

A NON-REFERENTIAL AND NON-COGNITIVE THEORY OF TRUTH, IN VIJÑĀNAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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Abstract. *Vijñānavāda Buddhism claims all kind of experience, including knowledge, is “mere ideation” (vijñaptimātra), being devoid of any objective counter-part, of any objective value. The experience of knowledge is determined solely by the individual predispositions of the knowing subject (his “imprints of the linguistic constructions – abhilāpavāsanā) and not by an alleged “external reality”.*

Nevertheless, the school is able to claim the existence of a “truth”, even in the absence of an objective reality that could account for this “truth”. The truth of Vijñānavāda philosophy does not mean, in an Aristotelian or realistic manner, the concordance between subjective representation and objective reality but a mere consonance of the various subjective knowledge experiences. What determines such a truth are the so-called “shared” (sādhāraṇa) seeds (bīja) of experience, which inflict a certain degree of similarity to the experiences of various individual subjects. Hence, the truth has no cognitive value, being rather a state of Karmic tuning, i.e. the consonance of the experiences engendered by the “shared” part of the Karmic imprints of each individual being.

Keywords: *Buddhism, Mahāyāna, Vijñānavāda, truth, idealism, Karmic imprints, vāsanā.*

I. The subjective origin of the categorical system

Vijñānavāda Buddhism claims all kind of experience, including knowledge, is “mere ideation” (*vijñaptimātra*), being devoid of any objective counter-part, of any objective value. The experience of knowledge is determined solely by the individual predispositions of the knowing subject (his “imprints of the linguistic constructions – *abilāpavāsanā*) and not by an alleged “external reality”.

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The categorical system originating in “the imprints of the linguistic constructions” (*abhilāpavāsanā*)

For Vijñānavāda, the categorical system has no grounds at the level of the objective reality; the relation between the conceptual construction of a cognitive subject and the reality beyond him is not a representational one. The conceptual schematization, being similar to imagination, fantasy, finds its origin only at the level of the cognitive subject.¹

Vijñānavāda relates conceptualization to the so-called “imprints of the linguistic constructions” (*abhilāpavāsanā*); these represent the seeds (*bīja*) which, in case of an individual, give birth to the conceptual constructions experienced by him. Although the term „*abhilāpavāsanā*” - “imprints of the linguistic constructions” or, in a looser translation, “imprints of the concepts”, is the one consecrated for referring to the seeds which give birth to conceptual experience, one can also come across other terms, such as “*vikalpavāsanā*” (“imprints of the conceptual discrimination”), “*prapañcavādavāsanā*” (“imprints of the discursive manifestation”) and so forth.

„Hence, Mahāmati, those who cling (*abhiniviṣṭa*) to the imprints of proliferation (*prapañcavādavāsanā*), of the philosophical (*tīrthyā*) [constructions], [imprints] which are devoid of a temporal beginning (*anādikāla*), [those] cling (*abhiniviṣ*) to the statements (*vāda*) of identity (*ekatva*), alterity (*anyatva*), existence (*astitva*), non-existence (*nāstitva*), [their] thinking (*mati*) not having established (*avadhārīta*) that [everything] is only (*mātra*) perception (*drśya*) of one’s own consciousness (*svacitta*).”²

„32. Consciousness (*citta*) engenders (*sambhū*) diversity (*vicitra*), being determined (*baddha*) by the imprints of conceptual discrimination (*vikalpavāsanā*). Although [diversity] is only consciousness (*cittamātra*), to the worldly (*laukika*) people (*nṛ*) it appears (*ākhyā*) as external (*bahiṣ*).”³

¹ For a study on the entirely subjective causes which lead to the categorical discrimination of the object, see Forman, 1989, 399-400!

² „*evameva mahāmate anādikālatīrthyaprapañcavādavāsanābhiniviṣṭāḥ ekatvānyatvāstitvanāstitvavādānabhiniviṣante svacittadrśyamātrānavadhāritamatayaḥ*” *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, chap.II, Nanjio, 1956, 90.

³ „32.*vikalpavāsanābaddhaṃ vicitraṃ cittasambhavam / bahirākhyāyate nṛṇāṃ cittamātraṃ hi laukikam* //” *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, chap.III, verse 32, Nanjio, 1956, 154.

„407. Due to the imprints (*vāsana*) and the seeds (*bīja*) of externality (*bāhya*) conceptual discrimination (*vikalpa*) is produced (*saṃpravṛt*). The dependent (*tantra*) [own-being] is perceived (*gṛh*) through this; that which perceives (*gṛh*), that is the constructed (*kalpita*) [own-being].”⁴

„Mahāmati, what are words (*rūta*)⁵? A «word» is said to be the discrimination (*vikalpa*) associated (*saṃyoga*) to speech (*vāc*) and letters (*akṣara*), to inter-personal (*paraspara*) verbal communication (*jalpa*) which is issued (*vinīḥṣṛta*) from the teeth, jaws, palate, tongue, lips and the cavity of the mouth, and which has as [its] cause (*hetu*) the imprints of conceptual discrimination (*vikalpavāsanā*).”⁶

„XI.38. The apparition (*vikhyāna*) of an object (*artha*) having constructed (*parikalpita*) characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*) is due to the imprints (*vāsanā*) caused (*nimitta*) by conceiving (*saṃjñā*) an object (*artha*) which conforms to verbal expressions (*yathājalpa*).”⁷

Therefore, the conceptual discrimination represents the actualization of a certain tendency existing at the level of an individual consciousness.⁸ This tendency is assumed by a certain individual along with appropriating a certain personal identity; in general, Vijñānavāda texts consider that the act of appropriating a certain personality consists of the appropriation of the body and its organs (*śendriyakakāya*) as well as of the appropriation of certain specific seeds (*bīja*) which will later become responsible for the tendencies of that particular individual, including the tendency of applying a certain categorical system.

