

Against Conceptual Svabhāva

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0 Introduction

- **Conceptual Contents and Inferential Relations:**
 - **Conceptual Contents:** The objects of our thought—the things we *think* or *think about* things.
 - * I can think *that Kanthaka is a horse*. Here, the object of my thought is a *proposition*, which I take to be *true*
 - * I can also think *of Kanthaka that he is a horse*. Here, the object of my thought is a *property*, which I take to be *true of Kanthaka*.
 - **Inferential Relations:** Conceptual contents stand in inferential relations.
 - * From the proposition *that Kanthaka is a horse*, it can be inferred *that Kanthaka is an animal*.
 - * From anything’s instantiating the property of *being a horse* it can be inferred *that it’s an animal*.
- **Two Orders of Explanation in Contemporary Semantics and Metaphysics:**
 - **Conceptual Contents Explain Inferential Relations:** [F]rom the Platonic perspective there’s an utterly natural explanation of our intuitive feeling that any horse must be an animal. *It’s that the two properties’ intrinsic natures together guarantee it*. We may therefore see this connection as an ‘intrinsic relation’—one that holds between the two properties strictly as a result of their individual intrinsic natures. Here is the locus of the needed ‘modal oomph’. Differences between properties’ own intrinsic properties establish modal connections between them, (Jubien 2009, 93).
 - **Inferential Relations Explain Conceptual Contents:** [S]entential conceptual content [is understood] in terms of the functional roles sentences play in virtue of standing to one another in reason relations of consequence and incompatibility, rational inclusion and exclusion. [...] In virtue of standing to one another in reason relations of implication and incompatibility, what thereby count as declarative sentences express conceptual contents—specifically *propositional* contents. Those contents can be thought of as the functional roles the sentences play in constellations of implications and incompatibilities, (Hlobil and Brandom forthcoming, 14-15).
- **The Target of this Paper:** The view that the constellation of rationally related conceptual contents, whether the elements of that constellation are understood *atomistically* or *holistically*, is *intrinsically intelligible*.
- **The Inspiration:** The Madhyamaka critique of *svabhāva*—inherent existence or “own-being”—as developed by Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Tsongkhapa, and, in particular the argument against causal relations meant to establish emptiness of *svabhāva*.
 - In it’s original context, principally levied against the Abhidharma conception of reality as consisting in a constellation of causally related “dharmas” (basic constituents of reality), each being given rise to and giving rise to others.

- But, as Nāgārjuna (if it's really him) shows in the *Vaidalyaprakarana*, the basic argument applies just as well to conceptual contents which follow from others and from which others follow.
- **The Plan:** Will be a bit roundabout:
 1. Explain the argument against things standing in *causal* relations found in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 1, as explicated by Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa.
 2. Consider the charge, raised by Nāgārjuna's interlocutor in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, that the resultant position of emptiness is self-refuting.
 3. Strengthen this objection by considering a spin, considered in Nāgārjuna's *Vaidalyaprakarana*, according to which the basic argument applies not to *causal* relations, but *inferential* ones.
 4. Consider an attempt to wiggle out of the argument by considering, in the causal case, the distinction between *potential* and *actual*, and, in the inferential case, the distinction between *implicit* and *explicit*.
 5. Argue that such a distinction, in both cases, is (and indeed must be) applicable, but that it's applicability depends on recognizing the essential dependence on conventional practices and perspectives.

1 The Argument Against Causality

- **MMK 1.1:** The first chapter of MMK begins with the following 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.
- **The Basic Argument:** Translating talk of "arising" into talk of "cause and effect," I take it that the core argument is the following argument by dilemma:
 1. If any two objects 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. If the effect is already present in the cause, then there can be no causal connection, since we don't have two things to be connected.
 3. If the effect is extrinsic to the cause, then there's no causal connection since there is no connection between the two things that are supposedly connected.
 4. So, no two objects ever stand in a relation of cause and effect.
- **The First Horn:** *Things arise from themselves.* The core problem with this conception is that we lose the very idea of arising; in order for something to arise from itself, that which arises must already be there in the source of the arising.
 - As Tsongkhapa remarks, this has "the absurd consequence that there would be no point to arising," (OR 1.1.2.1.1, p. 61).
 - Indeed, the real problem here is not simply that arising would be pointless, but, rather, that there would be no arising at all. As Candrakīrti puts it, "If things are self-produced, begetter and begotten—both are one, (MV 6, 13 p. 70)."
- **The Second Horn:** *Things arise from things that are other than themselves.* The core problem of the second of the dilemma, I take it, will be familiar to Western readers from Hume.
 - Hume conceives of the two events, for instance, that of a billiard ball striking another and that billiard ball moving forward as utterly extrinsic to another. As such, he thinks as follows:

"[M]ay I not conceive that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both of these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap from the second in any line or any direction? All of these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then would we give preference to the one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings *a priori* will never be able to show us any foundation for this preference," (19).

