

Liberty University  
B. R. Lakin School of Religion

TWO DECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE PHENOMENA:  
THE PESSIMISM OF DERRIDA, THE OPTIMISM OF YOGACARA BUDDHISM,  
AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

A Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

PHIL 697: Postmodernism & Existentialism

by

David R. Pensgard

November 2006

## Preface

Deconstruction, a recent development within the continental tradition of Western philosophy, has continued the trend that puts consciousness at the center of investigation. Husserl did so positively, Heidegger did so negatively, and deconstruction has put into question the very basis underlying the concept of consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This last move, while certainly intriguing, may only have initiated a novel way to be skeptical and nihilistic. Nonetheless, the fundamental concepts within deconstruction may not necessarily lead to an epistemological and metaphysical impasse. In fact, other cultures have reached similar insights with neither skepticism nor nihilism. For decades, some philosophers have made note of similarities between phenomenology in the West and Buddhism in the East. Even more so, with Derrida and deconstruction, we have at least one very close analog in the East, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism and its derivatives.

Comparisons between cultures lead to a necessary decentering that functions like the removal of blinders.<sup>2</sup> If kept from being a reduction of “endless complexities... into falsifying unities,”<sup>3</sup> this widening of scope, which the postmodern mindset encourages while at the same time proclaiming the impossibility of true translation,<sup>4</sup> has the potential to uncover persistent concepts that we are instinctively led to think of as absolute concepts. These similarities, assuming that they are not directly being imitated, indicate that there may be something objective that is being independently recognized in two very distant cultures and times. While he may not have endorsed this concept, Derrida did reject its opposite. Simple cultural (historical) relativism, a position that Derrida rejects, is unable to appreciate the value of independently derived conclusions. It postulates that all perspectives are

---

<sup>1</sup> Bina Gupta, *Cit Consciousness*, Foundations of Philosophy in India (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), ix. ‘*Cit*’ is the Sanskrit term for consciousness, loosely translated.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 76. For comparison of the concept of decentering in both Derrida and Buddhism, see Steve Odin, “Derrida and the Decentered Universe of Ch’an/Zen Buddhism” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17:1 (1990): 61-86.

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Part II. The deeper view, at this point, takes us to consider not only translation between cultures but each reading of any text as a translation. This includes, for Derrida, even the “reading” of the self.

equally valid, or put another way, one can acceptably choose the perspective that best suits one's needs, a methodology that Nietzsche adopts. This is the form of relativism that is most easily criticized as irrational. Derrida appears to agree when he implies that there is a complicated form of cultural relativism that can give us more information rather than allow the self-serving, anything-goes approach of Nietzsche. The very thing that simple cultural relativism cannot conclude is that, "logocentrism ... [is] nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism."<sup>5</sup> This is because simple relativism erases all objective means of criticizing ethnocentrism by prohibiting qualitative comparisons between cultures and their languages, and, because logocentrism is, itself, a cultural perspective that simple relativism must consider valid according to its fundamental axiom.

Contemporary comparative philosophers, even in full view of logocentrism, commonly retain some sense of higher-level value in comparison, retaining the belief that distant traditions may actually provide a good check to the otherwise isolated thought of any one philosophical track.<sup>6</sup> If it is possible that wisdom can be found outside of the Western tradition, as Derrida himself suggests, then it is within these surprising similarities, separated by millennia and thousands of miles, that we have the potential to move beyond the barrier to discover some form of alterity metaphysically and truth epistemologically. This is because, while recognizing many of the same problems as Western deconstructionists, at least one Eastern tradition, *Yogacara* Buddhism, a phenomenological response to *Madhyamaka*, claims to allow access into the text-like phenomena of both the self and the world, something thought hopeless in both *Madhyamaka* and the continental tradition.

Once established, the phenomenology of *Yogacara* Buddhism may provide insights for Christian theology that the Greek epoch, with its metaphysics of presence, was unable to provide. This last step vindicates aspects of both Derridean deconstruction and Eastern phenomenology while postulating a third position that becomes distinct.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>6</sup> J. J. Clarke, 122.

## I. Decentering Parallels

*I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens, to those who don't speak my language and to whom I neither speak nor respond.* —Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*<sup>7</sup>

*Whatever is a designation for the individual characteristics of the dharmas [truths] ... should be understood to be only a designation. It is neither the essential nature of that dharma, nor is it wholly other than that. That [essential nature] is neither the sphere of speech nor the object of speech; nor is it altogether different from these. That being the case, the essential nature of dharmas is not found in the way in which it is expressed.* —Asanga, *On Knowing Reality*, 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.C.E.<sup>8</sup>

*What is interesting about Buddhism, from a Derridean point of view, is that it is both ontotheological (therefore what needs to be deconstructed) and deconstructive (providing a different example of how to deconstruct). What is interesting about Derrida's type of deconstruction, from a Buddhist point of view, is that it is logocentric.* —David Loy, *The Deconstruction of Buddhism*<sup>9</sup>

### Similarities Between East and West

Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, cross-cultural philosophers in the west have been making comparisons between Eastern philosophies and similar conceptions in the West.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, *Yogacara* Buddhism stood out as being especially close to contemporary European thinking.