⁴ „407. *bāhyavāsanabījena vikalpaḥ saṃpravartate / tantraṃ hi yena gṛhṇāti yadgṛhṇāti sa kalpitam //*”
Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra, Sagāthakam, 407, Nanjio, 1956, 317.

⁵ „Words” or „concepts”; in Buddhism thinking, word and concept are closely connected, the word being only the public expression of concept.

⁶ „*tatra rutam mahāmate katamat? yaduta vāgakṣarasamyogavikalpo dantahanutālujihvauṣṭhapuṭavinīḥṣṛtaparasparajalpo vikalpavāsanāhetuko rutamityucyate*”

Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra, chap.III, Nanjio, 1956, 154.

⁷ „XI.38. *yathājalpārthasaṃjñāyā nimittam tasya vāsanā / tasmādapyarthavikhyānaṃ parikalpitalakṣaṇam*”

Asaṅga, Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra, XI.38, Limaye, 2000, 187.

⁸ Waldron, 2003, 2-3 states, in agreement with certain recent results of the cognitive sciences, that the “object” would be nothing else but a certain type of stimuli that are repeatedly produced. The “object” is nothing but an “instrument” the human being, due to his higher mental capacity, has created, in order to deal in a better way with experience, to be able to pursue his own interests more easily.

Consequently, the categorical discrimination is more related to the personality, to the individual self, appropriated by the consciousness rather than to the objective manifestation. The fact that, later on, the conceptual experience will be related to the objective manifestation represents an erroneous act (*viparyāsa, mithyā*) of consciousness; the conceptual discrimination is superimposed (*adhyāropa*) on the objective manifestation in the absence of any natural connection between them.

Therefore, conceptual knowledge is a mere subjective experience; Mahāyāna texts often compare the experience of conceptual knowledge with the experience of dreams and hallucinations, arguing that the situations are the same in the case of the conceptualized knowledge as in the production of the dreams, which is determined only by causes related to the subjectivity of the individual, without being influenced at all by what exists objectively, outside the individual consciousness. Explaining the occurrence of the conceptual knowledge does not resort to its possible referentiality, but it is simply a causal explanation applied to the sphere of the human psychic; this type of knowledge is produced simply when certain subjective conditions are met.

„65. A thesis (*pratijñā*) is caused (*kāraṇa*) by some conditions (*pratyaya*), causes (*hetu*), apparitions (*dr̥ṣṭānta*), as a dream (*svapna*), as the [town] of the Gandharvas, as a circle (*cakra*) [of fire], as a mirage (*marīci*), as the rays of the sun (*somabhāskara*).”⁹

Arguments for the subjective nature of the categorical discrimination

The subjective nature of categories results also from the frequently noticed tendency of the Buddhist texts to operate classifications of the objects of experience on soteriological grounds. The objects of experience are classified according to their role within the soteriological approach; the identity of the objects depends on this role they fulfil.

⁹ „65. *pratyayairhetudr̥ṣṭāntaiḥ pratijñā kāraṇena ca / svapnagandharvacakreṇa marīcyā somabhāskaraiḥ //*”
Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra, Sagāthakam, 65, Nanjio, 1956, 272-273.

The sanskrit text is slightly problematic, since literally it states that a thesis is produced *through* a dream (*svapna*), the [town] of the Gandharvas, a circle (*cakra*) [of fire], a mirage (*marīci*), the rays of the sun (*somabhāskara*), the corresponding sanskrit words being in the Instrumentative. Nevertheless, we interpreted the statement more freely, as a comparison.

It is obvious that, in this case, the categorical framing process is based solely on subjective grounds, the soteriological approach requiring an individual subject as reference point. Mahāyāna does not consider this type of classification as a special case, in which the subjective reasons would interfere only accidentally with the objective ones; on the contrary, the reasons on the basis of which any classification, any categorical framing is made can be only subjective, the classification on soteriological grounds being simply a common case of classification. In doing so, Mahāyāna anticipates certain tendencies that manifest in the cognitive sciences of today, which claim that the categorical system reflects not so much the structure of reality as the interests of the subject operating the categorical framing.¹⁰

Another argument in favour of the subjective nature of the categorical system and, implicitly, of any theoretical construction, is the obvious remark that they appear at the level of an individual being, at the level of a limited subject, and therefore can not elude the limited, particular perspective they are compelled to by their specific support. Therefore, the conceptual knowledge always carries with itself, intrinsically, the discriminatory attachment towards an individual self and the limited perspective to which they are compelled by the limited nature of the self at whose level they appear. The conceptual knowledge appears at the level of the mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*) which, on its turn, is determined by the mind (*manas*). But the mind, according to Vijñānavāda, is the one responsible for the appearance of the error of the individual, limited self (*ātman*). Because mental consciousness is determined by the mind, the error, the limitation, the subjectivity specific to the mind are inherent to it and, implicitly, this error will also characterise any form of conceptual knowledge that appears at the level of the mental consciousness. To put it differently, due to the fact that it appears at the level of an instance affected by the error of individuality, of subjectivity, conceptual knowledge possesses a certain inherent subjective, limited nature.

„I.21. The mind (*manas*) represents corruption (*pradoṣa*); [its] nature (*prakṛti*) is corrupted (*praduṣṭa*), and, therefore, whatever conforms to words (*yathāruta*) has an incorrect (*ayukta*) nature (*rūpa*).”¹¹

¹⁰Dasgupta, 1928, 38-39 shows how the mind (*manas*) and the operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*) are the ones responsible for the production of the conventional construction (*vyavahārika*, *saṃvṛti*), under any of its aspects.

