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Divine minds. Idealism as panentheism in Berkeley and Vasubandhu

'I entirely agree with what the holy Scripture saith, that in God we live, and move, and have our being.' (Berkeley 1949: 214)

Back in 2005, when I was still a student, I had one of those legendary seminars which was basically me and my sinology professor meeting in his office for a cup of green tea and some academic discussion. The seminar was called 'Contemporary Chinese philosophy', although the term 'contemporary' was used rather broadly. In one of our meetings, we discussed Xiong Shili's *Xin Weishi Lun* or *New Consciousness-Only Theory*. Xiong started out as a Buddhist in the *weishi* tradition (the Chinese variety of Indian Yogācāra Buddhism), but later became an important critic of Buddhism as well as one of the founding fathers of the New Neo-Confucianism movement (*xin rujia*) in 20th century China. As far as I can remember, this was my first encounter with Yogācāra, although in its Chinese guise. My professor explained to me the fundamental tenets of *weishi*/Yogācāra, namely that everything is mind, and that the phenomenal world is all there is, and I, being the overconfident junior year student I was, replied: 'Well, that's basically the same as Berkeley's idealism.' I explained that for Berkeley the external world is unreal and that ultimately, everything exists in the mind of God, and summarized his views saying: 'Ultimately, we are God's thoughts.' To which my professor replied: 'Yes, that's *weishi*.' Today, I'm not so sure anymore that either of us was right that day, and in this paper, I'll attempt to review the dubious theses we both propounded in that conversation.

Yogācāra is a vast and complex Buddhist philosophical tradition, and has been around for one and half millennia. To make things easier, I will focus on one of its major proponents: the Indian philosopher Vasubandhu. Berkeley and Vasubandhu the Yogācārin¹ easily suggest themselves for comparison: despite coming from very different cultural and intellectual backgrounds, they both espouse a kind of

¹ According to legend, Vasubandhu started out as an *Abhidhamma* philosopher in the *Vaibhāṣika* tradition but was later in life converted to Yogācāra by his half-brother Asaṅga. Against this, some contemporary scholars (e.g. Erich Frauwallner), have argued that there were actually two Vasubandhus, an older and a younger one. I will not pursue this debate here and simply focus on the Yogācārin Vasubandhu regardless of whether there is another one or not.

metaphysical idealism, and in both of their idealist systems, some kind of divine mind plays a central role. Specifically, in this paper, I will take a comparative look at them and explore the possibility of interpreting them as proponents of a kind of *idealist panentheism*. This entails two questions: (1) In what sense are Berkeley's and Vasubandhu's theories *idealist* philosophies? (2) Is it justified to interpret them as *panentheists*? To be more precise, the second question has two parts, namely: (2a) whether Berkeley's idealism should be regarded as a kind of *panentheism*, and (2b) whether the *theism*-part of panentheism can justly be applied to the Yogācāra notion of mind as ultimate reality. My answer will be mostly negative, though: I will argue that Berkeley is not a panentheist – unfortunately, since this leaves some pressing questions in his system unanswered – and that labeling Vasubandhu as a panentheist stretches the concept of God beyond the limits of reasonable application. But that is not the end of it: in the final section, I will argue that a Yogācārin reading of Berkeley's idealism opens up an interesting possibility for idealist panentheism.

1. What is panentheism?

Panentheists as well as their critics agree that giving a precise definition of panentheism is far from easy. Likewise, it is not exactly clear how to distinguish it from its rivals, theism and pantheism.² The most basic characterization to which more or less everybody could agree is: panentheism is the view that the world is contained in God, but that God at the same time exceeds the world. The world is *in* God, but not *identical* to God. Thus, panentheism manages to find something like a middle way between the extremes of theism and pantheism: theism maintains a strict ontological distinction between God and world; pantheism conflates the two and claims that God and world are identical; panentheism keeps God and world separate while at the same time acknowledging that they are intimately connected. Or, to put it differently: classical theism overemphasizes God's transcendence, pantheism overemphasizes his immanence, only panentheism hits the sweet spot right in between. Unfortunately, virtually every term in the statement 'The world is in God' stands in need of clarification: what is meant by *world*? What does it mean for the world to be *in* God? And what kind of *God* are we talking about? I admit that I have no ambition to enter this somewhat idiosyncratic discussion, let alone provide a definite answer to its central questions.³ But since the task of this paper is to answer the question 'are Berkeley and/or Vasubandhu panentheists?', we won't get anywhere if we don't have at least a working definition of panentheism, or else the question becomes nonsensical. How could you tell whether something has some property F without having at least a rudimentary understanding of

² For criticisms along these lines, see e.g. Göcke 2013 and Mullins 2016.

³ For those who *do* want to enter this discussion, Clayton 2004 and 2013, or Lataster 2018 might be suitable points of entry.

what F means? So, I will give a rough explication of what I mean by *world*, *in*, and *God* when applied to panentheism.

(1) *World*. Surprisingly little has been said about this part of the definition of panentheism. But then again, explaining the term doesn't seem too difficult: the world is all there is other than God, or all that exists as a result of divine creation. We should resist the temptation to specify this vague 'all there is' any further, so as not to unnecessarily restrict the concept of panentheism and make it dependent on a certain kind of metaphysics. For example, Mullins (2016: 339) says the world (or universe, as he prefers to say) 'is a spatiotemporal collection of physical objects', thereby eliminating any *idealist* conception of panentheism by mere definitional *fiat*. Obviously, such a definition is of little help when it comes to Berkeley or Yogācāra Buddhism.

