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Buddhism and Scepticism

Historical, Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives

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Scripture and Scepticism in Vasubandhu's Exegetical Method[*]

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In this chapter, I wish to explore philosophical responses to scepticism concerning Buddhist scriptural knowledge. My main focus will be on forms of scepticism that appear within scriptural exegesis, and I will limit the scope of the discussion to responses formulated by the Indian Buddhist thinker Vasubandhu. To this end, I will ask the following question: Is there a place, according to Vasubandhu, for scepticism in scriptural interpretation made by the religious tradition itself, and if so, what role does this scepticism play in the exegetical act? Accordingly, the particular form of scepticism on which I will aim to shed light is religious scepticism—in this context, any expression of doubt that challenges or disputes the credibility of scriptural knowledge claims.

This sense of scepticism is closely related to the approach taken by early modern thinkers such as René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza, who questioned the epistemological validity of religious scriptures in search of a firm criterion of knowledge. Descartes famously finds it logically unsatisfactory that "we must believe that there is a God, because we are so taught in the Holy Scriptures, and, on the other hand, that we must believe the Holy Scriptures because they come from God" (Descartes, 1641/1993, p. 34) and seeks a rational means of establishing God's existence, while Spinoza postulates that "the universal rule […] in interpreting Scripture is to accept nothing as an authoritative Scriptural statement which we do not perceive very clearly when we examine it in the light of its history" (Spinoza, 1670/2004, p. 101).

Vasubandhu also recognizes that philosophical difficulties of various kinds arise when one subjects Buddhist scriptures to critical interrogation

and that such difficulties can lead to doubt. He allows for scepticism of this kind, and at times even encourages it. However, given that he was writing in a milieu that revered the Buddha's words, he also seeks to preserve the authority of Buddhist scriptures. As a way of coping with this twofold demand, I will suggest, Vasubandhu's exegetical method converts religious scepticism into epistemological scepticism, a form of scepticism which does not deny that scriptures may convey truths about reality, but which doubts that we can accurately access these truths. In other words, Vasubandhu shifts the focus of doubt from the texts to the fallibility of human understanding.

In this framework, scepticism about scriptural knowledge claims can target two closely related but distinct objects: scriptural doctrines on the one hand, and the reader's understanding of them on the other. Scepticism of the former kind (religious scepticism) is depicted as misguided and as being rooted in cognitive or affective error. Scepticism of the latter type (epistemological scepticism) naturally has only an indirect bearing on the words of the scriptures, as it concerns the way in which they are interpreted and apprehended. In this way, Vasubandhu allows for scepticism about scriptural testimony while vindicating the scriptures from any intrinsic error.

This exegetical strategy aptly serves a tradition which valorizes its scriptures and at the same time purports to assess their credibility by submitting them to rational inquiry. It goes hand in hand with other, more familiar hermeneutical tools that Buddhist exegetics employed in order to resolve contradictions between different textual sources and to determine the intention of particular texts. What is important here is the distinction between explicit meaning (Skt. *nītārtha*) and implicit meaning (*neyārtha*), which rationalizes the hermeneutics of various Buddhist commentary traditions, including the Abhidharma, the Theravāda, the Madhyamaka, and the Yogācāra (Lamotte, 1949/1988, pp. 16–21; Thurman, 1978, pp. 25–34). The category of explicit meaning denotes propositions that are to be accepted as literally expressed, while the category of implicit meaning denotes propositions that require further interpretation. Other strategies, such as the four special intentions (*abhiprāya*) and the four hidden ornaments (*alaṃkāra*), are used for a similar purpose (Lopez, 1988, p. 7). The main assumption justifying these strategies is that in addressing himself to disciples of different spiritual capacities, the Buddha modified his teachings to suit their particular needs. Nevertheless, in spite of the contradictions that ensue from this pedagogical method and despite the interpretation they require, all of the Buddha's teachings are understood to provide a true description of reality. Vasubandhu's treatment of

scepticism regarding scriptural testimony should be understood in the light of these hermeneutical assumptions.

I will discuss the place of scepticism in scriptural exegesis from three perspectives. The first centres on methodological or meta-philosophical remarks that Vasubandhu made in some of his works. These remarks clarify the epistemological status of scriptures and the way in which one ought to approach them. I will then concentrate on the theory of exegesis and examine instances of scepticism in Vasubandhu's exegetical method in the *Vyākhyāyukti* (hereafter *VY*),[1] a work which lays out a set of principles for the adequate construction of commentarial treatises. Finally, I will turn to the ways in which these ideas are applied in Vasubandhu's commentary work. As scriptural interpretation takes place in various intellectual settings, I will first consider the pedagogical context, in which a teacher elucidates the meaning of scriptures in order (among other things) to resolve sceptical objections raised by an audience of disciples. Then, I will consider the context of philosophical debate, in which scriptures are adduced in support of the proponent's philosophical stance or in order to weaken that of an opponent. In this second context, I will show that the disagreements that ensue from Vasubandhu's transition to epistemological scepticism in polemical exegesis brings him up against the Pyrrhonian problematic, understood according to the dialectical interpretation (Lammenranta, 2008, 2012; Wieland, 2013). According to this interpretation, the problem that leads Pyrrhonian thinkers to adopt scepticism is their inability to resolve disagreements about the nature of reality without begging the question; that is, without making the partial judgement that their own doxastic appearances are true while those of others are not. It is this inability to escape our fundamental presuppositions, rather than the equal force of opposing opinions, that leads the sceptic to suspend judgement about them.

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[1] The translations of the *VY* below are based on the critical edition published in Lee (2001). References refer to the Derge edition of the Tibetan Canon (Zhu-chen Tshul-khrims-rin-chen, 1985, Vol. 136. #4069), followed by the page number in Lee's critical edition. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the contested issue of Vasubandhu's identity. The study will depart from the assumption that is mostly accepted in contemporary literature that the same author composed the *VY* and the other works examined below. On the question of authorship with respect to the *VY*, see Skilling (2000, pp. 297–299) and Verhagen (2005, p. 560 nn. 6 and 7).

Meta-Theory: Between Devotion and Doubt

Vasubandhu's reflections on the epistemological validity of scriptures are expressed in a number of meta-philosophical remarks. Some of these remarks exhibit sceptical and critical attitudes towards Buddhist scriptures, while others lean towards a devotional outlook, reaffirming the authority of scriptures and the knowledge they convey. One may wonder whether these different approaches can be reconciled. In other words, is Vasubandhu's position coherent, and if so, in what way precisely? According to my reading, devotion, doubt, and criticism blend harmoniously into a coherent hermeneutical view if devotion is seen as the appropriate attitude towards scriptures and doubt as the appropriate attitude towards human understanding of scriptures.

In a well-known passage of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (*AKBh*), [2] Vasubandhu laments the misunderstanding of Buddhist scriptures that has taken root among the dialecticians of his time. This misunderstanding, he adds, has come about because the Buddha and other realized beings are not present in the world anymore—a situation which means that readers with poor judgement misunderstand the true meaning of the Buddha's teachings. He sums up his presentation of Abhidharma thought in the following words:

The True Dharma of the Teacher is twofold, consisting of scriptures (āgama) *and attainment* (adhigama).

In that case, scriptures are the discourses (*sūtra*), moral code (*vinaya*), and metaphysics (*abhidharma*); attainment is the [factors] conducive to awakening (*bodhipakṣyā*)—this is the twofold True Dharma. […]

For the most part, the metaphysics I have described is established in the manner of the Vaibhāṣika school of Kashmir. That which is understood inappropriately here is my fault; the reliable means of knowledge (pramāṇa) *for the manner of the True Dharma are the Silent Ones [i.e., the buddhas].*

As a general rule, this metaphysics I have made known is established in the manner of the Vaibhāṣikas of Kashmir. In this respect, what I have misunderstood is my mistake. The buddhas and the sons of the buddhas, however, are the reliable means of knowledge for the manner of the True Dharma.

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[2] References to the *AKBh* in Sanskrit are to Pradhan (1975). References to the *AKBh* in Tibetan are to Zhu-chen Tshul-khrims-rin-chen (1985, Vols. 140 & 141, #4090). The verses are indicated in italics.