¹¹ „I.21. *manaḥ Pradoṣaḥ prakṛtipraduṣṭo [yathārute cāpi] hyayuktarūpaḥ /*”
Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, I.21, Limaye, 2000, 19.

The equally altered nature of the affective-volitive experience and of the conceptual experience

According to Vijñānavāda, there is a tight connection between the attachment to the ego, on the one hand, and the presence and the intensity of the tendency towards conceptual discrimination, on the other. As the tendency towards conceptual discrimination is related to the subjectivity of a certain individual, to a certain personality, the intensity of the attachment to the individual ego determines the intensity of the tendency towards conceptual discrimination. The same way the seeds of afflictions (*kleśa*) can be found at the level of the individual self (*ātman*) and of its tendencies, the seeds of categorical discrimination can be found in the sphere of the ego as well. For Vijñānavāda, the categorical discrimination does not have a more objective or a less altered status than the value discrimination depending on the preferences of the individual self. In the same way in which to constitute an object of desire is determined by purely subjective reasons, to constitute an object (*artha*, *viśaya*) of a certain type, with a certain categorical identity (*parikalpita svabhāva*), is equally the result of a decision made on subjective grounds. The altered nature of the erroneous discrimination of the individual self (*ātman*) can be found not only in the sphere of value judgements, but, equally, in the sphere of conceptualisation.

Realistic philosophy operates a sharp dichotomy between the subjective sphere, to which thirst/desire (*tṛṣṇā*), afflictions (*kleśa*), and value determinations (*vyākṛta*) belong to, and the objective sphere, to which conceptual knowledge, notions would belong to. But, for Vijñānavāda, both afflictions, the attachment to a certain individual self, on the one hand, and the adherence to a certain categorical system and the making of certain categorical discriminations based on this system, on the other, are equally related to subjectivity and alteration. The objective sphere of manifestation is constituted only of the amorphous flux of the dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

Moreover, as the afflictions determined by the ego illusively and erroneously inflict the appearance of the self-other duality (*sva-para*), the categorical discrimination determined by the ego also erroneously inflicts the appearance of some dualities, of the multiplicity inherent to it. In

The words „*yathārute cāpi*” are missing from the Sanskrit text preserved until today, as a result of the corruption of the manuscript. They represent only a reconstruction done by Bagchi, 1970. *Apud*. Limaye, 2000, 19.

doing so, similar to afflictions (*kleśa*), conceptual knowledge falsifies reality and inflicts the state of bondage. Vijñānavāda considers that the objects of conceptual knowledge, the “knowable objects” (*jñeya*) represent, just like afflictions (*kleśa*), obstructions (*āvaraṇa*) on the path to liberation, the texts of the school frequently discussing about these two types of obstructions: obstructions consisting of the knowable objects (*jñeyāvaraṇa*) and obstructions consisting of afflictions (*kleśāvaraṇa*).¹²

„Oh, Lord (*adhipati*) of Laṅka, the practice (*yoga*) of the philosophers (*tīrthya*) is produced (*pravṛt*) due to the clinging (*abhiniveśa*) of the philosophers to the individual self (*ātman*). The ugly (*asaumya*) practices (*yoga*) of the philosophers (*tīrthya*) are due to the perception (*darśana*) and the clinging (*abhiniveśa*) to [considering] the own-nature (*svabhāva*) of consciousness (*viññāna*) as a dual object (*dvayārtha*).”¹³

„206. Equally (*samatā*), the apparitions (*ākhyā*) of knowledge (*jñāna*) and of afflictions (*kleśa*) preclude (*vivarjita*) liberation (*vimukti*).”¹⁴

„The propensity for discrimination of this consciousness will be intensified by both the intellectual defilement of holding fast to perverse views and the affectional defilement of indulgence in passion.”¹⁵

The “obstructed” (*nivṛta*) nature of the conceptual knowledge

The Vijñānavāda texts assign to the conceptual discrimination an “obstructed” (*nivṛta*) nature, i.e. they consider that it is affected by the illusion of the determined individuality, by the illusion of subjectivity, which obstructs the absolute and liberated condition of reality, characterised by universality, non-determination. Subjectivity and individuality obstruct this condition because they involve at least the dichotomy between subject and object (*grāhaka – grāhya*), self and other

¹² The two kinds of *āvaraṇa*-s, the obstructions of the afflictions and those of the knowable objects, along Buddhist Mahāyāna tradition, in Muller, 2013, 1195-1197, 1200-1208. A detailed discussion on the obstructions of the knowable (*jñeyāvaraṇa*), in Swanson, 1983, 52-54, 63-65.

¹³ „*tīrthyayogo hi laṅkādhīpate tīrthyānāmātmābhiniveśātpurvartate / vijñānasvabhāvadvayārthānāmabhiniveśadarśanādasaumyayogastīrthakarāṇām //*” *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, chap.I, Nanjio, 1956, 11.

¹⁴ „206.....*samatājñānakleśākhyā vimuktyā te vivarjitāḥ //*” *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, chap.II, verse 206, Nanjio, 1956, 135.

¹⁵ *Mahāyānaśraddhotpāda*, part.3, Hakeda, 1967, 79.