(2) *In*. This is arguably the crucial part, and unfortunately, no universally agreed upon explication has been given yet. Phillip Clayton famously lists no less than thirteen available interpretations of the 'en' in panentheism, and his list is probably in no way exhaustive.⁴ To explain what it means for the world to be *in* God, panentheists often retreat to metaphors like: the world is God's body, or: the world is in the womb of God. But these metaphors, beautiful as they may be, are of little help when what we need is a precise and workable definition of panentheism. So far, we only know that panentheism is a view of the relationship between God and world, and that this relationship is neither one of identity nor of total distinctiveness. But what is it, then?

For the purposes of this paper, I will understand panentheism as a view of the God-world relation according to which:

- (a) The world is in God, but God exceeds the world: world and God stand in some kind of *part-whole* relation.
- (b) The world in some sense *ontologically depends* on God.
- (c) The world is *not identical* with God.
- (d) God and the world are *interrelated*: God influences the world and *vice versa*.

This is deliberately vague. But neither Berkeley nor the Yogācārins are typically regarded as panentheists, so we should start with a notion of panentheism broad enough to at least make it possible to count them as such. Specifically, our understanding of the 'en' in panentheism needs to be vague enough to allow an idealist interpretation. Since one of the core points of idealism is, of course, that there is no such thing as physical space, any *spatial* interpretation of 'en' (one drawing on a concept of physical space) is ruled out. But other than that, I will be fairly liberal in applying the vague modifier 'in some sense'. As long as Berkeley or Vasubandhu turn out to be panentheists on any reasonably plausible reading of the four conditions mentioned above, I will agree that they are.

⁴ Clayton 2004: 253.

(3) *God*. Panentheism is primarily a claim about the relation between God and the world, not about the nature of God. Thus, the panentheist's idea of God doesn't differ that much from the theist's. For example, both agree that God is the omnipresent creator and sustainer of the universe. Nevertheless, there are some notable differences due to the fact that the strong interrelatedness of God and world requires a more dynamic God, with all this entails. Borrowing from Hartshorne's classification scheme, we can characterize the panentheist God as ETCKW: God is **e**ternal, yet **t**emporal; **c**onscious; **k**nows the world; and is **w**orld-inclusive.⁵ This distinguishes panentheism from the impassible, immutable and atemporal God of classical theism (ECK) as well as from the non-personal God of pantheism (EW).

2. Berkeley's theistic idealism

The core of Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy is his infamous claim that *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived. By this, he means that all apparently mind-independent objects like the tree outside my window or the cup of coffee on my desk have no reality whatsoever apart from being perceived. Material objects are not real: reality consists only of ideas and the minds which perceive them. Berkeley's idealism is a direct response to Locke's representationalist realism. Representationalists claim that real, material, mind-independent objects exist 'out there', and that what we perceive are mental representations of these objects, generated through the causal process of perception. Thus, the real objects 'out there' are not directly accessible to me – all I have are my representations of them.⁶ Berkeley (correctly, I think) identifies this as the gateway to skepticism and argues that realist representationalism must be false.⁷ But if it is false, the only option which remains is idealism: mental representations don't represent anything – they are all there is. All of reality consists of nothing more than ideas.

Well, not *all* of reality, actually. Ideas are mental contents, and there is no content without a container. Thus, Berkeley's ontology is twofold: there are minds and ideas. Berkeley explains: 'The former [i.e. minds] are *active, indivisible substances*: the latter [i.e. ideas] are *inert, fleeting, dependent beings*, which subsist not by themselves, but are supported by, or exist in minds or spiritual substances.' (PHK 89/Berkeley 1949: 79-80) Minds are the substances which perceive mental contents, ideas are the mental contents which are perceived. And because mental contents presuppose a mind whose content they are, ideas have no self-sufficient existence, but depend on the minds which perceive them. In contrast, minds are active and their 'existence consists not in being perceived, but in perceiving ideas and thinking.' (PHK 139/Berkeley 1949: 105) Therefore, only minds can have any causal power – ideas

⁵ Cf. Clayton 2010: 184-185.

⁶ Incidentally, the Buddhist counterpart to this position is held by the Sautrāntika school which Vasubandhu seems to have followed at some point in his earlier career before converting to Yogācāra.

⁷ I will not discuss Berkeley's arguments against representationalism here since they don't matter for the question of panentheism. For an overview see Downing 2011: pt. 2.

are affected by mental activity but cannot themselves cause anything. So, according to Berkeley's theory, I am mistaken when I believe that there is a real, material, mind-independent cup of coffee on the table before me. Instead, the cup is a bundle of different ideas: a visual impression of a certain shape and color, a tactile impression of warmth, smoothness, and hardness, accompanied by olfactory and gustatory impressions of the smell and taste of fresh coffee. Representationalists would argue that these impressions represent a real, mind-external object. Berkeley denies this – the bundle of impressions *is* the real object, and the only one there is: 'Ideas imprinted on the senses are real things', he says, 'or do really exist; this we do not deny, but we deny they can subsist without the minds which perceive them, or that they are resemblances of any archetypes existing without the mind' (PHK 90/Berkeley 1949: 80).

