

Bibhuti S. Yadav and William C. Allen

Temple University

BETWEEN VASUBANDHU AND KUMARILA

Introduction

In this essay we stage Vasubandhu's response to Kumarila. We say 'stage' to indicate the theme and method of Sanskrit thought. At least five hundred years separate Vasubandhu (2nd century C.E.) and Kumarila (7th century C.E.). It seems time separates the two only to unite them in a historical discourse. Why else would a domineering figure like Kumarila reflect on the theme and method that Vasubandhu had once raised? Vasubandhu wrote in a meditative stance, tracing reflectively the genesis of the world in consciousness. The objects of consciousness equals consciousness of objects, the images that consciousness posits as referents in time and space. The world is not autonomous reality, only an apparitional presence; and it tortures human beings just as well. Suffering and salvation, Buddhas and the three worlds, are conceived and sustained in self-referential consciousness. Vasubandhu announced the death of ontology, thus shaking the moral, religious and social stance that Vedic realism entails.

Kumarila stages Vedic realism, and does so in the face of Vasubandhu's text. He never mentions Vasubandhu by name, only the group think (siddhanta) the latter had inaugurated. Kumarila, too, never thinks as a person, only as an exponent of the Vedic group-think. The discourse between Kumarila and Vasubandhu is not between a person and a person, not even between two authors. There are no persons and no authors, no private themes or methods of thought. Who the person was before becoming the author is irrelevant, the author is a consequence of the act of writing, and writing embodies a tradition of theme and thought. Philosophical discourse is between a text and a text, and a text is only a medium through which a group-think reiterates its identity in words. Philosophy is conceived in memory (smṛti); born of memory, the philosopher perpetuates the memory. History of Sanskrit thought is like a stage where a philosopher plays

out the drama of group-identity in the face of difference. The historical persistence of a claim (*pakṣa*) necessitates the staging of all forms of counter-claims (*pūrvapakṣa*). That is because philosophy raises questions that are so fundamental that they need to be raised and answered again and again.¹ Here we stage a question that is central to the texts of Kumarila and Vasubandhu: What is consciousness conscious of?

The key term is 'of'. In Sanskrit grammar, the dative case ending which 'of' denotes, indicates a relation of power, as in 'king's person'. The person is of the king and represents the power the king has over the people (*raja-purusha*). So also is the case with 'of' in "what is consciousness conscious of?" Does the relation emanate from a consciousness that seeks to create and bear the world? That is, does 'of' mean that the world is from and therefore for consciousness? Or does 'of' refer to objects that are transcendent to consciousness and necessitate human action by virtue of that very transcendence? Does the world belong to consciousness, or is it that consciousness belongs to the world? Where is the power and therefore the privilege placed? The question of the relation of consciousness and the world has been revived recently in philosophical discourse, with wider implications for issues like identity and difference, I and other, text and the reader. What is consciousness conscious of in reading a text? Who has the privilege, the text or the reader? We stage the debate between Kumarila and Vasubandhu in the hope that it will be of interest to the scholarly community for the same reasons.

I. The Difference

Both Kumarila and Vasubandhu espouse an act theory of consciousness. And they both situate the possibility of human actions in 'of', in the relation that obtains between consciousness and the world. Kumarila reads 'of' to denote the transcendence – and difference – of everything from consciousness. He takes an objectivist stance, placing the possibility of the act in the transcendent. The self is

1. For details see Bibhuti S. Yadav. "Methodic Deconstruction" in Shlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (eds), *Interpretation In Religion* (Leiden – New York: E. J. Brill, 1992) pp. 129-168.

transcendent to consciousness it has; if not, it would not be the subject or the agent of an act. The object, too, is transcendent to consciousness; if not, the subject need not engage in any cognitive or religious acts. Kumarila finds meaning in difference. There is a difference between self and the consciousness it has, consciousness and objects. Consciousness is not sovereign. The self uses consciousness to say 'I', to becoming an agent by doing things, and announcing its sovereignty over the results that ensue from its own acts. It is this lordship of the self, its existence as an agent that bears consciousness to achieve results, that accounts for the possibility of all acts, specially ritual acts.² It is the difference of self from consciousness, and of objects from both, that necessitates epistemology and Vedic texts as instrumental reason (*sādhana*) with which to materialize [material and moral ends (*abhyudaya*). The ends are transcendent to human acts, the realization of which terminates the acts. In the middle are things that are just as transcendent to consciousness, but which must be used to materialize the ends. The desire to achieve the ends drives human beings to act (*pravritti*), and between the self and ends there is the autonomous world of objects. It is this autonomy that makes the difference between dream and reality, wish-fulfillment and the need to work. Facts are not fantasy, the world not a dream. The world is there for all to see and to do. It is this world that consciousness is conscious of.

Vasubandhu takes a projectivist stance. He concedes that the world is sustained in the difference of subject and object, agent and act. But he insists that difference is not a thing in itself; it rather is a result of the self-differentiating activity of consciousness itself (*bheda vasana*). Consciousness is spermatic and possessive (*vija-vasana*), and it appropriates a world by differentiating in the form of subject and object, and it is in this differentiation that the world is sustained. Consciousness is its own before and after, and in the middle it manufactures a world which it then places out there in time and space as its own other. Consciousness is the house where the world dwells (*ālaya*), and there is nothing, no agent and no act, outside the house. This is not to deny that in the everyday world the self is not perceived to be transcendent to consciousness, or the object to the subject. This is only to say that consciousness

