

Class Seven - The Madhyamaka Critique of Causation

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Some Context and Background on Madhyamaka

- **The Story of Nagarjuna:** Nagarjuna most likely lived in the 2nd century. However, in the traditional that he initiated, he has taken on the status of a legendary figure, having been said to live for 600 year. According to Madhyamaka legend:
 - Nagarjuna was taken to the famous Nalanda monastery as child, who was not supposed to live beyond childhood.
 - * In reality, Nalanda monastery would not exist for a few hundred years, around the 5th century.
 - He eventually established himself as the abbot of the monastery the greatest Buddhist philosopher at the time at Nalanda monastery, the most feared debater.
 - Some five-hundred years earlier, because the Buddha thought humankind wasn't ready for them, he entrusted his deepest teachings, the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, to the nagas, a semi-divine race of half-human half-serpent creatures who live underwater.
 - While Nagarjuna was meditating by the water one day, some nagas popped up and brought him down to their underwater land, where he taught Buddhism, and comes back with the Perfection of wisdom sutras.
 - Nagarjuna teaches the perfection of wisdom sutras, and was the spiritual advisor to a king.
 - When the king's son intended to ascend to the throne—given that the king would not die as long as Nagarjuna was alive—he kindly asked Nagarjuna if he could cut off his head. Nagarjuna agreed, and died at sometime around the age of 600.
- **Madhyamaka:** The school of Mahayana Buddhism, based on the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, developed by Nagarjuna.
 - Madhyamaka philosophy was later most influentially developed by Candrakīrti (7th century).
 - Nagarjuna's philosophy, as developed by Candrakirti, was regarded as the pinnacle of Buddhist philosophy by the Tibetan Gelug tradition, founded by Tsongkhappa.
 - * For a bit of contemporary context, the Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelug tradition.

2 The Project of Madhyamaka Philosophy

- **The Restricted Scope of Abhidharma Critique:** As we've seen, according to the Abhidharma tradition, there is no self. A person does not have an "intrinsic nature" or "own-being" in virtue of which they can be identified as that person and just that person. However, *some* things do have such a nature, namely, whatever the basic constituents of ultimate reality.
 - There are debates within Abhidharma Buddhism regarding what the constituents of ultimate reality are, but all proponents of this school think that there are some such constituents which inherently are the things that they are.

- **The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras:** There are a bunch of different Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, but what is now the most famous is a short sutra that encapsulates the “heart” of the perfection of wisdom sutras:

Avalolita, the Holy Lord and Bodhisattva, was moving in the deep course of the wisdom which has gone beyond.

He looked down from on high, he beheld but five heaps (*skhandhas*) and he saw that in their own-being, they were empty.

[Material] form (*rūpa*) is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form, emptiness does not differ from form, nor does form differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness that is form.

The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness.

Here, O Sariputra,

all dharmas are marked with emptiness,
they are neither produced nor stopped,
neither defiled nor immaculate,
neither deficient nor complete.

- **Universalizing Non-Atman:** Nagarjuna’s project, based on the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, might be thought of as a radicalization of the Buddhist critique of the self.
 - You can think of a “self,” in an extended sense, as being something’s “essence,” “intrinsic nature,” or “own-being.” In Sanskrit: *svabhāva*.
 - The basic doctrine of Madhyamaka philosophy is that of *emptiness* (*sunyata*): everything is empty of (i.e. lacks) *svabhāva*.
- **The Crucial Status of Causation:** As we saw, Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti identified the essence of a thing with its causal role. As such, causation becomes the basic target of Nagarjuna’s critique.
 - *Note:* Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti were both writing *after* Nagarjuna. But the views they were systematizing were of the sort that Nagarjuna was reacting against.

Arguing against inherent existents causing each other is the first and crucial step in an overall repudiation of inherent existence as such.

3 The Basic Argument Against Causation

- **The Core Claim:** The core argument is stated in the very first verse of Chapter 1 of Nagarjuna’s MMK:

Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause;
Never in any way is there an existent that has arisen anywhere.

- **A Tetralemma:** This takes the form of a *tetralemma* (*catuṣkoṭi*), a common form of Buddhist argumentation. We have four alternatives—A, B, Neither, and Both—and we argue as follows:
 - It can’t be possibility A.
 - It can’t be possibility B.
 - It can’t be neither, because A and B are exhaustive.
 - It can’t be both, since it can’t be either.

Generally, in such an argument, the core argument goes by way of dilemma (rejecting the “both” and “neither” is easy once one has rejected A and B).

- **The Basic Argument by Dilemma:** Translating the argument’s talk of “arising” into our more familiar idiom of “cause and effect,” I take it that the basic argument runs as follows:
 1. If any two things ever stand in a relation of cause and effect, then the effect is either already present in the cause or extrinsic to the cause.

2. The effect can't be present in the cause.
3. The effect can't be extrinsic to the cause.
4. So, no two things ever stand in a relation of cause and effect.

I take it that this basic argument can be understood as a *generalization* of Hume's argument. That is, Hume conceives of the cause and effect as essentially separate from one another, and comes to the conclusion that we can't make sense of causal relations. The argument here presents this as one horn of a dilemma between two equally problematic alternatives.

