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Yogacara Buddhism: a sympathetic description and suggestion for use in Western theology and philosophy of religion



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Abstract:
A defense of Yogacara Buddhism in light of contemporary trends in Western philosophy and theology, this paper begins with an historical survey and proceeds with a comparative analysis. Yogacara was successful in addressing the same problems 1600 years ago that many in the West have failed to address, or even recognize today. With its metaphysical and epistemological implications, Yogacara may also be employed in the resolution of, or continuing investigation into, long-standing problems within Christian theology over and against the Greek metaphysics of presence.

Key words:
Yogacara, Christian theology, philosophy of religion, nihilism, illusion, conditions of cognition, narcissistic self-referentiality

Introduction

This paper intends to provide a defense of Yogacara Buddhism in the following manner. First, a basic history and description of the philosophy will present the problems it addressed and show how it successfully accomplished resolution of those problems. Second, a similar Western tradition will be compared to Yogacara and will be shown to be less robust and ultimately unsuccessful. Finally, it will be shown how Yogacara, especially its metaphysical and epistemological implications, may be capable of resolving long-standing problems in the West, especially within Christian theology. This particular Eastern tradition, through the tensions it creates with the West and the resolutions it may provide within Christian theology, will thus be apologetically vindicated and defended as a legitimate and viable philosophy.

Historical Data

Yogacara developed late within Indian Buddhism.[1] It was founded by the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu in the fifth century. Origins before this can be traced only through traditions in which Asanga is said to have been mentored by a man known as Maitreya who may or may not be historical.[2] Nonetheless, it is likely that Yogacara was already hundreds of years old by the time of Asanga.[3] Before being converted by his brother, Vasubandhu was a *Sautrantika* thinker and an expert in *Abhidharma*.[4] *Sautrantika* was a transitional school between *Theravada* and *Mahayana* Buddhism that emphasized the "representational and constructed nature of knowledge."[5] The *Abhidharma* are scriptures that have systematized Buddhist teachings and have "focused

on the analysis of experience."[6] As will be shown, this background was an appropriate preparation for Vasubandhu because Yogacara proceeds similarly.

The "foundational scripture" of Yogacara is Asanga's *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning (Samdhinirmocanasutra)*.[7] His brother, Vasubandhu, also produced important texts. The original texts of Yogacara no longer exist in their original Sanskrit but only Chinese and Tibetan translations.[8] Although new texts are constantly being written, the oldest surviving texts are from the third century.[9] This gap between the original teachers and the written tradition has fostered not a small amount of misunderstanding about Yogacara teachings. Only recently has textual criticism been able to piece together the original teachings and show how centuries of Yogacaran teachers have strayed from the original path the insights of which represent, perhaps, the greatest philosophical achievement of the east rivaling or surpassing the accomplishments of Western philosophy.[10]

Yogacara means, "The School that Practices the Way of Yoga."[11] Yet, the practical methodology of yogic meditation merely gives us the name for the philosophy; it is wholly inadequate as its description. Meditation is merely a means of abandoning delusions about the self and about the world. Obviously, a great deal of context will be needed in order to fully understand the goal of this strategy.

Background

In order to appreciate the Yogacara strategy, we must understand the setting in which the philosophy originated. This includes how fifth century Buddhists interpreted reality and the way in which they imagined their minds to operate with and as reality. Yogacara is heavily influenced by the *Prajnaparamita* sutras, scriptures of *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, or the *Middle Way*. As the first-known author of this tradition, Nagarjuna taught *sunyata*, holding that emptiness was the ultimate reality and that this insight destroyed all understanding. Thus, he rejected all theory and all philosophy as illusory, believing them to be definitively negated by the dialectic of emptiness.[12] Emptiness, or voidness, was intended to mean that the world is "empty of any imagined being, of any notion of an essentialist absolute."[13] Yogacara is a reaction to the *sunyata* position, but while Yogacara is often seen as a complete break from the doctrine of emptiness substituting a new idealism in its place, this is not the way that they themselves described their relationship to their predecessor. Asanga believed that he was correctly interpreting Nagarjuna and *Madhyamaka* whereas his (Nagarjuna's) followers had failed to do so.[14] Asanga wanted to "revive" philosophy by creating a robust view of the structure of consciousness through an investigation into meditation and use it to rethink the notion of emptiness so that it did not stop with the destruction of all views.[15] This was the goal of the first Yogacara philosophers, to move beyond the limits incorrectly believed to be set by Nagarjuna.[16]