(*sva-para*). In Vijñānavāda texts, the function of giving birth to obstructions is ascribed to the mind (*manas*), as its own essence, the mind being responsible for the illusory appearance of the ego, of the individual. However, the mind, through the determination relation it exerts upon the mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*) and upon the conceptual experience that is engendered at its level, transfers the “obstructed” (*nivṛta*) nature to the mental consciousness as well.¹⁶

„Again, the obstructed (*nivṛta*) and the [valorically] non-determined (*avyākṛta*) ones are those associated (*saṃprayukta*) to the mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*), which are born along (*sahajāta*) with it, namely the view of the reality of the body (*satkāyadrṣṭi*) and the view of perceiving extremes (*antagrahadṛṣṭi*).”¹⁷

II. A non-referential and non-cognitive theory of truth

The similarity between the individual experiences of various subjects accounted by means of the “similar karma” (*tulyakarma*)

Although Vijñānavāda denies all cognitive value to conceptual knowledge, reducing it to a particular type of subjective experience, the school does not slip into a form of absolute solipsism. Truly, Vijñānavāda claims that any type of conceptual knowledge simply represents a subjective phenomenon, with no cognitive value and no corresponding object; it also considers that the apparition of a certain conceptual experience is determined by entirely subjective causes, which are related only to the individual identity (*ātman*) appropriated by consciousness. Nothing else but the karmic imprints (*vāsanā*), the seeds (*bīja*) appropriated by the consciousness along with the appropriation of an individual identity, have a role in engendering conceptual knowledge.

However, despite their entirely subjective nature, the conceptual experiences of various subjects may have a similar content (*tulya*), and this is explained through the similarity of the karmic imprints

¹⁶ Tillemans, 1990, 245 (note 216) mentions a fragment from Candrakīrti which says that the consensus received by a thesis, by an opinion, represents the same kind of attachment as the attachment towards one’s native places.

¹⁷ „*nivṛtāvyaḥkṛtaṃ punaḥ*

manovijñānasamprayuktasahajātasatkāya[drṣṭy]antagrahadṛṣṭi”

Asaṅga, *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, Pradhān, 1950, 21 apud. Sparham, 1995, 118, note 3. „Perceiving the extremes” (*antagrāha*) refers to any kind of conceptual representation which delineates between what is included in the sphere of a concept and what remains outside of it.

(*tulyakarma*), through the so-called “common karma” (*sādhāraṇakarma*). Since the categorical system and the conceptual representations are determined by the karmic content, it is obvious that the similarity of these karmic imprints leads to a similarity of the conceptual experiences of the individuals as well. This is how Vijñānavāda manages to explain the common experience of a phenomenal “truth”, of the existence of a similarity among the experiences of various individual subjects.¹⁸

„All the dead (*preta*) which are in the situation (*avasthā*) [resulting from] the maturation (*vipāka*) of a similar Karma (*tulyakarma*) see a river full of pus and not only few of them.”¹⁹

„Since they are governed (*adhipatya*) by the maturation (*vipāka*) of some similar (*samāna*) own Karma (*svakarma*), their torment by these [infernal entities] was established (*siddha*), although the Hell guardians and the others are not real (*asat*).”²⁰

Interpreting in this way the existence of a certain similarity among the conceptual experiences of various individuals, Vijñānavāda manages to avoid the postulation of a phenomenal “truth” having cognitive value. Such a cognitive “truth” would have compromised its own theories regarding the non-referentiality of the conceptual knowledge, the absence of any cognitive value of all conceptual constructions.²¹ The similarities between the conceptual representations of various individual beings is not due to the fact that they would intend a unique objective reality, which thus could have represented the standard for the truth value of these experiences. According to Vijñānavāda, the similarity of representations is explained simply through the similarity of the causes generating these experiences. The similarity of the conceptual

¹⁸ A detailed discussion on the possibility of experiencing a „common object” even in an idealist context, in Kochumuttom, 1999, 168-169. His discussion is based on the arguments Vasubandhu brings in *Viṃśikā*, 4-5 (Anacker, 1998, 414). See also Prasad, 1993, 426, for an analysis of the way the common experience of beings is engendered. An interesting approach of the concepts of „similar Karma” (*tulyakarma*) and „shared world” (*bhājanaloka*), in Chung, 1993, 63-69. See also Waldron, 2003, 239-241, for a neuroscientific approach of the issue of trans-individual experience as determined by cultural conventions.

¹⁹ „*tulyakarmavipākāvasthā hi pretāḥ sarve 'pi pūyapūrṇāṃ nadīm paśyanti naika eva* /” Vasubandhu, *Viṃśikāvṛtti*, ad. 3c, Anacker, 1998, 414.

²⁰ „.....*taiśca tadbādhanam siddhamasatsvapi narakapālādiṣu samānasvakarmavipākādhipatyāt* /”

Vasubandhu, *Viṃśikāvṛtti*, ad. 4c, Anacker, 1998, 414.

²¹ Wright, 1986, 21-23 denies the “truth” nature of the conventional truth and reduces it to a non-cognitive category: that of the “common sense”. His study relies especially on texts belonging to the Hua-Yen branch of Vijñānavāda Buddhism.

representations is explained in the same manner as the similarity of any other phenomena; the explanation is a purely causal one, which appeals only to the similarity of causes and not to any cognitive, referential aspects. In case of the realistic theories of truth, the similarity of the conceptual representations experienced by different individuals is explained on the grounds of their cognitive, referential charge, i.e. on the grounds of the fact that all these pieces of knowledge intend a unique reality. Vijñānavāda, however, considers conceptual knowledge, in its entire variety, as simple phenomena, as simple experiences which, having similar causes, display a certain degree of similarity themselves. The conceptual representations of various individuals do not converge towards a unique reality but rather they are in tune with each other, are characterized by a certain consonance; although consonant, they still remain parallel experiences, without aiming any common “object”. The sphere of common representations does not have objectivity but it is only something constituted through the consensus of the subjects, something “established by the world” (*lokaprasiddha*).