> *When the Teacher, the eye of the world, has closed his eyes, and beings who*
> *see with their eyes have mostly perished, these teachings are thrown into dis-*
> *order by poor, careless dialecticians, who have not had experience of reality.*[3]

This passage contains the principles which rationalize the hermeneutical strategy that Vasubandhu follows in dealing with doubts about scriptural testimony. Richard Hayes suggests that Vasubandhu reconciles two potentially incompatible views in this passage:

> On the one hand, [Vasubandhu] has denied that the scriptures *as we now un-*
> *derstand them* are fully authoritative; that is to say, we cannot place full confidence in the scriptural tradition anymore, because the scriptures require interpretation and hardly anyone still exists who is competent to provide the requisite interpretation. But, on the other hand, by placing the blame for the current nonauthority of scriptures on the imperfections of teachers like himself, Vasubandhu salvages the view that the Buddha himself was a source of knowledge. (Hayes, 1984, p. 654, emphasis in original)

The Buddha's words are therefore reliable, but human understanding may fail to penetrate their true meaning. Moreover, Vasubandhu admits—perhaps as a mere expression of modesty, perhaps out of a genuine awareness of his epistemological limitations—that he himself may be guilty of misreading the scriptures. While he denounces those who misunderstand the teachings, it is noteworthy that he does not question the teachings themselves or the epistemic authority of the scriptures. If there is something we should be sceptical about, it is our reception of the scriptures, not the texts themselves. Furthermore, the sort of scepticism expressed here is not a general claim about our inability to arrive at true knowledge. It encompasses only our capacity to

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[3] *AKBh* ad 8.39c–41, pp. 459–460: *saddharmo dvividhaḥ śāstur āgamādhigamātmakaḥ │ta-trāgamaḥ sūtravinayābhidharmā adhigamo bodhipakṣyā ity eṣa dvividhaḥ saddharmaḥ ‖[…] kāśmīravaibhāṣikanīti siddhaḥ prāyo mayā 'yaṃ kathito 'bhidharmaḥ │ yaddurgṛhītaṃ tad ihāsmadāgaḥ saddharmanītau munayaḥ pramāṇam ‖ 8.40 ‖ prāyeṇa hi kāśmīravaibhāṣikāṇāṃ nītyādisiddha eṣo 'smābhir abhidharma ākhyātaḥ │ yad atrāsmābhir durgṛhītaṃ so 'smākam aparādhaḥ │ saddharmanītau tu punar buddhā eva pramāṇaṃ buddhaputrāś ca │ nimīlite śāstari lokacakṣuṣi kṣayaṃ gate sākṣijane ca bhūyasā │ adṛṣṭatattvair niravagrahaiḥ kṛtam kutārkikaiḥ śāsanam etad ākulam ‖ 8.41 ‖. Khu 266a1–5: ston pa'i dam chos rnam gnyis te ‖ lung dang rtogs pa'i bdag nyid do ‖ de la lung ni mdo sde dang chos mngon pa dang 'dul ba'o ‖ rtogs pa ni byang chub kyi phyogs te │ de lta na dam pa'i chos ni rnam pa de gnyis yin la │ […] bdag gis mngon pa'i chos 'di phal cher ni ‖ kha che bye brag smra pa'i tsul grub bshad ‖ ngan par zin gang de 'dir bdag gis nyes ‖ dam chos tsul gyi tsad ma thub rnams yin ‖ bdag gis chos mngon pa 'di ni phal cher kha che bye brag tu smra ba dag gi tsul du grub par bshad pa yin no ‖ 'di la bdag gis nyes par zin pa gang yin pa de ni bdag gi nyes pa yin te │ dam pa'i chos kyi tsul dag gi tsang ma ni sangs rgyas dang │ sangs rgyas kyi sras rnams kho na yin no ‖ ston pa 'jig rten mig ni zum gyur cing ‖ mngon sum skye bo phal cher zad pa na ‖ de nyid ma mthong rang dgar gyur pa yi ‖ ngan rtogs rnams kyis bstan pa 'di dag dkrugs.*

clearly discern the meaning of scriptural knowledge, and moreover suggests that by following appropriate logical and cognitive procedures, we may be able to read them properly. The dialectical setting examined below indeed seems to suggest that Vasubandhu held such a reliabilist attitude towards scriptural exegesis.

In another meta-theoretical remark that considers doubts about Buddhist teachings, Vasubandhu clarifies the role of scepticism in a pedagogical setting. At the beginning of the fifth chapter of the *VY*, which concludes the work and retrospectively clarifies its purpose, he explains the reasons why objections should be raised and why scriptures ought to be scrutinized. One reason is primarily rhetorical: when a commentator expounds the scriptures and raises objections, the audience develops curiosity and becomes more attentive, expecting the replies that follow.[4] Beyond this rhetorical effect, objections to the doctrines transmitted in scriptures have a pedagogical and theological function. They lead to a greater understanding of the teachings, from which devotion arises. In Vasubandhu's words:

> If it is asked: What is the purpose of an objection if one has [raised] objections and scrutinized [the matter]? [It is] because the replies are easier to understand after an objection. If one has previously heard of the greatness of the sūtras, the listener will act respectfully towards what he hears and remembers. Therefore, first express the purpose [for the teachings].[5]

According to this passage, then, sceptical objections do not undermine or refute scriptural knowledge claims. What Vasubandhu suggests instead is that doubts and objections are only provisional. Eventually, they are resolved in harmony with the scriptures, instilling faith in the heart of the listener or reader. The intended goal of this form of scepticism is thus to create conviction and deeper understanding, which are assumed to be available to the teacher and disciples. Rather than clear-cut scepticism, this attitude can be defined as "devoted criticism" (Nance, 2012, pp. 120–121): criticism whose purpose is restoring faith through a rational inquiry into the scriptures. From

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[4] "Furthermore, the Dharma teacher should first set forth the sūtras and then [raise] objections and scrutinize [the matter] because [this] arouses a craving for the replies in the audience." *VY* 114a7, p. 250: *gzhan yang chos smra ba pos thog ma kho nar mdo sde bkod nas brgal zhing brtag par bya ste | 'khor lan rnams la sred pa bskyed pa'i phyir ro ‖*

[5] *VY* 114b1–2, p. 250: *brgal zhing brtag pa byas na yang brgal ba ci'i phyir smos she na | brgal ba'i mjug thogs su lan rnams bde bar khong du chud par bya ba'i phyir ro ‖ sngar | mdo sde'i che ba nyid thos na| |mnyan pa dang ni gzung ba la| |nyan pa po ni gus byed 'gyur| | de phyir thog mar dgos pa brjod|*

this point of view, the critical scrutiny of scriptural testimony is a means of acquiring a pure understanding of the Buddha's words in a devotional manner. Accordingly, the final book of the *VY* stresses the importance of devotedly listening (*gus par mnyan pa*) to the teachings.

There is another exposition in the *VY* which displays this approach, in which Vasubandhu enumerates five benefits that come about from devotedly listening to the Buddha's teachings. These are: (1) hearing the unheard, (2) purifying that which has already been heard, (3) dispelling doubts, (4) bringing about right view, (4) realizing by means of wisdom profound word and meaning.[6] Hence, two of the main consequences of listening to the teachings are that those teachings that have already been heard by the listener become purified and clarified and that doubts in his mind are dispelled.[7] All this suggests that for Vasubandhu, one of the main motivations for questioning scriptural testimony in the exegetical project is generating faith, enhancing the understanding of the teachings, and establishing their authoritativeness. As scriptures are principally authoritative, scepticism about scriptures in the pedagogical context is seen as being rooted in the audience's misapprehension (whether actual or rhetorically induced by the teacher), which teaching attempts to correct.

Finally, another meta-theoretical comment on the question of scepticism and scriptures appears in a polemical context. A central theme of the *VY* is the authenticity and authority of Mahāyāna scriptures (Cabezón, 1992, pp. 224–225). As was often the case with later strata of the Buddhist textual corpus composed after the formation of the early canon, proponents of the Mahāyāna scriptures had to protect their claims of authenticity from criticism

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[6] *VY* 116b4–5, p. 257: *ma thos pa thos par 'gyur ba dang | thos pa yongs su byang bar 'gyur ba dang | som nyi spong ba dang | lta ba drang por byed pa dang | shes rab kyis don dang | tshig zab mo rtogs par 'gyur ba'o ‖*

[7] "If it is asked how one comes to purify what one has heard, [then] hearing what is expressed here or in other texts and leads to Buddhahood, or that which has been defiled, is clarified and purified by listening. In this way, one has purified that which has been heard. If it is asked how uncertainty (*som nyi*) is dispelled, [then] certainty (*nges pa*) with respect to that with which doubt (*the tshom*) arises when thinking of it is achieved by listening to the Dharma." *VY* 117a2–4, p. 258: *ji ltar na thos pa yongs su byang bar 'gyur zhe na | sangs rgyas 'byung ba gzhan dag las sam | 'dir thos pa brjod dam | dri ma can du gyur pa gang yin pa de mnyan pas gsal bar byed cing dri ma med par byed do ‖ de ltar na thos pa yongs su byang bar 'gyur ro ‖ ji ltar na som nyi spong bar 'gyur zhe na | de sems pa na the tshom 'byung ba gang yin pa de | chos mnyan pas nges pa 'thob bo ‖*

from non-Mahāyānist sectarians (Davidson, 1990, pp. 305–312). Accordingly, in the *VY*, Vasubandhu seeks to rebut arguments which aim to undermine the Mahāyāna doctrines by casting doubt on the authenticity of their authoritative textual sources. The purpose of Vasubandhu's arguments, in other words, is to defend the status of Mahāyāna scriptures as the words of the Buddha against claims that they are apocryphal. One statement in particular indicates that this motivation lies behind Vasubandhu's exegetical endeavour. At the end of his discussion about objections, Vasubandhu concludes that "therefore, the claim that the Mahāyāna is the word of the Buddha is not contradictory. For that reason, the claim that the *vaipulya* [sūtras of the Mahāyāna] are the Mahāyāna is without contradiction."[8]