2. Jaimini, *Mimamsa Darnam* Edited by Mahaprabhulal Goswami (Varanasi: Trara Printing Works, 1984) Vol 1, p. 20.

comes to have a self in the act of self-transcendence, and that the self seeks its own certainty by imagining an object transcendent to itself. The self does epistemology to affirm self-certainty. Why else would it attribute knownness to objects only as a means to infer its own existence? It even practices methodic doubt, denying the existence of all objects only to dramatize its own indubitability. The truth is that the so called "methodic doubt" is only a dramatic medium through which the ego finds comfort in face of itself: consciousness is sovereign. The difference of subject and object, of the act and content of doubting, is conceived in the self-differentiating act of consciousness of itself. But the sovereignty is paradoxical, for consciousness alienates itself by attributing autonomy to its own creation. It creates contents in difference to itself, and falls prey to its own contents. Difference is a sign of self-alienating consciousness, and it is this alienation that constitutes the condition of all work, secular and sacred. Kumarila's claim that human beings act because they desire things (ends) that they lack is naive. Human beings do not desire things because they lack them; rather, they lack things because they desire them. Lack is not a thing, it is not in things, and it of course is not nothing. There are no such things. Lack is a property of self-differentiating consciousness. It is also naive to claim, as Kumarila does, that with the loss of the ontological autonomy of objects is lost the difference between dream and the public world. The truth is that consciousness encloses itself in its magical network. It reacts to its own act, endowing 'thereness' to whatever it itself manufactures (*miritam*). It is this endowed 'thereness' of objects that accounts for the difference between wishes and reality, the private and the public world. Consciousness is like an author. It writes the world and then thinks it is reading a text autonomous to itself. There is no point in ritual acts, in doing sacred violence to soothe anxiety about heaven and hell. That would only give a religious texture to a very sick consciousness. The point is to do meditation, to trace the genesis of the world, including heaven and hell, in spermatic consciousness, and to reclaim tranquillity by emancipating consciousness from its own alienation. What Vasubandhu calls alienation, Kumarila calls salvation; what Kumarila affirms as the material and moral ends of man, Vasubandhu the divide - and difference - of Sanskrit thought is complete.

The divide is not without anguish. Kumarila lived in an era when conflicts about the world and worth of human work had hit home,

generating much reflection on the nature of the family and the relations it entails. The deeds of Siddhartha Gautama still dominated the forms of life and thought. Ought an individual exit the family – and civil society – to discover the meaning of being in time? Kumarila had a first hand experience of the divide. His nephew, Dharmakirti, left the Vedic fold; like most great Buddhist acharyas, he studied Vedic thought and found it wanting. Dharmakirti became a monk and later turned out to be the greatest logician in the history of Buddhist thought. Kumarila was a family man. In his view the father was a father, the son a son, and the former had power over the latter by virtue of sheer difference. Human relations are more than the images the persons in the relations have of one another. He saw no good in a renunciative form of life which, he believed, the philosophers justified through a theory of metasocial consciousness. Human relations are commanded by the transcendent Vedas, and they cannot be reduced to what consciousness thinks of them. Kumarila takes an objectivist stance in defense of Hindu society, the *sanatana dharma*. He saw meaning in social stability, in the ideology that a Brahmin is a Brahmin, a Shudra a Shudra, and none can be reduced to what the other thinks of it. Human consciousness is so fickle, its sovereignty so dangerous to the social order.

Kumarila believed that the historical identity of *sanatana dharma*, the Hindu social order, was enclosed in a source that transcends human consciousness. He saw a threat to the social order in Vasubandhu's dismissal of things transcendent to consciousness. Society cannot be a convention or construction, for consciousness may reconstruct it tomorrow. Kumarila had to refute the theory of consciousness that he thought was a threat to *sanatana dharma*. He disguised himself as a monk, mastered the categories of Mahayana Buddhist thought from the inside, and later used that knowledge to publicly defeat his Buddhist acharya. Gaining knowledge deceitfully and using it against one's own mentor is a sin in Sanskrit discourse. The intellectual triumph ensued in existential grief, which Kumarila overcame by self-immolation near Prayag. It is significant that Shankaracharya was there, looking for a competent critic who could honor him by writing a commentary on his work. He requested Kumarila to do him the honor. Kumarila refused. Only death on the holy fire could erase the anguish in his conscience.

We dwell on the anguish for a reason. Kumarila believed that there was a fundamental difference between him and his nephews,

Vedic Hinduism and Buddhism. And he reflected seriously on the difference, thus doing Buddhism the honor he denied Shankaracharya. Few philosophers of Kumarila's stature have taken the difference as seriously. Unfortunately, modern scholars have ignored Kumarila's discourse of Buddhism, and vice versa.³ The intellectual circle is saturated with neo-Vedantic jargons like 'global ethos' and 'unity of religions'. What good is the ethos that silences difference? What good is a unity that denies a textual and historical body to the religions? Kumarila had no patience for simplistic jargons. He wrote in the face of the Buddhist difference, knowing fully well that a text makes sense only in the context of competing texts. Kumarila and Vasubandhu take irreconcilable positions regarding moral and social values, cognitive and religious practice, nature and structure of scriptural texts, and schemes of salvation. Their difference is fundamental and cannot be compromised in the name of empty unity.

In what follows we present Kumarila's stance from the '*Niralambanavada*' and '*Sunyavada*' chapters of his *Slokavartikam*. Later we stage Vasubandhu's response from his *Vimsatika*.