For example, Stcherbatsky (1866-1942), a Russian student of Eastern philosophy, pointed out similarities between the ideas of Kant and *Yogacara* Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> It seems that both systems highlight the way in which the mind constructs the sensible world. Soon after, others likened *alaya* (*alayavijnana*), the *Yogacara* concept of consciousness, to Freud's unconscious and others to Jung's collective unconscious. Later, a connection with Husserl's inner-time-consciousness was recognized, however latent.<sup>12</sup> However, not only early Husserlian phenomenology but the tradition he inspired, including Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Lyotard, through to the deconstructive thought of

---

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 69.

<sup>8</sup> John M. Koller and Patricia Koller, *A Sourcebook in Asian Philosophy* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 313. This is a translation of Asanga's 5<sup>th</sup> century text, *On Knowing Reality: The Tattvartha Chapter of Asanga's Bodhisattvabhumi*, translated by Janice Dean Willis.

<sup>9</sup> David Loy, "The Deconstruction of Buddhism," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 227.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note well that, in the East, most religions are nothing more than philosophies together with practices enlightened by them. Thus, study of Eastern religions involves much more philosophy than theology or mysticism.

<sup>11</sup> Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), v.

<sup>12</sup> Gupta, 87.

Derrida is a much closer match to *Madhyamaka*, than to its derivative, *Yogacara*.<sup>13</sup> More recently, similarities with the whole Western tradition of phenomenology have been closely examined by Lusthaus in his realization that Yogacara, long thought to be a form of Berkelian idealism, was actually a very special form of phenomenology.

### **Phenomenologies East and West**

If we proceed with a dual focus upon the best available form from each tradition, the insights of Derrida the deconstructionist in the West and early *Yogacara* Buddhism<sup>14</sup> in the East, we will uncover separately derived concepts that will act as independent verification of one another. These two systems are extremely similar philosophical systems that both scrutinize the phenomena as something known and constructed by the consciousness. Both of these systems appear to subsume and even disregard metaphysical implications while focusing upon epistemological concerns. Yet, it is only by the metaphysical implications that these systems can be distinguished and utilized within Christian theology. This is because only a hopeful reference to an objective reality, or truth, despite our lack of complete access to it, has any chance whatsoever of arriving at the truth if it exists independently. As will be shown, *Yogacara* is hopeful about access to a real self and a real world. It has this in common with Christian theology but not with Derrida's deconstruction.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to *Yogacara* but in parallel with *Madhyamaka*, Derrida actively works to break down the sense of self-ness that we automatically assume, presume, and experience in the function of consciousness. Accordingly, this notion amounts to a delusion in which we think we *are*, and we presume substance of self where there is only a play of *différance*.<sup>16</sup> Gupta reveals a similar yet optimistic version of this when he states, "Yogacara is to refuse to ascribe permanence, however, limited, to the *alaya*, and to make it into a series of traces,

---

<sup>13</sup> M. J. Larrabee, "The One and The Many: Yogacara Buddhism and Husserl," *Philosophy East & West* 31:1 (1981): 3.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to restrict study of Yogacara Buddhism to its original, early form because the essential teachings have been effectively lost since its inception and only recently recovered by critical textual studies. For details see Richard King, "Early Yogacara and its relationship with the Madhyamaka school," *Philosophy East and West* 44:4 (1994): 659-683.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 20.

traces of traces, and so on ad infinitum, thereby making it almost literally the equivalent of what Derrida calls ‘*differanz*’ [sic].”<sup>17</sup> While both systems replace substance with absence and trace, the “almost,” in Gupta’s statement, as we will see, refers to the difference in destination to which the two systems work.

### **Continental Tradition from Husserl**

Husserl’s early work brought new insights into the nature of the phenomena related to but different from Berkeleyan idealism. This move generated a new tradition that became obsessed with the phenomena to the exclusion of substance metaphysics. A preoccupation with meaning and linguistics followed. This culminated in the deconstruction of Derrida in which the subject is part of a vast incomprehensible network that bears striking resemblance to a text. From this perspective, reality was to be understood as a non-linear complex of relationships built on the structure of the sign.

Derridian deconstruction was pessimistic about metaphysical objectivity, making sure to deride any attempts to achieve it. The dominant form of metaphysics, the metaphysics of presence, presupposed systematic, substance-thinking that was inherited from the Greeks.<sup>18</sup> In actuality, according to Derrida, our signs can grasp only traces of that which is signified. But, the “trace itself does not exist,”<sup>19</sup> i.e. it is not a substance. Derrida did not deny the function, effect, and role of trace but denied that it has *being* within a substance metaphysical view.

From the perspective of deconstruction then, questions and answers about ultimate reality (metaphysically) and our access to it (epistemologically) became nonsense. Skepticism and nihilism were not merely conclusions, they were states of mind firmly established by uncovering a universal sense of alienation which is true by definition. By use of negative dialectic arguments, Derrida rejected

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>17</sup> Gupta, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 167.

the hyletic (substantive) nature of consciousness and revealed the arbitrary nature of metaphysical assumptions. For example, if we presume to have presence within the metaphysics of presence, then the supplements of speech and writing are supposed to be superfluous, but they are nonetheless indispensable. This paradox is presented in order to reveal that the initial assumption was incorrect.<sup>20</sup> Grammatology employs *différance*, a tension between absence and presence in language, and expands its application beyond language to the outer/higher form of writing. *Différance*, with this tension as a dialectic, allows what it forbids, and presents this tension as a metaphysical property<sup>21</sup> that can only result in nihilism and skepticism.

