

Exploring the Ontological Conundrum:

Vasubandhu's Account of the Self and the Challenge of Comprehensive Functionality

In his work "Treatise on the Negation of the Person," Vasubandhu presents an argument that challenges the conventional understanding of the self, asserting that it can be conceptually and ontologically reduced to the aggregates. This stance is a direct response to the beliefs of Buddhist Personalists, who argue that while a self may be conceptually dependent on the aggregates, it cannot be ontologically reduced to them, as it points to something beyond the aggregates. At the heart of this debate lies the profound conviction that adherence to the self generates attachments, giving rise to desires that ultimately lead to suffering. The key objective is to seek a resolution to this suffering, as encapsulated in the idea that "negative affections arise from grasping-as-self" (Kapstein 350). In my perspective, the Buddhist Personalists offer a more accurate but somewhat incomplete understanding of the self. This is because Vasubandhu's argument, advocating for the conceptual and ontological reduction of the self to the aggregates, does not convincingly demonstrate how unconscious aggregates alone can account for the conscious unification of experiences.

Vasubandhu's exploration of the negation of the self is firmly rooted in epistemological reasoning. In his own words, he asserts, "because there are no such [perceptions or inferences] of the self, [it follows that] there is no self" (Kapstein 350). His argument hinges on a strict acceptance of direct perception and inference as the only valid sources of knowledge. Vasubandhu concludes that since a self cannot be directly perceived nor inferred to exist beyond the aggregates, it does not refer to anything beyond

those aggregates. Consequently, he posits that the self can be conceptually and ontologically reduced to the aggregates. Significantly, Vasubandhu distinguishes this perspective from the inference of sense faculties, highlighting the fundamental divergence in his approach to understanding the nature of the self.

Vasubandhu's perspective on the nature of perception and inference brings to light a crucial distinction. While sense faculties, though not directly perceived, can be inferred according to his framework, a self falls outside the scope of direct perception and inference. In his own words, in the process of inferring a sense faculty, "there is a manifest object [the object of perception] and a cause [the organ that perceives]"; this cause, in turn, is ascertained by another cause, which he identifies as the sense faculty (350). For instance, when one gazes at an object like an iPhone, the eye, functioning as a sense organ, perceives the iPhone—an object of perception for the eye itself. This intricate chain of perception underscores the role of the visual sense faculty, which causes the attention directed by the eye onto the iPhone. Vasubandhu's crucial point is that sense faculties can be logically inferred so that a self cannot be inferred, primarily because the self remains impervious to both direct perception and the inference process. Consequently, since the self cannot be directly perceived and resists logical inference, Vasubandhu concludes that no self can be found beyond the aggregates to which it is conceptually and ontologically reduced. This reduction occurs because, according to Vasubandhu, only two conceivable modes of self-existence exist, and the self conforms to neither of these modes.

Vasubandhu's perspective underscores a fundamental distinction: the self's existence is nominal, not substantive. He contends that for a self to possess substantive

existence, it must resist conceptual and ontological reduction to its constituent parts.

However, as Vasubandhu maintains, a self can be conceptually and ontologically reduced to the aggregates, rendering its substantive existence untenable. Instead, as he succinctly puts it, it can only claim a nominal existence: "the conceptual construction 'self' refers to the bundle-continuum alone" (350). To illustrate this point, consider my iPhone, which can be conceptually and ontologically reduced to its components for argument. Hence, the iPhone remains purely nominal; it cannot attain substantive existence because it succumbs to conceptual and ontological deconstruction into its constituent parts.

Applying this same line of reasoning to the self, Vasubandhu posits that due to its susceptibility to both conceptual and ontological reduction into the aggregates, it, too, exists only nominally and lacks substantive existence. Its existence is contingent upon the aggregates themselves, and it solely refers to these aggregates.

To bolster his argument, Vasubandhu draws upon the analogy of milk, aiming to demonstrate that a self cannot, in either a conceptual or ontological sense, extend beyond the confines of the aggregates. He advances his rationale by asserting that, since a self remains impervious to direct perception, it inherently lacks a physical form, rendering it incapable of being characterized as a "discrete entity" (351). Instead, Vasubandhu characterizes a self as akin to milk—a "collectivum" that exists as a conceptual construct (351). In Vasubandhu's view, were the self a discrete entity, it would stand apart from the bundles, necessitating an elucidation of its cause. However, he aligns with Buddhist Personalists who acknowledge that, at the very least, the self is conceptually intertwined with the bundles (351).

Furthermore, Vasubandhu contends that, much like milk, which can be dissected into its sensory attributes, such as color and odor, milk does not signify anything beyond these aggregates. This absence of reference beyond the aggregates permits milk to be conceptually and ontologically reduced to its constituent elements, signifying only the aggregates themselves. In Vasubandhu's view, this also holds for the self: just as one can objectively focus on the physical attributes of milk and break it down into its constituent aggregates, the self is similarly reducible to the aggregates. Even if the self is "causally founded upon" the aggregates, its reference remains confined solely to the aggregates, negating any reference beyond them. Consequently, Vasubandhu concludes that the self is ontologically reducible to the aggregates.

