From the Non-Existence of the Real World to an Affirmation of the Conventional: A Yogācāra Dialogue with Jan Westerhoff

WILLIAM S. WALDRON

> Were it not for the necessities of practical life,
> we might utter only eternal sentences.
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> François Recanati, *"Literalism and Contextualism: Some Varieties"*

> There is perhaps no collective representation that is not in a
> sense delusive. . . . The whole social world seems populated
> with forces that in reality exist only in our minds.
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> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*

IN THIS remarkable tour de force, Jan Westerhoff demonstrates the profound implications of these pithy epigraphs and, by relentlessly deconstructing one philosophical shibboleth after another, shows how baseless realist theories of the world really are—thereby propelling us into the depths of Mahayana groundlessness.

Westerhoff is well known for his important work on Indian Buddhist philosophy, and on Nāgārjuna (fl. ca. 2nd–3rd c.) in particular,[1] but he has also investigated the nature of ontological categories.[2] He brings these two perspectives together in *The Non-Existence of*

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[1] Westerhoff 2009, 2010a.
[2] See for example Westerhoff 2005.

the Real World by presenting arguments that, while drawn exclusively from Western analytic traditions, nevertheless "form a systematic development and defence of key Madhyamaka claims" (preface, p. xxix). In other words, Westerhoff is using Mādhyamika philosophy as the *organizing framework* for an extensive series of arguments against each of the core components of realism, as well as their many subcategories. And in doing so, he replicates—inadvertently I imagine—some of the lines of reasoning and basic conclusions that Vasubandhu (fl. ca. 4th–5th c.), the classical Yogācāra author, drew in his own *Viṃśatikā* (hereafter, *Twenty Verses*), several centuries after Nāgārjuna.

The contours of Westerhoff's argument will be familiar to readers of Mahayana Buddhism: something is only "real" if it exists independently of conditions, contexts, or observers. But there is no way to ultimately establish this "real" existence without—as Westerhoff tirelessly demonstrates—encountering countless unwarranted assumptions, inconsistencies, and downright contradictions, all of which lead him to advocate a form of irrealism. And while "an irrealist epistemology," Westerhoff explains, "starts out from a form of representationalism that treats our perceptions as part of a simulation or an interface" (p. 52), it soon recognizes "that we cannot 'get out' of the model in order to evaluate our perceptions against that world; in the same way coherence theory will not let us get outside of language in order to evaluate the truth of sentences against non-linguistic reality" (p. 266). This leads to some interesting conclusions:

> The idea that our brain creates the reality in which we live is relatively widespread and intuitive. Yet if we adopt the theory that our interaction with the world takes place via a representational interface, the best account of the relation between mind and world we can give is an irrealist one. This account is neither widespread nor intuitive (p. 73).

For readers who appreciate either of these robust philosophical traditions, or who simply want to dig deeper, much deeper, into the world of irrealism, this is a most welcome contribution. Starting with its layout and organization, this is a most accessible and inviting volume. It boasts a detailed four-page table of contents, a thirteen-page index, and a twenty-page bibliography, in addition to annotations sprinkled throughout the margins helpfully tracking its many topics and subtopics. One can thus readily find nearly any topic anywhere in the book and dip in to discover its arguments and counterarguments, along with relevant references. All this makes it a handy go-to reference work for controversies surrounding realism and irrealism.

Lest this seem unduly intimidating—and it is an "ocean of reasoning"—the book is written in an impressively accessible, if not colloquial, style and painted with the lightest of philosophical brushes. Almost every point is expressed in simple, straightforward terms with a minimum of philosophical jargon. Anyone with interest and persistence can follow these arguments to the end.

