



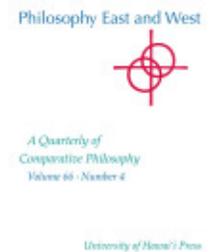
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Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy
by Jonathan C. Gold (review)

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mysticism in the sense of claiming a noetic grasp of a transcendent reality. It is a way of grasping precisely just what is before us. According to this view, there is a kind of knowledge to be had by dispensing with our dependence on symbols and cultivating or achieving a “direct seeing.”

If we pursue this line of thought, Cassirer’s conception of human knowledge as symbol-bound limits the compass of the human spirit. Cassirer could reply that in this process symbols are never truly eliminated and yet it must be admitted that not all possibilities of human knowing are fully tied to symbolic form. The reader will see that Steineck does not minimize the complexity of the approach to symbols and their status within the range of Zen Buddhist thought. His presentation places the reader in the position to explore Cassirer’s view in relation to what is not an explicit part of it.

This work provides the reader interested in Cassirer’s conception of symbolic form with a concise exposition of it crossing over much of the same ground that is treated in other recent interpretations. Its originality lies largely in the presence of instances of Japanese forms and images as they bear on Cassirer’s analysis. To date, no other interpretation of Cassirer’s thought takes this approach.

Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu’s Unifying Buddhist Philosophy. By Jonathan C. Gold. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 322. ISBN 978-0-231-16826-7.



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Vasubandhu is perhaps the most influential figure in the history of Buddhist philosophy, yet the very breadth of his contribution across many schools and traditions has led to a fragmentation of his works, as interpreters have tended to read them through the lens of narrow scholastic perspectives, finding little continuity or coherence. Some modern scholars, doubtful that anyone could have held such varied views, have gone so far as to divide Vasubandhu himself into two distinct philosophers, with two different and irreconcilable views. In his recent book, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu’s Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, Jonathan Gold offers for the first time a unified picture of Vasubandhu, extracting the driving philosophical motives, themes, and arguments that run through and tie together his diverse body of work. Carefully examining key discussions in Vasubandhu’s many and varied writings, Gold traces the continuities within Vasubandhu’s work, while illuminating the evolution of his thought. The discussions are often dense and difficult, but Gold provides lucid exposition and useful charts to help the reader follow his painstaking and intricate analysis. Identifying causality as the key unifying idea, Gold shows how it animates

Vasubandhu's discussions in both the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (*AKBh*) and his later Yogācāra works. What emerges is a portrait of a philosopher guided by a distinctive philosophical vision, which he develops through an engagement with various Buddhist traditions, putting the stamp of this unifying vision on all of them, drawing them together and paving them into a great way.

Any attempt to give a unified account of Vasubandhu's work must face up to the question of whether there were two Vasubandhus. In his first chapter, Gold undertakes the most extensive examination of this question to date, marshaling all the available textual and historical evidence to make a persuasive case that the apparent duality of the two Vasubandhus is merely a false construction produced by a flawed hermeneutic methodology. I hope this will eliminate once and for all any further compulsion to multiply Vasubandhus beyond necessity. Gold's placement of Vasubandhu within the scholastic landscape of his time shows nuance and historical sensitivity. He warns us against reifying scholastic designations into definite schools of thought that were self-consciously exclusive, arguing that the application of such later doxographic distinctions can be misleading. Gold instead brings out Vasubandhu's distinctive contributions to the various traditions with which he engages, revealing a philosopher not easily categorized according to later scholastic divisions.

Gold's analysis of the *AKBh* emphasizes two central features of Vasubandhu's reasoning: his reliance on causal arguments and his distinctive approach to scriptural interpretation, both of which are prominent in his refutation of the Sarvāstivāda view that the past and the future exist. Gold distinguishes four different versions of the argument for this view, bringing out the central role of causal reasoning in Vasubandhu's criticism of each: if things in the past and future existed now, they would have to produce effects now, contrary to observation and reason. Gold also teases out the crucial role of scriptural interpretation in these arguments, where Vasubandhu frequently adopts a non-literal interpretation of scripture. In the discussions that follow, Gold proceeds to show how this approach to scriptural interpretation runs through the *AKBh*.