### **Yogacara Tradition From Asanga and Vasubandhu**

*Yogacara*, in responding to its predecessor, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, also effectively responds to Derrida. *Madhyamaka* had much in common with Derrida's deconstruction; not only did this school of Buddhism warn that hidden philosophical pre-commitments and assumptions lie behind all use of language,<sup>22</sup> it also made use of negative dialectic arguments in order to reveal both the arbitrariness and internal inconsistencies of all metaphysical claims. This method of argumentation, *prasanga*, is a form of *reductio ad absurdum* that seems to correlate closely with Derridean negation.<sup>23</sup> The result of these arguments was to show that human notions of reality were incoherent. According to *Madhyamaka*, instead of the existence of an ultimate reality behind appearances, there was nothing or voidness (*sunyata*).<sup>24</sup> Beginning with the original Buddha himself, Prince Gautama, Buddhism had been in the process of developing this concept of voidness. Prior to the insights of the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu, the founders of *Yogacara*, the *Madhyamaka* school had arrived at a truly pessimistic

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 143

<sup>22</sup> Nathan Katz, "Prasanga and Deconstruction: Tibetan Hermeneutics and the Yana Controversy," *Philosophy East and West* 34:2 (1984): 186-187.

<sup>23</sup> Cai Zongqi, "Derrida and Seng-Zhao: Linguistic and Philosophical Deconstructions," *Philosophy East and West* 43:3 (1993): 389. See also, Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Is 'Prasanga' a Form of Deconstruction?" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 20:4 (1992): 345.

“condition” very similar to both the practically skeptical postmodern condition and the related apophatic or negative theology.<sup>25</sup> They had concluded that all was void and that voidness entailed the unreality of all perceived things *including* the self and doctrine (both philosophical and religious).

*Yogacara* worked to put an end to the pessimism that these concepts seemed to naturally engender by insisting that the mind must recognize its own delusions in order to proceed.<sup>26</sup> The amazing, key insight that *Yogacara* added to Buddhism was the “deconstruction of identity into alterity.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, unlike the Western tradition, things developed into a powerful and useful description of reality and experience based on the then well-accepted concept of *apoha* (an equivalent of Derrida’s trace) that gave precedence to absence over presence in naming.<sup>28</sup> Asanga and Vasubandhu, together, crafted an explicit reformulation of voidness very similar to what the West has been calling process metaphysics since A. N. Whitehead. From this perspective, voidness was not truly nothing, but was merely the absence of substance. As a process, things acquire their properties by imputation from other processes.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, this is not instinctively recognized by the average person, according to *Yogacara*. In fact, the automatic assumption of substance for self and objects (*atman* and *dharma*) are merely delusions created to suppress our anxieties and fears of non-being. Throughout life, we construct working theories such as substance to explain what we experience, but these are always in error.<sup>30</sup>

Though never explicitly related to writing as an apt metaphor for the process view of reality, *Yogacara* did incorporate the essential points. Rather than settling for something like Grammatology in which the dialectic of the wider view of writing is accepted as an absolute limitation, the insight of *Yogacara* was to realize that the nature of the self and the world is not contradictory if it is viewed

---

<sup>24</sup> John P. Keenan, “Buddhist Yogacara Philosophy as Ancilla Theologiae,” *Japanese Religions* 15:5 (1988): 203.

<sup>25</sup> Toby Avarad Foshay, “Denegation, Nonduality, and Language in Derrida and Dogen,” *Philosophy East and West* 44:3 (1994): 544-5.

<sup>26</sup> Lusthaus, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Gupta, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Keenan, 208-9.

from within process metaphysics. From this perspective, the self and the world are the same thing. Intense self-scrutiny then becomes the *objective* science of metaphysics that can realistically claim to deliver a ‘presence’ of the non-substance variety. While this does give a somewhat disappointing picture of consciousness as a continuous negation,<sup>31</sup> it does not go so far as to eliminate it altogether. And, as contradictory as the words sound, at least *Yogacara* delivers a consciousness that actually is something! Within its analyses of cognition, *Yogacara* has an extremely rich vocabulary that includes terms for fine distinctions that have not otherwise been recognized.<sup>32</sup> This is in contrast to both the *Madhyamaka* position (at least as it was understood by its followers) and the deconstructive perspective associated with the linguistic turn and encompassing thinkers from Nietzsche to Derrida.<sup>33</sup>

*Yogacara* does not stop with the recognition of the voidness of reality *as* essentially relational and constructed phenomena. It reworks phenomenology into a methodology, which is precisely why phenomenology in the West failed to proceed.<sup>34</sup> Despite Derrida’s attempt to rework Grammatology into a super-science, the grandfather of all other sciences, he nonetheless opposed methodology and the subject/object distinction that scientificity presupposes.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, *Yogacara* views the study of the self as the supreme science. By realizing the self as a part of the process network, one may find access to reality by looking within oneself. This results in a partial but progressive development of alterity as true self-awareness grows. In a move similar to the speculative idealism that came just before Hegel in the West, and in a manner similar to the immanentized theologies of the West after Kant, *Yogacara* encouraged deep self-contemplation and extremely rigorous analysis of consciousness in order to access reality directly. This is not to be confused with those attempts in the West which sought to access God by such methods because Buddhist traditions are atheistic. Nonetheless, the

---

<sup>30</sup> Lusthaus, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Gupta, 171.

