

# Class Eight - The Madhyamaka Critique of Intrinsic Nature

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Quick Recap

- **The Madhyamaka Project:** Critique the very idea of things as having intrinsic natures, imploding, from the inside, the very idea of there being some ultimate level of reality consisting in ultimately existing dharmas.
- **The Critique of Causation:** In Chapter 1 of MMK, we got an argument against inherent existents standing in causal relations, summed up by the very first verse:  
Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause;  
Never in any way is there an existent that has arisen anywhere. (MMK 1, 1)
- **Some Chapters We Didn't Read:** MMK is kind of like a firehose of arguments against any conception of things as having ultimate natures. Here are some highlights of chapters we didn't look at (I put the whole text on the Canvas if you're interested).
  - **Chapter 2:** Argues against the idea of any inherent existent moving (the argument is similar to the argument in Chapter 5 below).
  - **Chapter 8:** Argues against the idea of any agent can be oriented towards some aim in action.
  - **Chapter 10:** Argues against the idea of anything depending on anything else, as fire depends on fuel (similar idea here as in Chapter 1).

## 2 Chapter 5's Argument Against Defining Characteristics

- **Defining Characteristic (lakṣaṇa):** Something's essence or essential nature: that in virtue of which something, possessing it, is what it is.
  - **Example:** The defining characteristic of space is non-resistance.  
**Vasubandhu:** "Space is 'that which does not hinder.' Space has for its nature not hindering matter which, in fact, takes place freely in space (ABK 1, 5c).  
It is in virtue of possessing the nature of *not hindering* that space is *space*."
- **Nagarjuna's Argument:** Nagarjuna argues that this thought is unintelligible:  
Nowhere does there exist any such thing as an existent without defining characteristic.  
An existent devoid of defining characteristic being unreal, where would a defining characteristic go? (MMK 5, 2)

Nagarjuna's argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. A thing cannot conceivably exist without its defining characteristic.
2. If a thing cannot conceivably exist without its defining characteristic, then there's no sense to be made of the defining characteristic making the thing be what it is.
  - After all, if a defining characteristic has any significance at all, it must have a *function*. It must *do* something. What it's *supposed* to do is *make something be what it is*. That is, it is *supposed* to be *in virtue of having its defining characteristic* that something is what it is. But if everything must always already be what it is, a defining characteristic can do nothing.

3. There's no sense to be made of a defining characteristic.
- **Another Application:** Consider a potential bullet-biting response to the argument against causation, according to which one takes it that whole of reality is just one thing with different aspects that we articulate using causal language but where, ultimately, all divisions into separate things are conceptual imputations. Suppose we think that this entity is reality as a whole. Presumably, at the very least, it has the defining characteristic of *being the totality*, such that, for any existent thing at all, that thing is a constituent aspect of it. But what is this thought that we think when we ascribe this defining characteristic of being the totality to the totality? Can we ultimately make sense of it?

### 3 Chapter 15 Against Intrinsic (And Extrinsic) Nature

- **Trying to Find Intrinsic Nature:** If we think that things have intrinsic natures, then there must be *something* in virtue of which they are natured as they are. If there's *nothing* in virtue of which they are natured as they are, then they could be *anything!* Chapter 5 argued that thinking of that in virtue of which a thing is what it is as a "defining characteristic" doesn't work. One characteristically Buddhist thought would be to say that things are what they are, intrinsically, in virtue of the causes and conditions on which they depend. One might plausibly interpret Vasubandhu and Dharmakirti as thinking something like this.
- **Nagarjuna's First Point:** Intrinsic nature cannot be dependent on causes and conditions—it must be *intrinsic*:

It is not correct to say that intrinsic nature (svabhava) is produced by means of causes and conditions.

An intrinsic nature that was produced by causes and conditions would be a product.

But how could there ever be an intrinsic nature that is a product?

For intrinsic nature is not adventitious, nor is it dependent on something else. (MMK 15, 1-2).

- **An Alternative?:** Well, then it must be that the nature of things is *extrinsic*, inherited from the natures of the things on which they causally depend.
  - But this doesn't work unless the things from which the something's *extrinsic* nature is supposed to be inherited is *intrinsic* to those things:

Given the nonexistence of intrinsic nature, how will there be extrinsic nature.  
For the extrinsic nature

- **No Existents without Either Intrinsic nor Extrinsic Nature:**

Further, without intrinsic and extrinsic nature how can there be an existent?

For an existent is established given the existence of either intrinsic nature or extrinsic nature, (MMK 15, 4)

- **No Non-Existents Either:** This might lead one to think that what really exists is *nothing*—that everything is ultimately non-existent. But Nagarjuna rejects this as well:

If the existent is unestablished, the the nonexistent too is not established.