„III.12. Worldly (*loka*) acceptance (*prasiddha*) is from the unity (*eka*) [of the consent];

[*Bhāṣya*:] regarding the constructed own-being (*parikalpitasvabhāva*). Regarding an object (*vastu*), there is a similarity (*tulyatā*) of the perceptions (*darśana*) of all the worldly (*laukika*) [people], through the fact that [their] intellects (*buddhi*) conform (*anupraviś*) to some common (*saṁstava*) conventions (*saṅketa*), such as «this is earth (*pṛthivī*) and not fire (*agni*)», «this is a shape (*rūpa*) and not a sound (*śabda*)» etc.”²²

„169. The naming (*abhidhāna*) of all entities (*sarvabhāva*) has always [took place], along hundreds of births (*janma*), through the fact that, mutually (*paraspara*), discrimination (*vikalpa*) has repeatedly taken place (*abhyas*) and is repeatedly taking place.

170. If there were no speaking (*kathyamāna*), the whole world (*loka*) would fall (*āpad*) into confusion (*saṁmoha*); therefore, with the goal (*artha*) of eliminating (*vyudāsa*) confusion, naming (*nāman*) is done (*kr*).”²³

²² „III.12. *lokaprasiddhamekasmāt* /

[*Bhāṣya*:] *parikalpitasvabhāvāt / yasmin vastuni saṅketasaṁstavānupraviṣṭayā buddhyā sarveṣāṃ laukikānāṃ darśanatulyatā bhavati pṛthivyeveyaṃ nāgnūrūpamevedaṃ na śbda ityevamādi //*”

Asaṅga, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, III.12; Vasubandhu, *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*, ad. III.12, Anacker, 1998, 441.

²³ „169. *abhidhānaṃ sarvabhāvānāṃ janmāntaraśataiḥ sadā* /

„13. Due to the similarity (*sāmānyavattva*) of the ideations (*jñapti*), there is a commonly (*sāmānya*) shared (*bhājana*) element (*dhātu*).”²⁴

„ It’s not about the existence (*sattā*) of some real objects (*bhūtārtha*) since these are [only ideations] existing in common (*sādhāraṇyaya bhāva*).”²⁵

Thus, the problem of truth is transferred from the cognitive level to the level of simple experience. The truth of a sentence does not mean anything else but a certain consonance with the statements of the other subjects; when qualifying a sentence as true or false, the only thing that accounts for its truth-value is the totality of the subjective conceptual representations. There is no objective authority to establish what the truth is; all truth-related matters are about consensus, convention and practice.²⁶ The Sanskrit term used to refer to this type of truth, i.e. “*vyavahārasatya*”, utterly reveals its subjective status, its status of “practice”, of “convention”.²⁷ “*Vyavahāra*” does not carry any cognitive meaning but it refers simply to a certain human practice or, more exactly, to a social practice, a convention.²⁸

abhyastamabhyasantaṃ ca parasparavikalpayā //

*170. akathyamāne saṃmohaṃ sarvaloka āpadyate /
tasmātkriyate nāma saṃmohasya vyudāsārtham //*

Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra, Sagāthakam, 169-170, Nanjio, 1956, 287.

²⁴ „13. *jñapteḥ sāmānyavattvācca sāmānyaṃ dhātubhājanam //*”

Asaṅga, *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, 13, Levinson, 2001, 31.

²⁵ „*bhūtārthasattā naivāsti sādhāraṇyaya bhāvataḥ //*”

Asaṅga, *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, 17, Levinson, 2001, 38.

²⁶ The „conventional truth” (*saṃvṛttisatya*), according to Vijñānavāda, in Lusthaus, 2009, 113-116. The relation between truth and human conventions, in Lusthaus, 2009, 115-116.

²⁷Wright, 1986, 23-24 ascribes the conventionality of the “conventional truth” (*vyavahārika*) to the conventional, constructed, artificial character of language. The conventional truth would be nothing else but a mix of conventional linguistic expressions.

Waldron, 2003, 162-169 points to the connection between language and the constitution of common experience. Both language and the shared experience of the world are produced by the common Karma and, thus, their ontological statuses are quite similar. Waldron considers common experience as an “experience moulded into linguistic shapes”; the trans-individual nature of language bestows to the linguistically moulded experience an equally trans-individual character.

²⁸ Williams – Monier, 1997, 1034, col.1: „*vy-ava-hṛ*” - „to transpose”, „exchange”, „to act”, „proceed”, „behave towards or deal with”, „to be active or busy”, „work”, „to carry on commerce”, „trade”, „deal in”, „to manage”, „employ”.

„23. The constructed [own-being] (*kalpita*) is of the nature (*ātman*) of practice (*vyavahāra*)...”²⁹

„The conventional [truth] is a kind of truth because a person is not lying when he calls a pot «a pot», and as far as conventional designations are concerned, he is using them properly.”³⁰

**The mind and the storehouse consciousness as the bases
(*āśraya*) of the operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*)**

Vijñānavāda manages to offer a further detailed presentation of the manner in which the existence of a similarity among the conceptual experiences of different individuals is possible. This is done by means of a theory dealing with the “bases” (*āśraya*), with the factors which determine the operational consciousnesses responsible for the apparition of conceptualised experience. These theories are, to a certain extent, heterogeneous, at least in the way they are formulated if not in their content as well.

„Visual consciousness is born depending on the eye, form and store-house consciousness.”³¹

„Which are the supports (*āśraya*) of the visual consciousness (*caḥsurvijñāna*)?”