The charge that a given scripture is apocryphal is perhaps the most severe sceptical accusation, as it undermines that scripture's value altogether. In the *VY*, Vasubandhu addresses various objections that dispute the authenticity of the Mahāyāna scriptures based on the structure of the Buddhist canon, the doctrinal content of the Mahāyāna sūtras, and inter-canonical criteria (Cabezón, 1992, pp. 225). Scepticism in philosophical debates, however, employs other, less extreme measures. For example, philosophical rivals may question the accuracy or veracity of particular teachings or the way in which the scriptures are commonly understood. Sceptical objections in polemics pose a threat which must be warded off apologetically. The advocate of the scripture aims to defend its reliability by refuting arguments designed to undermine it, as Vasubandhu indeed does in the *VY* and elsewhere. The role of exegesis in these moderate cases is firstly to demonstrate that scriptural statements are authentic and accurate, or alternatively to show that they have been misinterpreted and ought to be read in another way. Additionally, its role is to clarify those scriptural statements in keeping with the philosophical thesis that the author is seeking to establish.

A distinction must be drawn between Buddhist and non-Buddhist scriptures. According to the *VY*, a Buddhist exegete comments on the words of the Buddha. Moreover, as non-Buddhist scriptures often lay out philosophical views that are dismissed by Buddhists, these scriptures are normally rejected from the outset. Therefore, the method of scriptural interpretation outlined above naturally does not pertain to works of non-Buddhist authors. With Buddhist scriptures, the case is different. Vasubandhu once more seeks to

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[8] *VY* 114a, p. 249: *de bas na theg pa chen po sangs rgyas kyi gsung yin no zhes bya ba de ni mi 'gal lo ǁ de'i phyir shin tu rgyas pa'i sde theg pa chen po yin no zhes bya ba 'gal ba med do ǁ*

accommodate a wide range of sources and to associate any sceptical objection to scriptures with misjudgement on the part of the sceptic. Misjudgements of this kind occur in different ways: one might follow non-literal utterances literally, or vice versa; fixate on the words rather than on their meaning; fail to acknowledge widely recognized sūtras; not recognize the interpretive context provided by multiple scriptural sources; or stumble into other hermeneutical fallacies (Cabezón, 1992, pp. 225–233; Gold, 2014, pp. 116–118).

Thus, Vasubandhu's meta-philosophical remarks indicate that scepticism concerning the credibility of scriptural testimony can be directed either at the scriptures themselves or at the ways in which they are understood by readers. Buddhist scriptures are essentially unerring. For this reason, questioning the doctrines they teach, exhibiting doubt, and raising critical objections all signify a state of misapprehension. Given that human understanding may be flawed, it is justified and even philosophically healthy to maintain a sceptical attitude towards scriptural knowledge claims as we understand them.

Theory: Doubts and Objections in the *Vyākhyāyukti*

What happens, however, when someone *does* directly call the content of scriptures into question? Vasubandhu addresses this issue in the *VY*. The commentarial project, as presented in this work, aims to elucidate different aspects of the primary scripture. Some of the methods used have little to do with the epistemological status of the scriptures. For example, the explanation of obscure phrases (*tshig don*; *padārtha*) seeks to clarify unfamiliar expressions. The purpose of the text (*dgos pa*; *prayojana*) provides an exposé of sorts of the work discussed. In themselves, these two methods neither cast doubt nor validate the truthfulness of scriptural testimony. Other aspects of the commentarial enterprise are more closely concerned with manifestations of scepticism. Vasubandhu does not seem to uphold a single concept of scepticism equivalent to those theorized in Western thought, but he does employ a few key terms which carry similar meanings. Two particularly relevant concepts that appear frequently in the *VY* are doubt (*the tshom*; *vicikitsā*), which is also referred to as uncertainty (*som nyi*; *saṃśaya*), and objection (*brgal ba*; *codya*), which is conceptually interchangeable with inquiry (*brtag pa*; *parīkṣā*). Another concept which bears on the topic is reasoning (*rigs pa*; *yukti* or *nyāya*).

In the *VY*, the two terms "doubt" and "uncertainty" appear side by side, although the former is used much more frequently. Vasubandhu does not define them or elaborate on the function of doubt. Nevertheless, it is evident from his use of the terms that doubt is not considered to be a positive attitude for the study of scriptures; it is rather an unwholesome state of mind to be abandoned. First, doubt arises from ignorance (*ma rig pa*; *avidyā*)[9] and is one of the properties of thorough obscuration (*kun tu rmongs pa*; *sammoha*).[10] According to one sūtra cited by Vasubandhu, it is also one of three states of mind, alongside non-knowledge (*mi shes pa*; *ajñāna*) and wrong views (*log par shes pa*; *mithyā-dṛṣṭi*), that are associated with having a childish nature, being deluded, and being deficient in wisdom.[11] Vasubandhu substantiates this statement, glossing the term "childish" as being associated with ignorance, doubt, and wrong views.[12] Likewise, not being able to cut off all doubt with respect to the Buddha is one of four faults that Vasubandhu enumerates.[13] Doubt is hence a mindset to be counteracted: one of the five benefits of listening to the Dharma is that uncertainty is dispelled, and one of the five qualities of listening to the True Dharma is that those who have doubt, or are

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[9] "Because doubt is brought about by ignorance." *VY* 78b4, p. 148: *the tshom ni ma rig pas rab tu phyi ba* [here I follow D: *rab tu phye ba*] *nyid kyi phyir ste* |

[10] "In this regard, because thorough obscuration is accompanied by ignorance, doubt, and wrong views." *VY* 31b1, p. 8: *de la kun tu rmongs pa rnams ni mi shes pa dang the tshom dang log par shes pa dang ldan pa'i phyir ro* ‖

[11] "From the *Sūtrakhaṇḍa*: 'Having a childish nature, having a deluded nature, having the nature of deficient wisdom.' As for that, it should be understood as possessing ignorance, doubt, and wrong views, in this order." *VY* 51a4–5, pp. 65–66: *byis pa'i rang bzhin can* | *rmongs pa'i rang bzhin can* | *shes rab 'chal pa'i rang bzhin can zhes bya ba ni mdo sde'i dum bu ste* | *de ni go rims bzhin du mi shes pa dang* | *the tshom dang* | *log pa'i shes pa dang ldan pa las rig par bya'o* ‖

[12] "With respect to that, 'childish' is indicated and the rest is explained: because of being connected with ignorance, doubt, and wrong views." *VY* 51a2, p. 65: *de la byis pa zhes bya ba ni bstan pa yin la* | *lhag ma bshad pa yin te* | *mi shes pa dang* | *the tshom dang* | *log pa'i shes pa dang ldan pa'i phyir ro* ‖

[13] "In brief, these four types of faults are taught: (1) with regard to the taught Dharma, the fault of mistaken meaning; (2) with respect to the practiced Dharma, the fault of not going to *nirvāṇa*; (3) with respect to listeners, the fault of having a scattered mind (*blo du ma*); (4) with respect to the Buddha, not being able to cut off all doubts." *VY* 44a3–5, p. 43: *mdor na skyon rnam pa 'di bzhi bstan pa yin te* | *bstan pa'i chos la don phyin ci log pa nyid kyi skyon dang* | *sgrub pa'i chos la mya ngan las 'das par mi 'gro ba nyid kyi skyon dang* | *nyan pa po rnams la blo du ma dang ldan pa nyid kyi skyon dang* | *ston pa la the tshom thams cad gcod mi nus pa'i skyon no* ‖

consumed by doubt (*the tshom zos pa*), arrive at certainty.[14] By contrast, the views of non-Buddhists, which disagree with the Buddha's teachings, cannot serve as an antidote either to ill view with respect to truths or to ignorance and doubt.[15]

Unlike the Pyrrhonians, who maintain that suspending judgement, or questioning truths by producing doubt, can lead to peace of mind, Vasubandhu believes that generating a doubtful mood is not the path that leads to a life of happiness and well-being. Quite the contrary: it is the removal of doubt which is linked to happiness. Vasubandhu mentions cutting off doubt as one of three kinds of bliss (*mchog tu dga' ba*; *prāmodya*),[16] and claims that forsaking doubt satisfies the heart.[17] As this treatment of doubt indicates, Vasubandhu does not consider this state of mind to be a useful approach in the assessment of scriptural knowledge claims, or indeed any kind of knowledge at all. Doubt cannot fulfil this function precisely because in cognitive terms, it stands in contrast to knowledge and reasoning. Doubt is here associated with uncertainty, the inability to arrive at a clear decision concerning truths—not in a positive, liberating sense, but rather in a sense of confusion that results in unhappiness. Scriptures which hand down the Buddha's teachings are therefore superior to the state of doubt, and of the two, they are the only source of reliable knowledge.