II. Kumarila on Vasubandhu

There are three keys to Kumarila's system of thought: common-sense, epistemology, and scriptural authority. Kumarila honored the great convention in Sanskrit thought, namely, the wisdom of common-sense. Even if the Scriptures or God go against the wisdom of lived experience, the authority of experience is to be followed. Philosophers are no exception; after all, they, too, are as embodied in their cogito as are the ordinary folks. Philosophy may have *apriori* hypotheses, but then it must be confined to explaining metaempirical concerns. And if it is concerned with empirical facts, as it should, then it must share at least one truth with ordinary folks, namely, that there is a world out there (*sadrsau bala panditau*). No matter how enlightened, the philosopher cannot take a stance at odds with the empirically evident (*prasiddham*). He cannot claim truth value for 'the tip of the finger

3. Recently the issues between Kumarila and Vasubandhu have drawn the attention of scholars, see William C. Allen. "Ontological Autonomy of Objects: A Translation and Buddhist Critique of Kumarila Bhatta's "Niralambanavada" in his *Slokavartikam*". Ph. D. dissertation, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, 1996.

touches itself" and expect to be taken seriously. There is a great deal of rationality and wisdom in the life of common folks.

Kumarila takes pride in constructing an epistemology in defense of commonsense. He asks Vasubandhu to consider the everyday assertion "I see blue." The assertion implies that I, the cognitive subject, is there, as is the object, say a cow, that has the property blue. And the cogito, the sensory act of seeing, relates entities⁵ that are altogether different. The subject is in the nominative and uses its sensory consciousness to come in contact with what it itself is not. The object, in this case the blue cow, is in the accusative, which occupies a point of space that the subject cannot. And the cogito, the sensory consciousness, connects the subject and the object in a purposive way. An entity cannot be both the agent and object of the same act.⁴ This is how life is in the everyday world. The subject has a cogito that is naturally referential, the object is an entity inevitably referred to, and it is this referentiality that sustains the world.⁵ Not to accept this, as Vasubandhu does, is to be at odds with commonsense. A cognitive episode affirms the difference of the subject from its sensory acts, and the act that moves toward an object is just as different. The subject may use its consciousness to cognitively or materially appropriate an object, but it just cannot be the object it appropriates. I may say "I have a blue cow", but I cannot say that I am the cow I have. So also is the case with "I see a blue cow". I see the cow, not myself; I see a particular cow, not all cows, blue or not blue; and I certainly do not see any or all things that are different from cows. I may, in a subsequent moment, say "I see a white cow". The sensations of blue and white have something in common, namely, my consciousness. But what makes for their difference is the locus in which they respectively reside, i.e., the blue and white cows. Without such difference, there can be no sensory contact, and thus no experience at all.⁶ Sensory contact is always with objects that are definite, vivid, unambiguous, real and my consciousness cannot change the spatial presence and temporal order of things. "I see blue" does not equal

4. Kumarila "Sunyavadah" in his *Slokavartikam* ed. by Durgadhar Jha (Darbhanga: Darbhanga Sanskrit Visvavidyala Press, 1979) Verse 68.

5. "Niralambanvada" in *Slokavartikam* Verses 60-68.

6. "Sunyavadah", Verse 20.

"I see my sensation of blue". My knowing something is different from my knowing that I know.

Kumarila accuses Vasubandhu, indeed Mahayana itself, of dismissing the wisdom of common folks. People believe that there are things out there, the things can be known and spoken about, and that knowability and speakability are properties of things, not consciousness. There is a correspondence between things and our knowledge of them, but they cannot be reduced to what we think of them. That is because consciousness is empty (*nirakara*), having no innate or intrinsic forms such as extension, shape, size, color, sound or smell. That also is why consciousness does not like playing magical tricks, or doing meditation; it only likes doing epistemology as the means of determining the order of things transcendent to itself. The vision that consciousness projects its impressions in space only to encounter them in a cognitive episode, is fundamentally flawed. Consciousness does bear impressions, but they are signs of sensory contact with real objects in the past.⁷ Impressions also presuppose a self that had the experience, stored them in its consciousness, and then recalls in the present. Without belief in the self that precedes and succeeds its experience, the presence of impression, and the causative relation between them cannot be explained.⁸ Dream objects, too, refer to past experience. Kumarila wonders why Vasubandhu cannot understand the simple truth that if an entity has no experience of anything at all, it cannot even dream or fall into illusion. It is because consciousness has known a shell as a shell, a piece of silver as silver, that it sometimes mistakes one for the other.⁹ No sensory contact with objects, no dreams; no valid perception, no illusions. That is also the case with fantasy or imagination. It is impossible to imagine a round-square, or to fantasize about a barren-woman's son. The limits of consciousness constitute its greatness. It is because consciousness is incapable of doing somethings, that it can do great things, doing epistemology to determine the being or nonbeing of things, for instance.

Kumarila was not a therapist. His texts suggest he could never be one. But he wonders if some psycho-ethical anomalies are not

7. "Niralambanavadah", Verses 180-184

8. *Ibid.* Verses 185-189.

9. *Ibid.* Verse 40.

behind the philosophical drive to disregard commonsense. If the objects of consciousness are nothing, then how does Vasubandhu come to know that nothing? Philosophers practice their craft by reflecting on lived experience, which ultimately is enclosed in sensory contact with objects. If Vasubandhu, like most ordinary folks, has no contact with nothing, then how can he think of explaining it to others, specially his peers.¹⁰ If cognitions have no truth hitting property, and if consciousness can create a state of affairs at will, then there is no point in human beings doing anything to materialize the desired ends (*purusartha*). Why say "bring the cow" or better still, why say anything at all? If wishing to be in *nirvana* equals being there, then why follow the words of Tathagata at all? Practice entails difference between dharma and adharma, what ought not to be known or done, and what ought not to be done after it is known to be worthless. Between the day he achieved enlightenment and the time he died, the Tathagata discoursed on dharma, meaning that he affirmed the difference between the speaker and the hearers.¹¹ If difference is nothing more than an image the egocentric consciousness projects in space, then Vasubandhu has to answer these questions. Was Tathagata's consciousness so egocentric that he could speak only to his own shadows? How enlightened, in that case, is a Tathagata whose audience is only his own alter-ego? Or, the real Tathagata, the one who is enlightened, is forever sitting in silence; he cannot say a word. In that case, whose words have the Buddhists heard? Could it be that the hearers are prior to the speaker, and that Buddhists can only hear the echoes of their own words? What value and dignity do Tathagata and people have as persons, if they are none other than the image one has of the other?