Vasubandhu gives his definitive explanation of emptiness in the very beginning of his seminal writing, the *Madhyantavibhaga*. In the emptiness or voidness itself, something exists and persists. This conclusion is not found explicitly in *Madhyamaka*. Nonetheless, Asanga and his brother claim it was implicit.[17] Therefore, the difference is not as great as was once supposed. They are reduced further when we consider that Yogacara was also a response to non-Mahayana schools including *Theravada* and *Sarvastivada*.[18] That is, Yogacara was a synthesis created in response to all existing schools of Buddhism at the time.

Yogacara drew from common beliefs in all these traditions to resolve the problems all of them were facing. Its key epistemological and metaphysical insights, being only somewhat new, drew from the common Buddhist belief that knowledge comes only from the senses (*vijnapti*). With a new insight, Yogacara proposed that the mind, itself, was an aspect of *vijnapti*. Asanga further recognized that, while the mind can sense its own objects, which are known *as* thoughts (apperception), it cannot verify its own interpretation. So, because the senses are constantly misinterpreted, it follows that apperception is as well. In other words, we cannot perceive correctly the perception that we do not perceive reality correctly *and* we cannot verifiably engage in apperception. These misconceptions are instinctive and nearly universal because they are caused by the desires, fears and anxieties that come with animal survival. This results in an automatic assumption of substance for self and objects (*atma*n and *dharma*). These are created to suppress our fears. Throughout life, we construct working theories to explain what we experience. These are always in error.[19]

Accordingly, Yogacara departs from the common Buddhist understanding not only in its view of the problem, but also in its view of the solution. From a perspective known in the west as *process metaphysics*, Yogacara talks about "grasper/grasped" rather than "subject/object" respectively. Yogacara, with a unique and decisive move never made in the west, also introduces a causal relationship. We grasp *because* we desire; desire *comes from* a sense of need. What we fundamentally lack is a self, thus we seek to preserve what we do not have. Because we strive to survive, we do not naturally challenge the assumption of our own being. The solution is to disown the phenomena within our minds as our own. Sensations of pleasure and pain, belief and willful ignorance, language and reason, these are all strategies employed to preserve the self but come at the expense of this unending sense of need.[20]

Beyond Nihilism (Nastivada)

Madhyamaka was taken to be completely destructive, offering no positive argument in place of what it rejected. Nagarjuna, through his understanding of emptiness, had rejected all views as invalid.[21] Interestingly, Asanga did not assert that Nagarjuna was wrong. Instead, his basic position was that, "the emptiness of things is not their nonexistence but their perfect (or absolute) existence." In other words, he claimed that Nagarjuna was not wrong, but had merely been misunderstood; he was never promoting metaphysical nihilism.[22]

The Yogacara departure from *Madhyamaka* comes as a critical focus upon the nature of the mind, seeking to explicitly describe the structure of consciousness as a way to reveal the path toward enlightenment.[23] This "turn toward conscious interiority" came more than one thousand years before Kant's *Copernican revolution* and the *subjective turn*. It came as a response to the effective squelching of all truth claims by *Madhyamaka* philosophers after Nagarjuna, which resulted in paradox and confusion. If every view is challenged as illusory, this must include even the fundamental Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Path! Moreover, this constant denial of all truth claims was "constantly in tension with the affirmative value of dependent co-arising."[24] Instead of seeing an *end* to meaning, Asanga interpreted voidness as a different kind of meaning.