The eye (*caḥṣu*) is its simultaneous (*sahabhū*) support (*āśraya*). The mind (*manas*) is its immediately preceding (*samanantara*) support. The store-house consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), possessing all the seeds (*sarvabījaka*), appropriating the [individual] basis (*āśrayopādātr*), gathering together (*saṃgrh*) the [Karmic] maturation (*vipāka*), is the support of the seeds (*bījāśraya*).³²

Irrespective of the manner in which they are exposed, the theories about the conditionings of the operational consciousnesses state the conditioning of conceptual experience by two factors. On the one hand, it

„*Vy-ava-hāra*” - „doing”, „performing”, „action”, „practice”, „conduct”, „behaviour”, „usage”, „custom”, „ordinary life”, „common practice”, „activity”, „adherence to law or custom”, „the use of an expression”.

²⁹ „23. *kalpito vyavahārātmā*.....”

Vasubandhu, *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, 23, Anacker, 1998, 465.

³⁰ Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, VI.4, Potter, 1999, 560.

³¹ *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*, V.5, Lamotte, 1935, 186; Vasubandhu,

Mahāyānasamgrahabhāṣya, ad. *Mahāyānasamgraha*, I.5, Lamotte, 1973, 15.

³² „*caḥsurvijñānasyāśrayaḥ katamaḥ / caḥsuḥ sahabhūr āśrayaḥ / manaḥ samanantara āśrayaḥ / sarvabījakaṃ āśrayopādātr vipākasaṃgrhītam ālayavijñānaṃ bījāśrayaḥ /*” *Yogācārabhūmi*, 4,5ff, in Schmithausen, 1987, 110.

is conditioned by the mind (*manas*), by the various components of the individuality appropriated by mind; on the other hand, it is conditioned by the seeds existing within the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). This means that responsible for the experience of the operational consciousnesses are both the factors that were appropriated by the mind as own self (*ātman*), and the trans-individual sphere of the storehouse consciousness. The apparition of the conceptual experience of an individual, the experience engendered by his operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*), requires the cooperation of two factors: the appropriated seeds, which are strictly individual, and the seeds that could be “shared” (*bhājana*) by other individuals as well, seeds which are not imprinted in a certain individuality but in the trans-individual sphere of the storehouse consciousness.

This does not bestow any objective value to the individual experiences, but only a trans-individual one. The individual experience is still subjective, similar to fantasy, devoid of an objective counterpart, without representational value. Nevertheless, there can be a certain similarity among the subjective representations of different individuals because some of the conditions that determine these representations are “shared” (*bhājana*).

This approach presents significant philosophical importance since it can lay the foundations of a theory of the empirical truth which could be applied to the knowledge engendered by the operational consciousnesses (the sensorial consciousnesses and the mental consciousness). Since the experiences of the operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*), i.e. the perceptual contents put in a conceptual mould by the mental consciousness, are caused by the trans-individual component of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), by the seeds (*bīja*) stored within it, these experiences acquire a certain trans-individual dimension and hence they are saved from being only subjective imagination (*parikalpa*).

The experiences of the operational consciousnesses are entirely subjective since they are determined by the mind (*manas*) and appear at the level of the individual self (*ātman*) appropriated by the mind³³; however, since they are also determined by the trans-individual component of the storehouse consciousness, they also acquire a certain degree of trans-subjectivity.

³³ For a study upon the dependency of the six operational consciousnesses on the appropriation of an individual identity, see Waldron, 2003, 97! For the dependence of the mental consciousness on the mind, see Waldron, 2003, 227-228 (notes 72-74)!

Taking his stand on the trans-individual element that is involved in their apparition, one may elaborate a theory to explain their “truth value”. Of course, this “truth value” would not have any cognitive significance but it would rather reflect the degree to which the trans-individual conditions are those who determine the apparition of these experiences. Therefore, the truth would be determined by the relation between the determining trans-individual component of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) and the determined operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*). The source of “error” would be the mind (*manas*), the individual seeds appropriated by it, which, through their contribution to the apparition of the knowledge experience, diminishes the role of the trans-individual elements within this process.

The strictly causal interpretation of the relation between the seeds of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) and the mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*) in classic Vijñānavāda

Despite the fact that the determination relation that the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), including its shared contents, exerts upon the operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*) was known to the authors of Vijñānavāda ever since the old period of the school, the early and the classic authors do not realize that this determination relation could account for the existence of a certain similarity between the individual experiences of various beings. They seem to totally deny the existence of such a trans-individual dimension of the individual experiences of various beings, sliding into a form of solipsism. At times, the dependence of the operational consciousnesses on the storehouse consciousness, on the condition consciousness (*pratyayavijñāna*), is stated³⁴, but, more than this, their dependency on the appropriated part of the storehouse consciousness draws their attention. These philosophers rather stress on the dependence of the operational consciousnesses on the mind (*manas*) and, through this, they highlighted their subjective side.

Classic Vijñānavāda authors often restrict themselves to generally stating the dependence of the operational consciousnesses on the storehouse consciousness without detailing on the nature of this relation. They hardly approach in different ways the dependence of the operational consciousnesses on each of the two components of the storehouse consciousness: the common (*sādhāraṇa*), shared (*bhājana*)

³⁴ For the conditioning of the six operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*) by the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), see Chatterjee, 1999, 106!

component and the non-common (*asādhāraṇa*), appropriated (*upādāna*) one.³⁵ This neglect suggests that the classic authors of the school were not aware of the philosophical bearings the relation between the operational consciousnesses and the shared side (*bhājana*) of the storehouse consciousness might have had.