- **Against Possibility Two:** I take it that the basic argument in the Madhyamaka tradition against possibility two is the one that Hume gives us.
 - **Candrakirti:** Here's a concise statement of what I take to be the basic Humean point:

If something can arise from something other than itself,
Well then, deep darkness can arise from tongues of flame,
And anything could issue forth from anything, (MV 6.14).
 - **A Clarification from Tsongkhappa:**

Here, the reason why the absurd consequence "if there were arising from another, anything could arise from anything" is presented is that the "other" in "arising from another" is not just something that is different in virtue of being the referent of a different noun, but something that is inherently existent as different. If it existed in that way, then the sprout's depending on the seed would be inconsistent; thus, their relation would be refuted. If it were to arise from another unrelated object, then it could arise from anything!
Therefore if the sense in which the seed were inherently different from the sprout and the sense in which it is different from charcoal were the same then it would make no difference whether or not the seed arose from either of these two, (OR 1.1.2.2.1, p. 67)
 - **The Basic Point:** If we conceive of the cause and effect as constitutively distinct, then we lose the idea of there being any necessary connection between them at all.
- **Against Possibility One:** Hume does not systematically consider a view in which effects are (perhaps implicitly) already contained within their causes. The argument against this possibility in the Madhyamaka tradition is directed principally against the non-Buddhist Samkhya school.
 - **The Thought:** The placing the paper into the fire and the paper's burning are not to be conceived of as two distinct, separately intelligible events. Rather, to place the paper into the fire is, ipso fact, for it to burn.
 - **The Basic Problem:** If the effect is already contained in the cause, there is really not *two things* standing in a causal relation. There is just *one thing*, perhaps by multiple descriptions. In that case, there's no causation at all!
 - **Candrakirti:**

If things are self-produced, begetter and begotten—both are one, (MV, 13 p. 70)
 - **Tsongkhappa:**

This has "the absurd consequence that there would be no point to arising," 1.1.2.1.1 (p. 61).
 - **Applying to the Example:** We are inclined to think that there is the act of placing the paper into the fire, then the act of the fire burning the paper. If the act of placing the paper into the fire, somehow already involved the paper's burning, then the fire's activity of actually burning the fire would be pointless.
 - **The Conclusion:** "The intrinsic nature of existents does not exist in the conditions," (MMK 2).
- **The Whole Argument, Applied to the Sort of Case for which it is Meant:**

- Suppose that we have two mental or physical events in our ultimate ontology, X-ings and Y-ings (it doesn't matter what they are), and we maintain that X-ings give rise to Y-ings. There are two possibilities here.
 1. In any case of a *X-ing then Y-ing*, the Y-ing is already contained in the X-ing in the sense that a X-ing, in being what it is, is such as to unfold into a Y-ing.
 - * If this first possibility obtains, then what is the reason for articulating our ontology in terms of X-ings and Y-ings rather than some third sort of event—Z-ings, say—that contains both X-ings and Y-ings as aspects? Shouldn't we, instead, say that the real constituents of our ontology are Z-ings, and their apparent division into two things—X-ings and Y-ings—is really nothing but a conceptual imputation, a result of the fact that there are two perspectives that we might have on a single event?
 - * If we say this, then, once again, there is no causal connection between X-ings and Y-ings because, really, there *are no* X-ings and Y-ings; these are really two aspects of a single event. We have Z-ings, sure, but we have no causation.
 2. In such a case, the X-ing is distinct from the Y-ing.
 - * In that case, however, the two events are not essentially connected, and so, in any case of a X-ings following a X-ing, all we have is merely that: one event following the other, without any connection obtaining between them.

- **A Middle Way Out?**

- **Another Example:** The most common example for which this possibility seems plausible is that between the seed in the sprout. We might be inclined to say that the sprout, in some way, already exists in the seed (latently, unmanifested, etc.).
- **An Aristotelian Samkhya Thought:** Consider the sprout and the seed. The sprout isn't *actually* in the seed at t_1 , but, even at t_1 , it exists *potentially* in the seed, and, subject to the right causes and conditions (e.g. sunlight, water, etc.), this potentiality will eventually unfold into an actuality at t_2 .
- **Tsonkhappa's Table-Pounding Response:** Tsonkhappa seems to respond to this thought simply by saying *is the sprout itself really there or not?*

[I]f that which is manifested were there previously, it would not need to arise; if it arose having existed previously, the infinite regress would still ensue. If, on the other hand, they said that that which is manifested did not exist previously, then one would abandon the position that only that which exists previously in the cause arises.
- **The Thought:** A potentiality/actuality distinction of this sort certainly makes sense *conventionally*, but when we try to apply it to the constituents of *ultimate* reality, we can always ask, is the effect *really there* in the cause or not?
- **The Two Truths, Again:** "If cause and effect are refuted in the context of existence through their own characteristic, cause and effect can be taken to be merely nominally imputed, and merely posited through the force of nominal conventions. [. . .] Since the benefits and harms of causes and effects are undeniable, one should develop ascertainment, thinking as follows: "Although in the context of mere imputation, causes give rise to effects, it is erroneous for me to grasp them in the context of existence through their own characteristics." One should not allow this to undermine one's ascertainment of the dependent arising of causes and effects," (OR, 3, pp. 98-99).