Does this mean that for Berkeley, all of reality is just a product of my imagination? If everything is just an idea in my mind, can we still distinguish between real and imaginary objects? Berkeley replies that the distinction still holds: there are some ideas which actually are produced by my mind and over which I have some measure of control. If I imagine an apple, I can *imagine* a green, red, or yellow one. But other ideas are forced upon me, and I have no control over them. Therefore, these ideas can't be products of my own mind: if I *see* a red apple before me on the table, I can't help but see a red one. So, the distinction between real and imaginary objects retains its force: real objects are ideas which are not created by my own mind. But then, where do they come from? They can't be caused by other ideas since ideas are causally inert. The only option is that they are caused by some other mind, and for Berkeley, this is the mind of God: 'But whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by sense have not a like dependence on my will. [...] There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them.' (PHK 29/Berkeley 1949: 53) This is, in a nutshell, Berkeley's *passivity argument* for the existence of God: To maintain a distinction between real and imaginary objects, we need to distinguish between ideas caused by my own mind and ideas caused by another mind. If ideas are not caused by my mind, they must be caused by another mind, and this is the mind of God.⁸

But now, another question arises: if ideas depend entirely on the mind perceiving them, do things just pop into existence whenever some mind perceives them, and then suddenly vanish when it stops? If I leave my office and lock the door, no one will perceive the cup of coffee on my desk anymore – does it cease to exist then? Again, Berkeley denies this:

⁸ There's an extensive scholarly debate about whether this is a convincing argument for the existence of God. Are we really justified in taking the step from 'There must be *some* other mind which causes my ideas' to 'There must be a *divine* mind'? See e.g. Mackie 1982: 71-80 or Daniel 2022. I will ignore this question here and focus on what *concept* of the divine mind Berkeley develops, not on his arguments for the actual existence of a divine mind.

For though we hold indeed the objects of sense to be nothing else but ideas which cannot exist unperceived; yet we may not hence conclude they have no existence except only while they are perceived by us, since there may be some other spirit that perceives them, though we do not. Wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever. (PHK 48/Berkeley 1949: 61)

Things (that is, ideas) may be mind-dependent, but they depend on no mind in particular: ‘Thus when I shut my eyes, the things I saw may still exist, but it must be in another mind.’ (PHK 90/Berkeley 1949: 80) But what about some lonely speck of dust drifting through the vast emptiness of interstellar space? With no living creature anywhere near it, whose mind should perceive it? For Berkeley, the answer is clear: God. There is an objective, real world for Berkeley – a world that exists independently of my mind, in fact of any finite mind. But this real world is not the world of material objects, it is the world of ideas in God’s mind:

Nothing can be more evident to anyone that is capable of the least reflexion, than the existence of God, or a spirit who is intimately present to our minds, producing in them all that variety of ideas or sensations, which continually affect us, on whom we have an absolute and entire dependence, in short, in whom we live, and move, and have our being. (PHK 149/Berkeley 1949: 109)

This is Berkeley’s second argument for the existence of God, the *continuity argument*: There is an objective reality, but since everything is mind-dependent, objective reality must depend on an infinite mind which keeps all ideas in existence even when they are not perceived by any finite mind.

We can now answer our first question: in what sense is Berkeley an idealist? Berkeley’s idealism turns out to be a sort of immaterialist realism, because its essence consists of two claims:

- (a) The immaterialist thesis: reality is entirely *mental* (it contains minds and ideas and nothing more).
- (b) The realist thesis: reality is *objective* (it transcends all finite minds and depends only on the infinite mind of God).

Let’s now turn to the second question: is Berkeley a panentheist?

3. Is Berkeley a panentheist?

At first glance, Berkeley’s idealism seems to be deeply panentheistic: all of reality is nothing but ideas in the mind of God. Take a look around: if Berkeley is right, all you see and hear are really ideas produced in your mind by the mind of God. But on second thought – is really *all* of reality an idea in the mind of God? There are two central problems:

- (a) The status of ideas in my mind: are the ideas in my mind numerically the same as the ideas in God’s mind? Or are they merely qualitatively identical, but numerically distinct ideas? If they are, it seems as if large parts of reality exist outside the mind of God.

(b) The status of finite minds: Minds are not ideas, and thus are perceiving, but not perceived. So, it seems as if finite minds can't be ideas in God's mind.

Problem (a): Are my ideas and God's ideas identical? Berkeley himself is unclear in this matter and seems to waver between two possibilities. In the *Principles*, he says about the ideas in my mind: 'There is [...] some other spirit that *causes* them' (PHK 146/Berkeley 1949: 108), while in the *Dialogues* he says: '[T]here must be some other mind *wherein* they exist.' (Berkeley 1949: 212) The first wording indicates that the ideas in my mind are causal effects of God's agency: God creates ideas in my mind, similar to those in his mind. If I seem to see a tree outside my window, God creates an idea of a tree in my mind which exactly resembles the same idea in his mind. These two ideas are then only qualitatively identical, but numerically distinct. The second wording seems to suggest a different picture: the ideas in my mind are numerically identical to the ideas in God's mind. God's mind and my mind don't have two different, exactly similar contents, they have one and the same content. My perception of the tree is wholly independent of my mind and brought into being solely by God's will. When we're perceiving something, we're literally reading God's mind. Mackie (1982: 65-66) finds the former position 'more interesting' and argues that there is evidence that Berkeley did in fact adopt it. But if this is true, then Berkeley can't be a panentheist: the ideas in my mind – my whole world, that is – don't exist in God. God causes these ideas in my mind and other ideas similar to mine in the minds of all other finite beings, so that it appears as if we share the same, objective reality. But in fact, the world I'm living in is only in *my* mind, not in God's.⁹ Only the second interpretation would allow us to regard Berkeley as a panentheist. But even assuming that there is a coherent reading of Berkeley's text that makes the second interpretation plausible, a further problem remains unsolved.

