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Shared Perceptions, Constructed Realities: How Vasubandhu's Mind-Only Philosophy Challenges Realist Assumptions in Intersubjectivity

By Gelila Vivian Chang

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Gelila Chang is a junior at Lake Nona High School in Orlando, Florida. She hopes to study philosophy and history, and to pursue in-depth research in these fields in the future.

ABSTRACT

In Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*, Vasubandhu's mind-only philosophy offers a compelling alternative to realist accounts of intersubjectivity by arguing that shared perceptions do not require the existence of mind-independent objects. Drawing on Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* and his responses to objections regarding spatial-temporal perception, intersubjectivity, and effective action, this study defends the plausibility of a mental-constructivist account of reality. The argument is extended through modern examples such as phantom limb pain, the rubber hand illusion, and mass hallucinations, which reveal the mind's capacity to generate shared and vivid experiences without external referents. Finally, the paper draws parallels with contemporary science: quantum physics, particularly the double-slit and Stern–Gerlach experiments, to demonstrate that observation plays an active, constitutive role in shaping physical outcomes. Quantum mechanics challenges classical realism in ways that strongly resonate with Vasubandhu's ancient insights. Together, these philosophical and scientific perspectives suggest that consciousness may be fundamental to the construction of what we perceive as shared reality.

Keywords: *philosophy, Buddhism, Vasubandhu, Twenty Verses, intersubjectivity, perception, realism, idealism, quantum physics*

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INTRODUCTION

In Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* (*Vimsatika*), he articulates the mind-only (*Yogacara*) position, asserting that external, mind-independent objects are unnecessary to explain our experiences. He posits that all experiences are manifestations of the mind. In contrast, realists—Buddhist philosophers in ancient India who affirm the existence of external, mind-independent objects—argue that such objects exist independently of our perception. Vasubandhu addresses three main objections to his mind-only theory by each providing several verses, namely, the following:

1. Restriction in Space and Time:
    - Objection: If there are no external objects, why do we see things in specific places and times (Vasubandhu, p. 3)?
    - Verse 1: This is all appearance only; for even non-existent objects are presented to us, as, for instance, a person with faulty vision sees unreal hair, etc (Vasubandhu, p. 3).
    - Verse 3: That in dreams, objects appear in specific places and times without existing externally. This shows spatial and temporal restrictions can occur without external objects (Vasubandhu, p. 4).
2. Intersubjectivity:
    - Objection: How can multiple people perceive the same object if there are no external objects (Vasubandhu, p. 4)?
    - Verse 3: Took ghost as an example, who all see a river of pus due to shared karmic conditions. Similarly, shared perceptions among people can occur due to similar mental states (Vasubandhu, p. 4).
3. Effective Action:
    - Objection: How can actions be effective if everything is a mental representation (Vasubandhu, p. 4)?
    - Verse 4: Wet dreams, where physiological effects occur without external sexual intercourse, demonstrating that actions can have real effects even without external objects (Vasubandhu, p. 5).

This paper uses intersubjectivity and modern science to demonstrate that Vasubandhu's mind-only position offers a thought-provoking and plausible alternative to the realist account. By emphasizing the role of consciousness and collective mental imprints, by defending Vasubandhu's position by further explicating his example to show the mind-only position offers a coherent explanation for our experiences without invoking mind-independent objects, and by providing examples on various scientific experiments in quantum mechanics that demonstrate the constitutive role of observation in shaping physical outcomes. This view is defended through the following four points:

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1. The objection and Vasubandhu's response: The objection challenged how different individuals can share the same experience if everything is merely a mental projection. Vasubandhu counters this objection by using the analogy of ghosts.
2. Further examples: The phenomenon of mass hallucinations, where groups of people report seeing the same illusion or experiencing the same event despite there being no external cause.
3. Counter argument: Realists could argue that mass hallucinations are exceptions rather than the rule.
4. Comparison with Modern Science: Quantum mechanics' superposition with Vasubandhu's idealism.