Buddhist Personalists present a counterargument using the analogy of fire and fuel, aiming to demonstrate that a self cannot be ontologically reduced to the aggregates. According to their perspective, fire serves as an apt metaphor. While conceptually constructed upon fuel, it possesses discrete and non-discrete qualities concerning its source. Should fire be exclusively discrete from fuel, fuel would lose its heat or heat-possessing attributes. Conversely, if a fire were entirely non-discrete from fuel, it would equate to the combustion process, rendering it indistinguishable (352). In parallel, the concept of self, according to Buddhist Personalists, exhibits analogous traits when constructed upon the aggregates. A self, they argue, possesses dual characteristics of being both discrete and non-discrete concerning the aggregates. If solely discrete, this would imply an enduring, unchanging self—a notion they reject.

Conversely, if it were purely non-discrete, it would imply the self's complete annihilation, a concept incompatible with their belief that the self does indeed signify something beyond the aggregates. In response, Vasubandhu counters that the transition from fuel to fire constitutes a seamless progression continuum. Whether fire emerges through conceptual construction or coexists with fuel, it remains only "temporally discrete" from its source (352). Similarly, Vasubandhu posits that a self, originating from the bundles, whether through conceptual construction or coexistence, is merely "temporally discrete from [the bundles] and impermanent" (352). This perspective emphasizes the transient and impermanent nature of the self, irrespective of its mode of emergence from the aggregates.

From my perspective, Buddhist Personalists present a more compelling, albeit still incomplete, account of the self. Their perspective allows for an ontology that elucidates how entities like my iPhone function in an ontological manner that transcends the mere sum of their parts. While it is possible to conceptually deconstruct my iPhone into its constituent elements, my iPhone illustrates something more profound—it signifies an entity beyond the mere aggregation of its components. None of these constituent elements within my iPhone can function in the same way that my iPhone as a whole can. To illustrate this point, consider the integrated functioning of my iPhone. It can accomplish tasks like making a phone call because its aggregated elements operate in harmony, collectively providing the capability for comprehensive functions. Conversely, no single element within my iPhone can make a call independently. Thus, despite the ability to

conceptually break down my iPhone into its parts, it ontologically represents something beyond the aggregates themselves: the capacity to execute complex functions seamlessly.

Vasubandhu might counter-argue that my iPhone's capacity to perform comprehensive functions, seemingly beyond the capabilities of its elements, is merely a sequence of mental events unfolding as a bundle continuum. He could contend that modern computer science elucidates how my iPhone's ability to function comprehensively can ultimately be reduced to the aggregated elements residing within it. Whether triggered by the interplay of these aggregated elements or coexisting alongside them, my iPhone's capabilities can be traced back to the elements themselves, much like the reduction of a self, a conceptual construct, to its constituent aggregates. In response, I would assert that Vasubandhu's perspective still falls short of providing a comprehensive explanation for the intricate functions of my iPhone. This functionality appears to align more closely with the seer-unifier concept advocated by the Nyayaikas rather than being solely executed by the aggregates themselves.

The crux lies in Vasubandhu's failure to provide a satisfactory account of the unification of human experience. Vatsayana's statement, echoing the perspective of proponents of non-self, asserts that distinct mental events have fixed objects, which can occur in various individuals but remain unconnected. Furthermore, according to this view, a separate mental event, even if centered on a fixed object within a single individual, should not be unified because it lacks a crucial component—an intrinsic unifier (379). However, Vatsayana offers a counterargument grounded in the very epistemological framework that Vasubandhu accepts—direct perception and inference. While he concurs

with Vasubandhu that the self cannot be directly perceived (378), he contends that the self can be inferred. Vatsayana asserts that the self is reflective in its quest for knowledge. The hallmark of the self that it desires to know reflects and comprehends. Vatsayana posits that this unified experience is distinctively associated with the self, as it serves as the indivisible agent responsible for both the desire to know and the acts of reflection. According to Vatsayana, this unique and cohesive experiential process cannot be attributed solely to the aggregates, even as Vasubandhu elaborates on his bundle-continuum theory.

Vasubandhu's ontological framework, or rather the absence thereof, falls short in elucidating how a discrete entity functions in a manner that is so all-encompassing that none of its constituent parts, to which it can theoretically be reduced, can independently replicate such comprehensive functionality. One might further contend, as Buddhist Personalists do, that the conscious unification of experience by the aggregates is indeed real, and it is the aggregates to which the mental events are connected that contribute to the sense of self. However, as Vasubandhu himself argues, experiences, whether they find their causal foundation in the aggregates or coexist with them, ultimately reduce to the aggregates alone. Such an explanation, according to Vasubandhu, falls short of the mark. Therefore, it is my turn to echo Vasubandhu's sentiment and express my perplexity: I "do not understand this blind prattle, whose meaning is indistinct!" (351).

Works Cited

Kapstein, Matthew. *Reason's Traces : Identity and Interpretation in Indian & Tibetan Buddhist Thought*. Wisdom Publications, 2001.