The four long chapters are organized around the systematic refutation of the heart and soul of the realist worldview—that the world exists independently of our engagement with it and that it can be accurately represented in an exclusively true fashion. The chapters respectively reject these tenets and advocate instead the nonexistence of (1) the external world, (2) the internal world, (3) ontological foundations, and (4) foundational truths. At bottom, Westerhoff avers, "our purpose is not epistemological" but ontological: "We are interested in examining reasons why there may not *be* such a world" (p. xxxii), or such selves, or such foundations or truths.

In three of the four chapters we find refutations of the three main components of metaphysical realism as classically outlined by Hilary Putnam:[3] Chapter 1 refutes the "mind-independence claim" that "the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects" (p. xxxii). The subtopics discussed here include the appearance of externality; distinguishing veridical from illusory states; problems entailed by the criteria of coherence, intersubjectivity, and efficacy, or in establishing a plausible epistemology based on direct realism; problems with immediacy and simultaneity; the status of illusions and hallucinations; the theory of representationalism; and, finally, arguments in support of irrealism based on its parsimony, the concept-dependence of the external world, and the interdependence of concepts. All of these, Westerhoff further argues, makes irrealism fully compatible with contemporary naturalism.

Chapter 3 builds upon the refutation of the "correspondence claim ('truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things')" (p. xxxii) already intimated and makes the argument for non-foundationalism. The author presents, and ultimately rejects, standard arguments for foundationalism (the idea that reality rests upon some ultimate basis): the regress argument, the transcendental argument, the self-refutation argument, and the argument against the symmetry of grounding. This clears the ground for arguments for *non*-foundationalism: arguments from inconsistent versions; arguments against intrinsic properties; arguments based on mathematics, quantum physics, and cognitive science; and circular non-foundationalism.

Chapter 4 refutes the "unique true theory claim" that "there is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'" (p. xxxii). This chapter discusses higher-order grounding, arguments both for and against coherence theory and ultimately true theories, and arguments from semantic contextualism and the failure of absolutely general quantification.

In addition to refuting the three classical arguments for realism, chapter 2 refutes the claim that there is a real internal or subjective world, or any version of a true "self." The subtopics here include questioning the presumed certainty of introspection;

3 Putnam 1981, p. 49.

discontinuities in the apparent stream of consciousness; problems with elementary integration units; and problems with the "self"—either as a substantial self, a unified self, a temporarily extended self, a self as agent with original intentionality, or a self as the subject of prudential concern.

Westerhoff's arguments follow a consistent, forceful pattern: he first provides the arguments for realism—that we do indeed have exclusively true knowledge about a world that does indeed exist independently of our limited perspectives—charitably showing how each argument supports its claims. He then demonstrates why its claims are either bundled with or rely upon unwarranted assumptions, or else raise additional problems that must be addressed in turn. For example, "The truths contained in any theory can only be truths about the world as long as there are other true statements not included in the theory, thereby undermining the very comprehensiveness that ultimate theories are aiming for" (p. 277). Needless to say, the array of arguments Western philosophers have devised over the centuries to defend realism, as well as refine their positions in response to criticisms, is by now quite extensive—thereby providing plenty of grist for Westerhoff's relentlessly deconstructive mill. The bulk of this hefty book consists of putting to rest each and every argument (à la Nāgārjuna's *sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya* ["the abandonment of all views"] in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, ch. 27, v. 30) that seeks to make realist ontological claims about the "true nature" of the world. This is an ambitious project, one requiring a very sharp—and durable—sword of discernment.

The structure of the book reflects a sequence recognizable by those familiar with Indian Mahayana philosophy: it first deconstructs the existence of "real" objects and then of "real" subjects, then deconstructs the possibility of truly representing "reality" through any linguistic construct, and finally rejects any ultimate claims to truth whatsoever—including any ultimate denials. This leads to the classical Mahayana conclusion that while reality may be ineffable, we may nevertheless formulate multiple, albeit always provisional, ways of "affirming the conventional." As Westerhoff concludes: "Intersubjective truths that hold relative to a sufficiently large body of subjects seem to be a reasonable substitute for objective truths" (p. 307). We shall return to this crucial point after retracing some of the steps he took to get there.