PART I

In Verse 2 of *Twenty Verses*, the objection claimed that, if external objects do not exist, then intersubjectivity—where multiple people perceive the same object—cannot be explained (Vasubandhu, p. 2). How can different individuals experience the same thing at the same time if there are no external objects? The objection challenged Vasubandhu's view by questioning how multiple individuals can have the same perception if there are no mind-independent objects. In the realist view, shared perceptions among individuals are best explained by the existence of extrinsic objects that exist independently of anyone's mind. The objection is supporting the consistency of perceptions, in everyday life, different people consistently report the same thing. For example, multiple people can look at a tree and agree on its shape, color, and location. This consistency suggests that there is something external to the mind that they are all perceiving. Another example is that if one person says, "The sky is blue," and another person agrees, it indicates that both are perceiving the same external sky. This mutual verification supports the existence of external objects that different minds can perceive similarly. The realist wants to say it must imply an object to explain the consistency of the report (Vasubandhu, p. 3). However, this inference can be seen as fragile. While consistent reports suggest inference about the appearance of an object, inference itself is not conclusive evidence. Therefore, the consistent appearance does not necessarily imply the existence of an external, mind-independent object. The realist argues that it must imply an object to explain the consistency of the report. Yet, this is an assumption that needs to be demonstrated as true. The consistency of perceptions could instead be explained by shared mental states or similar cognitive processes among individuals. Therefore, the realist's conclusion that external objects are required for consistent perceptions might not be as robust as it initially appears.

In order to respond, Vasubandhu described a scenario involving ghosts who all perceive a river filled with pus: this perception is shared among the ghosts, meaning they all see the same thing (Vasubandhu, p. 4). The reason for this shared perception is that the ghosts are experiencing similar karmic ripening. Their past actions and mental states have led to a situation where they collectively perceive this river of pus. But the fact is, this river of pus does not exist externally. It is not a physical figure that can be found in the physical world.

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Instead, it is a figure within the minds of the ghosts. Vasubandhu applied this scenario to human perception, just like the ghosts' shared perception of the river of pus is a result of their collective mental state, humans can have shared perceptions of objects because their minds are in similar states or have undergone similar karmic influences (Hillis, 1993, p. 10). This explanation implies that external, mind-independent objects are not necessary for explaining shared human perceptions. This suggests that the consistency and agreement in perceptions among individuals can be explained by shared cognitive frameworks or similar mental processes, rather than by the existence of an objective, external reality.

PART II

In the field of modern medicine, some real-life examples support Vasubandhu's view. For example, phantom limb pain (PLP). PLP refers to ongoing painful sensations that seem to be coming from the part of the limb that is no longer there. One of the best-known physicians of the Civil War era was Silas Weir Mitchell. In an article from 1866 in Atlantic Monthly, Mitchell described a neurological examination of a theoretical soldier who had lost all four limbs in a battle. In describing patients with missing limbs, he was one of the first to offer a description of phantom limbs, the perception that an amputated limb was still intact: "Where the leg, for instance, has been lost, they feel as if the foot was present, but as though the leg were shortened. If the thigh has been taken off, there seems to be a foot at the knee; if the arm, a hand seems to be at the elbow, or attached to the stump itself" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 4). This phenomenon supports Vasubandhu's claim that external, mind-independent objects are not necessary to account for our experiences. In the case of Mitchell, there is no external limb present, yet the patient's mind constructs a very real and tangible experience of it. This could prove that—the sensations are entirely generated by the mind. However, an objection to this claim might be that the sensation is caused by the fact that there was once a physical arm present, one could argue that the memory of the limb and its associated neural pathways contribute to the sensation of pain, giving credence to the idea that physicality is what is truly real for us, even if the physical thing is now gone (Katz, 1990, p. 1). To respond to this objection, we should recognize that the sensation of pain (especially in the case of wounded by war) for those patients arises without any current external stimulus, which ultimately suggests that the experience is internally generated by the mind. In the case of phantom limb pain, the mind can continue to generate sensory experiences even after the object no longer physically exists. This implies that the mind is not completely passively receiving input from external environments but is also actively constructing sensory experiences from itself. The absence of the external limb does not prevent the brain from creating the perception of pain or the sensation of an intact limb. This is consistent with what Vasubandhu's mind-only position supports: The mind, rather than external objects, is the primary source of our perceptual experiences.

Additionally, the occurrence of phantom limb pain in congenital amputees—individuals born without a limb—further supports Vasubandhu's argument. According to the National Library of medicine, a study of phantom limbs in people with congenital limb deficiency. This study provides a statistic that at least 20% of the

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congenitally limb-deficient subjects have experienced phantom limbs pain. The phantoms are detailed and can be described in terms of size, shape, position, movement and temporal properties (Melzack, 1997, pp. 1603-1604). These individuals can experience sensations in a limb they never physically possessed, highlighting that the mind alone is capable of generating these experiences. This phenomenon challenges the notion that physicality is the primary basis for our experiences and supports the view that our perceptions and sensations can arise purely from the mind's constructs. From the perspective of perception, even if a limb is missing or has never existed, the brain still generates signals that create the illusion of the limb's presence. These signals do not come from the external world but are "constructed" by the brain based on memories of the limb and past sensory experiences. This suggests that a person's senses are less under the influence of physical reality and more the result of the mind's imagination through psychological expectations and previous memories. This phenomenon demonstrates that human experiences and sensations can be entirely generated by internal mental processes, without relying on external physical objects. This aligns with Vasubandhu's Yogacara (mind-only) theory, which posits that our perceptions and experiences fundamentally arise from the workings of the mind, rather than the existence of an external world.