While *Madhyamaka* denied nihilism (*nastivada*), they *also* denied being. This

caused an intolerable tension that many were beginning to resolve through monism, the belief that a reality exists in higher, non-defiled states leaving only the lower physical reality as void. While some followed this path away from strict *Madhyamaka* teachings, Asanga and Vasubandhu were attempting to stay true to the *Prajnaparamita* sutras of Nagarjuna. To resolve the problem of how to teach and even understand doctrine without participating in illusion they argued that consciousness itself is dependently co-arising and must exist in illusion before awakening. Thus, "insight and doctrinal formulation" are valid "conventionally," but not ultimately.[25] Because Yogacara rejects both the object that is known as an independent substance *as well as* the reality of the knower, it is not idealism. Instead, it is a "critical awareness of the other-dependent relationships that condition all human thinking."[26] In other words, it is a process metaphysical view of self and physical reality without reliance upon the notion of substance in either.

Asanga's concept of "things" took on three aspects: First, there is the nature of a thing that the mind imposes in its attempt to know it. Second, there is the relational nature of things as they inter-depend. Third, at the highest level of understanding, there is absolute perfection of all things as relative, that is, as co-arisen.[27] In order to achieve enlightenment, one must understand what this emptiness of non-being entails, how it effects one's view of one's self (as "non-personal") and of the rest of reality.[28] This is the insight that allows us to see beyond our delusions.

According to Vasubandhu, things are not the creation of consciousness and they are not illusory. However, things are only known as they affect consciousness. The concept of substance is the illusion.[29] This distinctive perspective on what is happening in our minds allows for the resolution of many otherwise intractable problems. It indicates that untainted thought, free from all error, is attainable. In addition, by coming to appreciate that cognitive activity is more complex than previously thought, it allows for a realistic pursuit of its mastery while permitting a wide variety of strategies for success.[30] Vasubandhu's insight is actually a methodology for accomplishing this realization and the mastery that comes with it; we know this methodology as phenomenology.[31]

At this point, it is important to distinguish between phenomenology as a methodology and idealism as a metaphysical theory. Despite the analyses of D. T. Suzuki, Edward Conze, and others, Yogacara is not idealism. Classifying Yogacara as a form of idealism ignores the fact that it focuses upon a methodology and not a metaphysical view. Moreover, idealism is too vague a term in that idealism simply reduces to "not materialism."[32] Western philosophers distinguish between the metaphysical idealism of Berkeley, in which non-material yet substantive minds create phenomena and interact with one another, and the epistemological idealism of Kant (transcendental idealism), in which the subject becomes the ground for knowledge but only about the phenomena. To split finer hairs than this, however, there is also an important difference between Kantian epistemology and phenomenology, which produces both metaphysical and epistemological implications. Yogacara had recognized from its beginnings this blurring of the boundaries between the science of knowing and the science of reality-behind-appearances and did so more than one thousand years before Kant. It was phenomenological from its inception.[33] Yogacara rejects both materialism and idealism. All is not substance *and* all is not mind.

Buddhist phenomenology reached its greatest and most complete formulation with the Yogacara school. The problems that Gautama first recognized find their context in the phenomena. Thus, *karma* functions within a system of loss and need driven by appropriational habits within the mind.[34] It is an elegant and dense concept that requires

psychological, metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological categories to fully describe.