Since my acquaintance with contemporary Western philosophy is limited, and we cannot in any case engage every aspect of this ambitious volume, the remainder of this review article will focus on arguments of likely interest to some Buddhist readers: Westerhoff's first chapter on the nonexistence of the external world. As I was reading through the book, I found the arguments to be intriguingly similar to the signature teachings of the Yogācāra school of Indian Buddhism—the so-called Mind-Only school (Ch. *weishi yuqiexing pa* 唯識瑜伽行派)—so I thought it would be interesting, in the spirit of fruitful dialogue, to juxtapose some of Westerhoff's points with

those of Vasubandhu in his *Twenty Verses*, one of his most important and most cited texts.[4]

As noted, Westerhoff defines the target (*pūrvapakṣa*) of his critique—"existence"—quite narrowly: he is denying "objects that exist *independent* of human interests, concerns, and cognitive activities" (p. 1; emphasis added). Vasubandhu similarly begins his *Twenty Verses* by rejecting the independent existence of *artha*, a broad, multivalent term that both encompasses the sense of interests, goals, and aims, and refers to cognitive objects. Moreover, the appearance (*vijñapti*) of such objects in classical Yogācāra similarly arises in dependence on various cognitive processes (*vijñāna*, *saṃjñā*, etc.).

More specifically, Westerhoff argues that most forms of realism and representationalism depend upon the claims that an external world exists and that our perceptions provide accurate information about that world, what he calls the "*existence …*[and] *accuracy requirement*" (p. 19). The accuracy claim is unjustified, he argues, for the simple but profound reason that "we cannot take a position external to our perceptual interface in order to" compare it to some imagined external world (p. 48). Such a "view from outside of the interface would be a kind of God's eye point of view" (p. 49, n. 112), a form of hubris hardly justified by our limited human faculties.

The existence claim is more complicated—and more subtle—for it includes any claim that there is something, however imperceptible, beyond our perceptual interface. Roughly speaking, something can be said to truly exist—as opposed to being merely an illusion, an artifact constructed by our sense faculties—if it meets the following three criteria:

1. There is coherence or concordance between our various sensory modalities (including the object's existence in time and space).[5]
2. The objects are intersubjectively verifiable.
3. The objects exhibit causal efficacy.

These criteria are remarkably similar to those that Vasubandhu lays out near the start of the *Twenty Verses* where he argues that real objects occur only at specific times and places, are experienced intersubjectively, and have causal efficacy (v. 2).

Westerhoff rejects the first criteria on the grounds that "the coherence of our perception may not be a reflection of any coherent, external world out there, but might simply be an artifact produced by the perceptual machinery we employ" (p. 7). That is, it may be dependent on our constructive cognitive processes, as most contemporary

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[4] Verse numbers below refer to the edition of Lévi 1925.

[5] Westerhoff's following description compares favorably with Vasubandhu's criteria: "If we regard something as a reliable cause of our perceptions we have to make a number of assumptions about this something. It *must exist in space and time*, and its temporal existence must link up with the temporal existence of our perceptions" (p. 20; emphasis added).

cognitive scientists argue.[6] But the fatal problem with the coherence criteria is that it "*already implies* that we can draw a meaningful distinction . . . between what is really there, and what only appears, or between what only exists as part of our representations, and what exists outside of it" (p. 56; emphasis added). In other words, the coherence argument *assumes* the very thing it sets out to establish: that we can "take a position external to our perceptual interface" from which we can reliably distinguish appearance from "reality," the illusory from the veridical. Moreover, he continues, also echoing Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses* (v. 3), we experience coherence in many forms—in dreams or imagination, or in such shared illusions as echoes and mirages—none of which, most people agree, refer to objects *independent* of human interests or cognitive processes. Clearly, the coherence criteria alone cannot establish the veracity of independent objects.