Furthermore, an example that supports Vasubandhu's view is the Rubber Hand Illusion. In this experiment, a person's real hand is hidden from view, and a rubber hand is placed in front of them. When both the real hand and the rubber hand are stroked simultaneously, the person begins to feel as if the rubber hand is their own. This illusion demonstrates how the mind can create a sense of ownership and reality for something that is not actually part of the external world. The rubber hand illusion highlights how our perceptions can be manipulated by the mind, suggesting that what we consider to be external objects can be constructs of our consciousness (Vignemont, 2008, pp. 204-209).

PART III

In reference to the example provided earlier, realists may argue that mass hallucinations, where groups of people simultaneously experience the same illusion, are rare and exceptional cases(Bergeron, 2015, p. 8). These cases are not representative of the normal, everyday experiences of shared perception that most people have. For example, many people can observe a tree and agree on its characteristics, which happens far more frequently than mass hallucinations. Realists provide an explanation for the consistency and reliability of common perceptions between humans is the existence of external objects. These objects provide a common reference point that different minds can perceive similarly. The realists think that the predictability of shared experiences supports this view. Examples like: If several people are in a room and a ball is thrown, all of them will see the ball moving in a consistent trajectory and can predict where it will land based on their perception of the external object (O'Brien). While psychological conditions can explain certain abnormal conditions, such as individual hallucinations or group hysteria, realists argue that these explanations are limited in scope. They account for specific cases but do not adequately explain the vast majority of common experiences (Zelta, 2015).

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Realists argue that the objective reality of external objects provides a foundation for understanding the consistency and intersubjectivity of perceptions. Without external objects, it becomes challenging to explain why different individuals perceive the same things in the same way (Zelta, 2021). The balance between different individuals' perceptions suggests an underlying external reality that they are all accessing. This cognitive harmony is more straightforwardly explained by external objects than by independent-mental projections adjusting perfectly.

However, it is important to recognize that what offers an explanation might not necessarily be the truth. While the realist position is expedient for explaining shared perceptions, it is not the only defensible stance. Vasubandhu would argue against the necessity of external objects to account for our experiences. He would suggest that our shared perceptions can be coherently explained through a mind-only framework, challenging the realist assertion that external objects are indispensable for consistency and intersubjectivity in perception. For instance, eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable, as different individuals can have vastly different recollections of the same event (Loftus, Miller, & Burns, 1978). Noticing this, we are getting nearer to the place where our experiences are not determined by an entirely objective, external reality, but instead are a result of our mental states. Correspondingly, the collective cognitive constructs consist of (to a great extent in fact) societal norms, cultural beliefs, and shared expectations shape our perceptions and experiences. For example, the way people perceive color can vary significantly across cultures due to linguistic and cultural differences (Trafton, 2023). Such examples demonstrate how shared mental states can create a common reality without relying on the existence of mind-independent objects.

PART IV

Vasubandhu's view is supported not only by modern medical research but is also justifiable from the perspective of contemporary physics. Numerous well-known physics experiments have demonstrated that consciousness plays a fundamental role in the construction of experiential reality. In 1927, German physicist Werner Heisenberg introduced a concept in one of his research known as "observation collapses the wavefunction". This concept suggests that, in quantum physics, a system does not exhibit definite properties prior to observation, as one would expect in classical physics (Stoica, 2016, pp. 61-62). That is, a particle does not have a definite position, momentum, or spin orientation prior to being observed. Instead, it exists in a state of superposition, which is a combination of multiple possible outcomes, described by a wavefunction. Just like Schrodinger's cat, the cat could be both dead and alive before the box is opened. However, when an observation is made, the super superposition collapses into a single definite outcome, a process known as wavefunction collapse. Which also means, only at the moment we open the box can the cat's state of life or death be revealed. This underscores a profound insight, the act of measurement itself affects reality, transforming multiple potential possibilities into a single, definite outcome.

