

Book Review

Other Lives: Mind and World in Indian Buddhism, by Sonam Kachru. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. Pp. xiii + 299.

Sonam Kachru's *Other Lives: Mind and World in Indian Buddhism* (2021) is a nuanced exploration of the thought of Buddhist Philosopher Vasubandhu. It focuses on key verses at the beginning and end of Vasubandhu's Yogācāra treatise entitled *Vimśatikā* or *Twenty Verses*. The book is dense and not for the faint of heart; it rewards slow and patient reading and will be of interest to philosophers and Buddhologists who already have an understanding of Vasubandhu's texts and who are interested in alternative ways of interpreting certain of Vasubandhu's argumentative ambitions in the *Twenty Verses*. All citations from Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* will be from Kachru's translation in the Appendix of *Other Lives* (2021, pp. 201-221). Following Kachru, I also recommend Silk's edition (2016).

Because the book is so focused and careful, I want to provide a review that reflects that care by organizing my thoughts around several hermeneutical contexts which I shall use to critically engage with Kachru. My positive hope is to offer this review as a 'way in' for those who might be less well situated in the details of Indian Buddhist philosophy. More critically, I will make use of these hermeneutical contexts to raise some questions about why Kachru focuses on some contexts at the expense of others.

I have in mind five ways that one can and should interpret a given text. One can interpret a text in relation to itself, in relation to other works by the same author, with respect to interlocutors the author is engaging with, and by the insights of those subsequent philosophers who inherited the work of the author. Finally, one can also helpfully interpret an author's work by engaging with other authors in different times and traditions who are engaged in similar questions. Kachru's book delivers on all five of these interpretative contexts. I divide my remarks among them and say something about what I see as the main intellectual contributions of Kachru's work while also offering some critical reflections on where I think more work could have been done.

I submit that the starting point for interpreting a philosophical text is to understand it in relation to itself. We might put this in the form of a question: how do the parts of the text work together to create a whole on the basis of which we can individuate the text as a piece of philosophy in relation to other works? Kachru's book offers only a very brief breakdown of the text (cf. [Kachru](#)

2021, pp. 202-4) and little to no analysis of how its various parts fit together except with respect to the invocation of dreams at the outset and at the end. These brackets for the text can only be adequately understood by anchoring them in the rest of Vasubandhu's arguments. Thus, I first present a reconstruction of what I take to be the argumentative ambitions of the root text verse by verse. In doing so, I do not wish to run afoul of Kachru's warning that '[i]t might be that the inner life of philosophers from the past can look to be the same as ours when intellection is reduced to the familiar manipulation of the well-worn tools of our trade, analysis and argument. But we need not forever restrict our attention thus to claims or definitions and arguments for and against them' (Kachru 2021, p. 196). That is, I do not wish to explain away the differences between ourselves and Vasubandhu, but rather to render them more salient by making it clear how the various parts of this text fit together. But I do think that some picture of what the text is doing holistically at the level of 'analysis and argument' can help to contextualize some of the further phenomenological nuances that Kachru is at pains to highlight in his work.

The text begins with an analysis of impaired perception. Vasubandhu's example is one of cataracts on the eye which give the impression of seeing hairs or double visions of the moon. There are (obviously) no hairs out there in the world and there is certainly only one moon. But something is seen, even if what is seen is not as it appears to be. What is seen in both 'good' and 'bad' cases is a presentation of content projected by the mind. Vasubandhu thinks that the non-veridical case is much the same as the veridical one in the sense that even in ordinary perception, there is no mind-independent object that causes the impression to arise. In interpreting this opening argument, Kachru warns us that, '[w]ere we to follow some philosophers in thinking that Vasubandhu is offering an independent epistemic argument in his introduction, we must think that Vasubandhu believes he has already provided us with a reason to believe that objects do not exist. Or, we must think that he has given us reason to conclude that the deliverances of our perceptual experience could not be related to objects. But that would imply that he begins his work with a howler' (Kachru 2021, p. 52). Vasubandhu's opening move is not a howler. It is meant to challenge those philosophers who think that what is distinctive about perception is that it puts us in touch with a world independent of our minds to produce reasons in favour of such a view. The question Vasubandhu is asking the realist is: what evidence do you have that those things which we experience *as* mind-independent are in fact so?