How Yogacara is Correct or Insightful

Theodor Stcherbatsky (1866-1942), a Russian student of Eastern philosophy, was the first to notice a similarity between Yogacara philosophy and the metaphysical system of Kant. Both systems recognized the way in which the mind somehow *constructs* the phenomena of the sensible world.[35] However, Yogacara does not make the same mistake that Kant made (along with the tradition he inspired). Yogacara claims that the thing-in-itself, the *ding-an-sich*, is not permanently unknowable. In fact, not only is it completely knowable, but this is the goal of Yogacara, to pierce through the erroneous conceptions that keep us from seeing things as they really are. Like the speculative idealism before Hegel that sought to know God by looking at the mirror image of the divine within ourselves, Yogacara teaches that we are to look within and see a mirror image of reality. Because we are part of the network of reality, we can see reality within ourselves. Those who can see this image clearly have been awakened (*bodhi*).[36]

Ironically, at the same time that Stcherbatsky was comparing Yogacara to Kant, phenomenology was taking western philosophy in a direction that matched Yogacara much more closely. This is most clearly seen in the work of Husserl.[37] The Yogacara concept of consciousness, *alayavijnana* (storehouse of consciousness), *alaya* for short, possesses a persistence through time that makes it real for all practical purposes despite its lack of eternal substance. This is the solution that overcomes the nihilism and skepticism created by various misunderstandings of Nagarjuna's voidism. Some have likened alaya to Freud's unconscious and others to Jung's collective unconscious. While these similarities may be strong, a connection with Husserl's inner-time consciousness appears to be stronger, and thus early Husserlian phenomenology as a whole is a much closer match to Yogacara.[38]

Phenomenology in the West was concerned with noetic constitution (the make-up of the mind), modes and means of cognition, and the way in which meaning is constructed. Going beyond Kant's categories of the mind and his unity of consciousness in consciousness of unity, phenomenology was and is the investigation into meaning in a complex interplay between epistemology and metaphysics. This field of study has overcome various problems and has progressed into the well-systematized theories of Derrida.[39] This notwithstanding, Yogacara had long since moved beyond the place in which the continental tradition now works. Thus, it is actually more advanced.

Despite the absence of concepts like the universality of text and the sign-signified relationship within thought and construction of phenomena, Yogacara has made progress in finding a way beyond our basic limitations in accessing the thing-in-itself, that is, to the *Yathabhutam* whose nature is voidness. It is an emptiness in the sense that it is not a substance to which we are forbidden access. Instead, Yogacara makes the claim that emptiness has reality in itself. Yogacara avoids the nihilism of its predecessor but does so by realizing that each element of reality gains its essence only from its relationship with the rest of reality, that is, context.[40] As part of the context ourselves, we have access to it. In this way, Yogacara does not just mirror phenomenology in its grasp of the nature of human consciousness, it also mirrors deconstruction with its metaphysical claim that there is nothing apart from the play of differences between concepts. The only difference is that it does not fixate upon writing as a perfect archetype for the larger picture

of group-consciousness.

Superiority of Yogacara Over the Continental Tradition

Yogacara analyzes causation and noetic-noemic interaction, to use Husserl's terms for knower and known respectively, in far more detail than Western phenomenologists have. Within its analyses of cognition, Yogacara has an extremely rich vocabulary that includes terms for fine distinctions that continental philosophers have never independently recognized.[41] Central to Yogacara goals is an idea of deconstruction that seeks to conquer the conditions of cognition that lead to the delusion of the self. This is the very same "narcissistic self-referentiality" that has been correctly identified by Western philosophers since Kant. But this closing off of the world that makes our minds a prison is the trap that Yogacara has avoided by making the mind itself the problem rather than the means of recognizing and solving the problem. The doctrine of *Vijnapti-matra* is not intended to proclaim what is and is not available; it is merely an epistemological caution. The mind must recognize its own delusions in order to proceed.[42] In this, we see a move similar to the one made by Derrida, but with more optimism.