Thinking of the cause and effect as entirely extrinsic to each other, Hume concludes that we can have no determinate concept of a causal connection at all.

- Candrakirti explicitly elaborates this thought as follows:

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, 14)

If the two supposed relata of the causal relation are conceived of as utterly other, than we lose any grip on a relation that they bear to each other.

- Tsongkhappa clarifies this point:

“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!” (OR, 1.1.1.2.2.1 67).

- **Working Through an Example:** Consider the thought that touching the hot poker causes the sensation of pain. There are two possibilities:

- **Possibility One:** The event consisting in the sensation of pain is already contained in the event consisting in the touching of the hot poker.

- * After all, to touch the hot poker *is* to do something painful, and thus, it itself *involves* the searing pain.
- * So, feeling pain is part of what it is to touch the hot poker.
- * If that’s the case, then there’s really not two events here—there’s really one event: the touching of the hot poker, which is, ipso facto, the feeling of a sensation of pain.
- * If there’s really just one event here, however, then there can’t really be any causal relation between the touching of the hot poker and the sensation of pain because causal relations obtain between distinct events and these apparently distinct events are not really distinct.

- **Possibility Two:** The event consisting in touching the hot poker and the event consisting in the sensation of pain are really distinct entities.

- * If these two events are really distinct entities, however, then they must be intelligible as being what they are independent of each other.
- * So, intelligible that one might touch the hot poker and subsequently feel a pleasant tickling sensation.
- * In that case, however, we lose our grip on there being any essential link between the touching of the hot poker and the feeling of pain.
- * In any case of one following from the other, all we have is merely that: one following the other, without any connection obtaining between them.

2 The Argument Bites Back?

- **The Core Challenge from Nāgārjuna’s Interlocutor:** “If the inherent existence of all things is not to be found anywhere, your assertion which is devoid of inherent existence is not able to refute inherent existence,” (VV 1, p. 19).

- For Nāgārjuna’s assertion to refute inherent existence is for it to “dispel” this position, to put an end to it or (perhaps more accurately) peoples’ holding it.
- But something’s having such causal efficacy is precisely what is apparently refuted by Nāgārjuna’s argument in *MMK1*.

- **First Step of Response:** Nāgārjuna acknowledges that his speech, too, is without svabhāva:

“If things existed substantially they would exist without causes and conditions; however, they do not exist in this way. Therefore they are said to be without substance, and because they are without substance, empty. Therefore it follows that in the same way my own speech is without substance, because it is dependently arisen, and because it is without substance it is empty,” (VV 22, p. 27).
- **Second Step of Response:** Nāgārjuna maintains that his speech plays a part in establishing the lack of substance of things, but only in dependence on various causes and conditions (as anything plays a part in establishing anything):

“[My] speech, which is also without substance because it is dependently arisen, plays a part in establishing the lack of substance of thing,” (VV 22, p. 27).
- **Bracketing One Big Question for the Moment:** For the moment, I will bracket the big question of, how, exactly “dependent origination” is to be understood if not in terms of things arising from other things in the way that is subject to critique of MMK1.
- **Reframing the Point:** Nāgārjuna’s interlocutor clearly seems to be thinking of “refuting” in *causal* terms, but perhaps a stronger version of the charge can be seen by reproducing the argument in *inferential* terms.