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One notable example is the Spin Measurement experiment using the Stern-Gerlach Apparatus in the 1920s. This experiment was designed to measure the spin component of electrons or other spin-carrying particles, and to demonstrate how observation "forces" the system into a definite state. The study developed that wavefunction collapse takes a system from being a superposition of states, such as a superposition of a spin up state and spin down state, to a wavefunction which either describes spin up (z-component of spin equal to $+\frac{1}{2}\hbar$) or spin down (z-component of spin equal to $-\frac{1}{2}\hbar$) – but no longer a superposition of the two (McIntyre, 2002, p. 11). In simpler terms, the finding indicates that an electron may exist in both a spin-up and spin-down state at the same time, but once its spin direction is being measured by a device, it can only display one of the two.

Additionally, in the field of quantum physics, there is another experiment similar to the spin measurement experiment but more intuitive in demonstrating the effect of observation: The double slit experiment. This experiment, conducted in 1801 by Thomas Young, recorded the distribution pattern formed on a detecting screen when particles, such as protons or electrons, were emitted from a source, passed through a barrier with two slits, A and B, and reached the observation screen (Rolleigh, 2010, p. 3). The experimenter tested two scenarios: The first without observing which slit the particle passes through, and second with a detector set up to observe the particle's path. The experimental results were astonishing: when the particle's path was not observed, it produced a pattern of alternating light and dark fringes on the screen, which is a result characteristic of wave behavior. This indicated that the particle had passed through both slits simultaneously, behaving like a wave, and the resulting interference pattern was due to the wave-like components interfering with each other. In contrast, when the particle was observed, the interference pattern disappeared. Instead, two distinct spots appeared on the screen: one corresponding to particles passed through slit A, and the other to those passed through slit B (Rolleigh, 2010, pp. 5- 13). This outcome suggests that the observation forces the particle to choose a single outcome; it can no longer pass through both slits simultaneously to form an interference pattern, but must instead go through either slit A or slit B. In other words, when unobserved, the particle can travel along both paths simultaneously, in a state of superposition, with no predetermined outcome, it exists in a state of probability across all possible outcomes. However, once a detector is introduced, the particle is forced to select a single state, and only one definite result is presented. This collapse into a fixed state is known as the collapse of wavefunction.

These two experiments bear a striking resemblance to Vasubandhu's view: in both cases, reality does not seem to exist in a fixed or predetermined form, but rather comes into being through the act of observation. In this sense, observation is not a passive act or a mere bystander, but an element that may play a role in how physical reality takes on a determinate form. Vasubandhu's mind-only theory(idealism) similarly seeks to convey that the human world does not objectively exist "out there" but rather takes on a particular form through consciousness and observation. When modern physics tells people that a particle's position or state does not truly exist prior to observation but rather exists only as a set of potential possibilities, this insight parallels almost perfectly with Vasubandhu's claim in the Twenty Verses that phenomena arise dependent upon consciousness.

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The world itself contains an infinite range of potentialities, but it is the human mind that determines a single, definite reality.

These two experiments collectively revealed a central insight, that observation is not simply a passive registration of recording phenomena, but a dynamic process that may shape the essential characteristics of the observed reality. In contemporary physics, quanta are regarded as the most fundamental units and structures that constitute the universe, and they represent the most widely accepted scientific description of the basic fabric of reality. If even such a fundamental layer of physical reality, the quantum behavior, reveals the substantial role of consciousness or observation in its functioning, then Vasubandhu's assertion that "phenomena arise from the mind" appears all the more reasonable and persuasive, because for our world, at its most basic level, exists precisely on the basis of this interaction between consciousness and reality.

CONCLUSION

Vasubandhu's mind-only position provides a plausible and thought-provoking alternative to the realist account. He stressed the importance of a consciousness and very continuous imprints, and therefore, it supplies us with a coherent account of our experiences that does not require us to use non-existent mind-objects for it. Examples in the modern medical field such as the rubber hand illusion and the variability of eyewitness testimony support the idea that the mind plays a central role in shaping our perceptions. Furthermore, developments in contemporary quantum physics illustrates that even though quantum mechanics does not directly prove idealism, but it challenges traditional realism and causality, highlighting the active role of observation in shaping physical outcomes, an idea that resonates with Vasubandhu's mind-only theory—though conceived centuries ago—proves deeply resonant with contemporary scientific understanding and continues to shed light on present reality. Vasubandhu's mind-only doctrine does more than just offer an alternative, it forces us to reconsider the limits of perception and the boundary of fact and fiction, pushing the discourse beyond traditional realist constraints. Vasubandhu, through accentuating the requirement of consciousness, which is a construction of the mind, not only makes us realize our world-we get to construct it more deeply, produces an argument that is both sound in nature and highly profound in content, in discussing philosophy.

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