Scriptural interpretation also plays a central role in Vasubandhu's account of perception. Gold shows how Vasubandhu reverses the standard account, which regards the eye as having a view literally, and interprets mental views as merely metaphorical. Arguing that the eye does not really have any view in the literal sense, Vasubandhu makes a case for a figurative interpretation of scripture. He explains that figurative interpretation involves a reference to a nonexistent entity that is a mere construction, making a crucial distinction between appearance (what something is viewed as) and substratum (what is actually viewed), which runs through the *AKBh*. Vasubandhu argues that the appearance is a false conceptualization that is constructed on the basis of the substratum, which in his account is merely a collection of momentary causally efficient individual entities (*dharmas*). Both the subject that views an object and the object that is viewed are thus merely streams of *dharmas* that take on the false appearance of a unified consciousness grasping a unified object.

Vasubandhu insists that the causality unifying these streams of momentary entities is linear, rejecting the Vaiśeṣika thesis that the mereological relationship between

a whole and its parts is a causal relationship. Vasubandhu appeals instead to a conception of causality based on an analogy to the causal relationship between seeds and sprouts: past actions provide the seeds for future false conceptualizations in which apparent enduring mereological wholes are falsely constructed out of a series of momentary *dharmas* related by linear causality. Vasubandhu's view is thus revealed to be a variety of causal reductionism: ordinary objects can be reduced to a unitary causal line of *dharmas*. This is illustrated by the example of a line of ants, which can be reduced to the individual ants: there is no line distinct from the individual ants themselves.

Gold goes on to offer an interesting and illuminating account of Vasubandhu's view of causality as manipulationist, showing that this conception of causality is central to Vasubandhu's view of inference. Gold argues that Vasubandhu understands causality in terms of patterns of invariance observed in response to specific interventions, rather than as universal laws. Gold stresses that this allows Vasubandhu to see causality as taking place within a practical context, leaving room for a degree of flexibility about what counts as a cause, given our practical concerns, while allowing the operation of causality to remain invariant within these pragmatic constraints. This invariance provides a basis for inference: we are able to establish a universal pervasion between the cause and the effect, allowing us to infer an imperceptible thing by measuring its causes. Even though such inference will always be imperfect, due to the fact that the causal frame is itself grounded in practical concerns that operate in a context of conceptual construction, Gold argues that Vasubandhu's manipulationist account of causality nonetheless makes sense of the practical utility of inference.

Gold shows how Vasubandhu's views in the *AKBh* anticipate Yogācāra ideas, emphasizing the centrality of causality in both metaphysics and epistemology. The metaphysical distinction between a level of false construction and a level of true reality, mediated by the causal nature of the ultimately real entities, is a hallmark of Vasubandhu's Yogācāra, and his understanding of causality as the touchstone of the real anticipates Dharmakīrti's proof of momentariness from causal efficiency. Gold's analysis of Vasubandhu's own argument for momentariness from spontaneous destruction shows how that argument relies on the assumption that there can be no delayed production, which becomes a major point of contention in the later debate over momentariness. With respect to epistemological issues, Gold argues convincingly that Vasubandhu implicitly assumes Dignāga's view that perception and inference have distinct objects. Gold also compares Vasubandhu's account of inference to Dharmakīrti's, stressing the central role of causality in both, but here I think Gold overstates the role of causality in Dharmakīrti's theory of inference, which actually distinguishes three types of inference: causal, self-nature, and non-apprehension. Moreover, Dharmakīrti's argument for momentariness is not a causal argument, but a conceptual argument of the self-nature variety. It does rely on a pervasion between existence and causal efficiency, but this is merely to say that causality is the touchstone of the real, not that it is the exclusive basis of inference.