<sup>32</sup> Lusthaus, vi.

<sup>33</sup> Clarke, 213.

<sup>34</sup> Lusthaus, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 4.

methodology appears to be much more effective as a means of accessing the self and the world of the phenomena.

Of course, it is also important to keep in mind that, in contrast to Husserl, a similar concept had been recognized by Heidegger who claimed that the Aristotelian concept of immanence allowed for access by means of internalization. Yet, the perennial problem of arbitrariness, recognized by several including Derrida, became insoluble to the point where it was accepted as a brute fact, a feature of reality.<sup>36</sup> *Yogacara* sought to overcome this problem by approaching consciousness skeptically, yet with hope of eventual removal of most delusions.

## II. Pessimistic Deconstruction

*Such an arrangement has suggested to some the need for a wholesale conversion to a very different way of thinking. At the very center of this conversion would be a deep humility that confesses grave human limits; we cannot pretend to achieve a translanguistic God's-eye view from which to judge the putative correspondence between ideas and words or between words and states of affairs. We receive our community's linguistic practices ... as a gift that enables communication—but only within grammatical limits. How humiliating!* —Nancey Murphy and Brad J. Kallenberg<sup>37</sup>

Derrida pursued the first step of the Buddhist. Though often distinguished from destruction, deconstruction has turned out to be mostly destructive. Derrida defines Grammatology as the careful witness of the end of the platonic philosophical tradition. However, Derrida sees himself being within something that is discovering its own obsolescence with no access to an objective perspective.<sup>38</sup> Thus, his break with the old tradition is not complete because it cannot make room for itself. This is a resignation that misses the “possibility for a new, nonconceptual ‘opening’ to something very different.”<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>37</sup> Nancey Murphy and Brad J. Kallenberg, “Anglo-American Postmodernity: A Theology of Communal Practice,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 12, 248-249.

While avoiding metaphysical discussions, except for pejorative references to what other cultures have done, Derrida was implicitly making bold metaphysical claims by rejecting the objective reality of the “transcendental signified,” his term for the ineffable.<sup>40</sup> He continued the work that was destroying substance metaphysics and *effectively* replaced it with a process view deductively derived entirely from the concept of the sign. In some sense, he vindicates Whitehead by providing an analytical basis for this move (rather than Whitehead’s desire for an empirical basis). Yet, Derrida does not make any direct, positive metaphysical claims. Instead, by revealing how the sign accurately represents *our understanding* of relationships between all elements of reality, and by linking phenomenology with the study of literature, which had long been involved in the study of texts, Derrida opened up a new way to take hold of the phenomena. This “critical reading” is similar to the *Yogacara* methodology of rigorous, merciless self-penetration of consciousness, yet, as a destructive deconstruction, it seems to strive in the opposite direction. While it is in agreement with *Yogacara*’s general goal of clearing away the “classical categories of history” and, by implication, all the learned and even instinctive categories, Derridian deconstruction does not seem to work toward the ultimate goal of rescuing the self.<sup>41</sup> Derrida sees our worldview, including the self, as an onion that cannot survive the removal of *all* of its layers, whereas the *Yogacara* methodology is working to save the phenomena of the self like a gem cutter that is seeking to remove the obscuring layers from around the precious gem in the center.

While the above metaphor may be helpful, perhaps the best way to illustrate this point is with the concept of auto-eroticism. While Derrida sees the metaphor of auto-eroticism as an apt illustration of the play of absence and presence in writing, and by extension the play of the same in our experience of the phenomena,<sup>42</sup> *Yogacara* would see the metaphor as wrong-headed. As essentially composed of relationships, in which all of our characteristics are imputed by others, we contemplate ourselves and

---

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, lxxxix.

the world around us in actuality. It is only when we move on to contemplate what might lie beyond our reality, the divine other, that we engage in empty speculation. While *Yogacara* does not concern itself with this final move, it does honestly deal with the nature of this world. The marriage-like relationship we have within this world is real, actually erotic, and this has nothing to do with whether or not our “play” with the divine transcendent is false or genuine. In this way, *Yogacara* recaptures the original meaning of “transcendent.” Derrida’s pessimism went beyond Kantian pessimism and *Yogacara* gives us the tools needed to restore to us the older noumenal/phenomenal split by giving us back access to the phenomenal self and world.

### **An Epistemological Caution At Best**

Western deconstruction, at its best, leads to an epistemological caution, but at its worst, it is skeptical and nihilistic. This is because it tears down the arbitrary guesswork within the Western tradition based on the metaphysical epoch of the Greeks by showing how ignorant we are, necessarily, about the nature of reality behind appearances. However, by showing the arbitrariness of such pursuits, by attempting to keep ahead of a “bad infinity” that continuously threatens to negate meaning and being,<sup>43</sup> and by deliberately not replacing them with a grounding for the sign, Derrida leaves us in a state of nihilism.

