

# Class Eleven - The Three Natures in Cittamātra/Yogācāra

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Some Context

- **Yogācāra/Cittamātra:** One of the central Mahayana schools of Buddhist philosophy. These two terms refer to the same school:
  - **Yogācāra:** Just means “practitioner of yoga,” a specific kind of meditation practice. So, “Yogācāra” denotes the school by the *method*.
  - **Cittamātra:** Means “mind/thought only,” expressing the thought that apparently independent phenomena are really mental constructions. So “Cittamātra” denotes the school by one of its basic *doctrines*.
- **The Sandhinirmocana Sutra:** Translates to something like “Sutra Unraveling the Thought.” Mahayana sutra likely composed sometime between the second and third century CE.
  - References the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, so written sometime after them (i.e. sometime after 1st or second century)
  - One of the foundational sutras for Yogācāra, the school of Mahayana developed by Asanga and Vasubandhu (4th century), who both rely heavily on it.
  - Originally written in Sanskrit, but the Sanskrit text is lost.
    - \* The translation you read by Powers is from the Tibetan translation of the text.
- **Asanga:** 4th century CE Buddhist philosopher, regarded as the philosophical founder of the Yogacara school. According to stories:
  - Meditated alone in a cave for 12 years, aiming to receive teachings from the (future) Buddha, Maitreya, who will teach the dharmas after Sakyamuni’s Buddhi’s are long.
  - Maitreya eventually appears, and takes Asanga to Tushita, one of the heavens, where Maitreya resides (and where Sakyamuni Buddhi resided before going down to Earth).
  - Asanga receives the teachings of Maitreya, and records them in five treatises, and goes on to teach Yogacara.
- **Vasubandhu (Again):** Asanga’s half-brother. According to the stories:
  - Asanga was worried about Vasubandhu (who’s views at this time we read), having the wrong view. So he sent his students to convert Vasubandhu to Yogacara.
  - Apparently, it works, and Vasubandhu begins writing Yogacara works.
    - \* How much of a turn Vasubandhu actually makes from his earlier Sautrantika views is a matter of debate.
      - It’s easy to see substantial continuity in the views (see the Gold chapter), and some people think that there’s a sense in which Vasubandhu was really a Yogacaran all along.
      - But it does seem that there is some substantial divergence insofar as Yogacara incorporates distinctively Mahayana ideas such as those found in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras.
- **A Note on the Tibetan Canon:** The Tibetan (particularly Geluk) Canon, largely influenced by Candrakirti, though it teaches Yogacara, takes Yogacara to involve a fundamental mistake of attributing inherent existence to the mind, and thus only takes it to be one step on the path to the true Madhyamaka view.

- In the traditional Geluk doxography, there's the following ranking of the different Buddhist traditions:
  1. Madhyamaka
    - (a) As developed by Candrakīrti.
    - (b) As developed by Bhāviveka
  2. Yogacara
  3. Sautrantika
  4. Vaibhashika
- I take it, however, that there's a way of interpreting Yogacara so that it's compatible with Madhyamaka, further spelling it out, and, particularly, focusing on the *subjective* side of emptiness and its realization.
- **The Madhyamaka Identity of Emptiness and Dependent Origination:** In perhaps the most famous verse from *MMK* (from a chapter we didn't read), Nagarjuna says, "Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness.
  - **Two Characterizations of Dependent Origination/Emptiness:**
    - \* **Positively:** Things only ever exist in dependence on causes and conditions.
    - \* **Negatively:** Things are empty of inherent existence.
  - **Question:** What is it to realize the dependent origination/emptiness of all things?
    - \* Nagarjuna himself is rather quiet on this question.

## 2 Constructed and Dependent Nature

- **The Three Natures:** "The three natures are just the constructed [fabricated/imputed], the dependent, and the perfected [established]," (TSN 1).
- **Dependent and Constructed Natures:** "What appears is the dependent, because it depends for its existence on causal conditions. How that appears is the constructed, because it is merely a construction," (TSN2).
  - **What Appears:** An appearance is ultimately always an appearance *of* something. But, ultimately, there can be no "something" with an inherent existence that appears. Ultimate reality is devoid of inherent existence. What appears is always what is dependently originated.
  - **How Things Appears:** Things appear as being substantive, possessing inherent existence, being independent entities.
- **The Illusoriness of the Constructed Nature:**
  - **Three Examples:** Two examples from the Sandhinirmocana Sutra and one from Vasubandhu:
    - \* **Example One:** "Gunakara, for example, the imputational [constructed] character should be viewed as being like the defects of clouded vision in the eyes of a person with clouded vision. Gunkara, for example, the other-dependent character should be viewed as being like the appearance of the manifestations of clouded vision in that very person, manifestations which appear as a net of hairs, or as insects, or as sesame seeds," (83).
    - \* **Example Two:** "Gunakara, for example, when a very clear crystal comes in contact with the color blue, it appears as a precious gem, such as a sapphire or a mahanila. Further, by mistaking it for a precious gem such as a sapphire or mahanila, sentient beings are deluded," (85)
    - \* **Example Three:**

“It is like something made by magic which, owing to the power of a spell, appears as an elephant: there is only an appearance there, but no elephant whatsoever.