It should be noted that Kumarila's quarrel is not with Tathagata who rightly warned against the dangers of possessive materialism, the habit of defining the self in terms of the things it desires to have. His quarrel is with those Mahayana philosophers who, he thinks, are obsessed with nothingness and who elevate the imagination to a theory.¹² Kumarila sees danger in excessive empowerment of consciousness and its subjectivity. The hearer becomes more important

10. *Ibid.* Verse 39.

11. *Ibid.* Verses 72-73.

12. *Ibid.* Verse 201.

than the word and its source, the reader erases the text only to inscribe instead the signs it wishes to see, and consciousness becomes the lord of the world, including the religious world. Dharma and adharma, heaven and hell, Tathagata and his words—all are construed as constructions of samsaric consciousness. Nothing means anything in itself anymore. This is precisely what Mahayana did to the history of Buddhist thought. There on the Grdhakut mountains, the historical Tathagata inaugurated a discourse in everyday language. He vowed not to play games with ordinary folks, insisting that he will speak truthfully and usefully, that he will say what he means, and mean what he says (*yathavaditathakari*). The historical Tathagata had guts; he left politics and diplomacy in order to speak some plain truths to the world. There is a great reciprocity of speech and intentionality, word and meaning, in his discourse. This reciprocity is canonized in the Pali texts.

Mahayana changed all this. It invented a Tathagata who could succumb to the overpowering subjectivity of his audience. The new Tathagata appears on the same Grdhakuta mountains only to erase the truth and memory of earlier words, i.e., the Pali canons. He sees no good in truth, no point in the reciprocity of speech and intention, saying and meaning. There on the mountains, and in the presence of Sariputra, the new Tathagata does what the Shakyamuni of Kapilvastu would never do. He plays games with people by practicing the doctrine of expedient device (*upaya kausalya*). Among other things, the doctrine dishonors the wisdom of commonsense. It assumes that ordinary folks are incapable of hearing words of truth, that they are like children who need toys to play with, and that Tathagata ought to give them just that. The Tathagata is still trustworthy; he had no intention to lie. But there are extraneous reasons, the consciousness and language of ordinary folks among them, that force him to lie.¹³ He must discourse with the world that just cannot bear truth. He performs strategic and diplomatic discourse, using words skillfully. He uses words he himself knows are false, but he does so in ways that people believe his words. The new Tathagata has no courage to say what he knows, so sensitive he is about people's image of themselves and their language. He delights in politically correct

13. For detail see Richard Garner, "Are Convenient Fictions Harmful to Your Health?" *Philosophy East and West*. Vol. XLIII, No. 1. January, 1993; pp. 87-106.

speech, using words to mean neither truth nor lies (*na satyam na mṛṣā*). He speaks "true falsehood", making assertions that have a texture of truth but indeed are false (*samvrtisatya*). Mahayana canonized this textuality, this assumption of truth through words that are admittedly false, and called it *Prajnaparamita sutras*. There are no scriptural texts in Mahayana, if the texts are construed as embodiment of truth. There are only textures, the illusion of truth in words.

Kumarila valued clarity and rigor in philosophical discourse, both of which he sheltered in either/or logic. If a thing is, then it is; it cannot both be and not be at the same time. If an assertion, say "X is Y", is true, then it cannot be anything else. It cannot be neither true nor false, or both true and false at the same time. An assertion can be truly false, in which case the word 'true' cannot be used as a qualifier of what is patently false. There can be no "true falsehood", no *samvrti* which also is *satya*.¹⁴ Kumarila notes with sadness that Mahayana philosophers have devalued either/or logic, and with that, the value of clarity and coherence in formal discourse. He accuses them of sloppiness, double-talk, politically correct speech, even downright cunningness. Why else would Vasubandhu - and Nagarjuna - use *samvrti* as a qualifier of *satya*, when he uses *samvrti* to signify the false, the illusory, and the fictional? How can something be true and false at the same time? That is as ludicrous as saying "my assertion is false, but I speak the truth". Ordinary folks do not use language in that sense, let alone the philosopher. Having lost the reciprocity of intention and speech, and with that the value of truth in philosophical discourse, Vasubandhu only gives a texture of truth to what he himself knows is false. Like the Tathagata the Mahayana invented, Vasubandhu has no courage to say what he means, and mean what he says. If *samvrti* means the false and fictional, then say so. It will do no good to compound it with *satya*, which means 'truth'. *Samvrti* is *samvrti*; *satya* is *satya*; and the two cannot be compounded as *samvrtisatya*. Truth is truth; it cannot be cut in half to signify contradictory meanings. Vasubandhu's discourse is semantically flawed, which in fact is a cover of politically correct speech. The discourse of *samvrtisatya* is performed so as not to offend ordinary folks who believe that an assertion is good only if it is true, and true only if it displays the ontological order of things. But Vasubandhu has no faith in the combination of good

14. "Niralambanavada", Verses 6-7.

and truth, no trust in ordinary folks who believe in that very combination. Kumarila sees an irony in all this. The Mahayana philosopher is an elite intellectual who is severely alienated from ordinary folks in defense of whose interests he claims to speak.