Verse 2 offers a charitable answer to this question by offering three important motivations for realism about perception. Here's the argument reconstructed in standard form:

1. If the content of perception is only a presentation of content, then perception cannot:
 - a. occur with the spatiotemporal regularity it does with respect to different streams of consciousness,

- b. be the basis of intersubjective agreement about how the world seems and
 - c. account for the difference between the causal efficacy and non-efficacy of veridical and non-veridical experiences;
2. But perception does a) occur with spatiotemporal regularity, is b) the basis of intersubjective agreement, and does explain c) the difference between veridical and non-veridical experiences;
 3. Therefore, the content of perception is *not* only a presentation of content. There are real mind-independent objects whose existence explains a) the regularity of perception in space, b) intersubjective agreement, and c) the difference between the efficacy and non-efficacy of veridical and non-veridical experiences.

In verses 3-7, Vasubandhu responds to these worries and it is here that Kachru's analysis shows a remarkable level of nuance and depth (2021, p. 2).

By beginning his work with an appeal to other human contexts of experience (like dreaming) and other lifeforms and their environments important to Buddhist cosmology (such as the lives of hungry ghosts and beings in hell, more about which below), Vasubandhu effectively reminds his interlocutors that Buddhists must believe that other lives and other minds ought to influence the way we describe what being minded involves. He also takes it that doing so has consequences. Thinking with such alternating contexts of possible experience, to put it impressionistically for now, has the consequence that the concepts of 'mind' and 'world' can be shown to be peculiarly entangled.

Vasubandhu's claim is that these different contexts of experience, however entangled, do not require a world independent of the mind experiencing it to realize the contents of those experiences. Vasubandhu's reply to the realist's tripartite worry can be schematized as follows:

4. Dreams are experiences that have spatiotemporal determinacy and, in some cases, have the same effects as waking experience (for example, erotic dreams) but no mind-independent objects as their cause;
5. *Pretas* all see the same river of pus, thus there is intersubjective agreement, even though the determinacy of this hell has no mind-independent object;
6. Time in hell under the torture of karmically generated demons is efficacious in the absence of a mind-independent object;
7. If 4-6 are true, then perception's being impressions only can address all the realist's worries.
8. Therefore, perception's being impressions only can address all the realist's worries.

Siderits (2007, p. 157) helpfully interprets this argument according to the so-called 'principle of lightness', a version of Ockham's razor. If the realist and

idealist readings of how perception works both have coherent stories to tell, then the idealist wins the day because it posits fewer entities than the realist. This does not reduce or eliminate important differences between these varying modes of experience. Rather, '[i]t is helpful to think of the text as being framed by consideration of possibilities enshrined in Buddhist cosmology and narrative that may require revision of some part of the common-sense commitments of Vasubandhu's interlocutors and those of his readers, then and now' (Kachru 2021, p. 4). Specifically, Vasubandhu wants to attack the common-sense commitment that what is distinctive of perception is that it discloses a world that is independent of the operations of our minds.

Having argued that his own view is on par with the realist's in terms of explanatory power, Vasubandhu then does some housekeeping, addressing potential worries that his own particular brand of philosophical idealism is inconsistent with canon (Kachru 2021, p. 211). The Buddha often spoke of awareness, sensory systems, and objects to which those sensory systems are differentially sensitive as if they are three distinct but causally related domains. If that's so, then it seems we have *prima facie* reasons to think that the Buddha was committed to some form of realism about the objects that stimulate relevant sensory systems to produce moments of consciousness.

Vasubandhu's response is to point out in verse 9 and its commentary that the Blessed One also spoke of the arising of consciousness as being the result of dispositional powers. This is what Kachru refers to as Vasubandhu's 'interesting thesis' (2021, pp. 17-20). What we really need to explain the entanglement of mind and world is not a mind-independent set of natural causes for the presentation of content, but rather an historically deep and *cosmologically vast* understanding of action (*karma*). This is the heart of Kachru's reading of Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*.