Gold's discussion of Vasubandhu's Yogācāra works stresses their continuity with the *AKBh*, relying heavily upon Vasubandhu's approach to scriptural interpreta-

tion to explain his willingness to adopt Yogācāra views. In his detailed and extensive analysis of Vasubandhu's approach to scriptural interpretation, Gold extracts and precisely formulates ten key principles, stressing the importance of taking into account the special circumstances under which the Buddha is speaking and the role of reason in defending figurative interpretations. Gold applies these principles to his analysis of the Yogācāra texts, arguing persuasively that this attitude toward scriptural interpretation opened the door for Vasubandhu's acceptance of Yogācāra doctrines and scriptures. Gold illustrates this nicely by comparing Vasubandhu's discussion of shape in the *AKBh* and *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa*. In the *AKBh*, Vasubandhu had stressed that shape was a conventional designation of a stream of *dharma*s, but in the *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa* he stresses that it is an idea in the mind, thus eliminating any tendency to reify an agent to determine the conventional designation of words. Gold emphasizes that this view is a natural outgrowth of the modes of reasoning employed in the *AKBh*, showing that far from making a sharp break with his previous method of analysis, Vasubandhu extends the use of that method to reduce two streams of *dharma*s to a single mental stream.

Scriptural interpretation and causality also figure prominently in Gold's analysis of Vasubandhu's arguments for idealism in the *Viṃśatikā*, which he reconstructs as an inference to the best explanation, relying heavily upon considerations of parsimony. Offering the example of a dream, Vasubandhu shows that without assuming the existence of extra-mental objects he can account for our ordinary experience of a world that is determined in space and time, intersubjectively experienced, and causally efficient. Just as in a dream objects appear to the mind at certain times and places, the objects of waking experience are nothing but the ripening of karmic tendencies within the mind itself. Karmic patterns within the mind also explain the intersubjectivity of experience, as various people with similar karma enact what appears to be a common world. This not only shows how it is possible for everything that exists to be mind-only; it also offers a significantly simpler account of karma than a dualistic account, which requires the positing of not only extra-mental objects but also some kind of causal story connecting the original mental action to the later physical event that results. It is easier to explain current misfortune on the basis of previous action if both are mental events related by mental laws. Gold stresses that the mereological argument against the existence of atoms should be understood in the context of Vasubandhu's need to reconcile his account with Buddhist scripture, which speaks of sensory objects. Once again, Vasubandhu defends a figurative interpretation based on a special intention of the Buddha in the context of that scripture, but in order to show that this interpretation is better than the literal one, he is obliged by his own interpretive principles to offer a general argument against the possibility of physical objects.

A somewhat sharper break from the *AKBh* can be seen in Vasubandhu's doctrine of the three natures in the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, where he develops his distinctive understanding of the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness. In contrast to the *AKBh*, where each individual *dharma* has its own single nature, Vasubandhu now argues that things have three natures: an imagined nature, a dependent nature, and a perfected nature.

Despite this apparent departure from the *AKBh*, however, Gold shows that Vasubandhu again deploys many of the features of the Abhidharma analysis, and what emerges is once again an account of the world in terms of a linear causal series of momentary *dharmas*. The difference is that in the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* the *dharmas* are all mental, the apparent duality between the mind and the object being the result of karmic impressions from past mental activity: each thing is imagined to be distinct from the mind that grasps it, but this apparent duality is nothing but a dependent pattern of activity within the stream of mental states itself. Explicating this view, Gold offers lucid presentations of Vasubandhu's account of the store consciousness in which the unripened karmic impressions are collected, and of his famous analogy to the magician's illusory elephant.

Finally, Gold corrects some common misinterpretations of Vasubandhu's idealism, stressing that it cannot be a form of subjective idealism (such as Berkeley's) because the denial of the false duality that characterizes our experience entails also the denial of the mental subject, which, like the mental object, is reduced to a series of momentary *dharmas*. Consequently, the denial of duality does not amount to the denial of external objects: the realization that the duality is only apparent actually results in the presentation of these very objects as they really are. Nor does the reduction of the mind and its objects to karmic impressions in the store consciousness amount to the reification of some set of ultimate causally efficient *dharmas*, because the causal story that underpins the account is rooted in a manipulationist theory of causality that depends on causal framing in the context of our practical needs and desires. In the remainder of the book Gold attempts to extend this idea of causal framing to develop an account of ethics and responsibility in the absence of agency.