Problem (b): do finite minds depend in any way on God? Some have claimed they do. Michael Levine, in an attempt to frame Berkeley as a pantheist, claims that 'finite spirits [...] may be considered to be aspects or modifications of God because they too cannot exist apart from God.' (Levine 1987: 36) This is a strange contention. For one, Levine provides no evidence in Berkeley's writings for his claim. And second, Berkeley states clearly that minds and ideas are 'entirely distinct' from each other (PHK 2/Berkeley 1949: 42). He also states that the existence of a mind 'consists not in being perceived, but in perceiving ideas and thinking.' (PHK 139/Berkeley 1949: 105)¹⁰ Consequently, we cannot perceive other minds – our only way to know that other minds exist is to perceive their effects, i.e. the ideas they produce in us: 'we cannot know the existence of other spirits, otherwise than by their operations,

⁹ One might object that the world of my ideas is still in some sense in God since God causes these ideas. But if panentheism boils down to the idea that the world is in God because he created it, then how does it differ from standard theism?

¹⁰ On some occasions, Berkeley does say that finite minds are not just active, but also passive – but that doesn't mean that they are mind-dependent like ideas are. He merely means that they are passive insofar as they are affected by the mind of God. Cf. Frankel 2012: 392.

or the ideas by them excited in us.’ (PHK 145/Berkeley 1949: 107).¹¹ So, minds are not ideas. Claiming that finite minds depend on God would blur Berkeley’s clear distinction between minds and ideas and render the concept of finite minds inconsistent: they are ideas (in the mind of God), but also not ideas (insofar as they are minds). But if minds can’t depend on God, where do they come from?

This question becomes even more pressing when we take a look at Berkeley’s account of divine creation. By the end of the last of his three dialogues, Philonous says:

All objects are eternally known by God, or which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in his mind: but when things before imperceptible to creatures, are by a decree of God, made perceptible to them; then are they said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds. Upon reading therefore the Mosaic account of the Creation, I understand that the several parts of the world became gradually perceivable to finite spirits, endowed with proper faculties; so that whoever such were present, they were in truth perceived by them. (Berkeley 1949: 252)

For Berkeley, divine creation means: there are ideas of all things eternally present in God, which God then makes perceivable to finite minds. So, creation merely concerns ideas, not minds – it is the beginning of a certain relation between ideas in the divine mind and finite minds, and *not* the creation of these finite minds.¹² Even worse, if creation is tantamount to ideas becoming perceivable, finite minds can’t be created, simply because they are not ideas. There is a curious tension within Berkeley’s system between the strict idea/mind dichotomy on the one hand, and the claim that everything there is depends on the mind of God. It seems as if Berkeley can’t have it both ways: either finite minds are created – but then, they must be ideas in the mind of God, too; or they are not ideas, but then they cannot be created and thus don’t depend on the mind of God. In the final paragraph, I shall argue that this is the place where a Yogācārin intervention might become helpful. But for now, we have a strong argument against counting Berkeley as a panentheist: not all there is exists in God – only the world of ideas does. And even this world of ideas can only exist in the mind of God if the ideas in God’s mind and in finite minds are numerically identical.

4. Vasubandhu’s selfless idealism

Right at the beginning of his *Twenty Verses (Viṃśatikā)*, a short summary of his idealist philosophy, Vasubandhu states the core tenet of Yogācāra thought: that everything is mind only (*cittamātra*): ‘Everything is mind or representation (*vijñapti*) only, because there is the appearance of non-existent objects, just as a person suffering from an ophthalmological disorder sees things like hairs, the moon

¹¹ There is much debate about this question, too: How *can* we know that there are minds – be they our own or others – if minds are not ideas? Cf. Dancy 1987: 128-148. Again, I have to skip this question.

¹² Berkeley himself seems to admit as much in a letter: ‘I take creation to belong to things only as they respect finite spirits’ (quoted in Winkler 1989: 221).

etc. which do not really exist.’ (V 1/Wood 1991: 97)¹³ A person with an eye disease might look at a white wall and see black spots on it. But this is an illusion – actually, there are no black spots, even though the person has the impression of seeing them. But these mental impressions don’t correspond to some actual black spots on the wall, or even to anything outside the mind, although it seems to the subject as if they represent an external reality. The central thesis of Yogācāra is that all of reality is like this: all that is real is nothing but impressions or mental events (*vijñapti*).¹⁴ There is no external reality outside the mind. In another verse, Vasubandhu likens our perception (*pratyakṣa*) of the external world to a dream – the objects we perceive in a dream are not real, mind-independent objects, so why call this perception at all, when actually we don’t perceive anything? (V 16) Thus, for Vasubandhu, what we take to be the real, material, mind-external world is really just a stream of impressions or mental events in our conscious awareness.