In the auto-commentary on this verse Vasubandhu further argues that speaking of sense-fields doesn't necessarily commit one to a realist ontology.

A conscious mental event possessing some specific manifest content, such as some particular hue, for example, comes into being on account of a seed or dispositional power attaining the end of a directed process of change. The Blessed One spoke of these two—the dispositional power and the manifest content—as being, respectively, the two conditions for perceptual experience called the eye and hue, to continue with our example of visual experience (Kachru 2021, p. 212).

It is further claimed (in verse 10), that teaching about sense-fields has the advantage of inviting people to understand the selflessness of persons.

Having set his house aright in terms of issues to do with the Buddha's words, Vasubandhu now goes on the attack and argues in verses 11-15 that there is no coherent concept of a mind-independent entity. The level of argumentative sophistication in this section of the text is utterly remarkable. It was therefore unfortunate to find that Kachru's book spends precious little time exploring it. Charitably interpreted, this omission is probably on purpose and

in deference to the fact that a proper treatment of these verses would require a book in itself (cf. [Kachru 2021](#), p. 146). Even so, as I mentioned at the outset, I fear that without such contextualization, the argumentative function of Vasubandhu's advertence to the entwining of minds and worlds in other lives will not be sufficiently salient.

Vasubandhu's aim in this part of the text is to show that the Buddha could not have been a realist about the external world because there is no basis on which to establish the mind-independent existence of perceptible objects or even the physical atomic *dharmas* out of which composite wholes are composed. Again, my reconstruction here is terse, but constraints of space demand brevity:

9. If a sense object were mind-independent and real, then it would be either:
 - a. An intentional object, that is a single whole, over and above its parts
 - b. A plurality of atoms
 - c. An aggregation of atoms;
10. One never knows an intentional object separate from its parts;
11. Therefore, a sense object does not exist over and above its parts.
12. Individual atoms are undetectable by the senses;
13. If individual atoms are undetectable by the senses, then a plurality is undetectable by the senses;
14. If a plurality of atoms is undetectable by the senses, then a plurality of atoms cannot be a mind-independent sense-object;
15. Therefore, a plurality of atoms cannot be a mind-independent sense-object.

At this point, Vasubandhu has dismissed the first two options for how a realist might explain the nature of a mind-independent sense object of perception (a, b). But the third option is a more sophisticated option, so he will argue against it at some length in the remaining verses of this section.

Here's Siderits setting up a visual metaphor for the third possibility (c) that Vasubandhu considers: 'The idea is roughly like this: if a single snowflake fell on you it probably wouldn't register, but if enough snowflakes are stuck together to make a snowball, you'd probably feel them when they struck' ([Siderits 2007](#), p. 161).

16. If an aggregation of atoms is to be a mind-independent intentional object, then either the atoms that aggregate together:
 - a. have an actual finite size or
 - b. are sizeless geometrical points;
17. If an atom has an actual finite size, then it must be a composite whole made of parts;
18. If something is a composite whole, made of parts, then it is not a real mind-independent entity.

Vasubandhu reasons here under the assumption that something's being composite means that its unity is imposed on its parts by a category in the mind.

19. Therefore, if an atom has an actual finite size, then it is not a real mind-independent entity.
20. If an atom is a sizeless geometrical point, then combining atoms will not increase their size;
21. If combining sizeless atoms will not increase their size, then an aggregation of such atoms will not create a mind-independent composite whole that is perceptually discernible;
22. Therefore, if atoms are sizeless geometrical points, then their aggregation will not create a mind-independent composite whole that is perceptually discernible.
23. Therefore, it is not the case that an aggregation of atoms can be a mind-independent intentional object.

I hope that this reconstruction gives the reader some indication of the philosophical nuance Vasubandhu offers his reader in this portion of the text.