3 The Argument Against Inferential Relations

- **Vaidalyaprakarana:** “Thesis and reason are neither identical nor different,” (VP, 41).
 - “[I]f reason and thesis are not different, what is accomplished?”
 - “If they are distinct, what will be obtained?”
- **An Inferential Spin on MMK 1.1:**

Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without reason;
Never in any way is there a content that has been rationally inferred anywhere.
- **The Basic Argument:** Rather than taking the basic “not from self nor from other” argument to apply to *causal* relations, we also consider it in application to *inferential* relations:
 1. If any two contents ever stand in an inferential relation, then the conclusion is either contained in the premise or extrinsic to the premise.
 2. If the conclusion is contained in the premise, then there can be no inferential connection, since we don’t have two separate things to be connected.
 3. If the conclusion is extrinsic to the premise, then there’s no inferential connection since there is no connection between the two things that are supposedly connected.
 4. So, no two contents ever stand in an inferential relation.
- **Working Through an Example:** Consider the inference from “the poker is glowing bright red” to “the poker is hot.” There are two possibilities:
 - **Possibility One:** The content *hot* is already contained within the content *glowing-bright-red*.
 - * If that’s so, however, then there’s no inferential relation between *glowing-bright-red* and *hot* at all, or, since the conclusion is already there in the premise, so there is no sense to be made of going *from* the premise *to* the conclusion.
 - **Possibility Two:** The content *hot* is extrinsic to the content *glowing-bright-red*.
 - * If the conclusion is utterly extrinsic to the premise, then what sense can we make of the thought that the conclusion “follows forth” from the premise?
- **An Example from Contemporary Philosophy:** More famously in contemporary philosophy, this basic issue arises in attempting to deal with Carroll’s (1895) Paradox concerning Achilles and Tortoise.

- **The Second Horn:** Carroll's paradox takes off on the thought that the acceptance of q is not already built into the acceptance of p and $p \rightarrow q$, and thus, something further is needed. But this famously gives rise to a regress.
- **The First Horn:** In response, some recent authors such as Eric Marcus (2021) have suggested that the content q is already contained in p and $p \rightarrow q$, and so, it's part of having a "qualifying understanding" of the premises that "insofar as one has in mind the beliefs that p and that $p \rightarrow q$, it is impossible not to believe q ," (110). But insofar as the content of the premises, properly understood, already contains the conclusion, it is hard to see how there is actually any inferential relation between the premises and conclusion at all.
- **The Issue:** It seems that this precludes us from being able to make sense of any contents standing in rational relations at all. But accepting this argument seems catastrophic for rationally maintaining any philosophical position at all!
 - Presumably, whatever is to be said about the argument against causal relations and the self-refuting charge there, there should be an analogue in this case.

4 A Modal Distinction to the Rescue?

- **Potentiality/Actuality:** A natural way to try to wiggle out of the dilemma of MMK1 is to draw an Aristotelian (*Met-Θ*) modal distinction in order to say that, in one sense, the effect is "contained in" the cause, but, in another sense, it is not:
 - The sprout exists in the seed *in potentiality*, but it does not exist in the seed in *actuality*. That is, it exists in the seed in that the seed has *the potential* to be a sprout, but, insofar as it is just a seed, *this potentiality has not been actualized*, and so the seed it is not *actually* a sprout.
- **Implicit vs. Explicit:** The analogous way to try to wiggle out of the dilemma concerning inferential relations is to draw a distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* content.
 - **Applying to the Example:** Whereas the content *red* is *explicitly* contained in the content *glowing-bright-red*, the content *hot* is only *implicitly* contained
- **Tsongkhappa's Table-Pounding Response:** Tsongkhappa considers the possibility that the effect exists in the cause as an unmanifested potentiality, but responds simply by assisting: *Is it already there or is it not already there?!?*

[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, (OR 1.1.1.2.1.1, p. 61).
- **An Analogous Table-Pounding Response:** Is the "implicit" content actually there in the explicit content or is it not?
- **The Point of the table-pounding response:** I take the upshot of this table-pounding response to be the following:
 - If we take things to be *intrinsically* such that this distinction applies to them, we are always compelled to answer the question of whether the effect or conclusion is *really there* in the cause or premise or not, and we are left with the same basic problem.
 - We *can* apply a potentiality/actuality or implicit/explicit distinction, but such a distinction can only be applied *conventionally*.

Tsongkhappa: 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).

5 Dependent Origination

- **The Traditional Abhidharma Distinction:**
 - **Conventional Reality:** Consists in things that exist only in the context of linguistic practices of designation (chariots, selves, etc.).
 - **Ultimate Reality:** Consists in impersonal dharmas that give rise to one another and whose collective activity explains conventional reality without explanatorily depending on it.
- **The Generalized Madhyamaka Critique:** The ontological dependence relations that are supposed to ultimately obtain are intelligible only relative to the very conventional practices they are supposed to independently explain (c.f. Arnold 2010, 2019).