But what does it mean for something to be purely mental? Vasubandhu explains this by arguing that whatever is real has three natures or essential qualities (*trīsvabhāva*): the imagined (*parikalpita*), the dependent (*paratantra*), and the perfected (*pariṇiṣpanna*) nature.¹⁵ Take the cup of coffee on my desk again. I can see the white cup and the black liquid in it, I can smell the freshly brewed coffee, and when I put my hands on the cup, lift it, and take a sip, I can feel the warm, hard, and smooth surface of the cup, and taste the sweet, herbal bitterness of the coffee. This is the *imaginary* nature: out of my bare sense data, I construe a real object out there – the cup of coffee – that I take to be mind-independently real. But no such object exists, which is why we should call it imaginary.¹⁶ Still, conceiving the cup as a real, material object is part of my experience, and thus it is part of the nature of this type of mental event. In reality though, there is only a stream of mental events, of visual, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory sensations, accompanied by all kinds of volitions, conceptualizations, and associations. This is the *dependent* nature: the continuous flow of mental events from which we construct a real, dualistic world of persistent material objects and of subjects that perceive this world. The dependent nature with its subject-object-dualism is the basis for our conceptualizations which make up the imagined nature. But ultimately, all our conceptualizations are empty. In reality, there is neither cup nor coffee. In fact, there is not even warmth or sweetness, since these, too, are conceptualizations. Moreover, there is no subject to conceive them either, since without objects there is no subject. Ultimately, reality beyond all conceptualizations (as it is seen by the Buddhas), is non-dual and just such. The true nature

¹³ References to Vasubandhu’s works via title and verse number. V = *Viṃśatikā*; TR = *Trīṃśikā*; TS = *Trīsvabhāvanirdeśa*.

¹⁴ Griffiths 1986: 80 points out that *vijñapti* means not only representations, but all mental events, since Vasubandhu (as well as most other Buddhist philosophers) has an intentionalist theory of mind.

¹⁵ This theory is expounded in his *Trīsvabhāvanirdeśa*. Translations e.g. in Garfield 2002: 130-135 or Wood 1991: 33-39.

¹⁶ So, from a Yogācāra point of view, Berkeley has grasped the *parikalpita* nature of reality, but unfortunately stopped there. Cf. Garfield 2002: 161.

of things is just ‘suchness’ (*tathatā*). This is the *perfected* nature (*pariniṣpanna*): That ultimately, there is no imaginary nature in dependent nature – that the whole stream of mental events which make up the cup of coffee is ultimately nothing but suchness. There is neither subject nor object, but just a flow of nonconceptualized mental events. The perfected nature is the complete absence of the imaginary nature in the dependent nature. Still, to give a full description of what it means to be real, we need to mention all three natures; none of them is negligible.

So, Vasubandhu’s central claim is that all of reality depends on the mind.¹⁷ However, he doesn’t simply stop there, but proceeds to give an elaborate account of the mechanics of reality-production through the mind. Drawing on concepts derived from earlier Yogācāra sūtras and from the *Abhidharma* tradition, he presents a complex system of eight consciousnesses which explains how the mind generates the specific world we experience. Beginning at the surface, there are five sense-consciousnesses – for example visual, tactile, or acoustic consciousness – plus consciousness itself (*manovijñāna*) as a sixth sense which synthesizes the disparate streams of different classes of mental events into a unified consciousness.¹⁸ Below this personal, surface level of consciousness lies the so-called afflicted or tainted consciousness (*kliṣṭamanas*) which is responsible for splitting the world into subject and object and for creating the illusion of a persistent self. Thus, it is the root of our attachments and therefore ultimately responsible for the arising of suffering. Upon reaching enlightenment, the *kliṣṭamanas* will vanish and will be transformed into impartial wisdom (*samatāvijñāna*). On a still deeper level, we find the ultimate rock-bottom of consciousness which gives Vasubandhu’s Yogācāra idealism its particular flavor: the store-consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). The concept of *ālayavijñāna* had already been present in earlier traditions of *Abhidharma* philosophy and serves as a bridge between two apparently contradictory ideas in Buddhist philosophy: *anātman* and *karman* (or karma). On the one hand, Buddhism teaches that all things are impermanent (*anitya*) and have no persistent self or essence (*anātman*) – in fact, its whole soteriological program hinges on this claim. On the other hand, Buddhism also teaches that all of reality is governed by the law of *karman* which inevitably connects causes and effects and results in the infinite round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*). But if everything is impermanent, how can something that happened in the past affect the present? How can something ‘I’ have done in the past affect what happens to ‘me’ now? How can ‘I’ be reborn

¹⁷ He goes on to develop a handful of subtle arguments to defend his idealist position (for example by arguing that materialism is self-refuting because the concept of an atom is inconsistent), but I won’t engage with them here. My question is whether Vasubandhu can be called a panentheist, and for this question, his arguments (brilliant as they may be) have no relevance. See Siderits 2007: ch. 8 and Finnigan 2017: 180-188 for a detailed discussion.