In response to these obvious objections, realists often call upon the second criteria, the claim that the objective existence of a world is verified by shared, intersubjective experience. If we all see or hear something, then it must exist objectively, at that time and place, "independently of human interests, concerns, and cognitive activities" (p. 1). But, as Westerhoff notes, this argument also rests on a questionable assumption:

> The intersubjectivity criterion relies on the assumption that the veridicality and shareability of a perception are closely connected. The realm of veridical perceptions coincides with those that are shareable: if perceptions are not deceptive, they are shareable, and the realm of the illusory coincides with the subjective: if perceptions are deceptive, they are not shareable (p. 10).

Unfortunately for the realist, the commonality of perceptual objects can largely be accounted for by the commonality of our human cognitive faculties: "If human perceptual abilities have evolved by natural selection in order to deliver a coherent representation of the world, it is hardly surprising that this representation is also shared by all humans" (p. 7, n. 12). After all, we all have roughly the same perceptual faculties and therefore share a human, species-specific world—as is obvious when we contrast it with the perceptual worlds of gnats, bats, or dolphins. Early Indian Buddhist traditions also argued that our experience of the world (*loka*) is correlative with the structure of our faculties, an idea that Yogācāra Buddhists developed further by connecting our common, shared world (*bhājana-loka*) with our unconscious cultural influences.[7] Last, as with the coherence criteria, we also have commonly accepted intersubjective percep-

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[6] Hoffman 2000, 2019.
[7] Waldron 2002.

tions—such as the circle of fire, images seen in mirrors, and so forth[8]—to which few would attribute a truly independent, objective existence. In short, "veridicality (or its absence) cannot simply be equated with public observability (or its absence)" (p. 11). Here, too, the criteria of intersubjectivity by itself does not carry water.

The very possibility of intersubjective illusions, moreover, undermines the third and last classical criteria that realists rely on to establish the existence of objects truly independent of human interests and cognitive abilities—that of causal efficacy. As we know, there are "non-deceptive things that fail to be efficacious" (p. 11), such as matches, pens, and keys that do not work, as well as deceptive things that do work, such as placebos, sexual images in dreams, and the phantom limb syndrome—whose chronic pain can be relieved using mere images in a mirror.[9] In short, there is no hard-and-fast, *singular and exclusive* relation, such as the realists maintain, between what is efficacious and what is "real" or illusory. These are interchangeable, or at least context-dependent, characteristics. And "if efficacy is context-dependent [then] it is a fundamentally *relational* property, not an intrinsic one, and thus not one indicative of a substantial ontological division between the efficacious and the non-efficacious" (p. 12; emphasis added). Note the crucial distinction here between relational properties and intrinsic, substantial, ontological ones—a classic Buddhist distinction at the crux of these arguments.

In a summary that would serve equally well in Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*, Westerhoff concludes that

> we cannot equate the veridical with all and only those perceptions that are mutually coherent, intersubjective, and efficacious, as we cannot equate the illusory with anything that fails to satisfy one of those criteria (p. 14).

This would appear, though, to leave the irrealist somewhat in the lurch, for if these classical criteria do not provide indisputable proof of the existence of a world truly independent of our engagement with it, as the realists claim they do, then how, one must ask, do the irrealists explain the relationship between our perceptions and the objects they *appear* to represent? Why do they *seem* so consistent and reliable? Here, Westerhoff follows a classic Mahayana, and especially Yogācāra, sequence. He moves from naïve realism to representationalism, then declares that representations are just appearances—which, however, can be usefully distinguished—and thus concludes with a robust affirmation of the utility of conventional truths, albeit now shorn of claims to ultimacy. Let's trace this line of reasoning.