The central problem in Buddhist ethics is reconciling the tension between the assignment of moral responsibility and the reduction of the agent to a causally connected collection of individual mental states. This problem is closely connected to the problem of free will: in the absence of an agent and given the causally determined nature of the individual mental states, there seems to be no room for freedom, which in turn threatens to undermine the utility of practice as a method of bringing about enlightenment. Gold stakes out a novel position that allows a slim opening for a limited freedom in a largely deterministic world. He considers the hard determinism of Charles Goodman, who presents a dilemma: in the absence of an agent, acts must either be caused or random, neither of which amounts to free choice in any meaningful sense. He also considers a form of compatibilism advocated by Mark Siderits, which locates freedom and moral responsibility at the conventional level. As an alternative to both these views, Gold argues that moral responsibility and a limited freedom should be located at the ultimate level and ascribed to the individual mental states. These, he insists, can have a limited freedom that can, through causal influence on future states, accumulate over time, transforming suffering and selfishness into bliss and compassion. Moral responsibility accrues to these individual states, which can be considered to act well or badly depending on what effects they contribute to the totality of accumulating karma. Gold resists characterizing this view

as an alternative form of compatibilism, although it does seem to find freedom at the ultimate rather than at the conventional level. He distinguishes his view from compatibilism, however, by stressing that unlike most forms of compatibilism, his view rejects both commonsense agency and metaphysical determinism.

Gold's argument for the possibility of a limited freedom for the individual mental states depends on several key points. First, according to the *AKBh* all mental states are characterized by volition (*cetanā*), which implies that all mental states are by their nature mental acts. Second, an analysis of the twelve links of dependent origination in the *AKBh* reveals that actions are caused only by defilements (such as attachment), never directly by other actions. Gold concludes from this analysis that actions are responses to the presentation of content, given various tendencies; the conditions that produce action thus (to use Leibniz's phrase) incline without necessitating. Nonetheless, Gold admits, the inclination to act can be almost irresistible, given the degree to which we are bound by our attachment to false constructions. Consequently, the best we can do at the moments when we see through these constructions is to refrain from reinforcing the compulsion to act in the future, which is best exemplified in the taking of monastic vows. Most importantly, metaphysical determinism is refuted on the grounds that the reduction of the agent to a collection of causally determined events takes place within a causal frame that is itself dependent on our purposes and concerns at the conventional level. Causality turns out to be as much a conceptual construction as the self, and consequently each causal frame is self-undermining: at the ultimate level there is no privileged causal frame. Gold thus concedes that human action is almost completely constrained by causes and conditions, but he appeals to causal framing to find a tiny foothold for free choice in an otherwise highly determined world.

Gold extends Vasubandhu's analogy of the line of ants in a striking way to illustrate the possibility of action without agency: the individual mental states are like individual ants, and the apparent agency that arises is like the seemingly intentional activity of the whole line of ants. No individual ant ever intends to produce the neatly organized and seemingly purposeful movement of the entire line; each ant merely lays down pheromones and follows pheromones that have been laid down. In the same way, each individual mental state through its mental activity conditions future tendencies, and thus marks each present thought in such a way that future thoughts identify with it. Each state lacks agency and yet many such states collectively generate what seem like the actions of an agent with intent. While these mental actions are not completely free, being conditioned as they are by past mental actions, it remains possible that an individual mental state at a particular moment, seeing the causal frame in which it is conditioned, could refrain from laying down the same causal markers and thus produce conditions for the further reduction of such markers in the future. Over a long period of time this could radically change the course of the stream of mental events, transforming a being bound by attachments and selfishness into one acting with boundless compassion and generosity. It is on the basis of this slim opening for freedom that Gold argues we must understand Vasubandhu's ethics.

Although this is an intriguing and original approach to the problem of free will and moral responsibility, I am not convinced that Gold's account successfully avoids the dilemma presented by Goodman. In the analogy between the individual ants and the individual mental states, the choice to set up conditions for refraining from future mental action would be analogous to the choice of the individual ant to stop laying down pheromones. Obviously this is something that the ant is not free to do, yet in Gold's view the individual mental state must be capable of this at least under some circumstances. The question is: on what basis does the mental state make this choice? Presumably because it becomes aware that the conceptual framework in which its activity takes place is false and injurious. This might be analogous to an ant realizing that the food that the colony is gathering is poisoned and then having the ability to stop laying down pheromones to try to dampen the injurious activity of the whole colony. The problem is that if we think of the choice in this way, then we have turned the individual mental state into an agent with libertarian freedom. On the other hand, if we admit that the decision to negate future activity is merely the effect of the total conditions in which that mental state finds itself, then its action seems to be completely determined. Moreover, insofar as whether or not the individual mental state at a given moment manages to see through its false conceptual framework is just the result of whatever past karma happened to ripen at that moment, then it looks like the decision is to some extent random.