„15. The five [consciousnesses] appear (*udbhava*) in the root-consciousness (*mūlavijñāna*) according to conditions (*yathāpratyaya*).”³⁶

In *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣyaṭkā*,³⁷ Sthiramati notices the dependence of the individual experiences engendered by the operational consciousnesses on the trans-individual factors, on the so-called “exterior domains, such as the manifestation of forms and of others” (*rūpādīpratibhāsaḥ bāhyam āyatanam*), on “the manifestation, by the storehouse consciousness, of the common objects” (*ālayavijñānasya sādharmaṇārthapratibhāso*). He also remarks that this dependence relation must be understood only as the “production of the manifestations of the operational consciousnesses having the exterior domains as their regent condition” (*pratibhāsasya pravṛttivijñānasyotpattāvadhīpatipratyayatvād bāhyamāyatanam*) and not as the dependence of their content on something trans-individual. The relation between the operational consciousnesses and the storehouse consciousness is, in Sthiramati’s opinion, a strictly causal one and he does not investigate whether the storehouse consciousness determines also the content of the individual experiences. Even if the experiences of the operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*) are caused by and appear in dependence on the manifestations of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), their content, their object, is not determined in any way by the fact that all of them share a unique storehouse consciousness as their condition (“*na tu tad viṣayatvād...*” – “do not have it as their object ...”). Sthiramati accepts a strictly causal theory of perception, according to which perception is determined by something exterior to the individual consciousness experiencing it. This strictly causal relation between the storehouse consciousness and the operational consciousnesses is, in fact, the only relation that the authors of the classic period seem to accept. Only the act of apparition of the individual experience seems to depend

³⁵ A discussion on the common (*sādhāraṇa*) and the non-common (*asādhāraṇa*) object of the storehouse consciousness, in Waldron 2003, 161-162.

³⁶ „15. *pañcānām mūlavijñāne yathāpratyayamudbhava*”

Vasubandhu, *Triṃśikā*, 15, Chatterjee, 1980, 96.

³⁷ Sthiramati, *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣyaṭkā*, 146.5 ff, in Schmithausen, 1987, 415-16, note 769.

on the storehouse consciousness, on its trans-individual component, not also the object of this experience, its content, whose nature is, in the opinion of the authors of the classic period of Vijñānavāda, entirely subjective, similar to imagination, fantasy.

„The external fields (*bāhya āyatana*) representing the manifestation (*pratibhāsa*) of forms (*rūpa*) and of others by the operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*), are the manifestation (*pratibhāsa*) of the common (*sādhāraṇa*) object (*artha*) of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), moreover, those represent the perceived object (*grāhya*)..... [It is stated] that the fields (*āyatana*) are external (*bāhya*) because they are the regent condition (*adhipatipratyaya*) for the apparition (*utpatti*) of the operational consciousnesses (*pravṛttivijñāna*) and not because they would have them as an object (*viṣaya*).”³⁸

The “immediate” object and the “remote” object of the operational consciousnesses

It is only the late texts that debate the problem of the existence of a consonance relation between the content of the individual experiences, of the experience of the operational consciousnesses of various individuals, and the trans-individual seeds, the shared seeds from the storehouse consciousness. Late authors remark that, since there is a trans-individual, shared, element involved in the determination of the

³⁸ „.... *pravṛttivijñānasya rūpādipratibhāsaḥ bāhyam āyatanam / ya ālayavijñānasya sādhāraṇārthapratibhāso so 'pi grāhya pratibhāsasya pravṛttivijñānasyotpattāv adhipatipratyayatvād bāhyam āyatanam ucyate na tu tadviṣayatvād iti /*”

Sthiramati, *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣyaṭīkā*, 146,5 ff apud. Schmithausen, 1987, 415-16, note 769.

The first part of the quotation seems to state that the „external fields” (*bāhya āyatana*) represent both the object of the operational consciousnesses and of the storehouse consciousness. Both the terms „*pravṛttivijñāna*” and „*ālayavijñāna*” are in the Genitive and they determine the syntagm „*bāhya āyatana*”. Therefore, the text seems to state that the „external fields” would stand in the same relation towards the operational consciousnesses and the storehouse consciousness, i.e. they would be equally the objects of the storehouse consciousness and of the operational consciousnesses. Nevertheless, the last part of the quotation utterly rejects the possibility of such an interpretation.

operational consciousnesses, then the content of their experiences might have a trans-individual, shared, element as well.

„The sixth [consciousness, namely the mental consciousness], is not the object (*ālambana*) of the five [sensorial consciousnesses] since these five are established only³⁹ in the object component (*nimitta*) of the eighth [consciousness].”⁴⁰

A more elaborate discussion of this matter is found at Hiuan-Tsang, although the manner he formulates Vijñānavāda doctrine is not entirely the classic one and, consequently, his theory about the “immediate” and the “remote” object of a consciousness rises problems when one has to integrate it into the classic doctrine of Vijñānavāda.

Hiuan-Tsang starts by exposing the fact that every consciousness, by its status of “consciousness”, involves an “immediate” object (*sākṣāt*) of its experience. This one represents simply what consciousness perceives in a representation that appears at its level.

„That factor (*dharma*) that doesn't exist separately (*avisamyukta*, *avinirbhāgin*) from the consciousness that is focused upon him (*ālambaka*), upon which it is established and through which it experiences the representation component (*darśanabhāga*), that is the «immediate object» (*sākṣādālambana*). Every consciousness (*vijñāna*) has this kind of object since no consciousness can exist without being established on an inner object, without perceiving such an object.”⁴¹

However, at the same time, the consciousness may also have another type of object, i.e. an external one, standing in a tight connection with the internal object, with the “immediate” object, whom it determines. This outer object represents the object “intended” by the consciousness, which the “immediate” object reproduces at the level of consciousness.

