

Class Four - Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti: The Refined Metaphysics of Impermanence

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Recap and Question

- **The Two Truths:** We ended last time with the basic distinction between two truths, or, two realities:
 - **Conventional Reality:** The realm of apparent existents which do not survive mental decomposition and whose apparent existence as independent entities is a product of conceptual and linguistic construction or reification.
 - **Ultimate Reality:** The realm of real existents consisting in whatever ultimately resists physical and mental decomposition, the basic set of simples out of which all composite things are composed.
- We located things like persons and chariots in the domain of conventional reality and whatever the ultimate, simple, fundamental things are, in the domain of ultimate reality.
- The question remains of how, exactly, to spell out this metaphysical distinction.

2 Vasubandhu's Presentism

- **A Bit on Vasubandhu:** Vasubandhu is:
 - A 4th to 5th century C.E. Buddhist philosopher (was supposedly the teacher of Chandragupta II (r.c. 375-415), the third ruler of the Gupta Empire).
 - Arguably the greatest Buddhist philosophy (at least if philosophical breadth is a measure). Developed the definitive versions of three different schools of Buddhist thought:
 - * **Vaibhāṣika:** The dominant Abhidharma school at Vasubandhu's time. The basic system of Abhidharma was collected, around 150CE in a massive work called "the Mahāvibhāṣā" (literally, something like "great explanation"), and Vaibhāṣika means "upholder of the vibhāṣā." As a philosophical position, Vaibhāṣika's are also referred to as Sarvāstivāda, as we'll see.
 - * **Sautrāntika:** A school of Abhidharma developed by Vasubandhu in response to Vaibhāṣika, meaning "followers of scripture (sūtras)" (the thought being that the Vaibhāṣika position is in conflict with the teachings of the Buddha).
 - **Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣya:** Vasubandhu's treatise, the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (meaning something like "Exposition of the Treasury of the Abhidharma"), both systematically articulates the Vaibhāṣika view, and, in the commentary, developed the alternative Sautrāntika view (this made people very mad).
 - * **Cittamātra (Yogācāra):** A Mahayana school developed latter by Vasubandhu, of which his half-brother Asaṅga is a notable proponent.
 - Some scholars have wondered whether it is really the same Vasubandhu who developed these different schools, but the consensus nowadays is that it is indeed the same person.

- **A Dilemma:** One of the main disputes that Vasubandhu has with the Vaibhāṣika view concerns the nature time. There is a basic dilemma for any Buddhist philosophy of time:

“Does a past and future thing really exist, or not? If it exists, then you have to say that conditioned things are eternal, because they exist at all times. If, on the other hand, it does not exist, then how is one bound in it or by it, or freed?”

 - On the one hand, saying that the past and future exists seems to amount to saying that things are eternal, which, of course, is precisely what the Buddhist denies.
 - On the other hand, the Buddhist maintains that things in the present exist only as dependent on prior causes and conditions, and this seems to require that the past exists in order for the present to be dependent upon it.
- **The Svarstivada View:** All times (past, present, and future) exist.
 - Generally, all such views maintain that the difference between e.g. present and future is not a difference of existence of non-existence, but a difference in mode of existence or the possession or not of a property.
- **The Position Differentialist View:** Vasubandhu takes the best to be the “position differentialist view,” defended by Vasumitra (2nd century CE), according to which:

“A dharma proceeding through the times, reaching one position and then another, is taken as being one thing and then another due to its having another position, not another substance,”

 - **A Contemporary Analogue:** This is essentially the “block theory” of time, defended in recent years by David Lewis, where positions in time are understood by analogy to positions in space.
- **Question:** What is it for a dharma to be at the present position rather than some future or past position?
- **Vasubandhu’s Main Objection:**

“[W]hat is the obstruction by virtue of which, sometimes it does [its] activity, sometimes not? Suppose you say that the conditions are not in place: no, because you have conceded that they always exist. And when the activity is said to be past, present, and future, how can this be?”
- **An Argument:** Here’s my best stab at reconstructing a valid argument:
 1. If there is some dharma x that exists, inactively, in the future, then there must be something preventing x , which exists in the future, from doing its activity.
 - If there wasn’t anything preventing x from doing its activity, then since it’s in the nature of x to do what it does, it would be doing it.
 2. There can’t be some other future dharma y that’s *preventing* x from doing it’s activity, because, if there were, then preventing x from doing its activity would be something that y would actively doing, and thus, y would be present.
 3. There can’t be some present dharma y that’s preventing x from doing its activity, since present things can only directly causally effect other things that are present (causal affection requires co-temporaneousness), and x is supposed to be future. (likewise for past dharmas)
 4. So, there can’t be anything preventing x from doing its activity.
 5. So, there can be no dharma x that exists, inactively, in the future.
- **Vasubandhu’s Conception of Reality:**

“It is the way of things that what comes about, perishes. Form comes about, form perishes. It is the way of things that one thing comes about, another perishes. The future comes about, the present perishes,” (1.27d).

3 Dharmakīrti's Nominalism

- **A Bit on Dharmakīrti:**
 - 6th or 7th century Buddhist philosopher.
 - Along with his predecessor, Dignāga (c. 480–c. 540 C.E.), rigorously developed the Sautrāntika position originally developed by Vasubandhu.
- **Particulars and Universals:** Suppose I flash a red light at t_1 , and then, two seconds later, flash a red light again at t_2 . Did you see the same thing at t_2 as you saw at t_1 ?
 - If one thinks that there really universals, then one will be inclined to say *yes*: at both moments, you saw *redness*. Though there were distinct particular red flashes, both red flashes instantiated the general property of being red.
- **Realism and Nominalism:** A realist thinks that universals really exist. A nominalist thinks that universals do not really exist.
- **A Statement of Nominalism:** Dharmakīrti is a nominalist:
 - “Real things are themselves different, but in conceptual cognition they appear in some single form,” (PV1.68)
 - “Due to the intention of that cognition, a universal is commonly said to exist. But it does not ultimately exist in the way that it is commonly conceptualized by that cognition,” (PV1.70)
 - “The apprehension of a single essence (ātman) in many things is a false cognition,” (PV1. 72).
- **An Argument from Momentariness:** If one accepts the metaphysical thesis that what ultimately exists only ever exists momentarily, it is easy to use this thesis as a premise for an argument against universals:
 1. What exists is momentary.
 2. Universals persist through many moments (e.g. there is redness at t_1 and t_2).
 3. So universals do not exist.
- **An Argument from Causal Efficacy:**
 1. What exists is what is ultimately causally efficacious.
 2. Only particulars are causally efficacious; universals are not.
 - Causal efficacy involves change. Accordingly, “the universal is not what performs functions because, since the universal is constant, it cannot causally support anything,” (1.75d).
 3. So only particulars exist; universals do not.
- **Ultimate reality is non-conceptualizable:** Conceptual cognition is essentially cognition of *generalities* (e.g. cognition of things as *red* or *blue*). The constituents of ultimate reality, on the other hand, are always utterly *particular*.

4 The Two Truths Refined

- **Conventional Truth:**
 - Persistent.
 - Involves generality.
 - Conceptually grasped.
 - Ultimately causally inefficacious.
- **Ultimate Truth:**
 - Completely Momentary.
 - Utterly particular.
 - Conceptually ungraspable.
 - Ultimately causally efficacious.