights how our perceptions can be manipulated by the mind, suggesting that what we consider to be external objects can be constructs of our consciousness.

References