¹⁸ If you are thrown off by the fact that Yogācāra Buddhists posit separate consciousnesses for each source of sense perception, remember that Buddhism in general has a *process* view of reality: reality is neither the set of all things nor of facts, but of events. And since visual mental events are qualitatively different from acoustic events, they constitute a different type of reality. Only when the *manovijñāna* synthesizes these various events into a unity does consciousness in our familiar understanding of the term arise.

if there is no I in the first place? It seems as if something stable is needed to explain how karma and rebirth are possible, and this is where *ālayavijñāna* becomes crucial. *Ālayavijñāna* receives and stores all karmic effects and carries them from one rebirth to the next. It also ‘saves’ the individual consciousness (pretty much like you save a file on your hard drive when you close a program) when you fall asleep or sink into a state of deep meditative absorption, and lets it re-emerge once you gain consciousness again. Because the *ālayavijñāna* is the root cause of all consciousness, the *kliṣṭamanas* confuses it with a real and persistent self. But the store-consciousness is neither self nor persistent; it is in permanent flux – just like everything else – receiving input from the surface layers of consciousness and in turn producing an ever-changing stream of mental events.¹⁹

So, when Vasubandhu says that all of reality is mind-only, he means that it is an infinite stream of mental events generated by the store-consciousness, the cause and foundation of all other types of consciousness. He explains:

Because it [the mind] is a cause and an effect, the mind has two aspects. As the foundation consciousness it creates thought; known as the emerged consciousness it has seven aspects. (TS 6/Garfield 2002: 131)

Yogācārins often illustrate this idea by saying that the store-consciousness receives the karmic seeds (*bīja*) of our actions which then ‘perfume’ it and give it its unique character. Our current actions and experiences produce seeds (or dispositions, if you prefer a contemporary term), which are then stored in the *ālayavijñāna*. Once these seeds come to fruition, they generate new experiences and thus shape the particular stream of consciousness we are perceiving. As a consequence, the store-consciousness and the other, emergent layers of consciousness mutually depend on each other: the store-consciousness generates the stream of mental events which make up the experience of the emergent consciousness, but what happens in this stream also influences the store-consciousness. Both sides of the mind are locked in a closed, infinite circle of cause and effect: the mind causes mental events which then influence the generating activity of the mind. This is what Vasubandhu calls the ‘transformation of consciousness’ (TR 17): In three steps, the mind transforms itself and thereby generates the illusion of a world of external objects (and the subjective I opposed to them). In the first transformation, the store-consciousness activates itself and begins bringing the seeds stored in it to fruition. The second transformation generates the *kliṣṭamanas* and gives rise to the illusion of the self, and the dualism of subject and object. The third transformation produces the six personal consciousnesses and their respective experiences. What we perceive as an external world, then, is nothing but a complex transformation of consciousnesses. Ultimately though, it is just one mind transforming itself since the different layers of consciousness are not separate from each other. Using a striking metaphor, Vasubandhu likens the relation between different consciousnesses to waves on the ocean (TR 15):

¹⁹ Aptly, Vasubandhu compares the store-consciousness to ‘a torrent of water’ (TR 4/Wood 1991: 50).

although we say that the ocean produces the waves, the waves and the ocean are ultimately identical. The waves are nothing other than the ocean, and it makes no sense to think of the ocean as something apart from the waves.

So, with regard to our first question – is Vasubandhu an idealist? – the answer seems obvious: of course. What else could he mean when he says that everything is mind only?²⁰ But some have disputed this claim and argued that Vasubandhu is only making an epistemological point – we only have access to mental representations – while he is entirely silent on the ontological nature of the reality behind these representations.²¹ This is not completely beside the point: Vasubandhu believes that the perfected nature of reality is ultimately just ‘thus’, free of all conceptualizations. But ‘mental’ is also a concept which presupposes the distinction between mental and physical and therefore only makes sense within the realm of the imaginary nature. Shouldn’t we then say that reality is ultimately neither mental nor physical, but neutral? But then we would be ignoring the fact that the dependent nature is still real – being part of a mental stream of events is what it means for something to be real. So, Vasubandhu still comes out as an idealist, although a strange one. He agrees that reality is fundamentally mental, that it contains nothing but mental events, although the concepts we use to describe this reality (like ‘mental’ or ‘impression’) are ultimately illusory. Reality is mental even though what it means for reality to be mental can only be fully understood from the standpoint of the nondual awareness of the enlightened ones. So, Vasubandhu still deserves to be called an idealist. But is he also a panentheist?

5. The divinity of *ālayavijñāna*

As far as I know, nobody ever even considered counting Vasubandhu as panentheist. But why not? It doesn’t seem too far-fetched to say that for Vasubandhu, the store-consciousness plays a role remarkably similar to the panentheist’s God. If we adapt the criteria of panentheism I have outlined in section 2 above so that they fit Vasubandhu’s particular type of idealism, we will find that he could easily subscribe to all of them:

(a*)The world is in *ālayavijñāna*, but *ālayavijñāna* exceeds the world: world and *ālayavijñāna* stand in some kind of *part-whole* relation.

For Vasubandhu, the world is the dependent nature, the stream of mental events which forms the basis of our constructions of reality (and which, from the perspective of the enlightened, is identical with the perfected nature). Since there is no reality or world outside this stream of mental events

²⁰ Garfield 2002: 159 states that by ‘simply reading the texts themselves and taking Vasubandhu at face value’, we will arrive at the conclusion that he is an idealist.