From here, we get a time-lag argument in verse 16. There Vasubandhu re-invokes the context of dreaming by claiming that, cognitive awareness regarding perceptual evidence is analogous to what happens in dreams and similar experiences'; the similarity, of course, being that neither has an external object which causes it to occur. In this auto-commentary on this verse, Vasubandhu unpacks the time-lag argument as follows (Kachru 2021, p. 217):

[W]hen a cognitive episode regarding perceptual evidence—a cognitive episode, that is, with the content 'I am enjoying an instance of perceptual evidence'—comes about, at such time the object is not actually seen. This is for two reasons: firstly, there is the fact that the analytic work of discerning or judging involved in such a cognitive episode can only derive from cognitive awareness; and, secondly, there is the fact of strictly visual awareness having ceased to be operative by the time cognitive awareness comes into play.

In standard form:

24. All mental and physical events are momentary;
25. One's cognition of one's own perception as 'evidential' pertains to mental and physical events that have already arisen and passed away;
26. If one's cognition of one's own perception as 'evidential' pertains to mental and physical events that have already arisen and passed away, then our sense that perception makes its object evident is constructed by the mind;
27. Therefore, our sense that perception makes its object evident is constructed by the mind.

This argument attacks the epistemology of perception by attempting to show that our sense of perception's immediate evidentiary force is constructed by our minds, hence neutering it of any import in an analysis of its metaphysics.

In verse 17cd and in the verses that follow it, Vasubandhu concludes as he began by focusing on the analogies between perception in dreaming with the claim that, 'when dreaming, one who has not yet awakened does not understand the unreality of the content experienced' (Kachru 2021, p. 218). The apprehension of the world that we inhabit in dreaming and in perception is, to use Kachru's term, 'entwined', but also *committed*. Just like when we dream, the world of the dream seems independent of our ways of engaging with it, so also does the world of sense seem real when we perceive it. When one becomes lucid within a dream, one is able to see the world as a mental construction. So also does a liberated person have the ability to understand the world of sense as a mental projection.

Kachru interprets Vasubandhu in the following way: 'There is no reason to think that our waking experiences are relevantly like dreams in any global way. Indeed, the very reason dreams can support the sense of the example works against them, given that it is only on waking that we come to discern this peculiarity of dream experiences. We do not wake up from our waking experiences' (Kachru 2021, p. 53). But Vasubandhu thinks that we absolutely do wake up from our waking experiences. This is what *bodhi* is, a waking up from the dream of ordinary experience that is precisely parallel to waking up from a dream or becoming lucid while continuing to dream (see Vasubandhu's final paragraph of auto-commentary on verses 17cd in Kachru 2021, p. 218). Further, even if there are important ways in which dreaming and perception are disanalogous, as Kachru claims, it does not follow that we have *no reason* to think that perception and dreaming are similar *globally* (more on this in a moment). They can be similar enough that we can use those similarities to generate epistemic worries about the specialness of perception and the realist metaphysics it tends to motivate. Kachru continues: 'whatever else the distinction between waking and dreaming might consist in, it cannot consist in there being two entirely insulated realms, any more than it can consist in there being (ultimately) only one realm' (Kachru 2021, p. 74). But Yogācāra philosophy is precisely the claim that ultimately all there is consciousness. This is why the school is often called *citta-mātra* or 'mind-only'. This is also where the global similarity of perception, dreaming, and all other forms of intentional mental activity comes in: the storehouse consciousness and the afflicted mind are the main psychological systems that construct the sense of self and project a world of value and meaning that is then interpreted by the untutored mind as being really *out there* and caused by mind-independent events.

Verse 18 offers an analysis of how to individuate mental states without recourse to objects which cause them by invoking intersubjectivity and offers a further account of how to distinguish dreaming from perception without invoking an external object. Verses 19 and 20 conclude with a consideration of

an objection about how the bad *karma* associated with killing could be accumulated if no one has a body or a voice on account of consciousness being all there is. My analysis here has been very quick but I hope that the schema provided here can function as a kind of scaffolding to help the reader engage with the depth of Kachru's work. The rest of this review will be much shorter than what has preceded it.