For the people proclaim the nonexistent to be the alteration of the existent, (MMK 15, 5)

- **An Example:** Consider darkness, which we might think of as the absence of light. We can only make sense of darkness as a non-existent by think of the "alteration of the existent," namely light. When we turn off a light (which is an existent having some nature), we get darkness. The general point here is that the very idea of a *non-existent* is only intelligible by contrast to an *existent*. If the latter notion is unintelligible, so too is the former.

- **The Middle Path:** So *what is it?* Do things have intrinsic nature or extrinsic nature? Are things ultimately existent or nonexistent? The middle path, Nagarjuna says, involves rejecting such reifying distinctions:

Intrinsic nature and extrinsic nature, existent and nonexistent—  
who see these do not see the truth of the Buddha’s teaching, (MMK 15, 6)

“It exists” is an eternalist view; “It does not exist” is an annihilationist idea.  
Therefore the wise one should not have recourse to either existence or non-  
existence, (MMK 15, 10)

## 4 Chapter 22 and the Self-Undoing of Madhyamaka Philosophy

- **The Example of Chapter 22:** A Tathāgata is a Buddha—an awakened being—literally “one who has thus gone.”

- It might seem that, if anything has an intrinsic nature, it is the Buddha, who has the nature of Buddhahood. This just serves as a prime example for Nagarjuna to prosecute his critique.

- **The General Conclusion:**

What is the intrinsic nature of the Tathāgata, that is the intrinsic nature of this world.

The Tathāgata is devoid of intrinsic nature; this world is devoid of intrinsic nature, (MMK 22 16).

- **A Paradox?:** Nagarjuna says that the intrinsic nature of the world is the same as that of the Tathāgata. This seems to imply that the world has some intrinsic nature, but, as he says in the very next line, it’s nature is to be devoid of intrinsic nature!

- **An Expression of this Seeming Paradox Elsewhere:** “All things have one nature, that is, no nature,” (Nagarjuna VV).
- **One Interpretive Line worth Noting:** Some people, such as Graham Priest and Jay Garfield, have argued that Nagarjuna’s view is simply contradictory. I don’t think that such a flatfooted interpretive response to this apparent paradox is right, but it’s interesting.

- **The Emptiness of Emptiness:** It is a crucial mistake to think that, ultimately, emptiness, being devoid of intrinsic nature, is the intrinsic nature of all things:

This voidness of the so-called void  
Is known as *emptiness of emptiness*;  
It was set forth to counteract the thought  
That emptiness is something real. (MV 6, 186).

- **“Empty” is Said Only for the Sake of Instruction:** Nagarjuna and Candrakirti suggest that their arguments and the apparent views that they endorse in putting forward these arguments are functioning merely negatively, to undo problematic thinking concerning the nature of ultimate reality without putting some alternative conception of ultimate reality (i.e. ultimately, everything has the essential nature of emptiness) in its place:

“It is empty” is not to be said, nor “It is not empty,”  
nor that it is both, nor that it is neither; [“empty”] is said only for the sake of  
instruction, (Nagarjuna, MMK 22, 11).

‘Reflections are not real, but using them we smarten our appearance.  
In just the same way we should understand that arguments  
That have the power to cleanse the face of wisdom  
Unlike your limping sophistries, engender realization of the goal, (Candrakirti,  
MV 6, 175)

- **Other Similar Remarks in Nagarjuna and Candrakirti:**
  - **Nagarjuna MMK 13, 8**  
Emptiness is taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get rid of all views  
But those for whom emptiness is a view have been called incurable.
  - **Nagarjuna MMK 25, 24:** The concluding verse of the chapter on Nirvana:  
This halting of cognizing everything, the halting of hypostatizing, is blissful.  
No Dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone.
  - **Nagarjuna MMK 27, 30:** The concluding verse of *MMK*:  
I salute Guatama, who, based on compassion, taught the true Dharma for the  
abandonment of all views.
  - **Nagarjuna, VV 29:** If I had any thesis, the earlier fault you mentioned would apply  
to me, because the mark of my thesis has been affected. But I do not have any thesis.  
To that extent, while all things are empty, completely pacified, and by nature free from  
substance, from where could a thesis come? From where could something affecting the  
character of my thesis come?
  - **Candrakirti:** Of course anyone making a positive assertion must establish his argument  
with his adversary and the latter should be persuaded to accept it. But the *Madhyamika*  
brings no reason *against* his adversary; he makes no use of reasons and examples but  
pursues his own thesis only until the adversary gives up his, (*Prasannapada* 1, 19).
  - **Candrakirti:** But as we make no negative assertion whatsoever how could there be  
a positive thesis which would either contradict it or not contradict it? Because the  
opposing terms would be meaningless, as are the length and shortness of a donkey's  
horns, (*Prasannapada* 1, 56).