²¹ Lusthaus 2002: 535 speaks of an ‘ontological silence’ in the Yogācāra texts. For an overview of the debate, see Trivedi 2005.

flowing from the source of the *ālayavijñāna*, we could easily agree that the world is in it. And insofar as the store-consciousness contains the seeds of all realities past and future, it is also plausible to say that the (actual) world is merely a part of the whole of reality that lies dormant in the store-consciousness.

(b*)The world in some sense *ontologically depends on ālayavijñāna*.

All of reality is a transformation of consciousness, so clearly, it depends ontologically on it. Since reality is nothing but a stream of mental events, how could these events not be ontologically dependent on the mind?

(c*)The world is *not identical with ālayavijñāna*.

The world is the stream of mental events caused by the *ālayavijñāna*, but a cause and its effect are not identical.

(d*)*ālayavijñāna* and the world are *interrelated*: *ālayavijñāna* influences the world and *vice versa*. By bringing the seeds contained in it to fruition, the store-consciousness influences what mental events we experience, and our experiences and actions generate new karmic seeds. So yes, world and *ālayavijñāna* mutually influence each other. If we apply Hartshorne's ETCKW-scheme, we get a surprisingly similar result: The store-consciousness is eternal, or rather sempiternal, since the process of generating the ever-changing stream of mental events is without beginning or end. It is also temporal and, of course, conscious and world-inclusive.²² So, isn't Vasubandhu a panentheist, then? No. Because even if the store-consciousness fits the panentheistic bill in many respects, there is one crucial thing it is not: *divine*. Even if the store-consciousness is the ultimate foundation of reality, and even if all that exists and ever will exist is contained in it, it is not a divine mind²³ because it is not *one* mind and not separate from the individual mind. In contrast to Berkeley, who understands reality as the set of ideas in the one mind of God, the Yogācārin's assume that there are multiple store-consciousnesses – in fact as many as there are sentient beings.²⁴ Thus, there is actually a multitude of worlds, each created by a different store-consciousness. But if only *my* reality, the stream of conscious events I am experiencing is contained in *my* store-consciousness which in no reasonable sense transcends my mind, then it would stretch even the panentheistic concept of God beyond recognition to call the store-consciousness 'divine'. Vasubandhu may be a panenpsychist, if you will, but he's not a panentheist.

Or is he? As it turns out, the idea of multiple store-consciousnesses gives rise to a serious objection against Vasubandhu's idealist system: the problem of solipsism. If each store-consciousness creates its

²² Does the *ālayavijñāna* know the world? This is hard to say since the term 'know' here presupposes a whole theory of God-world-relations that are hard to apply to the store-consciousness. At least we can say that since all of reality is created by the store-consciousness, it is not ignorant about it.

²³ It is worth noting that in Lambert Schmithausen's encyclopedic study of *ālayavijñāna* (Schmithausen 1987), the word 'divine' doesn't appear a single time.

²⁴ Williams 2009: 89 emphasizes this point.

own mental reality, how come we seem to experience a shared reality? If I have the experience of stepping on your toe, why do you have the experience of pain? Why assume that any other mental stream than my own is real? As we will see, answering this objection will lead Vasubandhu either away from idealism – or straight into panentheism.

How can Vasubandhu account for the existence of a reality shared with other minds?²⁵ There are just two options: either he doubles down on his idealism and concedes that the notion of a shared reality is an illusion – thereby essentially accepting solipsism; or he allows that other minds are real and can interact with each other – and is then forced to accept some common ground which guarantees that all different mental streams remain consistent with each other. For Berkeley, this is God’s job: we live in a common reality because our reality depends on the one mind of God. So, it seems as if Vasubandhu can either give up the idea of a shared reality and adopt solipsism, or he can hold on to the idea that different minds can share a common reality and then adjust his idealism accordingly. Some later Yogācārins (e.g. Xuanzang who translated Vasubandhu’s works into Chinese) have actually chosen the first path and stated that the impression of living in a common reality is just the result of similar karmic seeds in our respective store-consciousnesses.²⁶ But Vasubandhu seems to prefer the second option. In the *Vimśatikā*, he concedes that not all mental events are caused by karmic seeds in the store-consciousness coming to fruition, but that some are caused by another mental event in a different stream which is somehow linked to mine.²⁷ Apparently, then, Yogacara minds are not just monads but can interact with each other. But how can they do that if all of reality is just a transformation of consciousness? In what sphere of reality does this interaction take place? For the common-sense realists, this sphere is just the physical world. But if we assume that there is no physical world because everything is mind only, this route is blocked. Vasubandhu doesn’t really offer an alternative, but we can find a hint towards the end of the *Vimśatikā* when he speaks of our knowledge of other minds:

Knowledge of those, [who claim] to know other minds, is unreal, just as one’s knowledge of one’s own mind [is unreal]. For, in the manner in which [the mind] is known to the enlightened ones, it is unknown [to ordinary men]. (V 21/Kochumuttom 1982: 194)

We never experience other minds directly. Our knowledge of all individual, emergent minds is embedded in the dependent nature of our stream of mental events. But a Buddha will be able to overcome this delusion and know other minds directly. But if a Buddha knows other minds directly,

²⁵ Later Yogācārins have discussed the problem of other minds more thoroughly than Vasubandhu, e.g. Dharmakīrti in his *Samtānāntarasiddhi*. See Wood 1991: 107-132.