„That factor (*dharma*) which, although existing separated from consciousness, nevertheless represents the pattern, the object component (*nimittabhāga*), which is able to engender the representation component (*darśanabhāga*), the one in which [the representation component] is established and through which it is perceived, that is the «remote object»⁴².”⁴³

³⁹ „Only” is here demanded by the context and its presence does not preclude the determination of the operational consciousnesses also by the mind (*manas*).

⁴⁰ Hiuan-Tsang, *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun*, Poussin, 1929, 469.

⁴¹ Hiuan-Tsang, *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun*, Poussin, 1929, 445-446.

⁴² The Sanskrit term for „remote object” is difficult to restore; the dichotomy immediate object – remote object is not found in any of the Sanskrit texts of Vijñānavāda that have

Not every consciousness necessarily has such a “remote object”; the consciousness may experience also in the absence of such an external counter-part of its perception. The common human experience reveals the cases of hallucinations, dreams, imagination, where the absence of an intended external object is obvious.

„Not every consciousness has this kind of object (*ālambana*) since a consciousness can exist even in the absence of an external pattern, of a corresponding object component (*nimittabhāga*).”⁴⁴

This distinction is important when applied to the ideatic experiences of the operational consciousnesses because, in their case, in most situations, there is a corresponding remote object and the relation between that remote object and the immediate one accounts for their truth value.

„The five [operational] consciousnesses, before being revolved, are gross, weak, feeble; that’s why they depend on a pattern and hence they always have a remote object.”⁴⁵

Even if Hiuan-Tsang does not go into details about this relation, the fact that he accepts it creates the possibility of claiming an “empirical truth” and saves the experience of the operational consciousnesses from the status of pure imagination.

The theory about the “immediate” object and the “remote” object of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) considered in relation to the overall doctrine of Vijñānavāda

This theory regarding the existence of an “immediate” object and of a “remote” one, of a consciousness, can not be found in the early or classic literature of Vijñānavāda, but only in the late texts of some Chinese authors. Sometimes, the later versions of Vijñānavāda present significant shifts from the classic Vijñānavāda. The theory itself raises some noteworthy problems, such as the possibility of applying the distinction between the immediate and the remote object to the storehouse consciousness. There are, however, some formulations of the theory which present it in such a way that it becomes possible for it to be integrated into the whole system of thought of Vijñānavāda. The relation

survived until today and, therefore, even „*sākṣāt*”, as the Sanskrit equivalent of „immediate”, is only a reconstruction.

⁴³ Hiuan-Tsang, *Ch’eng-wei-shih-lun*, Poussin, 1929, 446.

⁴⁴ Hiuan-Tsang, *Ch’eng-wei-shih-lun*, Poussin, 1929, 446.

⁴⁵ Hiuan-Tsang, *Ch’eng-wei-shih-lun*, Poussin, 1929, 448.

between this theory and the overall Vijñānavāda doctrine is though one of consistency and not one of implication, as this theory supplements the classic doctrines of Vijñānavāda and not just details them.

Applied to the mind (*manas*), this distinction between the remote object and the immediate one always reveals the existence of a remote object which the afflicted mind focuses upon and appropriates.

„The mind (*manas*), before its revolution (*parāvṛtti*), has always a remote object (*ālambana*). Being always inborn (*sahaja*) and never appearing as constructed (*parikalpitodbhava*), it never acquires its own immediate object otherwise than by depending on an external pattern.”⁴⁶

The specific activity of the mind (*manas*) is never simply the creation, through an inner act, of a specific object; the mind rather appropriates a pre-existing object being “established” in the experience of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). This pre-existing object represents its remote object which, once appropriated, once represented as the individual self (*ātman*) becomes its immediate object.

The storehouse consciousness, at least when considered according to the classic Vijñānavāda, i.e. as “the one holding all the seeds” (*sarvabījaka*), can have only an immediate object and never a remote one. Due to the universal nature of the storehouse consciousness, nothing can exist outside it.

However, Hiuan-Tsang mentions the existence of three distinct opinions about the alleged existence of a remote object of the storehouse consciousness. One of them states the impossibility of the existence of a remote object of the storehouse consciousness and this position is the only one compatible with the classic system of thought of Vijñānavāda. The other two theories, which support the possibility of the existence of such a remote object even in the case of the storehouse consciousness, are based on the presupposition that the storehouse consciousness is one for each individual person. Not having an absolutely universal nature but being limited to the level of one person, any storehouse consciousness can have and must have an external object, a remote object, as clearly revealed by the situations when it perceives elements which are related to the experience of another person’s storehouse consciousness. However, this manner of considering the storehouse consciousness, as an entity circumscribed to an individual, is not really compatible with the classic Vijñānavāda and thus the possibility of the existence of a remote object of the storehouse consciousness may be claimed only within the framework of a slightly modified version of Vijñānavāda.

⁴⁶ Hiuan-Tsang, *Ch’eng-wei-shih-lun*, Poussin, 1929, 447.

„Regarding the object (*ālambana*) of the eighth consciousness, there are three opinions:

1) The eighth [consciousness] has only an immediate object, since it manifests its objects in a spontaneous way, under the determination of Karma, of some intrinsic causes;

2) The eighth [consciousness] also has a remote object. When it manifests the body of another person, in doing so, it must establish itself upon the manifestations of the eighth [consciousness] of the other. Hence, it manifests an ideation which represents its immediate object.....

3) None of the two theories are precise We must say that the eighth consciousness, either in case of those under bondage either in case of the enlightened ones, can either have either not have a remote object.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ Hiuan-Tsang, *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun*, Poussin, 1929, 446-48.

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