The case is different, however, with objections or inquiry. These are incorporated as an indispensable element of teaching the Dharma and are listed as one of the five aspects of scriptural commentary. In the *VY*, the term "objections" almost invariably appears adjacent to "replies" (*lan*), thus creating

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[14] "There are five good qualities of listening to the True Dharma: (1) what is not understood is made understood; (2) what is wrongly apprehended is abandoned; (3) gnawing doubts are settled; (4) certainty becomes the essence; and (5) the noble beings' eye of wisdom becomes perfectly clear." *VY* 122a3–4, pp. 274–275: *dam pa'i chos mnyan pa la yon tan lnga yod de | rnam par mi shes pa rnam par shes par byed pa dang | nyes par bzung ba 'dor ba dang | the tshom zos pa nges par byed pa dang | nges par byas pa snying por byed pa dang | 'phags pa'i shes rab kyi mig sbyong bar byed pa'o ∥*

[15] "Furthermore, the views of non-Buddhists are not antidotes to ill views with respect to truths, doubt, and ignorance." *VY* 57b3–4, 85: *gzhan yang phyi rol pa rnams kyi lta ba ni bden pa rnams la ngan par lta ba dang | the tshom dang | ma rig pa rnams kyi gnyen po ma yin pa dang |*

[16] "The three kinds of bliss [are] (1) the bliss of abandoning distraction of the mind; (2) the bliss of cutting off doubts; and (3) the bliss of thoroughly grasping the result." *VY* 67b7, p. 115: *mchog tu dga' ba rnam pa gsum ni sems g.yengs pa spong ba'i mchog tu dga' ba dang | the tshom gcod pa'i mchog tu dga' ba dang | 'bras bu yongs su 'dzin pa'i mchog tu dga' ba'o∥*

[17] "Satisfying the heart, because of cutting off doubts." *VY* 119a7, p. 265: *snying dga' bar byed pa ni the tshom gcod par byed pa'i phyir ro∥*

the compound "objections and replies" (*brgal lan* or *brgal pa dang lan*; *codyaparihāra*). This recurring conjunction implies, once again, that Vasubandhu considers that objections are intended to serve as a springboard for their own resolution. In the first appearance of the term in the *VY*, Vasubandhu explains that objections and replies are "non-contradiction with respect to reasoning (*rigs pa*; *nyāya* or *yukti*) and with respect to coherence (*snga phyi*, literally 'previous and next')."[18] Reasoning, as defined in the *VY*, consists of the three means of knowledge: direct perception (*mngon sum*; *pratyakṣa*), inference (*rjes su dpag pa*; *anumāna*), and authoritative speech (*yid ches pa'i gsung*; **āptavacana*).[19] On this conception, reasoning encompasses not only logical inference and unmediated experience, but also other Buddhist scriptures subsumed under authoritative speech. Any objection which points at a contradiction between the primary scripture in question and one of those three aspects of reasoning is considered as an objection from reasoning.[20] The term "coherence" is left undefined, though various instances of objections belonging to this class clarify its meaning. Later in the work, Vasubandhu elaborates on the subject and recognizes three types of objection. In addition to the first two, which are classified as objections concerned with meaning (*don la brgal ba*), he lists the category of objections concerning words (*sgra la brgal ba*).[21] Arguments in this category are directed at irregularities in the grammatical structure of the text.

For each of the three types of objections, Vasubandhu provides a set of examples.[22] One example of an objection concerned with words given here

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[18] *VY* 31a1, p. 7: *brgal ba dang lan brjod pa las ni rigs pa dang snga phyi mi 'gal ba'o* ‖

[19] On the three means of knowledge in the *VY*, see Verhagen (2008, pp. 244–247). On reasoning in Indian Buddhism more broadly, see Nance (2007).

[20] "In brief, here, 'reasoning' means the threefold means of knowledge—direct perception, inference, and authoritative speech. It should be known that an objection which contradicts any of these is an objection which contradicts reasoning." *VY* 87b3–4, p. 173: *mdor na rigs pa ni 'dir tshad ma rnam pa gsum po mngon sum dang rjes su dpag pa dang yid ches pa'i gsung ngo ‖ de dag las gang yang rung ba zhig dang 'gal bar brgal ba yang rigs pa dang 'gal par brgal ba yin par rig par bya'o* ‖

[21] "Objections are of two kinds: objections concerned with words and objections concerned with meaning." *VY* 85b4–5, p. 167: *brgal ba ni rnam pa gnyis te | sgra la brgal pa dang | don la brgal ba'o* ‖; "Objections concerned with meaning are also of two kinds: objections from contradiction with respect to coherence and objections from contradiction with respect to reason." *VY* 86a5, p. 169: *don la brgal ba yang rnam pa gnyis te | snga phyi 'gal bar brgal ba dang | rigs pa dang 'gal bar brgal ba'o* ‖

[22] For further discussion and examples of objections in the *VY* see Nance (2012, pp. 118–120) and Cabezón (1992, pp. 225–233).

is based on a paragraph in which the present tense is used in order to refer to an action in the past—"Where are you coming from?"—when in fact the person had already arrived. According to this objection, the present tense cannot be used for the past in such a way.[23] An example of an objection with respect to reasoning arises in response to a paragraph whose subject matter is the result of giving. This paragraph states the maxim according to which giving leads to great wealth, which rests on one principle of the theory of *karman*. A sceptic, however, raises the objection that this assertion contradicts reason, since a logical inference shows that even those who are miserly achieve wealth, while those who give may also suffer poverty.[24] Finally, one of Vasubandhu's examples of an objection concerning coherence deals with two passages from Buddhist scriptures. According to the first passage, human beings perform meritorious and non-meritorious actions, by virtue of which they are reborn. The second passage, however, suggests that while actions and their retribution exist, those agents who perform the actions do not exist. The sceptic interlocutor claims that such an intrinsic nature—of being existent and non-existent at the same time—is logically incoherent.[25]

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[23] "For example: 'Although Venerable Śāriputra dwelled [in the past], [the Buddha asked:] Śāriputra, where are you coming from now? [Śāriputra replied:] Your Honour, I'm now coming from the shade of a dense grove.'—In this application, using the past tense like the present is not reasonable." *VY* 85b5–6, pp. 167–168: *'di lta ste | tshe dang ldan pa śā ri'i bu bzhugs zin kyang | śā ri'i bu khyod da gzod dang gang nas 'ong 'ong | btsun pa da gzod thibs po'i tshal nas gdugs la mchis pa las mchi mchi'o zhes bya ba'i sbyor ba 'di ni da ltar byung ba bzhin du 'das pa'i dus la bya ba rigs pa ma yin no ||*

[24] "Likewise [another example], 'Fully cultivating and training in the root of merit which arises from giving—if it is done many times, one attains great wealth.'—This is contrary to inference: opulence occurs to the miserly ones and poverty occurs to the ones who give; because even the miserly may be rich and because even those who give may be poor." *VY* 87b–88a, pp. 174–175: *de bzhin du sbyin pa las byung ba'i bsod nams bya ba'i gzhi kun tu bsten cing bsgoms te lan mang du byas na longs spyod chen po nyid 'grub par 'gyur ro zhes bya ba yang rjes su dpag pa dang 'gal ba yin te | ser sna can la phyug pa dang | gtong ba la dbul po yang snang ste | ser sna can yang phyug po nyid yin pa'i phyir dang | gtong ba yang dbul po nyid yin pa'i phyir ro ||*

[25] "Likewise [another example], according to some, 'human beings here engage in both that which is meritorious and non-meritorious, they appropriate it, and furthermore, because of that, they carry [that *karman*] and are reborn.' However, according to some, 'both action exists and the fruition of action exists, but there is no agent.' Such an intrinsic nature is an objection with respect to coherence." *VY* 86b3–4, p. 170: *de bzhin du kha cig las mi rnams kyis ni 'di na bsod nams dang | sdig pa gang yin gnyis ka byed pa ste | de'i bdag gir bya ba yin zhing des | de yang khyer te 'gro bar byed pa yin zhes gsungs pa dang | kha cig las las kyang yod rnam par smin pa yang yod la byed pa po ni mi dmigs so zhes gsungs pa de lta bu'i rang bzhin ni snga phyi 'gal bar brgal ba yin no ||*

As indicated earlier, although objections dispute the authority of the scriptures and the validity of their knowledge claims, Vasubandhu's attitude towards them is consistently positive. Objections bring benefit in the rhetorical, pedagogical, and theological effects they have on those learning the scriptures. Their final purpose and result is the interiorization of the Buddha's teachings. What is the difference, then, between doubt and objections which renders the former unacceptable but the latter a desirable form of inquiry? The difference, it seems to me, lies in the relation of the two to reasoning. Doubt is portrayed as a prejudiced and rationally unjustifiable form of scepticism. Hence, it cannot be altered through reasoning (although it can be dispelled by listening to the Dharma). Objections, on the other hand, are grounded in logical claims and rational thinking and constitute a form of scepticism which can be rationally defended or responded to. Both types of sceptical attitude mentioned in the *VY* call attention to the cognitive vulnerability of human understanding, without claiming any fault on the part of scriptures. Doubt is a flaw in the listener's judgement, devoid of any capacity to assess knowledge claims. Objections serve to validate the knowledge claims presented by Buddhist scripture because they are ultimately overcome, demonstrating that this form of scepticism rests on a misunderstanding that must eventually be corrected. Therefore, according to the *VY*, scepticism is warranted when one assesses scriptural claims, but any doubt is eventually misguided, one way or another.