Kumarila was a convinced man. He believed that a good form of life was a prerequisite for a clear and convincing form of thought. Category mistakes, misleading analogies, incomplete or incoherent argument, defiance of commonsense – such anomalies ensue from moral failure. There is a causative relation between dharma and *shastra*, being good and the ability to see things as they are in themselves (*dharmaja*). A good man speaks the truth, no matter how unpleasant the speech. A man with no moral sense speaks deceitfully, no matter how pleasant or politically correct the speech. In Kumarila's view, Vedic texts are the key to the good life; loss of faith in the texts entails confused and deceptive forms of discourse (*adharmaja*). Vedic texts do not lie. They are like the sun, revealing truths that are good for all.¹⁵ As long as the sun shines, people do not mistake fantasy for perception, darkness for light, dream for reality. So also as long as Vedic texts are present, people can differentiate the unpleasantly true from the unpleasantly false, dharma from adharma, truthful speech from the politically correct speech.

However, there are beings, like the owls, that cannot see under the sun. And Mahayana philosophers, in Kumarila's estimate, are just that, the owls. Because they cannot see under the sun, they conclude that there are no things to see.¹⁶ Things, for them, are there only if they can see; and if they cannot see, the things are not there. Enclosed in the owl's syndrome, the philosophers replace light with darkness, day with night, perception with hallucination. They even propose dreams as a paradigm of reflection, thus pushing their alienation from common folks to the limit. Why must the philosophers take pride in the alienation? Why must the philosophic cogito achieve critical virtues only by denying the obvious? Kumarila discerns signs of moral anomalies

15. Shantaraksita, *Tattvasamgraha with Kamalashila's Commentary*. Edited by Dvarikadas Shastri (Varanasi: Bauddha's Bharati, 1968), Vol. II. Verse 2349 and commentary.

16. *Kamalashila's Commentary on Tattvasamgraha*, Vol. II. Verse 2350 and commentary: Ulukavat pratighatah adharmajah.

in the Mahayana discourse. Rendered inefficient by the anomalies, defying social obligations that Vedic texts command, philosophers like Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna are unable to see what common folks believe are there for all to see. Vedic texts place good in the social order. They command us to do things with the things that transcend consciousness, and they do so to enhance the material and moral good of all human beings. Because Mahayana philosophers do not listen to Veda, they not only have no sense of the common good, they also have lost touch with commonsense.¹⁷ Kumarila still has hope for people like Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna, they being his kin after all. If only they could once again listen to the Vedic text and all that it entails! If only they could believe once again that the Vedic text is infallible – and therefore good – by virtue of being transcendent to human consciousness!

III. Vasubandhu on Kumarila

Vasubandhu hears Kumarila very well. He hears him say that sense object contact entails correspondence of sense and sense data, words and objects, knowledge and things themselves. Contact displays relation between things that are autonomous and different. To deny this is odd, for it amounts to saying that one senses, knows and speaks about nothing. Why are some philosophers obsessed with nothingness?

Vasubandhu is amused by Kumarila's rhetoric, which he likes to clear right away. This he does by honoring two, not one, conventions of Sanskrit discourse. First, that sense object contact is the basis of lived experience, and, secondly, that philosophy must honor that very experience. In deference to common sense, he asks Kumarila to concede that sense object contact does entail correspondence between sense organs and the entity present to them, and that, by the same token, it cannot entail correspondence between sense organs and things that remain in themselves unsensed. Whenever there is contact, there is perception; in the absence of contact, knowledge is not known to occur. No contact, no correspondence. To deny this is odd, for that amounts to saying that one sees color or hears sound without coming in sensory contact with them. Vasubandhu returns the rhetoric: How can Kumarila talk about things-in-themselves

17. *Ibid.* Commentary on verse 2350.

when he has no sensory contact and thus no knowledge of them? For all we know, they might be fictional. Why this obsession with the autonomy of things, with the ontology of absolute difference? Experience shows that an entity comes to be, that other entities causatively precede and succeed it, and that it is this interdependence that constitutes the world. In defiance of commonsense, Kumarila polarizes the world in terms of thing and nothing, being and nonbeing. He denies the middle. The truth is that neither being nor nothing are autonomous, and denial of one does not necessarily mean affirmation of the other. There is just too much concern for certainty and order in Kumarila's discourse. The ontology of difference, the claim that a thing is in itself, is actually a cover for the ideology of social difference. It has to do with the belief that a Brahmin is a Brahmin, and nothing else; a Shudra is a Shudra and nothing else; and that to deny the difference is to violate the natural order of things.

Vasubandhu, and his tradition, sees no good in the canonization of the myth of social difference. If the Vedic text is self-evidently true and good for all, then why is it that not all human beings, Buddhists included, have faith in it? Vasubandhu, too, believes in causative relation. He believes that something is true only because it promotes the material and moral good of all human beings, and not because it is true in itself. This kind of truth the Vedas do not contain, and hence there is no universal faith in them. And even if they do contain universal good - and thus truth -, then why is it that Kumarila does not grant the universal right to hear, read and interpret them? Why this marginalization of the mass of humanity? Veda is not like the sun; it does not reveal all things to all human beings regardless of caste and gender. It is unreasonable to say that those who do not believe in Veda are as ignorant as owls. There is no point in double talk, in first denying people the universal right to use the Vedic lens and then accusing them of acting like owls. How can people see and know if universal sensory contact between people and the Vedic text is prohibited apriori? The truth is that Veda is manufactured to canonize the material privilege and false pride of the elite minority, the higher castes.¹⁸

Vasubandhu belongs to a tradition that extended sense object contact to scriptural experience, to Tathagata speaking for all and

18. *Ibid.* Verses 2351-2352, and commentary.

sundry and human beings hearing his words. It violates commonsense to say that language speaks itself, or that there are words without a speaker. There is no such thing as a text in itself, no words that float autonomously even if there are no human beings who speak or hear them. A word is so by virtue of being spoken and heard, and a text is so because it is written, read and interpreted.¹⁹ Why can't Kumarila recognize what most human beings do, that autonomy of things, and thus impersonal origin of words, may entail the false and the Illusionary? It is common knowledge that a forest fire, though of impersonal origin, can make a blue lotus appear red.²⁰ Commonsense also says that the moral worth and truth value of words have to do with qualitative contact between speaker and hearer, text and its readers.²¹ It is also common knowledge that people believe the words of a person who is known to be good. And Tathagata is such a person. If only Kumarila could find meaning in the words of Tathagata who spoke contextually and skillfully!