Despite the practical value in making theories, Derrida denies that there is any way to justify any particular point of departure within one’s own culture as if it were a valid starting place for an investigation.<sup>44</sup> As with the *Madhyamaka* Buddhists, deconstruction’s distant twin, we are left to wonder if there is any universally applicable way to make sense of our experiences at all. Asanga and Vasubandhu would have criticized Derrida, as they did their *Madhyamaka* predecessors, for viewing

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 150-157.

<sup>43</sup> David Loy, *Nonduality*, 256.

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 162.

reality (the greater text) as a supplement (replacement) for a non-existent presence<sup>45</sup> rather than viewing reality as essentially and sufficiently relational. This is an extremely subtle distinction that, in its practical application, reduces to optimism versus pessimism.

This is an affirmation of one of Derrida's central rejections, that *through* the use of the *sign* ( $\delta\iota\alpha - \gamma\rho\alpha\varphi\epsilon\iota\nu$ ) one objectifies the other as a mirror image of the self. Thus one repeats the self-image as one speaks to and about other things in all attempts to describe and communicate.<sup>46</sup> This is the diagram that one must keep in mind as a grammatologist, but, in contrast, it is precisely the methodology that vindicates *Yogacara* because it is the very recognition of the self as a part of the phenomena, the other, that allows the Eastern methodology to succeed. They were able to recognize that a metaphysics of trace is capable of reifying absence into *différance*.<sup>47</sup> The essential conclusion being made here is that the recognition of trace presupposes a recognizer:

Just as there is consciousness of presence, there is also a consciousness of absence, and a consciousness of their difference; if Derrida's critique is not to be arbitrary but rather justified by evidence, or the failure of evidence, such evidence or failure of it must be presented to consciousness with regard to the objective world, objective knowledge, objective beliefs .... But such justification presupposes the presence of a witness-consciousness to which all affirmations as well as negations must be presented and without which no trace will be presented as a trace.<sup>48</sup>

### III. Sufficient Perception of Self Is Sufficient Perception

*It may be asked: how is inference to be distinguished from perception? Inference is understood as mediate knowledge, that is, where the object is not actually perceived, but is accepted to be present because of some mark or sign .... The fire perceived and the fire inferred are alike in both being non-different from their respective knowledges, and hence the question does not arise whether the fire is immediately present or not. The distinction between the perceptual and the inferential knowledge is that, in both cases, the object remains identical while our mode of knowing it differs.*  
—Ashok Kumar Chatterjee<sup>49</sup>

In the fifth century, fifteen hundred years before Derrida, Asanga and Vasubandhu provided an optimistic phenomenology by illustrating a way to access both the self and the world. While failing to

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 144-145.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>47</sup> Gupta, 175.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 176.

penetrate the truly transcendent other, the realm and essence of the divine, it does claim to successfully rescue us from any disintegration of the self and from meaninglessness. Within *Yogacara* thought, selves can persist through time and realistically be thought to survive death. Metaphysically, our reality has meaning because of the relationship each part and collection of parts has with other parts and collections. Epistemologically, our access to ourselves, once purged of delusions, can become a starting place for access to the world.

*Yogacara* is, thus, optimistic epistemologically and it is successful metaphysically (by process metaphysics through a phenomenological methodology). We can discover who we are and we can know our relationship to the world and other people in the world through rigorous penetration into our own consciousness. Though difficult, it is possible to eliminate the false views one-by-one until a refined view of what our mind is eventually takes shape.

Most importantly, *Yogacara* does not necessarily close off communication with the truly transcendent. It does not arbitrarily conclude that there is nothing outside of (con)text.<sup>50</sup> In fact, though never explicit due to the atheistic presuppositions of Buddhism, the implications of *Yogacara* phenomenology forbids the existence of neither a substance nor a process God.

In opposition to Derrida, and in technical agreement with *Yogacara*, our instincts *might* not be playing tricks on us. There is no definitive reason to reject the possibility of the outside reality that our equipment (Kant's categories), when functioning properly (Plantinga), always presumes. Our theory of truth may remain correspondent while our theory of knowledge may admit our limits (temporarily). Continuous refinement of the best data and rejection of any bad data that can be found can potentially yield an accurate, though dim, picture of the true nature of ourselves and the world.

---

<sup>49</sup> A. K. Chatterjee, *The Yogacara Idealism*, second edition (Varnasi, India: Bhargava Bhushan Press, the Banaras Hindu University Press, 1975), 85. First edition 1962.

## Existence, Being, and Theology (Onto-, Negative, and A-)

From within their respective process perspectives, both Derrida and the *Yogacara* philosophers would have rejected the concept of absolute, eternal being as the referent of the words “existence” and “being.” But, with *Yogacara*, being is not completely rejected, it is only dismissed when it is superficially understood. Instead, the “always-already” nature of the true entity, appreciated only by the Awakened,<sup>51</sup> is not devoid of metaphysical significance, but yet, it is not as simple as instinct perceives it to be.<sup>52</sup> In effect, the only thing being denied is the *access* to the absolute, leaving open the possibility, philosophically, that a substance exists completely different from our own nature. Many schools of Buddhist thought independently recognize some form of energy with substance-like characteristics to which change is eternally attributed and out of which relational beings are constituted.<sup>53</sup> Yet, in most cases, this doctrine is accepted grudgingly and in conflict with the basic teachings of voidness. Only in *Yogacara* is this doctrine rigorously defended and foundational.