Arnold: "[F]or Nāgārjuna, it is only relative to the conventionally real world that any description proposed as ultimately true can be so much as intelligible," (2019,

- **Applying the Thought Causation:** We can comprehend events as standing in causal relations, but doing so involves appealing to our linguistic practices of prediction and explanation according to which certain effects are treated as primary to others. In particular, what lies within the sphere of our agency is, within the context of our practices, generally regarded as primary in the context of a causal explanation (c.f. Woodward 2003, 2021).
 - **Question:** Why do we acknowledge the touching of the hot poker as the cause and the sensation of pain as the effect?
 - **Answer:** Because, in our inferential practices, the former, lying within the sphere of our agency, has explanatory priority of the latter.
 - * "Don't touch the hot poker—it'll hurt your hand."
 - * "How'd you hurt your hand?" "I was an idiot and touched a hot poker."

If we try to make sense of the relation between these two events *intrinsically*, apart from consideration of our practices and practical aims, we fail.

- **Generalizing the Point:** A causal relation is a particular type of ontological dependence relation. Such dependence relations are in general intelligible only relative to perspectives according to which one event can be "taken up" as primary and another as secondary.
 - Price:** "[A] perspectival view of causation makes better sense than alternatives of both the asymmetry of causation, and its temporal orientation," (252).
 - Arnold:** It is only *from some perspective*, only under some description, that anything could so much as be individuated as "appropriator" and "appropriated." (2019, 716).
- **Dependent Origination:** Everything is dependent upon causes and conditions, but what it is to be a cause or condition cannot be understood in and of itself, apart from our practices, purposes, and perspectives.

6 Dependent Implication

- **The Same Point for Inferential Relations:** We cannot make sense of conceptual contents, standing in inferential relations, apart from our actual practices of discourse according to which certain claims are taken up as primary and others as secondary, relative to different perspectives.

Brandom's Perspectivalism: "Conceptual contents are *essentially expressively perspectival*; they can be specified explicitly only from some point of view, against the background of some repertoire of discursive commitments, and how it is correct to specify them varies from one discursive point of view to another," (1994, 590)

- **Spelling this Point Out:** It is only the context of the potential difference in discursive points of view that the distinction between *explicit* content and *implicit* content gets any traction at all. In the conceptually primary case we have the following distinction:
 - **Explicit Content:** What is explicitly acknowledged by both parties.
 - **Implicit Content:** What one party is capable of bringing out in discourse as something to which the other party is implicitly committed.
- **The Crucial Point:** It is only in virtue of the perspectival distinction between the different commitments acknowledged by the respective parties that the distinction between explicit and implicit content gets any traction at all. If one tries to look in the *contents themselves*, trying to consider their intrinsic natures qua contents, one will not be able to make sense of this distinction, and, without this distinction, one cannot make any sense of inferential relations obtaining between contents.
- **Applying to the Example:**
 - "Don't touch the poker! It's glowing bright red, and that means that it's hot, so it will burn you."

Here, the *explicit* content (that it's glowing bright red) is what is taken to be acknowledged by both parties, and the *implicit* content (that it's hot) is what only one party, at least initially, explicitly acknowledges.
- **The Upshot:** We *can* understand conceptual contents and their rational relations, but doing so requires abandoning the conception of a self-standingly intelligible constellation of rationally related conceptual contents. Only relative to our conventional practices and perspectives can we find the traction needed to coherently apply the key concepts.
- **Answering the Charge of Self-Refutation:** Nāgārjuna's arguments in *MMK* do refute emptiness, standing in an incompatibility relation to that view, but this fact can only be understood relative to potential differences in perspective at play in the practice of Madhyamaka philosophy, where different commitments are acknowledged and undertaken.

7 The Middle Way with Conceptual Contents

- **Question:** Do conceptual contents really exist? The platonist says *Yes!* The nominalist says *No!*
 - **Against Platonism:** When we try to search for conceptual contents as intrinsically existing entities, "trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language" (Wittgenstein 1956, §97), we necessarily come up empty.
 - * The fundamental distinctions required to make sense of such contents fail to find traction in the "crystalline" constellation of contents considered as such. For this traction, we need to go "back to the rough ground" of our actual discursive practices, (§107).
 - **Against Nominalism:** We cannot say that conceptual contents "don't really exist," but that only our discursive practices do, since making sense of anything at all, including our discursive practices, involves trafficking in conceptual contents.
- **Answer:** Both positions are the product of a problematic conception of conceptual contents (if they exist) as having svabhāva. As such, both should be rejected:
 - "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)

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