²⁶ Schmithausen explains with reference to a passage in Xuanzang’s *Xin Weishi Lun*: ‘Our conviction to live in one and the same world is therefore merely an imagination based on the fact that there are certain common features in our *karman* which cause our *ālayavijñānas* to produce *similar* mental images of the outer world.’ (Schmithausen 2005: 244)

²⁷ ‘The representations of consciousness are determined by mutual influence of one [individual] on another’ (V 18/Kochumuttom 1982: 189). See Siderits 2007: 170-173 for a discussion of this reply.

how can they still be *other* minds?²⁸ If conscious experiences in another mind were directly accessible to a Buddha, then there wouldn't be any difference between the Buddha's mind and other person's anymore. They would become one mind.²⁹ This, then, seems to be the one reality which comprises the multitude of seemingly distinct store-consciousnesses, and the sphere in which different minds can interact with one another: the one enlightened Buddha-mind. It seems as if Vasubandhu is implicitly obliged to accept a kind of Berkeleyan divine mind and become a panentheist – even if he doesn't know yet. Vasubandhu may not pretend to be a panentheist, but the seed of panentheism is already stored in his idealist system, waiting to come to fruition.³⁰

6. Berkeley, the Yogācārin?

So far, the result of our comparison has been largely negative: neither Berkeley nor Vasubandhu can justly be regarded as panentheists. Berkeley is not a panentheist because finite minds don't exist in God's mind, and Vasubandhu is not a panentheist because the store-consciousness as he describes it is not a divine mind. Still, there are two noticeable similarities between them: first, God and *ālayavijñāna* play a structurally similar role in their respective idealisms, insofar as they both are the foundation and ultimate cause of the mental reality. The difference is that Berkeley's system is two-tiered, since it assumes two distinct classes of minds, finite and infinite, which interact with each other to create reality, while for Vasubandhu, the mind is a single system with multiple levels that creates reality out of itself. Second, both struggle with the problem of other minds. Berkeley has a hard time explaining how other minds than God's can be accounted for, since all that came into existence did so by being made conceivable by a finite mind through God's action. Vasubandhu struggles with explaining why there should be other minds at all since it seems as if ultimately, we might be nothing but the thoughts of the one Buddha-mind (not to mention the problem that the idea of multiple, individual store-consciousness seems to contradict the core Buddhist belief in *anātman*). But even if they aren't panentheists, might it be that a mash-up of Berkeleyan and Yogācārin ideas could produce a better, more convincing concept of idealist panentheism? Remember that for Berkeley, the crucial problem was how to explain the generation of finite minds. As finite beings, they have to be created; but since creation pertains only to ideas, minds can't be created. Where, then, do they come from? Berkeley can't give a convincing answer to that question. But what if Berkeley adopted two ideas from his Buddhist companion: *anātman* and *ālayavijñāna*? The first would allow him to reject the

²⁸ This point is argued in Wood 1991: 102. See also Williams 2009: 309f.

²⁹ See e.g. Husserl 1960: 109 for this line of argument: '[If] what belongs to the other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.'

³⁰ It thus comes as no surprise that later East Asian traditions of Buddhism (which were heavily influenced by Yogācāra) have explicitly embraced panentheism – or rather: panenbuddhism – for example Chinese Huayan.

assumption that finite minds are ultimately real – or at least on the same level of ontological reality as the mind of God. As a consequence, there would be no problem with explaining the creation of minds any more since the distinction between ideas and finite minds becomes obsolete. The second would turn God into a universal store-consciousness which generates all of reality, thereby dissolving the problem of how individual minds interact with each other and experience a shared reality – reality turns out to be just the mental stream of the one divine mind. In this way, Berkeley’s idealism would become a true panentheism, deserving the prefix *pan*, since absolutely everything is in God, even finite minds. Finally, Berkeley could say without exception ‘*that in God we live, and move, and have our being.*’ (Berkeley 1949: 214).

Let’s get back for a moment to that memorable conversation I recounted at the beginning. What should we say now – were my professor and I right? Hardly. Is Vasubandhu’s Yogācāra just like Berkeley’s idealism? Not really. They both are idealists in the sense that they believe that to be real is to be mental, but that’s about it. Berkeley’s idealism paints the picture of a purely mental world of finite spirits who in contact with the divine mind, create their shared reality. Vasubandhu instead views individual minds as sprouting from the deep, subliminal realm of the *ālayavijñāna* and has a hard time steering clear of the Scylla of solipsism and the Charybdis of panentheism. And are we really, for Berkeley, the thoughts of God? No, not at all. For Berkeley, we are finite minds, and minds are emphatically not the same thing as ideas. Neither are we for Vasubandhu, although we might call ourselves the thoughts (or blossoms) of *ālayavijñāna*, but we’re not God’s thoughts, since whatever *ālayavijñāna* may be, it surely is not divine. But even though we both got Berkeley and Vasubandhu wrong back then, our mutual misunderstanding may point the way to an actual panentheistic idealism.

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