Pedagogical Applications: Sceptical Arguments in the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgavṛtti*

On the theoretical and meta-theoretical levels, then, scepticism directed at scriptures is deemed an expression of misunderstanding. This is also the case on the level of application. One work that amply illustrates how the strategy is used in the pedagogical context is Vasubandhu's *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgavṛtti* (*Commentary on "Distinguishing Between Phenomena and Their Essence*," hereafter *DhDhVV*). [26] The primary text on which

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[26] Originally composed in Sanskrit, the *DhDhVV* is extant in Tibetan only (except for several Sanskrit fragments). The translations below are based on the critical edition published in Nozawa (1955). References are to the Derge edition of the Tibetan Canon (Zhu-chen Tshulkhrims-rin-chen, 1985, Vol. 124, #4028), followed by page numbers in Nozawa's critical edition. The verses are indicated in italics.

Vasubandhu is commenting in this work is one of the works attributed to Maitreya.[27] Both the primary text and the commentary give voice to doctrines articulated in the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism. They delineate the theory of emptiness the way it has been developed by the Madhyamaka school, yet describe it as having a close affinity to practice and the transformation of consciousness, a hallmark of the Yogācāra school (Anacker, 1992). Maitreya makes a dichotomous distinction between *dharma*s (phenomena) and *dharmatā* (the true essence of phenomena). *Dharma*s are the manifold entities conceived by ordinary minds. They are accompanied by mental confusion, since they are appearances of what ultimately does not exist, and therefore do not accord with the ultimate nature of reality. By contrast, *dharmatā* signifies the true, unified reality which the myriad appearances conceal. This ultimately existing reality is undifferentiated, without distinctions between perceiving subjects and perceived objects, devoid of entities to be designated and devoid of designations.

The discrepancy between that which appears but does not exist and that which exists but does not appear is the source of the illusion which leads to mental afflictions and suffering. Accordingly, the soteriological goal of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice, as explained in the *DhDhV*, is liberation from this illusion, achieved by developing non-conceptual wisdom and by transforming the "basis" (*āśraya*); namely, the storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*).[28] In his commentary, Vasubandhu clarifies these principles, while considering various objections directed at Maitreya's work. As in the *VY*, Vasubandhu utilizes these objections to clarify Maitreya's teachings further and to advance his exegesis.

In the *DhDhVV*, Vasubandhu consistently rebuts sceptical criticism of Maitreya's work. The distribution of roles usually follows the one described in the *VY*: a hypothetical listener raises various objections to the doctrines, and Vasubandhu assumes the role of the commentator and resolves them. Thus, it is never the case that the listener's misgivings motivate a rejection

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[27] See Dharmachakra Translation Committee (2013, pp. x–xi) for a hagiography of Maitreya. Modern scholars are divided on Maitreya's identity. Some see him as a historical figure, an advocate of the Yogācāra school of Buddhism and one of its founders. Others suggest that Maitreya is a pseudonym for the important Yogācāra scholar Asaṅga. On the authorship of the texts ascribed to Maitreya, including the *DDV*, see Mathes (1996, pp. 11–17).

[28] For an elaborate explanation of the doctrines presented in Maitreya's work and Vasubandhu's commentary, see Brunnhölzl (2012, pp. 13–153), Mathes (1996, pp. 23–28), Robertson (2008, pp. 482–491), and Tucci (1930, pp. 18–35).

of the primary text as unreliable or mistaken. In its critical scrutiny, the *DhDhVV* employs some of the key ideas conceptualized in the *VY*, such as objections, reasoning, and especially contradiction with respect to reasoning. The philosophical discussion, however, does not involve doubt and uncertainty, objections to words, or contradiction with respect to coherence. Many of the critical questions directed at Maitreya's doctrine concern the nature of the two categories of *dharma* and *dharmatā*. The listener interrogates their extension, their relation to each other, their ontological status, and so on.

One objection Vasubandhu addresses over the course of this exchange concerns the defining characteristics of *dharma*s. The listener poses the following question: would it not be more reasonable to maintain that *dharma*s lack one of their two properties—either their non-existence or their appearance?[29] Vasubandhu examines the two possibilities and presents an argument that dismisses them one at a time, with the underlying premise that both properties are required in order for the misperception of reality to be possible:

> [Maitreya] says: If one of the two, non-existence and appearance, did not exist, then confusion and non-confusion, and affliction and purification, would not be feasible (*mi 'thad*).

> If non-existence existed, but not appearance, then there would not be confusion [caused] by that non-existence, because there [can] be no confusion with respect to non-existence being non-existent. If confusion did not exist, then non-confusion would also not exist, because non-confusion has [confusion] as its antecedent. Therefore, affliction would not exist, because that has confusion as its cause. If that did not exist, purification would also not exist, because purification has affliction as its antecedent. Therefore, if that [purification] did not exist, since liberation would be effortless, that would contradict direct perception (*mngon sum*).

> On the other hand, if appearance existed, but not non-existence, in that way too, since non-existence would not exist, there would not be confusion, since if appearance were established according to its nature, confusion [would] not [exist]. If confusion did not exist, the rest would also not exist, in the same way as [explained] above. Therefore, since human action would be meaningless, this would contradict reasoning (*rigs pa*).[30]

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[29] "It is asked: again, why is it unacceptable that [*dharma*s] lack one of the two, non-existence and appearance?" *DhDhVV* 29a4, p. 23: *yang ci'i don gyis med pa dang| snang ba dag las gang rung zhig med par mi 'dod ce na |*

[30] *DhDhVV* 29a4–29b1, pp. 23–24: *gsungs pa| med pa dang snang ba dag las gang rung zhig med na ni 'khrul pa dang| ma 'khrul pa dang| kun nas nyon mongs pa dang rnam par byang ba mi 'thad do| gal te med pa kho nar gyur te snang bar ma gyur na ni de med pas 'khrul par mi 'gyur te| med pa ni med pa nyid du ma 'khrul pa'i phyir ro ‖ 'khrul pa med na ni ma 'khrul pa yang med par 'gyur te | ma 'khrul pa ni de sngon du 'gro ba can yin pa'i phyir ro ‖ des na kun*

This passage from the *DhDhVV* presents two arguments from contradiction with reasoning (direct perception being subsumed under reasoning) and employs them in order to resolve the objection and validate Maitreya's doctrine. Stylistically, the *DhDhVV* embodies Vasubandhu's sceptical strategy by interweaving many of the commentarial responses to the objections with the primary text (a stylistic device used in other Buddhist commentaries as well). In other words, replies to the doubts directed at the primary text rely on claims from the primary text itself. This has a rhetorical effect: the primary text is portrayed as if it had anticipated the sceptical criticism to which the commentary responds. Furthermore, this argumentative style has a philosophical significance. Since the scripture "anticipates" the criticism and the commentarial response, it is accorded logical precedence over the commentary and the objections.