I am not convinced that appealing to the lack of an ultimate causal frame allows one to escape from this dilemma. Causal framing is supposed to defeat metaphysical determinism by showing that there is no final reduction governed by a single set of deterministic causal laws. However, the fact that no causal frame is ultimate also implies that the very reduction of the agent to this particular set of mental states related in this particular way is merely provisional and dependent on our needs and concerns at the conventional level. The individual mental state is thus not any more free because of causal framing: the ontological status of the state itself is called into question by the fact that there is no ultimate causal frame.

Despite these difficulties, Gold's account of Vasubandhu's ethics makes an important contribution to the debate over free will and moral responsibility insofar as it offers an interesting position that has so far been overlooked. In his final chapter, Gold teases out the implications of this potentially fruitful view for the kinds of problems that confront the world today, concluding that we should not expect to bring about sweeping changes by acting on abstract principles like justice, because all too often we find that, being in the grip of attachment and ignorance, our best intentions backfire on us. The best way to address the massive suffering in the world today is to understand the causal conditions that bring it about and implement incremental changes, which over time will transform these conditions. Although this final chapter is somewhat speculative, Gold's interpretation of Vasubandhu's ethics offers an appealing alternative to the tendency to attempt to solve the world's problems through intervention and force driven by rigid ideological commitments, rather than through an understanding of their root causes coupled with patient and persistent efforts in counteracting these causes.

This book is the most comprehensive account of Vasubandhu's philosophy to date, and it is likely to become an indispensable resource for future scholarship. Although some of Gold's interpretive positions are bound to remain points of contention among scholars, his careful textual analysis challenges our preconceptions about Vasubandhu, forcing us all to rethink our understanding of this pivotal Buddhist thinker. Gold brings Vasubandhu to life, not only by painting a compelling portrait of the philosopher and his views, but also by showing how these views remain relevant to the continuing discussion of living philosophical questions and pressing practical problems.

The Philosophy of Lokāyata: A Review and Reconsideration. By Bijayananda Kar. Delhi: Motilal Banarstdass, 2013. Pp. 136. Rs. 295.



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The paucity of classical sources concerning the Cārvāka/Lokāyata school is mirrored by a scarcity of contemporary scholarship. On that note, this book is a welcome contribution. The subtitle of this book promises “a review and reconstruction.” There is some review of classical and contemporary sources (although perhaps not quite enough); however, the bulk of the book is Kar's reconstruction of what he thinks the Cārvākas might have or should have said. I will follow Kar in using “Cārvāka” and “Lokāyata” interchangeably to refer to the classical Indian school usually taken to endorse materialism, atheism, hedonism, and/or skepticism.

Kar's book consists of an introduction and conclusion with six chapters on a variety of issues (knowledge, materialism, atheism, morality, the self, and socio-individual relationship). In the introduction, Kar explains the points where he thinks the Cārvākas ought to be reevaluated. After a brief review of classical sources including the Upaniṣads, Early Buddhist texts, and Cārvāka philosophers such as Bṛhaspati, Purandara, and Jayarāṣi, Kar sets out to challenge many of the received views. His first controversial (if somewhat puzzling) point is that the Cārvākas engage in “no wholesale condemnation of the Vedic source,” but only of those parts that refer to trans-empirical phenomena (pp. 3–4). He also claims that the Cārvākas can't endorse the type of dogmatic metaphysical materialism they are usually taken to endorse, a claim he supports in more detail in the chapter on materialism. This illustrates the main claim of the book that the Cārvāka school is not nearly as simplistic or dogmatic as it has been taken to be by both classical and contemporary scholars.

The key to this claim comes in Kar's chapter on epistemology. While many sources present the Cārvākas as accepting perception as the single means of knowledge, which is then meant to support materialist metaphysics, Kar argues that the