In contrast, Derrida uses the “experience of being” as a means of denying the actuality of being. He distinguishes Heidegger’s *Urwort* as the originary concept of being from the actual intended meaning of the word “being” in such a way that the referent is no longer an actual thing. Derrida draws from this the illusion of the concept of truth. Truth becomes merely a play of words rooted in nothing ontological.<sup>54</sup> “Being” is a special word *only* because it is the most basic form of the most basic category of word yet remains a concept that is held within a system of language. It is called “originary” because it attempts to undergird all other things in the concept of irreducible simplicity and *not* in an ontological reality.

If Heidegger is correct that, before we can do ontology we must do ontic studies, and if Saussure is correct that, before ontic studies we must do language studies, then it seems to follow that

---

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

<sup>51</sup> Lusthaus, v.

<sup>52</sup> Lusthaus, 297, see note 74 on p 314.

<sup>53</sup> Joanna Rogers Macy, “Systems Philosophy as a Hermeneutic for Buddhist Teachings,” *Philosophy East and West* 26:1 (1976): 23.

Derrida is correct that, before we do language studies we must have global knowledge of the context of all writing so that the boundaries become clear. We are often comfortable making these leaps of assumption, or presumption, that link our language and ideas of existence (both types) with words. But careful consideration of the problems, for Derrida, destroys the assurances of ontotheology. So it's not a matter of asking whether we ourselves, the outside world, or God exists... it's a matter of doubting whether the questions can even be formulated meaningfully.<sup>55</sup>

As a result, within Christian theology, a proper understanding of Derrida has a powerful but negative effect because it removes the validity of the metaphysics of presence upon which much Christian theology has been built. Yet, when placed within the context of *Yogacara* Buddhist phenomenology, which effectively and implicitly rejected and worked against the implications of apophatic theology,<sup>56</sup> deconstruction need not lead to the end of theology and theism. *Yogacara* gives us a much clearer view of the self and a much more optimistic epistemology. It is a firm starting place, an understanding of self, from which we can probe the rest of the phenomena *and* its limits, its boundaries. The outer edges of the phenomena need not touch nothingness as Derrida supposed, but leaves the possibility for the demarcation of something of another nature.

By analogy, when we view a form in the dim light of dusk, we know little about it. Yet, even in the bright light of mid-day, our understanding of it is incomplete since we perceive only its surface. Similarly, Derrida causes us to notice the edges of the phenomena beyond the limits of Greek metaphysics, thus revealing, through negation, the limits of any and all metaphysical insight and speculation. With *Yogacara*, we have a light that is brighter still because it goes beyond negation. It helps us to look within ourselves and to view our world with greater epistemological optimism and realistic trust in our ability to perceive correctly through the use of direct perception together with experience and background knowledge (i.e. context).

---

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 20.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

With visual perception, we see objects by means of a finite number of reflected photons. In dim light, the number of photons is small and the image is less distinct. In bright light, the number of photons is large and the image is described better. Yet, even in the best light, the description is only partial because only the surface is being described. With *Yogacara*, we have the ability to see the self and the surroundings with a finite, but positive descriptive interaction similar to that between photons and the eye. As such, not only can we appreciate a superficial description of other phenomena, to go even beyond *Yogacara*, perhaps we can also see the “surface,” similar to a phase barrier, between the phenomena and what lies beyond! That which encloses the phenomena may impart some of its characteristics to the boundary itself in the same way that a container of water imparts shape to the water it contains. Paul Tillich, a theologian, was similarly fascinated with the intersection of the infinite (God?) with the finite and imagined the shore of the ocean to be an apt metaphor. As finite, our intersection with the infinite is necessarily also finite, yet this is the best description we are likely to obtain unless we somehow become infinite ourselves.<sup>57</sup>

Derrida was able to recognize the limits, or boundaries, of the phenomena. He called for the exorbitant scraping of these boundaries in order to come as close as possible to escaping the limits of the (con)text, the universe built on the sign.<sup>58</sup> Yet, he ignored that which might lie above or outside of the text and remained focused on the text. The founders of *Yogacara* philosophy, unfortunately, did much the same thing. Despite providing access to the local “other,” they also limited their gaze to the phenomena. One is tempted to wonder why neither of them did not simply turn around. Yet, we immediately recognize that these philosophers were unable to justify the presuppositions that “turning around to face the boundary” would entail. With regard to the divine nature and the truly transcendent other, both of these philosophies limit themselves to negative dialectics.

---

<sup>56</sup> Foshay, 544-5.

<sup>57</sup> By way of a related eschatological tangent, however unlikely, it remains possible that infinity may be achieved without divinity. Yet, this transformation must necessarily be initiated by a cause that is infinite itself. In this view, actual infinities can be created if they are not created by a finite process.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 161-2.