An objection addressed in this way concerns the reduction of all reality into the two categories of *dharma* and *dharmatā*. Before he clarifies the defining characteristics of these categories, Maitreya proclaims that the two ought to be distinguished according to their defining characteristics. The hypothetical listener in the commentary then critically interrogates the philosophical distinction:

> [As for the meaning of the quote] "to distinguish these two due to their defining characteristics"—first, is it that only phenomena and the true nature are distinguished, but another [category] is not? Or else is it that [everything] amounts to nothing more than these two?[31]

In other words, the question is whether there are other ontological categories whose recognition is unnecessary for liberation or whether the two categories completely encompass everything that exists. Responding to this question, Vasubandhu "invokes" Maitreya (emphasized), who provides the core of the reply:

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nas nyon mongs pa yang med par 'gyur ba yin te| de ni 'khrul pa'i rgyu can yin pa'i phyir ro| |de med na rnam par byang bar yang mi 'gyur te| rnam par byang ba ni kun nas nyon mongs pa sngon du 'gro ba can yin pa'i phyir ro ‖ de'i phyir de med na 'bad pa med par grol bar 'gyur bas na mngon sum dang 'gal lo ‖ 'on te snang ba kho nar 'gyur gyi med par ma gyur na | de lta na yang med pa med pas 'khrul par mi 'gyur te | snang ba de'i bdag nyid du yongs su grub na ma 'khrul pa'i phyir ro ‖ 'khrul pa med na snga ma bzhin lhag mar yang mi 'gyur ro ‖ de'i phyir skyes bu'i byed pa don med par 'gyur bas rigs pa dang 'gal lo ‖

[31] *DhDhVV* 27b5–6, p. 20: *smras pa | de dag mtshan nyid sgo nas ni rnam par dbye ‖ zhes bya ba ci re zhig chos dang chos nyid de dag nyid rnam par dbye'i gzhan ni ma yin nam | 'on te 'di dag tsam du zad pa yin zhe na |*

To answer, it is not the case that the distinction between the two is made after setting them aside from many [categories].

- How then?

- That which the Buddha presented—the aggregates (*phung po*; *skandha*), the elements (*khams*; *dhātu*), the sense spheres (*skye mched*; *āyatana*), and so on—in short, *all this is two*.

- Why [is it so]?

- *Because [the categories of] dharma and dharmatā comprise [everything].*[32]

Vasubandhu then clarifies: "If the aggregates, the elements, the sense fields, and so on are abridged, they become two kinds; that is, phenomena and the true nature."[33]

A similar passage employs this device and begins with Maitreya's characterization of phenomena and their true nature. *Dharma*s, Maitreya says, appear but do not exist, while *dharmatā* exists but does not appear. According to the primary scripture, this is the source of the confusion, delusion, and false imagination (*yang dag pa ma yin pa'i kun tu rtog pa*; *abhūtaparikalpa*) afflicting sentient beings. Regarding this claim, the listener inquires how something which does not exist can nevertheless appear.[34] Vasubandhu explains in response:

[Maitreya] says that *[it appears] in the way that illusory elephants and so on appear*. For instance, just as an elephant produced by a magician and so on, or the spell for restraining magical weapons and so on, do not exist as they appear, although there is an appearance, in the same way, false imagination, too, appears but does not exist.[35]

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[32] *DhDhVV* 27b6–7, p. 20: *brjod pa mang po rnams las bkol nas gnyis su rnam par dbye ba byed pa ni ma yin no ‖ 'o na ci zhe na| bcom ldan 'das kyis phung po dang | khams dang | skye mched la sogs pa rnam par bzhag pa gang yin pa de mdor bsdus pas | 'di thams cad ni gnyis te | ci'i phyir zhe na | chos dang chos nyid kyis bsdus pa'i phyir ro ‖*

[33] *DhDhVV* 27b7–28a1, p. 20: *phung po dang | khams dang skye mched la sogs pa de ni | bsdu na rnam pa gnyis su 'gyur te | 'di lta ste | chos dang chos nyid do ‖*

[34] *DhDhVV* 29a1, p. 23: *med pa snang ba yang ji lta bu zhe na |*

[35] *DhDhVV* 29a1–3, p. 23: *gsungs pa | sgyu ma'i glang po che la sogs pa snang ba bzhin no ‖ dper na sgyu mar byas pa'i glang po che la sogs pa dang| nor dang 'bru la sogs pa ni ji ltar snang ba de ltar med la| snang ba yang yin pa la de bzhin du yang dag pa ma yin pa'i kun tu rtog pa yang med bzhin du snang ba yin no| |gzhan yang yod pa yang mi snang ba'i phyir ro| |'khrul pa zhes rjes su 'jug go zhes bya ba ni ba dag med pa rnam pa gnyis yod pa mi snang ba'i phyir yang 'khrul pa yin no| |*

In other words, the appearance of phenomena which do not actually exist is no different from other mundane illusions, which appear to us even though they do not really exist.

Finally, another objection centres on the ontological relation between the two categories. Vasubandhu raises the hypothetical question of whether *dharma* and *dharmatā* are the same or different from each other[36] and responds, once again, by relying on Maitreya's original claims:

> [Maitreya] says: These two are neither the same nor different, because existence and non-existence [are with] difference and without difference.[37]

Vasubandhu then elaborates on the reply that he extracted from the primary scripture with an argument from contradiction with reasoning:

> It is unacceptable (*mi 'dod*) that the two mentioned above, *dharma*s and *dharmatā*, are one and [it is unacceptable that they are] different.
>
> - Why is that?
> - Because existence and non-existence are distinct and not distinct. First, it is unreasonable (*thad pa ma yin*) that *dharma*s and *dharmatā* are one.
> - Why [is it so]?
> - Because existence and non-existence are distinct. Since *dharmatā* exists and *dharma*s do not exist, how can [things] which are distinct in existence and non-existence be one? They are also not different.
> - Why [is it so]?
> - Because existence and non-existence are not distinct.
> - How are they not distinct?
> - Because *dharmatā* is thoroughly distinguished by the mere non-existence of *dharma*s, due to the non-distinction [between the two] in the perceived object [that they constitute]. It is demonstrated that *dharma*s and *dharmatā* are neither the same nor different.[38]

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[36] "One may wonder: as for this, assuming that it [the characterization of phenomena and the true nature] is so, is it asserted that [the ontological relation between] phenomena and the true nature is a case of being one, or a case of being different?" *DhDhVV* 29b2, p. 24: *de ni de lta yin na ci chos dang chos nyid dag gcig nyid du khas blang bar byas pa'am | 'on te tha dad pa nyid du snyam na |*

[37] *DhDhVV* 29b2–3, p. 24: *gsungs pa | **gnyis po dag ni gcig nyid ma yin zhing so so nyid ma yin te | yod pa dang med pa dag khyad par dang khyad par med pa'i phyir ro ***||

[38] *DhDhVV* 29b3–6, pp. 24–25: *gnyis po dag ces bya ba chos dang chos nyid dag ni gcig pa nyid dang tha dad pa nyid du mi 'dod do || de ci'i phyir zhe na | yod pa dang med pa dag khyad par yod pa dang khyad par med pa'i phyir ro || re zhig chos dang chos nyid gcig pa nyid du ni 'thad pa ma yin te | de ci'i phyir zhe na | yod pa dang med pa dag khyad par yod pa'i phyir ro || chos*

The claim is that it does not stand to reason that *dharma*s and *dharmatā* are the same, since they differ in their ontological status (the latter exists while the former do not); however, they are also not different, since the two constitute different facets of one object of perception (the existence of *dharmatā* is founded on the non-existence of *dharma*s). To put it another way, their epistemological extension is identical, and in this regard, they are mutually dependent. As these examples show, for Vasubandhu, objections directed at scriptural testimony in the pedagogical context involve some misunderstanding. When such objections are vocalized, they are immediately addressed and a deeper understanding of the scriptures and doctrines evolves. Hence, when the credibility of scriptures is at stake, it is human understanding that ought to be questioned.

Argumentative Applications: Contested Scriptures in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*

Whereas the pedagogical setting is generally tolerant towards expressions of doubt about scriptural testimony, from the outset, the polemical setting focuses on doubts directed at scriptural understanding. Such is the case in the *AKBh*, one of Vasubandhu's major polemical works. In this text, the exegetical component permeates the discussion and manifests itself on various levels. First, the prose portion, which constitutes the majority of the work, comprises an overarching commentary (*bhāṣya*; *bshad pa*) on the verse section. Second, within the prose commentary, Vasubandhu engages in a hermeneutical analysis of numerous sūtra fragments. Often, it is expressions of doubt towards the interpretation of scriptural testimony that trigger exegesis. Given the breadth and wide-ranging nature of the *AKBh*, I will only concentrate here on several representative sūtra fragments that give rise to disagreements or philosophical objections and show how Vasubandhu deals with them. Some fragments stir exegetical polemics. Many others, however, are adduced by Vasubandhu or his philosophical opponents without being called into

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nyid ni yod pa yin la chos ni med pa yin pas yod pa dang med pa khyad par can dag ji ltar gcig nyid du 'gyur | tha dad pa nyid kyang ma yin no ‖ ci'i phyir zhe na | yod pa dang med pa dag khyad par med pa'i phyir ro ‖ ji ltar khyad par med ce na | chos nyid ni chos med pa tsam gyis rab tu phye ba yin pa'i phyir te | gzung ba la sogs pa'i khyad par med pa'i phyir ro ‖ chos dang chos nyid dag gcig ma yin pa dang | so so ma yin pa nyid bshad zin to ‖

question. Additionally, at least in one place, the authority of a sūtra is disputed altogether, with the effect that the debate reaches an impasse. In this case, and contrary to his approach in the *VY*, Vausbandhu does not respond apologetically, but terminates the debate with a hopeless shrug and a sceptical remark reminiscent of the one discussed above:

> Now, if they do not recite these sūtras, what can we do in this case? The Buddha has gone to *parinirvāṇa*, the teachings are without a leader, they are being shattered into many parts, and are even separated from word and meaning at will. However, for those who do [accept] this scripture [as] a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*; *tshad ma*), the scripture also establishes [the teaching of] the intermediate state.[39]

This response, just like the meta-philosophical comment above concerning the widespread misinterpretation of scriptures, can be seen as an acknowledgement of our inability to fully resolve exegetical disagreements when absolute certainty about the meaning of scriptures is precluded. In this, Vasubandhu exhibits an intuition similar to that of the classical sceptics. For the latter thinkers, particularly adherents of Pyrrhonism, disagreements served as an important sceptical weapon, and—as some interpreters of Pyrrhonism argue—constituted the core justification for suspending belief (Fogelin, 1994; Lammenranta, 2008, 2012; Machuca, 2011, 2015). In the five modes of Agrippa documented by Sextus Empiricus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, disagreement is one form of argumentation leading to the suspension of belief, alongside relativity, infinite regress, circularity, and arbitrary hypothesis. This set of sceptical devices challenges epistemic justification to this day.