We have seen the first step of the sequence: the Cartesian-like doubt that our perceptions might not correspond to what is "truly" there. In recognizing this, "the direct

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[8] Westerhoff 2010b.
[9] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998.

realist cannot avoid introducing a distinction between *what we perceive* (the external cause of our dagger-representation) and *what appears to us* (an object represented as spatially extended, sharp, silver-coloured, etc.)" (p. 30). This distinction typically leads to a theory of representationalism, the idea that what we actually perceive is just an internal *re*-presentation, an appearance, of whatever external event has causally impacted our sense fields. This shifts the ontological focus of the argument—and its attendant claims—from an "external" object to an "internal" experience: "The direct realist will therefore typically interpret talk of the 'directness' or 'immediacy' of perception as *cognitive* directness or immediacy," in the sense that the cognized object is "*cognitively* or *representationally* direct" (p. 22). This is also the gist of Vasubandhu's initial, and nearly tautological, assertion in the *Twenty Verses* that what appear to be objects (*artha*) are just percepts, just representations (*vijñapti-mātra*), lacking any truly objective basis.

The next steps begin to dismantle this notion of representation, that our perceptions *re-present* something other than themselves. First, logically speaking, the notion of representation *already assumes* the independent existence of external objects—which is, again, the very thing it is trying to establish. Rather, Westerhoff argues, we should acknowledge that "the postulation of an external world is *also part of the representational interface*" (p. 53; emphasis added). In other words, "both the self (conceived of as a phenomenal self model) and the world (the physical system that generates our representations) have to be understood as belonging to the represented" (p. 68). However, he explains, we do not usually recognize that both subjects and objects are already part of the interface because "what the representing parts of the model represent are other parts of the same model that *appear as if* they belonged to a group of entities distinct from the model" (p. 55; emphasis added). Vasubandhu (v. 8) makes a similar argument in regard to the apparent reality of the faculties and objects mentioned in earlier, non-Mahayana Buddhist texts: while subjects and objects may seem to refer to real and objective phenomena, they are not "real" in an intrinsic, ontological sense (that is, possessing their "own-nature," [*svabhāva*]). Rather, they are distinct, yet *interdependent* aspects of ordinary cognitive processes (v. 9), which, due to our innate predispositions (*vāsanā*), *appear* as independent subjects and objects—grasper (*grāhya*) and grasped (*grāhaka*) in classic Yogācāra terms.

But if representations are not representations of independent "things," then what we are left with are mere *appearances*. Westerhoff outlines the consequences of this: "An irrealist epistemology starts out from a form of representationalism that treats our perceptions as part of a simulation or an interface . . . [but then] sees no need for postulating the existence of hidden forces behind the veil" (pp. 52, 54). And without such an ontological basis or foundation, we cannot claim to know *anything* that is "outside of the interface" (p. 48, n. 12). Thus, he concludes that "there is no way the world truly

is, that there is *appearance only*, without some underlying final [basis] that shoulders all the ontological burden" (p. 297; emphasis added). Unsurprisingly, Vasubandhu reaches a similar conclusion in his *Twenty Verses*: an appearance (*vijñapti*) is itself also just an appearance (*vijñapti*), untethered to putative objects (*artha*) existing independently of it. Accordingly, nothing definitive can be said about "reality" one way or the other; it is ultimately ineffable, as Vasubandhu states in his explanation of verse 10. Thus, having rejected all the standard criteria used to justify realism, Westerhoff rejects the idea that there are *any* ontological foundations that enable us to ultimately distinguish between what truly, independently exists and what does not—that is, between the veridical and the illusory.