According to Vasubandhu's doctrine of *alayavijnana*, the perception of an object is the perception of an external entity which is an embodiment of the fruition of the seed in consciousness and the consciousness which so embodies itself because of its internal causative transformations. Both sense organs and objects sensed are expressions of the same seed. There is a one to one correspondence between senses and sense objects. There is correspondence between the act of definite seeding and definite manifestation of materiality. There is a definite desire to see which transforms itself into a definite sense organ and that entails a corresponding object. Both sense organ and object sensed are because of the arrival of consciousness through definite transformations of itself into sense organ and corresponding sense object. As is the desire to see so is the sense object in correspondence with the organ; as is the desire to hear so is the sound or word that we hear, etc. There is always correspondence between the definiteness of sense organ and object.²²

What is consciousness conscious of? We have seen that for Kumarila weight is on the side of the object. If you deny that

19. *Ibid.* Verses 2417-2420, and commentary.

20. *Ibid.* Verse 2403-2404, and commentary.

21. *Ibid.* Verse 2352, and commentary.

22. *Vimsatika*, Verse 9, and auto-commentary.

which consciousness is conscious of, you deny consciousness itself. If there is no object, there can be no consciousness. Vasubandhu would put the matter the other way around, no consciousness, no object. The knower and the known, the appropriating cogito and the appropriated object are devoid of subject/object polarity. This subject object duality is an imagined (*kalpana*) difference. Vasubandhu does not deny that this polarity exists, but the attributes projected there do not exist apart from consciousness. Both subject and object are constructions (*nirmita*). The controversy hinges on the function of two key words in the discourse: imagination, (*kalpana*) and cognition (*pramiti*). Cognition is an implied form of imagination, a trick of consciousness. Cognitions occur in the history of consciousness which is pure imagination. Vasubandhu is critiquing epistemology which for Kumarila and other realists is the means of enlightenment, however, for Vasubandhu epistemology does not give liberation but bondage. The knowing subject and the known object are instruments of thinking. Vasubandhu wants to transcend how we know and what we know because both are works of imagination. How we know and what we know are the anguish of suffering caused by *klesha*. Consciousness concretizes this imagined attribute and thing. There is duality of seer and seen, eyes and visual object. When the eyes see blue, what is the locus of the blueness? It does not belong to a dharma outside of consciousness, rather it belongs to consciousness which projects this kind of dharma and its attributes. Vasubandhu questions the ontological autonomy of the attributes and properties that consciousness associates with external objects. He does not deny that they are there; he denies that they are there apart from consciousness. How is the knower and the known caused to be? They are instantiations of the self-differentiating propensity of consciousness.

To ask what consciousness is conscious of is a misleading question because it assumes that consciousness is one thing and the object is another and that both are given there and form a relation. But how does consciousness come to know what it knows? How do two or more people become aware of the same thing? It is because of a common psycho-history of consciousness that we come to believe a certain thing is there. One such important belief is a hell in which beings suffer torments. Kumarila insists that definiteness depends on the certainty of objects that are there, but Vasubandhu demonstrates that definiteness exists in dreams and in hell. Consciousness

is powerful enough to see anything at any time or space. Objective public experience is possible because of mental streams (*samtanya*) like ghosts (*pretas*). We can speak of and account for collective experiences of objects even though they are not given at a specific time and place, like the experiences of ghosts.²³ It is like an apparition. "It is evident that all the ghosts experience a river of puss. Not only one ghost sees the puss river; all the ghosts see the river full of puss because of the sameness of karmic impressions. Ghost is used as the example here. In spite of the fact that there is no real puss river, all ghosts see the same river because of the similarity of the fruition of their karma".²⁴ Similarly, objectivity of object experience has to do with similarities of cognitions rather than similarity of objects; similarity of cognitions has to do with the recurring presence and persistence of impressions (*vasanas*), not objects.

Vasubandhu, no less than Kumarila, believes that philosophers should respect the vision for common sense, but without taking recourse to a transcendental stance. Vasubandhu also agrees with Kumarila that the world is sustained in the relation of contact between senses and the world. Regarding this sensory contact however, Vasubandhu offers a new understanding of its role and relation within the doctrine of Dependent Origination. First, contact is not a thing in itself, nor are the senses or the objects between which contact happens. They are not given. We see things not because we have eyes, rather it is because we see things that we have eyes. His is a functional model. Secondly, contact is a happening between particular sense organs and objects. It happens to consciousness. Consciousness is presupposed in sense organs.

Vasubandhu maintains respect for commonsense, wisdom and rationality, but he wants to find out how this lived experience comes to be. He takes an immanent, not transcendental stance. Contact, object, and senses are not transcendental to consciousness; they happen to and through consciousness. According to the doctrine of Dependent Origination, a thing comes to be and ceases to be and what ceases to be may come to be again. There is no ceiling. To say what is never cannot be is non-sense. Whereas Kumarila accuses

23. *Ibid.* Verse 3: "And non-restriction as to moment-series is like with pretas (ghosts) in the seeing of pus-rivers, etc. by all of them".

24. *Ibid.* Auto-commentary on verse 3c.

Vasubandhu of explaining objects away, Vasubandhu is interested in examining how objects come to be and what is the role of consciousness in bringing objects to being and then erasing them or not erasing them from its horizon. Consciousness is primary. Consciousness comes to acquire objects and then loses them in its own interests.