According to the dialectical interpretation of the Pyrrhonian problem, the suspension of judgement is based on our inability to resolve disagreements among different doxastic appearances without begging the question at issue; in other words, without partially judging that our own doxastic appearances are true while those of others are not, thereby assuming what we are supposed

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[39] *AKBh* ad 3.12, pp. 122–123: *athaitāny api sūtrāṇi tair nāmnāyante | kim idānīṃ kurmo yac chāstā ca parinirvṛtaḥ śāsanaṃ cedam anāyakaṃ bahudhā bhinnaṃ bhidyate cādyāpi yathecchaṃ granthataś cārthataś ca | yeṣāṃ tu tāvad ayam āgamaḥ pramāṇaṃ teṣām āgamato 'pi siddho 'ntarābhavaḥ.* Ku 118a5–6: *'on te de dag ni mdo de dag kyang mi 'don to zhe na| ston pa gang yin pa ni yongs su mya ngan las 'das| bstan pa 'di'i 'dren pa ni med| rnam pa mang po ni tha dad kyi steng du da dung yang tshig dang don la dga' dgur byed na go |da ci zhig byar yod de re zhig gang dag la lung 'di tshad ma yin pa de dag la ni lung las kyang srid pa bar ma grub bo||*

to prove (Lammenranta, 2008, p. 16). When we take a stance in disagreements, it is not the case that we consider all competing views to be equally persuasive. Rather, each side in the disagreement takes the other party's argument to be unsound and finds one position more compelling than the other. The five modes of Agrippa are designed to show truth-seekers that justifying this belief in a satisfactory way without begging the question (i.e., on impartial grounds) is a logically impossible task. Someone who attempts to do so will eventually run into one of three difficulties: infinite regress, in which her belief is justified by a further belief that needs to be justified in turn; circularity, in which her belief is supported by another belief which is justified by the first one; or arbitrary hypothesis, in which her belief rests on a belief that is arbitrarily postulated, without being further justified.

In the exegetical framework of the *AKBh*, then, non-Buddhist scriptures are cast aside, sweeping disagreements about the authority of Buddhist scriptures are tolerated, and the meaning of certain Buddhist scriptures is left undisputed. Therefore, debates that necessitate elaboration involve those Buddhist scriptures whose canonicity is granted by the disputing sides, but whose meaning is understood in contrary ways. These debates instantiate the Pyrrhonian problematic as understood according to the dialectical reading, and in what follows, I wish to explore Vasubandhu's treatment of this issue.

Objections against the interpretation of sūtra passages are raised by Vasubandhu and his opponents alike. Thus, for example, sūtras are critically scrutinized in a debate between Vasubandhu and a follower of the Pudgala-vāda school on the question of whether the Buddha taught the existence of persons.[40] Vasubandhu seeks to demonstrate that persons do not ultimately exist, but are merely conventional designations for ever-changing streams of aggregates. In support of this position, he cites a stanza which, to his mind, establishes that the name "Buddha" stands for a stream of aggregates (*yā hy asau buddhākhyā saṃtatis*; *sangs rgyas zhes bya ba'i rgyud gang yin pa*). The Pudgalavādins object to this reading of the quoted passage, questioning Vasubandhu's understanding of it (*katham idaṃ gamyate*; *'di ji ltar khong du chud ce na*). Immediately thereafter, they introduce a sūtra fragment of their own, which they believe corroborates their view that a person is an entity that is distinct from the aggregates. In this passage, the Buddha is said to explain that a person is the bearer (*bhārahāra*; *khur khyer ba*) of the burden (*bhāra*;

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khur); namely, aggregates. Vasubandhu disputes their understanding, suggesting that the Buddha's use of the term "person" in that particular sense does not contradict his own theory of persons. Vasubandhu and his interlocutors, then, question each other's interpretation of scriptures. These expressions of doubt—including Vasubandhu's readings, when rebutted by his opponents—target not the scriptures and the truths they convey, but the opponent's understanding of them. What follows from this scholastic choice, it seems, is that errors, when they occur, are the lot of human (mis)understanding and not that of scriptures.

The polemical context invites the exegete himself to question scriptures presented by his interlocutor. In these cases, it is noteworthy that from the outset, Vasubandhu's scepticism is directed at the interlocutor's understanding of the scripture, with the tacit assumption that scriptures transmit true knowledge. In several places, Vasubandhu specifically calls attention to the cognitive biases involved in his philosophical opponents' misreading of scriptures. For example, they fail to understand the meaning of the Buddha's teaching, being fixated on the literal meaning of the words. This is the case in a discussion about the four characteristics of conditioned *dharma*s (arising, duration, passing away, and impermanence); Vasubandhu's Sarvāstivāda interlocutor holds that each of the characteristics is a *dharma* in itself. To demonstrate that this position was proclaimed by the Buddha, the Sarvāstivādin cites a sūtra which states that the characteristics can be discerned.[41] Vasubandhu dismisses this evidence as a misunderstanding rooted in over-literal reading.[42]

Similarly, in the course of a debate about the nature of moral downfall, the Sarvāstivādin argues that monks who have committed one downfall do not lose their moral restraint altogether. Vasubandhu disagrees with this and

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[41] "In this case, it is said in the sūtra: 'The arising of the conditioned factor is known, the passing away [is known] too, abiding and transformation [are known] too.'" *AKBh* ad 2.46, p. 76: *yat tarhi sūtra uktaṃ "saṃskṛtasyotpādo 'pi prajñāyate vyayo 'pi sthityanyathātvam apī"ti*. Ku 81b1: *'on gang mdo sde las| 'dus byas skye bar yang mngon no| |'jig par yang mngon no| |gnas pa gzhan du 'gyur ba nyid du yang mngon no zhes gsungs so zhe na|*

[42] "The understanding of the words is dear to the Gods, but not the understanding of the meaning. The Blessed One, however, said that the object of confidence [ought to be] the meaning [and not the words]." *AKBh* ad 2.46, p. 76: *granthajño devānāṃ priyo na tv arthajñaḥ | arthaś ca pratiśaraṇam uktaṃ bhagavatā. tshig śes pa ni lha rnams dga' ba yin gyi don śes pa ni ma yin no || bcom ldan 'das kyis ni don la brten par gsuṅs so. tshig śes pa ni lha rnams dga' ba yin gyi don shes pa ni ma yin no| |bcom ldan 'das kyis ni don la brten par gsungs so| |*

references a sūtra passage which testifies to the contrary view; namely, that
a monk who commits a downfall ceases to be a monastic.[43] The Sarvāstivādin
objects to the ascribed meaning and interprets the passage to fit with his po-
sition. At this point, Vasubandhu criticizes his interlocutor for committing
another hermeneutical fault: reinterpreting an explicit statement which ought
to be understood literally.[44] Here, the Sarvāstivādin reads the Buddha's
teaching as implicit and elucidates it on a parallel, allegorical level, thereby
misconstruing its original meaning.

However, the *AKBh* recognizes an even more fundamental issue, which
casts gloom over the exegetical enterprise and seems to provoke unsettling
scepticism at a deeper level. This issue concerns the very criterion of
knowledge; in this case, the standards for determining the circumstances un-
der which scriptures ought to be interpreted instead of taken literally. It con-
cerns, in other words, the hermeneutical dichotomy of explicit and implicit
meaning. At stake is our capacity to apply this method properly, and conse-
quently the possibility of reaching a well-founded understanding of scrip-
tures. This issue comes up in a debate about the nature of dependent origina-
tion. Vasubandhu criticizes the Vaibhāṣika's understanding of this doctrine,
which he sees as being removed from the words and meaning of the sūtra.
Specifically, he is disturbed by their inclination towards reifying the various
states in the process of dependent arising. To this end, he cites a sūtra in
which ignorance—the first link in the chain of dependent origination—is de-
fined as "non-knowledge related to the past" (*yat tat pūrvānte 'jñānam*; *sngon
gyi mtha' mi shes pa gang yin pa*), meaning that ignorance is not deemed to
be a distinct entity (*dharma*), but is only a term which designates an already
known entity: the *dharma* of non-knowledge (*ajñāna*; *mi shes pa*).