For Derrida, the *Khora* is that which is and is not, but which allows for the possibility of everything else. In some sense it is the basis for more complex things in the same way that paper and ink are essential for the written word and the way that dimensionality is required for the distinction between positions (as with coordinate systems).[43] Yogacara philosophy sees this as the *absolute* of universal reason. The subject does not create the object, as in idealism, rather both the subject and the objects are created by the absolute.[44] This absolute is the *sunya* (void). It is the matrix in which the dual opposites in tension, like subject-object, can exist.[45] Derrida has formulated a nearly identical concept with respect to the text, but he does so by throwing reason into question when he identifies it with the ancient Greek tradition of philosophy. Ironically, a fully independent philosophical tradition has arrived at the same concept, indicating that it may not be logocentric (arbitrarily closed-minded with delusions of full objectivity) after all. It seems that the Yogacara teaching that the absolute is actually absolute, and therefore universal, is likely to be the better teaching.

The key insight that Yogacara added to Buddhism was the "deconstruction of identity into alterity."[46] Alterity is the Western postmodern term for the otherness of the other, i.e. self-alienation.[47] Since its beginnings, Buddhism has taught impermanence, discontinuity, and difference. The problem was that the experience of every-day life did not bear this out. Alterity resolves this problem of the apparent continuity of the self and the immutability of identities in general by providing a way for the self to exist (i.e. persist) *without* being. Like the process metaphysics of the West, the self is defined by processes instead of substances. But, going beyond the west, in both process metaphysics and phenomenology, Yogacara conceived of alterity in causal terms. Alterity is not inherent; it is caused by misconceptions. Therefore, it can be fixed![48] While noting many similarities and parallels between Yogacara and phenomenology in the West (along with the Continental tradition beginning with Husserl and running through Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Lyotard, and Derrida), and while noticing that Yogacara has apparently overcome the obstacles that have stalled the progress of the Western tradition, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Yogacara is far superior, far more advanced, as Lusthaus confirms.[49]

Utility for Christian Theology

The Christian tradition has employed the philosophy of the ancient Greeks since its beginnings in the first century. It seems that this fact is a mere historical coincidence. Yogacara can be employed instead of or in addition to Greek philosophy in order to gain insight into the study of special revelation within the Christian tradition. Yogacara is "an insightful group of interlocking insights into the deepest level of meaning" that can be used to unlock latent concepts and even provide new insights.[50] This vindication reveals that Yogacara may be a powerful tool for excising the gangrenous delusions about the nature of the self that, if truly erroneous, stand as obstacles between ourselves and the ultimate goal of all human pursuits, adequation, which is the need to access the other, the ultimate, God. The Hellenized theology of the early church fathers should be critically analyzed from an alternative philosophical perspective in order to ensure that the traditional views of scripture are as robust as possible and free from ambiguity. Multiple perspectives have a decentering effect upon all knowledge; theology is no exception. If the object of study is the divine, then it is truly transcendent and of a completely different nature. Perhaps the Yogacara philosophy is better equipped to handle this notion than the essentialism of the Greek philosophical epoch.

Subjectively

Instead of focusing upon faith as an essence or upon a tradition, the implications of Yogacara demand that Christian theology focus upon the converted mind.[51] With its passive picture of the consciousness, this has significance within soteriology including a potential resolution of the tension between predestination and responsibility. Perhaps more importantly, Yogacara may shed light on the nature of sanctification as a process that transforms the mind by means of interaction with another, the disagreeable other that demands a wrestling match.[52]

Ontologically

The Trinity has been a mystery from the perspective of Greek philosophy. Accordingly, it is rarely recognized that the being of Jesus is never defined (as such) in the words of the New Testament. He is described only through his relationship to others and most fundamentally in his awareness of the Father's presence. As a relational being, Jesus is transparent like a window that reveals something else. From this perspective, He is truly "The Way" and he *is not merely* a thing that shows the way. As such, Jesus can be seen as a relationship instead of a substance. Perhaps this is one possible resolution to the apparent contradiction of the Trinity made available through Yogacara. Rather than one substance also being three substances (the paradoxical tension between "nature" and "substance" notwithstanding), perhaps Jesus is the relationship we have with the Father. In this way, our identity and Jesus' identity both consist entirely in our relationships to one another.[53] This seems to make intelligible some otherwise mysterious statements made by and about Jesus.