Kumarila has done epistemology for one purpose, namely, to make rational decisions about whether to take things or leave them. We engage in actions to acquire things we desire most. Once we know things, we have a basis on which to decide whether they are good or not. Against this Vasubandhu argues that if human consciousness does not desire things, there is no point in doing epistemology. It is because consciousness desires objects that it needs to know them. It is because consciousness does not like certain objects that it needs to reject them. There is a desire behind the cogito. The *vasana* is already present in the need to do *pramana*. The acquisitive consciousness is already presupposed in the need to do epistemology. Objects happen to consciousness. Consciousness seeks objects. *Prameya* is *visaya*. The knowable object is a desired object. The object is known because it is desired or not desired. Epistemology is done as a means to fulfill human interest. There is no detached or objective interest in doing epistemology.

Vasubandhu phenomenizes epistemology. He does so by offering a reinterpretation of the nature of contact. Vasubandhu's unique understanding of contact distinguishes him from everybody else. He aptly explains the notion of contact between sense organs and objects without postulating the externality of objects. How does this contact occur? It occurs as in dreams. The subtle but distinguishing point at which Vasubandhu parts company with his predecessors and contemporaries is the reality of contact and the reality of the object with which one comes into contact. The whole meditation tradition of Vasubandhu is rooted in the problem of contact. Contact is not an innocent thing. The sense organs do not passively come into contact with what is there. There is a discernible psycho-history of consciousness (*karma-klesh*) that accounts for why we perceive things as we do. Vasubandhu is interested in the causes and conditions through which consciousness comes to assume epistemic texture. He asserts that cognitions always happen in the

background of actions. *Samskaras* precede past actions, the need to know and knowledge itself. *Samskaras* determine the need for the very awareness of the object known, the knowledge through which to know the object, and the subject that knows it. His point is to show that epistemology is an act of the imagination. Vasubandhu's position is that speakability and knowability and the suffering they entail are properties of the knowing consciousness, not of objects. Whereas the realist, including Kumarila, regard consciousness as descriptive, for Vasubandhu it is constructive. Inference and the correspondence theory of knowledge on which it depends is all a construct of consciousness. Causality is also a construction of consciousness. Consciousness establishes its own dependence on things of which it is the creator (*svabija*). The autonomy of objects is rooted in the notion of contact. If contact is lost, then the whole world is lost. Vasubandhu believes he can keep the contact without losing the world.

There is evidence of sensory perception without objects. There is evidence of contact of sense with objects that are not really there. In the moment of contact there is a feeling of definiteness, vividness, non-erroneousness, indubitability and immediacy; yet there is no real object. Vasubandhu questions the very notion of contact. He does not deny contact; rather he questions the realist's understanding of what contact entails. He questions the givenness, presence, and immediacy of the contact. In contact there is the idea of sensory limit. What constitutes the sensory limit if the object is not present? It is the idea, not the alleged object, that accounts for the sensory limit. The moment I see this, the visual sensation and the object are gone. So what accounts for the sensory limit is the ideation of consciousness, not a sense of consciousness.

Regarding this sensory limit, if the so called object in sensory perception is not there, then what is present? Vasubandhu takes recourse to the notion of *pratibhasa*. The so called objects are counter present to the mind which is remembering without knowing that it is doing so. Memory is presupposed in perception. Vasubandhu accepts that contact occurs, but it is not contact of the object present. It is of our impression (*vasana*) of past experience that is brought into the present. He does not question the moment of contact; questions the presentness of the object because that which is

perceived is already past. It is the mind that recollects the past object. Even though it seems to be present, it is erroneously perceived to be there. Kumarila says that without experience there can be no memory. Vasubandhu says that without memory there can be no sense perception. For Vasubandhu life is a stage on which consciousness plays its magic. Consciousness has transformed itself into the world. The agent of salvation cannot be different from the agent of suffering. We should understand how consciousness works and use it wisely. The locus of salvation cannot be different from the locus of suffering. Salvation is within this world here and now. It is the emancipation of consciousness from its own constructions.

Among the weightier objections leveled against Vasubandhu is the problem of other minds. Kumarila detects a defect in Vasubandhu's position. If subjectivity of consciousness is so powerful that it can create the world then it is beyond control; it has become sovereign. It won't accept people as they are, but people will be reduced to my image of what they are. Vasubandhu's position is not solipsism. He recognizes an inter-subjectivity of mental streams and accounts for human interaction on the basis of karmic coincidence. Consciousness, driven by its own *vasanas*, transforms or projects itself into outside objects and the idea or awareness of objects is caused by such projections. This stance engenders a serious objection from realists like Kumarila: Experience shows that by engaging in good and bad activities in the company of real actually existing good friends and bad friends, we become good and bad respectively. If such persons are not there independently, then how can Vasubandhu account for this causal efficacy relation. By hearing good and evil words we have the idea of doing good or evil. How is even the hearing of the words of the Buddha possible if there are no words and no speaker of the words?²⁵

Vasubandhu offers a courageous response to this objection. "All that you (realists) have declared to be impossible, all this is possible because of the mutuality of the power of one mental stream over others, that is, the mutual affectability of all persons. This mutuality occurs in the contact of a given person's consciousness with another person's consciousness, not between a person and an

25. *Ibid.* Verse 18, and auto-commentary.

object".²⁶ Whereas Vasubandhu confined his discussion in the previous portion of the text to the relation between consciousness and objects, here he is addressing the relation between two persons. Regarding the ability of one person to influence another, the point is contact between a person who does good things and a person in whose presence the good things are done. What is this contact between? It is not between two people. The contact is the mutuality²⁷ between two minds. The contact here implies appropriate compresence and concurrence between two streams of consciousness. The mutual affectability has nothing to do with real objects. The contact has to do with the mutuality of the intention in a certain person to speak certain words either true or false and the desire of another person to hear words either true or false. The mutuality is the concurrence of the desire of a certain person who says and does certain things and the desire of another to hear them and do them. These are the things that account for mutuality which is the basis for moral life. What are the conditions of moral life? Mutuality has to do with certain mental forces in our mind that become good or bad in interaction with other good or bad persons who say or do good or bad things in our presence. Mind is replete with repressed impressions.