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[43] "Well then, it was said by the Blessed One: he is not a monk, not a mendicant, not a son of
the Śākya, he falls from the status of a monk." *AKBh* ad 4.39, p. 223: *yat tarhi bhagavatoktam
"abhikṣur bhavaty aśramaṇo 'śākyaputrīyo dhvasyate bhikṣubhāvāt |"* Ku 189a4: *'o na bcom
ldan 'das kyis dge slong ma yin dge sbyong ma yin| shākya'i bu ma yin| dge sbyong gi dngos po
las nyams par 'gyur te|*

[44] "[Vasubandhu:] This is done over-hastily. [Sarvāstivādin:] Why then over-hastily?
[Vasubandhu: Because] that which is [conveyed] explicitly by the Blessed One is [here] con-
veyed in a different manner." *AKBh* ad 4.39, p. 223: *idam abhisāhasaṃ vartate | kim
atrābhisāhasam | yat bhagavatā nītārthaṃ punar anyathā nīyate |* Ku 189a5–6: *'di ni ha cang
thug thub ches par 'gyur ro||'di la thug thub ci zhig bya zhe na| bcom ldan 'das kyis nges pa'i
don gang yin pa gzhan du 'dren pa'o||*

Vasubandhu further claims that the aforementioned sūtra is of explicit meaning.[45] The Vaibhāṣika claims in response that the sūtra defines ignorance as a *dharma* in an implicit manner.

Vasubandhu's assumption, which animates the whole debate, is that expositions (*nirdeśa*; *bstan pa*) such as the one given for ignorance indicate that the sūtras containing them are necessarily of explicit meaning. At this point, the Vaibhāṣika questions not only the classification of the sūtra according to the explicit/implicit dichotomy, but also Vasubandhu's aforementioned criterion for determining that a sūtra is explicit. The Vaibhāṣika claims that the fact that it employs an exposition does not indicate in and of itself that the sūtra is explicit. At times, the Buddha defines concepts by enumerating their most essential aspects—an exposition which requires further explication.[46] For example, Vasubandhu's interlocuter mentions a commentary in which the internal earth element (*pṛthivī-dhātu*; *sa'i khams*) is defined by a list of material body parts (the hair on the head, the hair on the body, etc.). In this line of argument, one can detect a movement towards undermining the foundations of Vasubandhu's hermeneutical system, an agreement about the standards of explicit and implicit meaning.[47]

Vasubandhu makes an attempt to address this attack on his paradigm by demonstrating that his interlocutor has failed to understand the exposition itself and has consequently perceived this exposition as incomplete, even though it proves to be complete when understood correctly (and this, in turn, shows that the sūtra is explicit, as Vasubandhu argued before).[48] In this case,

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[45] "But because that which is of explicit meaning is not of implicit meaning, this is not the meaning of this sūtra." *AKBh* ad 3.28, p. 136: *yac ca nītārthaṃ na tat punar neyaṃ bhavatīti naiṣa sūtrārthaḥ.* Ku 128a7: *nges pa'i don gang yin pa de ni drang ba'i don ma yin pas 'di ni mdo'i don ma yin no*||

[46] "Not every [sūtra] by way of an exposition is of explicit meaning. Expositions are also given according to the most important aspects [which then require elucidation]." *AKBh* ad 3.28, p. 136: *na vai sarvaṃ nirdeśato nītārthaṃ bhavati | yathāpradhānaṃ cāpi nirdeśāḥ kriyante.* Ku 128a7: *bstan pa'i sgo nas thams cad nges pa'i don kho na yang ma yin gyi*| *gtso bo ji lta bar bstan par yang mdzad de.*

[47] This indirectly reveals the circular nature of this hermeneutical tool, as noted in Tzohar (2017, p. 266).

[48] "In this case, it is not hair and so forth which are defined by the earth element, because of which their definition is [allegedly] incomplete [and requires further elucidation], but rather in this case, it is the earth element which is defined by hair, and so forth. And because, moreover, the earth element has not been included in the hair and so forth, its exposition is complete [and does not require further elucidation; that is, it indicates a sūtra of explicit meaning]." *AKBh* ad 3.28, p. 136: *na hi tatra keśādayaḥ pṛthivīdhātunā nirdiśyante | yata eṣām aparipūrṇo nirdeśaḥ*

then, the misunderstanding ascribed to the sceptic afflicts three orders of in-
terpretation: the meaning of the scripture ("ignorance is a *dharma*"); the ap-
plication of hermeneutical tools (interpreting a literal scripture as if it were
implicit); and the meta-procedure for determining how hermeneutical tools
are to be applied (failing to accept the elements which distinguish an implicit
scripture from an explicit one). Vasubandhu and his Vaibhāṣika interlocutor
find themselves in a vicious circle in which each of them seeks to validate
his criterion of truth by appealing to the epistemic source, while the epistemic
validity of the source of knowledge is measured by the criterion of truth.
Their disagreement ends, as a Pyrrhonian would undoubtedly anticipate, with
one of the five modes of Agrippa; namely, circular reasoning.

Vasubandhu, however, does not draw the normative conclusion that the
sceptic draws—that one should suspend judgement with respect to scriptural
knowledge claims. He does not terminate his exegetical debates with doubt,
nor does he prescribe this as a desirable dialectical state. In light of his char-
acterization of doubt in the *VY*, it seems safe to say that Vasubandhu differs
from the sceptic in this regard because he does not believe that the suspension
of judgement is the way to attain tranquillity, still less higher spiritual in-
sights. For him, radical doubt does not defeat the authority of Buddhist teach-
ings. Unlike the sceptic, Vasubandhu seems to hold a form of external coher-
entism or reliabilism whereby the true meaning of scriptures can be revealed
when the correct exegetical procedure is followed. Even though only Bud-
dhas have direct experience of the truths transmitted in scriptures, by relying
on a proper method of scriptural interpretation, unawakened beings can ap-
proach the profundity of the Buddha's knowledge.

Conclusion

As a philosopher and exegete, Vasubandhu is far from being an adherent of
an all-embracing sceptical worldview. Knowledge of reality with the aid of
scriptures is possible, at least to a substantial degree. Nevertheless, in his
exegetical system, scepticism in the sense adopted here is an essential aspect

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*syād api tu keśādibhir eva pṛthivīdhātuḥ tatra nirdeśyate | na ca keśādīn abhyatītyāpy asti
pṛthivīdhātur iti saṃpūrṇa evāsya nirdeśaḥ.* Ku 128b1–2: *'di ni dpe ma yin te| de las ni gang gis
na de dag ma rdzogs par bstan par 'gyur ba sa'i khams kyi skra la sogs pa ston pa ni ma yin gyi
'on kyang de las ni skra la sogs pa dag kho nas sa'i khams ston pa yin te| skra la sogs pa ma
gtogs pa yang sa'i khams med pas 'di rdzogs par bstan pa kho na yin no.*

of scriptural commentary. This is true for both the teacher who sheds light on the message of sūtras before his disciples and the philosopher who engages in dialectical argumentation based on scriptural sources. To preserve the authority of the Buddha's words, Vasubandhu channels all sceptical inclinations towards a separate object: our understanding of Buddhist teachings, or misunderstanding thereof. This is the standard object of doubt in these philosophical debates, as demonstrated in different places in the *AKBh*. It also stands at the heart of Vasubandhu's explanation of disagreements regarding the authority of scriptures and their content. As far as scriptural learning is concerned, both the teacher and his disciples may raise sceptical objections regarding the credibility of the teachings. In such cases, sceptical expressions are either conceived as unwarranted due to their prejudiced standpoint and should be rectified by means of further learning, or they are seen as a means of grounding and interiorizing knowledge claims stated by the scriptures.

In this understanding of doubt and authority, we detect a complex view of the relation between scripture and reasoning as sources of knowledge. In Buddhist thought, and in the Indian philosophical tradition more broadly, scriptures and reasoning are considered to be two important factors in the acquisition of liberating knowledge. Traditionally, Indian epistemology maintains that inference is more reliable than scriptural testimony and that in the event of contradiction between them, the former should triumph. Vasubandhu's treatment of scepticism, however, provides an additional perspective. True, reasoning is the tool which enables us to determine the true meaning of scriptures; but at the same time, reasoning may err. Scriptures, on the other hand, are intrinsically a source of true knowledge, whether they are correctly understood or not.

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