Now, this might seem to leave us in a postmodern quagmire, bereft of any way to distinguish truth from fiction, reality from fantasy—not merely an academic concern, we might add. Luckily, he notes, the "set of objects [putatively] behind the veil of perception is not doing much explanatory work in the first place" and therefore "we *do not require* it to be able to draw a distinction between what is veridical and what is illusory" (p. 60; emphasis added). Rather—since everything is *already* just an appearance—the distinctions we need to make in everyday life between what is "real" and what is illusory can be found by distinguishing one *kind* of appearance from another. And the criteria for distinguishing between these appearances turn out to be the *very same criteria* the realists were using all along—coherence, intersubjectivity, efficacy—but free of any claim to ultimate ontological foundation or truth. Accordingly, everything can now be couched in terms of conventional designations (*prajñapti*): "Irrealism accepts the existence of an external world in a manner of speaking," albeit a manner of speaking that is informed and adjudicated by "a reflective equilibrium of coherence, intersubjectivity, and efficacy" (pp. 79–80). Based on *these* criteria, Westerhoff continues, we can collectively articulate "intersubjective truths" that "hold relative to a sufficiently large body of subjects" and that are compelling enough to function as "a reasonable substitute for objective truths" (p. 307). Realism is in the end replaced by intersubjective verifiability.

This is a fascinating place to arrive at, not least because the centrality of intersubjectivity is arguably the main point of Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*.[10] After similarly eliminating other possibilities (including permutations of materialism), in verse 18 Vasubandhu says that appearances (*vijñapti*) arise predominantly through mutually influencing each other (*anyonya-adhipatitvena*). This is a powerful insight, especially if we consider it in light of other Yogācāra texts, where things are said to appear similarly to beings whose cognitive and cultural schemas ("the substratum that consists of our tendencies toward proliferating everyday expressions about characteristics, names,

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[10] Waldron 2023.

and preconceptions")[11] are largely shared (*sādhāraṇa*), albeit mostly unconsciously (*ālaya-vijñāna*), and whose shared influences give rise to our collective, shared worlds (*bhājana-loka*).[12]

So where does all this leave us? Despite the differences in the ontological and epistemological positions of the two works I have been comparing—if the category "ontology" is even viable by the time Westerhoff is through!—they similarly refute realist claims about objects imagined to exist "independently of human interests, concerns, and cognitive activities" (p. 1) and advocate that we focus instead on the predominant role of social and cultural interaction in human affairs. To extrapolate, we might say they are arguing that the fullness of human experience should not, indeed cannot, be reduced to a mere calculus of "objective" material forces and that claims to practical knowledge need, at the very least, to be augmented and informed, if not indeed framed, by intersubjective experience—that is, the things we investigate in the humanities.

Where this leaves us is where many of us already are: in an ongoing dialogue within and between the multiplicity of academic disciplines and sciences, which—insofar as they are post-Kuhnian—eschew metaphysical claims for more modest declamations. That is, we not only appreciate and benefit from the specific findings these various knowledge systems provide; we are also always renegotiating the complex interrelations between them. We see this in the centuries-long "nature versus nurture" debate, which is repeatedly revised in response to new knowledge. Much more urgently, however, we need to intentionally integrate a variety of perspectives—scientific, political, economic, social, cultural, and religious, among others—if we are going to address the many challenges facing our world today. And this requires precisely the kind of "reflective equilibrium of coherence, intersubjectivity, and efficacy" that Westerhoff advocates. Indeed, these criteria constitute a useful set of ground rules—a "constitution of knowledge" following Jonathan Rauch's felicitous expression[13]—for adjudicating competing knowledge claims and formulating equitable policies and practices, not to mention filtering the incessant outflow (*āśrāva*) of confabulations that our contemporary infosphere endlessly proliferates.

Hopefully, Jan Westerhoff's *The Non-Existence of the Real World* will instill a deeper appreciation of the broad consensus we *already* enjoy for "affirming the conventional" in its many forms and lead to a more fruitful dialogue between traditional Mahayanists and the contemporary world—one still largely configured, we must remember, in terms of the Western Enlightenment, but whose seeds of self-deconstruction have lately come to unexpected fruition, a case in point being this very dialogue.

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[11] **nimitta-nāma-vikalpa-vyavahāra-prapañca-vāsanā-upādāna*; *Saṃdhinirmocana Sutra*, v. 2. Waldron 2003, p. 95.

[12] Waldron 2002.

[13] Rauch 2021.

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