Notwithstanding Vasubandhu's explanation here, the objection continues that if there is no real body and no real words, then how can anyone be culpable of murder, for example?²⁸ All human moral and religious transactions are only possible because of the reality of real persons in compresence. So how can Vasubandhu establish a basis for moral life? To this objection Vasubandhu asserts that contact is conceived and constituted by consciousness only. The relation is consciousness only; the persons are consciousness only. So what is the meaning of death if there is no real body and what is the meaning of words if there are no real words? Vasubandhu's explanatory account suggests that death has nothing to do with activities like picking up and using a weapon, rather death and murder have to do with the desire to kill an object. And what is an object? This object is really an embodiment in space of our likings.

26. *Ibid.* Verse 17c., and 18a., and auto-commentary.

27. *Middha*: the mind (*citta*) enclosed in and replete with repressed impressions.

28. *Vimsatika*, verse 18 and its auto-commentary.

needs, aversions, etc. What motivates the butcher to pick up a weapon and kill a sheep is the desire to do so. This sheep is an externalization of the image (*vasana*) the butcher has of the object. If we really understood the other person in his otherness and lived with this otherness, we would not need to love or kill. The subject that picks up the weapon to kill is not an object. There are no real polar dualities. They are only differentiations of consciousness. The idea of sin or crime is possible only when it is associated with the idea of agency. Agency is no more than the self-consciousness that happens to consciousness. Consciousness bifurcates itself into subject and object and then the act of killing occurs. Killing only makes sense because of the notion of the subject that does it. Morality and culpability presuppose the idea of an agent which is the activity of consciousness itself. This agent does something, not to a thing, but to an object which is a symbol of hatred eventuating in killing or love resulting in beneficent behaviour toward the symbolic referent. The subject reduces other things to objects. An object is consequent upon the desire to love or hate. And this desire bonds the person who does to the person to whom it is done. Religion has to do with the relation of I and it and this relation of I and it is constituted by consciousness. There is no thou even religiously speaking. It is the subject to which moral culpability or praise is attributed. Without the subject there can be no good or bad deeds. Vasubandhu says this is possible because agency (personhood) is constituted by consciousness, not by things.

Vasubandhu, no less than Kumarila, speaks in the name of his scriptural tradition, namely the *Prajnaparamitta sutras*. He speaks in the name of Tathagata. The difference is that these sutras are the work of a human being, however enlightened he may be. The *Lotus Sutra* sets the stage on which Tathagata speaks words which are projections. He speaks in a disguised form concerning the doctrine of Dependent Origination. A thing is not a given. An object is equal to how it comes to be. It has a history. It depends on something else; it is not autonomous. It is not a thing in itself. A thing is not in itself over there about which we can say it is or is not. The premise of either/or logic is that a thing is given; it is the ontological status quo. Vasubandhu demonstrates the reasonability of questioning this assumption without doing violence to common sense. The faith in the Buddha has to do with the

desire to hear his words which in turn has to do with the kind of person I have constituted myself to be. Vasubandhu has heard the words of the Buddha, acknowledging primacy to the hearing, not the speaking. Having heard the words of Tathagata, Vasubandhu has decided to follow them in renunciation of the very world which Kumarila affirms and defends. He renounces the world, however, as a monk only to return to it with liberative words. The controversy whether there is something transcendental to consciousness or not is the destiny of Buddhism. It faces this challenge wherever it goes. This controversy defines Buddhism. It has always had to face the question of social efficacy if objects do not exist. Vasubandhu wants to overcome what consciousness has done through its own work. Consciousness is used with the intention to overcome the world of objects over there in time and space. Consciousness has created the world and has the ability to change the world by changing itself.

In the *Vimsatika* Vasubandhu answers charges concerning why the Buddha spoke false words. Buddhism has recognized a two-fold designation of the Buddha's teaching, *nitartha* and *neyartha*. *Neyartha* is referred to as provisional teaching. It literally signifies to be led or driven to something else. The term entails the acceptance of a given point of view only to lead the holder of that point of view to something else. There is an efficient alienation between the medium and the aim. Buddha knows that what he is using as a means is false, but believed to be true by his listeners. There is efficient reciprocity between the two intentionalities, speaker and listener. Buddha's words are only a means to an end. What does this means ultimately tell us? It tells us that there is no thing in itself either spiritual or material, no atman, no *vastu*. There are no things in themselves internal or external. They do not have attributes. There are no ontological properties of entities by themselves. They are all imagined (*vikalpa*). There is no knowing subject in itself. There is no doing subject in itself and no thing in itself with which to do things. This is why the Buddha spoke false words. He spoke of *rupa* provisionally, but he had something else in mind, namely, to lead people from this teaching to the idea that all is consciousness. The Buddha has a liberative mission to enter each and every house. He speaks the language of the house tactfully, strategically, but his mission is the same. Each house is a projection of consciousness

itself. The house is empty by itself but its inhabitant manufacture the house. They construct devices, boundaries, gates and schemes of being and non-being. Their house plays magic on them. The mission of the Buddha entering the house in which eternal entities are discussed is to tactfully and strategically lead the inhabitants of the house to the realization that there is emptiness of eternal self-subject-agent. He speaks the language of eternal entities in order to turn the inhabitants on to deconstruct the belief in defense of which the house speaks the language it does. Those who are dispositionally ready to hear the discourse on momentariness enter the path of nonessencelessness. That is the mission.