I now briefly turn to considering other works by Vasubandhu and how these can help to illuminate his philosophical ambitions in the *Twenty Verses*. Kachru is seriously concerned with this dimension of interpreting Vasubandhu but he engages in this part of the project in a way that I found challenging. Much of Kachru's analysis of Vasubandhu's work outside of the *Twenty Verses* is focused on the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, an encyclopaedic treatment of topics in pre-Mahayana Abhidharmic philosophy (Pruden 1991). Vasubandhu's doctrinal commitments in this text are complicated. The verses of the *kośa* express an orthodox Sārvastivāda perspective, while the commentarial prose of the *bhāṣya* embodies a critique of Sārvastivādin orthodoxy from the perspective of the Sautrāntika school. It is an even more complicated question how these evolving Abhidharmic commitments open onto and anticipate Vasubandhu's conversion to the Mahayana school of Yogācāra. Kachru does not offer any analysis of Vasubandhu's evolving philosophical and doctrinal commitments.

There are important differences between Vasubandhu's changing philosophical voices as a Sārvastivāda, Sautrāntika, and Yogācārin. These differences are pronounced enough that there is a dedicated strand of Vasubandhu scholarship that sees him as two people rather than one (Frauwallner 1951). And the alleged divide occurs along the faultline of his pre- and post-Mahayana conversion. I agree with Kachru's implicit commitment to reading these texts as written by one extraordinary philosopher (see Gold 2015, ch. 1 for more). But to put my worry in a slogan that I owe to Jack Beaulieu: reading the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* to understand the commitments of the *Twenty Verses* is like reading the *Tractatus* to understand Wittgenstein's commitments in the *Philosophical Investigations*. To be sure, we can read one to understand the commitments of the other, but the order of explanation must be carefully foregrounded given that in both cases, the latter text arose in part as a means for the author to distance himself from commitments embodied in the former one.

Kachru's achievement with *Other Lives* has been to demonstrate that with a close analysis of even a few verses of Vasubandhu's oeuvre, we find one of the most acute philosophical minds to have ever lived. Vasubandhu is not just interested in similar questions to those that interest contemporary philosophers of mind, he thinks about these questions in ways that lead him to very different places. As Kachru points out, the commitments Vasubandhu embodies might not resonate with us today, but the way he uses them to explore the structure of experience is worthy of careful consideration. For

example, consider Vasubandhu's example of encountering demons in hell. Kachru points out that, '[l]ike beings in hell, we are in the grip of what is manifest to us on the basis of constraints we mislocate and mischaracterize when we think that our experiences are constrained by an array of objects in the present, specified (as if) independently of the experiential profile of any one particular lifeform' (Kachru 2021, p. 185). As foreign as the context of this example might be, we can note that its lesson is instructive: often we take the valence of our experiences – especially, emotionally charged ones – as being properly caused by persons and events outside of us. But a wise person eventually comes to see that it is our dispositions that frame the meaning of so much of our experience and that it is here that we have the capacity to intervene in the course of our own life, to change the patterns that define the scope of our possibilities. This is one of the central insights of Buddhist philosophy in India.

I submit that Vasubandhu's capacity to evolve and reformulate his commitments helps us to discern a developing thread of philosophical insight that is not only historically interesting, but philosophically alive. Vasubandhu's work can help us critically examine our own methodological presuppositions and commitments. As Kachru points out, 'Our unearned confidence in the universality that attaches to our intuitions in our parochial use of conceptual tools in a couple of languages is only exceeded by the institutionalized form of sanctioned ignorance of the greatest part of serious thought in other cultures, in other languages, at different times' (Kachru 2021, p. 195). Vasubandhu is special as a philosopher in the history of world philosophy because in many respects, his main interlocutor is himself. Thus, Vasubandhu can help us out of methodological, conceptual, and historical solipsism by expanding our senses of intellectual possibility by teaching us how to talk to others but also how to talk to ourselves. In conclusion, thinking alongside Kachru and Vasubandhu has been instructive for me and I think will be for anyone who takes the time to work through this careful book.

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzaco62>

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