Within many schools of Christian theology, including the mainline traditional orthodoxy, the theological philosopher begins with a presupposition of the existence of the divine “Other.” This is the author of the text, the container of the phenomena that lies above and outside of it. Yet, this presupposition must not subsequently be discovered to be impossible or irrational; this would mean death for theology. Having been rescued recently from Kantian limits by means of postmodern ideas like Derrida’s, Christian theology must also survive Derrida by other means.<sup>59</sup> I believe that *Yogacara* holds great potential for doing just that. As a philosophy, it bears the potential for restoring the world and our selves to us by means of an ever-increasing probability of adequation through scrutiny of consciousness.

Yet, the very ability of the self to arrive at correct conclusions through a process of purging self-serving delusions then becomes the question. This topic is also hotly debated within Christian theology under the name, “the noetic effects of sin.” To what extent does our condition, as being alienated from God, allow us to fulfill *Yogacara*’s directive to refine our self image? Unfortunately, as an atheistic philosophy, the *Yogacara* tradition does not investigate the possibility of transcendent assistance but relies upon self-discipline alone. Christian tradition, in contrast, often takes note of an inherent need for a gift of revelation at this point. Accordingly, epistemological assistance is required to successfully analyze even our own consciousness. Without this, perhaps, we are left without independent criteria for recognizing our self-serving delusions. If this is true, then adequation is possible only through dependable testimony.

If the written texts that we can create bear close resemblance to the world which we do not create, a world that includes consciousnesses, it follows that interpretation of impossibly complex, sign-based relationships becomes the central dilemma as a form of hermeneutics of the world-text. *Yogacara* suggests that we limit our investigation to our own consciousness because our access to it is

---

<sup>59</sup> This statement bears in mind the “death of God” heralded by the proto-postmodern Nietzsche. The “rescue” being envisioned here is from the epistemological dualism presented by modernism, the acceptance of which is given as a

direct. If Husserl is correct that our best chance of making the transcendent world immanent is through consciousness, and if it is hopelessly unverifiable as Derrida suggests, then *Yogacara* succeeds in taking the game to the next level through providing a methodology for reducing the unverifiability to a minimum. This move is in line with Nancey Murphy's suggestion that ideologies can be replaced by more empirically verifiable ideologies in a process of continuous epistemological refinement. However, without dependable guidance, such pursuits are at best an issue of progressively higher probabilities, and at worst, are blind strivings in the wrong direction.

As we strive to understand, we create theories. So, we cannot appreciate ourselves as a creation until we recognize our instinctive need to recreate in the image of the creation. Derrida echoed Rousseau's recognition of this drive to simultaneously flee and recover our natural essence.<sup>60</sup> Christian theology resolves this conflict conceptually by recognizing the unfinished status of humanity. *Yogacara* represents the clearest possible view of the unfinished, process-based nature of our present existence while leaving open the possibility for a divine, substance-based existence.

This serves as a resolution, in view of all the above, that makes sense of the deconstruction of the phenomena by Derrida, the partial reconstruction through the honest self-recognition of *Yogacara*, and the often paradoxical descriptions of God, Christ, and the God-man relationship provided by Christian scripture as will be explored next.

### **A New (Double) Basis for Theology**

Greek philosophy, along with its metaphysics of substance, was employed by medieval Christian theologians as they attempted to make sense of a God described by a much older, Jewish tradition. Today, after centuries of development in both the East and West, a decentering must take place in which Christian theology should question its union with Greek thought. Perhaps *Yogacara*

---

requirement for rationality.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 197.

philosophy can be used as a metaphysical basis instead of, or in addition to, Greek philosophy. If properly pursued, this may produce insight into the study of special revelation within the Christian tradition. *Yogacara* is “an insightful group of interlocking insights into the deepest level of meaning,” that might bring out new perspectives and reveal otherwise latent meaning in revelation.<sup>61</sup> If correct, *Yogacara* is essential for overcoming deluded conceptions of what a human being is and what the world is behind all appearances. The Hellenized version of theology created by the early church fathers may be partially in error and may act as an obstacle in the pursuit of access to the truly transcendent God.

### **New Perspectives on Old Problems**

By way of brief examples, *Yogacara* phenomenology, as a methodology for gaining metaphysical insight about the self and the world, might prove useful in resolving the following tensions. As a starting place, soteriologically, *Yogacara* demands concentrated focus upon the mind of the subject before and during conversion.<sup>62</sup> The age-old conflict between predestination and responsibility, may be resolved by *Yogacara*'s passive view of consciousness. *Yogacara* may also help to illuminate the process of sanctification by reformulating the transformation of the mind as a confrontation between immovable substance (God) and inherently mutable process (self) as is suggested by the very name of God's chosen people when seen as a condition rather than as a race.<sup>63</sup>

Epistemologically, *Yogacara* demands a context-sensitive appraisal of all theological models. “This is, then, a deconstructive strategy which denies and empties all supposed assurances that one has gained a once-for-all truth.”<sup>64</sup> This can also be useful to Christian theology so long as the *possibility* of the independent existence of a once-for-all truth is retained.

---

<sup>61</sup> Keenan, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>63</sup> N.b. the translation of the name “Israel” as “wrestles with God.”

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 39.