The constructed nature is the elephant; the dependent is the appearing of that; and the absence of an elephant there is the perfected,” (TSN 27-28).

- \* **What is *really* appearing:**
  - **Example One:** Whatever the causes and conditions of clouded vision are (I don’t know what they are—ask an optometrist).
  - **Example Two:** The clear crystal, illuminated with blue light.
  - **Example Three:** A piece of wood that the magician has someone made appear as an elephant (see TSN, 34).
- \* **What *appears* to appear:**
  - **Example One:** Hairs, or insects, or sesame seeds
  - **Example Two:** A sapphire or mahanila.
  - **Example Three:** An elephant.
- **Applying the Same Model:** In the case that concerns us:
  - \* **What is *really* appearing:** The various causes and conditions that are all devoid of intrinsic nature.
  - \* **What *appears* to appear:** Things with intrinsic natures. But this appearance is “unreal fabrication,” it is the “construction of what does not exist” apparent intrinsic natures are merely constructed: they are conceptual imputations.
- **The Non-Duality of Mind and Phenomena:** Constructed phenomena appear to be mind-independent entities. So, there appears to be a fundamental duality between mind and the world of substantial independent things in which we find ourselves. However, insofar as these apparent “substantial independent things” are constructed, mental fabrications, although they appear “as dual,” ultimately there is “no duality there” (TSN, 4). That is the sense in which it is right to say that constructed phenomena are non-existent.
- **Constructed Reality is Mind-Only:** “What is constructing what does not exist? Thought [mind] (*citta*).”
  - \* **Both cause and result:** Mind is both what is constructing constructed reality and the “storehouse” of constructed reality (TSN 6).

### 3 The Perfected Nature

- **The Perfected Nature:** The perfected nature is the dependent nature’s being empty of constructed nature.

**A Statement in th Sandhinirmocana Sutra:** “In the same way, you should see that the other-dependent character is not thoroughly established in permanent, permanent time, or in everlasting, everlasting time as being the imputational character, and is without its nature, it is the thoroughly established character,” (87).
- **The truth of the matter in the Above Examples:** What really appears lacks the nature of what appears to appear.
  - **Example One:** The clouded vision causes and conditions lacks the nature of being hairs, insects, or sesame seeds.
  - **Example Two:** The clear crystal illuminated with blue light lacks the nature of being a sapphire.
  - **Example Three:** The piece of wood lacks the nature of being an elephant.
- **Applying the Same Model:** The dependent nature (what really appears) is empty of the constructed nature (what appears to appear). *That* is the perfected nature.

## 4 General Remarks on the Three Natures

- **Existing and Non-Existing:** There is a sense in which all three natures can be said both to “exist” and to “not-exist.”
  - **The Constructed Nature:** Both exists and does not exist in that “It is grasped as existent while never existent as such,” (11).
    - \* The constructed nature exists but exists only as a mere appearance, lacking any underlying reality.
  - **The Dependent Nature:** Both exists and does not exist in that “it is known through the existence of an error, and not known as it appears,” (12).
    - \* We only ever have knowledge of the dependent nature through its appearing as otherwise than it is.
  - **The Perfected Nature:** Both exists and does not exist in that “it exists as nonduality and is the very nonexistence of duality,” (13.)
    - \* It exists in that it is known, but what is known is the very non-existence of the duality of mind and phenomena that appears. So, there is a sense in which it does not exist in that it exists as there mere negation of what appears to exist but does not truly exist in that way.

In a similar way, Vasubandhu argues that all three natures are all dual and non-dual, and pure and impure.

- **The Ultimate Non-Difference of the Three Natures:** A true understanding of each of the three nature requires understanding it in relation to all of the others.
- **Apprehension of the Perfected is a Kind of Cessation:** To apprehend the perfected nature is not to *perceive* the *non-duality*. Rather, one it is “*the non-perception of duality*.” With this:
  - “the dual appearance goes away; as a result of its removal one arrives at the perfected, which is the absence of duality,” (33).

## 5 Comparison with Kant

- **Phenomena as Constitutively Mind-Dependent:** Like Vasubandhu, Kant takes the phenomena of everyday experience (things like bottles, books, and tables) to be constitutively mind-dependent.
  - It appears that such things as bottles and books are mind-independent.
  - However, the apparent existence of things as independent substances standing in causal relations is a product of conceptual activity.
- **What to Say about Noumena?:** Kant takes it that phenomena, ultimately, are appearances. What they are appearances of, ultimately, is noumena: things in themselves.
  - Things in themselves can’t be characterized as falling under the categories, since we only have a determinate idea of the objects of empirical cognition falling under the categories (thinking of the laws they must conform to insofar as they are possible objects of our cognition).
  - So, there is a sense in which we can say nothing at all about the metaphysical nature of noumena—we can only ever have a merely negative conception of them.
  - But Kant wants to maintain that this is an *epistemological* point, rather than a *metaphysical*. That is, it’s not that things in themselves *really lack* intrinsic natures—it’s just that we cannot possibly have *epistemic access* to their natures.
- **The Mahayana Perspective:** The idea that things really do have intrinsic natures is ultimately nothing more than a cognitive illusion, a product of the mental fabrication.
- **Question:** Are we inclined to side more with the Mahayana outlook or the Kantian one?