From the Yogacara view, we persist by means of the relationships we have with others: beneath us hierarchically (from our parts), among us (with our community), and above us (with our moment-by-moment Creator). Our reality is a process reality and our goal should be to eliminate the delusions that keep us from understanding and accept-

ing our insubstantiality. But, does this mean that this is the only reality? Clearly, this would be a *non sequitur*. This is not, and I would argue should not be, our conclusion about ultimate reality. This is where Yogacara, other Eastern traditions, and Western versions of process theology err. This is because if we extend this view to the other members of the Trinity (or even to Jesus *qua* God) we immediately deviate from all scriptural propositions about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *qua* God. Because of this, it seems that process theology is necessarily a heterodox divergence from the declarations of Christian scripture. Process theology makes the same move with God that Yogacara insists we make with ourselves. Perhaps the Greek notion of substance and eternal essence is the best method for describing God while the Yogacaran notion of process-appraised-through-phenomena is the best way to see created beings and things as well as the relationships and communications between the two (the Christ and the Holy Spirit *as* they interact).

In conclusion, Yogacara is not only robust in itself, and superior to its cousin in the West, but it has potential, as a philosophy, for resolving theological dilemmas. Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that, philosophically, Yogacara is vindicated and deserving of careful study.

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1 Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), iv.

2 John P. Keenan, "Yogacara," in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese*, eds. Yoshinori, Takeuchi, et al, vol. 8 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 203.

3 John M. Koller and Patricia Koller, *A Sourcebook in Asian Philosophy* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 306.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid*, 577.

6 *Ibid.*, 569.

7 Keenan, "Yogacara," 203.

8 *Ibid.*, iv-vi.

9 *Ibid.*, 9.

10 Alex Wayman, "A defense of Yogacara Buddhism," Philosophy East & West 46:4 (1996): 447.

11 Koller and Koller, 306.

12 Keenan, "Yogacara," 203.

13 Ibid., 210.

14 Richard King, "Early Yogacara and its relationship with the Madhyamaka school," Philosophy East & West 44:4 (1994): 659.

15 Keenan, "Yogacara," 203.

16 As I will show later, this bears a striking resemblance to the moves made by philosophers after Immanuel Kant in the western tradition.

17 King, "Early Yogacara and its relationship with the Madhyamaka school," 659.

18 Richard King, "Vijnaptimatrata and the Abhidharma context of early Yogacara," *Asian Philosophy 8*, no. 1 (1998): 5.

19 Lusthaus, 1.

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21 John P. Keenan, "Buddhist Yogacara Philosophy as Ancilla Theologiae," *Japanese Religions* 15:5 (1988): 36.

22 Koller and Koller, 306.

23 Keenan, "Yogacara," 203.

24 *Ibid.*, 203-4.

25 *Ibid.*, 204-5.

26 *Ibid.*, 207.

27 Koller and Koller, 306.

28 Keenan, "Yogacara," 207.

29 Koller and Koller, 307.

30 Lusthaus, x.

31 *Ibid.*, 9.

32 *Ibid.*, 5.

33 *Ibid.*, ix.

34 *Ibid.*, 4.

35 *Ibid.*, v.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 M. J. Larrabee, "The One and The Many: Yogacara Buddhism and Husserl," Philosophy East & West 31:1 (1981): 3.

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41 Lusthaus, vi.

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45 *Ibid.*, 133.

46 Lusthaus, 8.

47 Simon Blackburn, "alterity," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1996), available Oxford Reference Online <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e2589> (28 October 2006)

48 Lusthaus, 8.

49 *Ibid.*, vii.

50 Keenan, "Buddhist Yogacara Philosophy as Ancilla Theologiae," 35.

51 *Ibid.*, 40-41.

52 N.b. the translation of the name "Israel" as "wrestles with God."

53 *Ibid.*