*Yogacara* may also prove useful with regard to the metaphysics of the fully transcendent. Though it seems to be an adequate means of describing God, substance metaphysics has proven somewhat mysterious, paradoxical, or even contradictory if used to describe the Trinity, the Christ as both man and God, and man's relationship to God. Yet, traditionally, this has rarely been recognized as insoluble. Word games involving substances and natures have created sentences that are as impenetrable as the Greek-based formulation of the Trinity itself. One solution, made possible by *Yogacara* metaphysics, could be the reformulation of the Christ as essentially relational. Biblically, Jesus is always described through his relationship to other people and, fundamentally, to the Father. In a process view, the Christ becomes a conduit and a window who acts primarily as a way to something else. As John 14:6 says, this would allow Jesus to truly *be* "the Way" and not merely a thing that *shows* the way. Jesus, would be a relationship instead of a substance. Jesus *qua* man, just like humanity, would possess an identity consisting entirely in his relationship to others.<sup>65</sup> This seems to make intelligible some otherwise mysterious statements made by and about Jesus in the New Testament.

Accordingly, human beings persist by means of the relationships we have with others: beneath us hierarchically (from our parts), among us (with our community), and above us (with our moment-by-moment Creator). If our reality is a process reality, then our goal should be to eliminate the delusions that keep us from understanding and accepting our insubstantiality just as Asanga, and perhaps Derrida, would suggest. However, does this mean that this is the only reality? Clearly, this would be a *non sequitur*. This is not, and I would argue should not be, our conclusion about ultimate divine reality. If God exists, then surely not in the mode of our own existence. In fact, "God does not exist, he is eternal."<sup>66</sup> This is where *Yogacara*, other Eastern traditions, and Western versions of

---

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>66</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To Philosophical Fragments*, Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 332.

process theology err.<sup>67</sup> In extending the process view to the other members of the Trinity (or even to Jesus *qua* God) we immediately deviate from all scriptural propositions about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *qua* God.

Because of this, it seems that process theology, an otherwise close relative of *Yogacara*, is necessarily a heterodox divergence from the declarations of Christian scripture. Process theology makes the same move with God that *Yogacara* insists we make with ourselves. Instead, I propose that the Greek notion of substance and eternal essence is the best method for describing divine reality while the *Yogacara* notion of process-appraised-through-phenomena is the best way to see the creation and creatures as well as the relationships and communications between the two in the form of the our relationship through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

*Madhyamaka* Buddhism, an unexpected twin of continental philosophy, parallels Derrida when it seeks to terminate philosophy in voidness. *Yogacara* has successfully moved beyond these cynical dead ends by adopting phenomenology as a methodology for the study of the self and “speculation” about the world. Nonetheless, while escaping from negative investigation, *Yogacara* does not succeed in moving beyond the phenomena.

Christian theology has made use of Greek metaphysics for millennia. Yet, if the various intractable problems and the recent conclusions of deconstruction are any indication, this union may not be the best possible approach. Perhaps, in light of the above analysis and arguments, a new metaphysical theory, or better, a combination-theory, will prove to be more constructive.

---

<sup>67</sup> Process theology may appear, *prima facie*, as a close cousin to *Yogacara* process metaphysics. However, it is the defining element of process theology to extend the process description to God. This move was not made by the *Yogacara* philosophers and, in this author’s opinion, is an unwarranted move.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chatterjee, Ashok Kumar. *The Yogacara Idealism*. Varnasi, India: Bhargava Bhushan Press, the Banaras Hindu University Press, 1975.
- Clarke, J. J. *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Foshay, Toby Avar. "Denegation, Nonduality, and Language in Derrida and Dogen." *Philosophy East and West* 44 (1994): 543-558.
- Gupta, Bina. *Cit Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Katz, Nathan. "'Prasanga' and Deconstruction: Tibetan Hermeneutics and The 'Yana' Controversy." *Philosophy East and West* 34 (1984): 185-204.
- Keenan, John P. "Buddhist Yogacara Philosophy as Ancilla Theologiae." *Japanese Religions* 15:5 (1988): 35-56.
- King, Richard. "Early Yogacara and Its Relationship with the Madhyamaka School." *Philosophy East & West* 44:4 (1994): 659-683.
- Koller, John M. and Patricia Koller. *A Sourcebook in Asian Philosophy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Larrabee, M. J. "The One and The Many: Yogacara Buddhism and Husserl." *Philosophy East & West* 31:1 (1981): 3-15.
- Loy, David. *The Deconstruction of Buddhism in Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Lusthaus, Dan. *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.

- Macy, Joanna Rogers. "Systems Philosophy as a Hermeneutic for Buddhist Teachings." *Philosophy East And West* 26 (1976): 21-32.
- Matilal, Bimal Krishna. "Is 'Prasanga' a form of Deconstruction?" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 20 (1992): 345-362.
- Murphy, Nancey, and Brad J. Kallenberg. "Anglo-American Postmodernity: A Theology of Communal Practice." in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 26-41. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Odin, Steve. "Derrida and the Decentered Universe of Ch'an Buddhism." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17 (1990): 61-86.
- Zong-qi, Cai. "Derrida and Seng-Zhao: Linguistic and Philosophical Deconstructions." *Philosophy East and West* 43 (1993): 389-404.