Some Remarks on the Genesis of Central Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Concepts

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Abstract The present paper is a kind of selective summary of my book The Genesis of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda (2014). [1.–2.] It deals with questions of origin and early development of three basic concepts of this school, viz., the ‘idealist’ thesis that the whole world is mind only (cittamātra) or manifestation only (vijñaptimātra), the assumption of a subliminal layer of the mind (ālayavijñāna), and the analysis of phenomena in terms of the “Three Natures” (svabhāvatraya). [3.] It has been asserted (H. Buescher) that these three basic concepts are logically inseparable and therefore must have been introduced conjointly. [4.] Still, from Vasubandhu onward treatises have been written in which only one of the three concepts is advocated or demonstrated to be indispensable, without any reference to the other two being made. Likewise, in most of the earlier Yogācāra treatises, the three concepts occur in different sections or contexts, or are even entirely absent, as vijñaptimātra in the Yogācārabhūmi (except for the Samdhinirmocanasūtra quotation) and ālayavijñāna in the Mahāyānasūtrālāṃkāra and Madhyāntavibhāga. [5.] It is therefore probable that the three concepts were introduced separately and for different reasons. [5.1.] As regards the concept of the “Three Natures”, I very hypothetically suggest that it was stimulated by the Tattvarthapātaṇa of the Bodhisatvabhūmi. [5.2.1.] In the case of ālayavijñāna, I still think that my hypothesis that the concept (term + idea) originated from a problem emerging in connection with the “attainment of cessation” (niruddhāsamatāpatti) holds good and has not been conclusively refuted, but I admit that Prof. Yamabe’s hypothesis is a serious alternative. [5.2.2.] An important point is that in the Yogācārabhūmi we come across two fundamentally different concepts of ālayavijñāna, the starting point for the change being, probably, the fifth chapter of the Samdhinirmocanasūtra. [5.3.] As for ‘idealism’, we may have to
distinguish two strands, which, however, tend to merge. [5.3.1.] The earlier one uses the concept cittamātra and emerges as early as in the Pratyutpanna-buddha-sam-mukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra in connection with an interpretation of visions of the Buddha Amitāyus. [5.3.2.] The later strand introduces the concept vijñaptimātra and seems to have originated in the eighth chapter of the Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra in connection with a reflection on the images perceived in insight meditation. [5.3.3.] In texts like the Mahāyānasūtraśāstra, concepts from other Mahāyāna-sūtra strands (like abhūtāparikalpa) become prominent in this connection, and it is only in the Mahāyānasamgraha that the use of vijñaptimātra is finally established.

Keywords Yogācāra/Vijñānavāda · Cittamātra · Vijñaptimātra · ‘Idealism’ · Ālayavijñāna · Svabhāvatraya

1. The Three Central Concepts

The doctrinal system (or edifice) of the fully developed Yogācāra- or Vijñānavāda School is distinguished by a number of characteristic tenets.¹ The most conspicuous one would seem to be the tenet that the whole world is nothing but mind (cittamātra) or nothing but manifestation² (representation³/cognition⁴: vijñaptimātra). Another central tenet is the assumption of eight forms of mind, the traditional set of five sense perceptions plus non-sensual cognition (manovijñāna) being increased by two more, namely the defiled manas, a continuous subtle notion of ego, and ālayavijñāna, the continuous subliminal source of the other seven. The ontology of the Yogācāra system is structured in terms of the three characteristics (lakṣaṇa) or natures (svabhāva), which means that ‘things’ have three aspects: one that is purely fictitious (parikalpita), one that is dependent on causes and conditions (paratantra), and a perfect one (parinispanna), i.e., the absence of the imagined aspect, or true reality (tathatā). The Yogācāras have also developed their own peculiar description (or theory) of the path to liberation and especially to buddhahood, and their own peculiar view of buddhahood itself. In my paper, I shall, however, mainly concentrate on the issues of manifestation-only (vijñaptimātra), the subliminal ālayavijñāna, and the three natures (svabhāvatraya).

¹ The present paper is only a kind of resumé of Schmithausen (2014) (S 2014). For a more detailed argumentation and documentation, readers are referred to the respective parts or paragraphs of this book as indicated in the footnotes of the present paper.

² Thus, e.g., Silk (2016).

³ S 2014, Sect. 357.4; for the pre-vijñaptimātra meaning see Sect. 357.2. I have used this term in the sense of the German word Vorstellung, because it is ambiguous in that it may express both the act and the content. But since, in contrast to the German word, ‘representation’ risks to be associated, in philosophical contexts, with the position of representationism that assumes mental states to be (or contain) representations of an independent, external reality (Kellner and Taber 2014, p. 735, fn. 90), I have decided not to use it in this paper.

⁴ Kellner and Taber (2014, p. 734f). For the present paper, cognition, even if understood as including both mental cognition and sense-perceptions, appears less appropriate because it is somewhat odd when vijñapti is used for the content (≈ pratibhāsa).