

The Correspondence Principle and Its Critics

Johannes Bronkhorst

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Most modern readers will not consider situations in which a potter makes a pot, or a pot comes into being, as being particularly problematic. A number of Indian thinkers, on the other hand, most of them belonging to the first half of the first millennium CE, did. The modern historian of Indian thought will wish to know why these Indian thinkers had problems with situations like these. He is less concerned with the question whether such situations are inherently problematic. He will be keen to know whether the Indian thinkers involved shared beliefs or presuppositions that made such situations special.

Unfortunately the Indian thinkers do not tell us in so many words *why* situations like these are problematic. They do not present us with analyses that try to explain the difficulty. However, they do present us with a number of solutions to the perceived problem. If we wish to arrive at an understanding of the problem as they thought of it, we have to consider both the way they present the problem and the solutions they propose for it. This way we may hope to come to an understanding of the belief or presupposition that made these situations problematic.

We will consider a number of passages that deal with situations of this kind. We will see that authors who describe the problem are puzzled by the fact that there is no pot when the potter makes it, or when the pot comes into being. And the solutions offered tend to tell us that, somehow, there *is* a pot when the potter makes it, or that there is something else to which the word ‘pot’ refers. This already suggests that the use of words and sentences plays a role. Let us look at some examples.

J. Bronkhorst (✉)
Université de Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
e-mail: johannes.bronkhorst@unil.ch

The Buddhist Nāgārjuna formulates the problem as follows:

If there existed anywhere something that has not come into being, it could come into being. Since no such thing exists, what is it that comes into being?¹

This obviously relates to situations that might be described by statements like “The pot comes into being”. The verse asks: “where is the pot?”.

The Brahmanical thinker Bhartṛhari formulates the same problem in different words:

‘Coming into being’ is the name for obtaining one’s own being; what is to be obtained is obtained by something that exists. If something existing comes into being, how can something nonexistent come into being?²

The *Āgamaśāstra* reformulates the problem, and concludes that nothing can come into being:

In their debates with one another, some teachers maintain the arising of what exists; other intelligent ones maintain the arising of what does not exist. Nothing that exists can come into being – what does not exist cannot come into being either; arguing thus, followers of non-duality teach non-arising. We approve of the non-arising taught by them; we are not in contradiction with them. Listen to how there is no contradiction.³

In ultimate truth, nothing comes into being.⁴

The birth of something existent is possible through illusion, but not in reality. For someone who thinks that [something] comes into being in reality, it is the thing that has come into being that comes into being.

The birth of something non-existent is possible neither through illusion nor in reality. The son of a barren woman is born neither in truth nor through illusion.⁵

Here we find not only a formulation of the problem but a solution to it as well: nothing comes into being. But why is there a problem to begin with? The commentator Śāṅkara (perhaps the same as the Vedāntin of that name) gives the following explanation:

Objection: A pot arises from clay, and a son from a father.

¹ MadhK(deJ) 7.17: *yadi kaścīd anutpanno bhāvaḥ saṃvidyate kvacit/ utpadyeta sa kiṃ tasmin bhāva utpadyate 'sati//*

² Vkp 3.3.43: *ātmalābhasya janmākhyā satā labhyaṃ ca labhyate/ yadi saj jāyate kasmād athāsaj jāyate katham//*

³ GK 4.3–5: *bhūtasya jātim icchanti vādinaḥ kecid eva hi/ abhūtasypāre dhīrā vivadantaḥ parasparam// bhūtaṃ na jāyate kiñcid abhūtaṃ naiva jāyate/ vivadanto 'dvayā hy evam ajātiṃ khyāpayanti te// khyāpyamānām ajātiṃ tair anumodāmahe vāyam/ vivadāmo na taiḥ sārddham avivādāṃ nibodhata//*

⁴ GK 3.48cd: *etat tad uttamaṃ satyaṃ yatra kiñcin na jāyate//*

⁵ GK 3.27–28: *sato hi māyayā janma yujyate na tu tattvataḥ/ tattvato jāyate yasya jātaṃ tasya hi jāyate// asato māyayā janma tattvato naiva yujyate/ vandhyāputro na tattvena māyayā vāpi jāyate//*

[Reply:] It is true that among uninstructed people, we find **the idea and the verbal expression “That comes into being”**. **This verbal expression and this idea are examined by people of discernment, who ask: “Do these two represent the truth, or are they false?”** **The thing characterized as a pot, a son, etc., which is the object of the verbal expression and the idea, insofar as it is examined, is only a word.** ... If a thing is existent, it does not come into being, for it exists already, like clay, the father, etc. If it is non-existent, it still does not come into being, precisely because it does not exist, like the horn of a hare, etc. If it is both existent and non-existent, again it does not come into being, for it is impossible for a single thing to be contrary to itself. Hence it is established that nothing comes into being.⁶

The problem, judging by this passage, has to do with words: it is the use of the word *pot* in “the pot comes into being” that creates the expectation that there must be a pot where there is none.

It is Śaṅkara again (the same one or someone else of the same name) who proposes a different solution to the problem. This solution is known by the name *satkāryavāda*. Here the effect (the pot in our case) exists before it comes into being:

If the effect did not exist prior to its coming into being, the coming into being would be without agent and empty. For coming into being is an activity, and must therefore have an agent, like other activities such as going etc. It would be contradictory to say that something is an activity, but has no agent. It might be thought that the coming into being of a pot, **though mentioned**, would not have the pot as agent, but rather something else. ... **If that were true, one would say “the potter and other causes come into being” rather than “the pot comes into being”**. **In the world, however, when one says “the pot comes into being” no one understands this to mean that also the potter etc. come into being**; for these are understood to have already come into being.⁷

Once again, Śaṅkara here points out that the problem lies with what we *say*, i.e., with *words*. We *say* “the pot comes into being” when speaking about an event in which there is no pot. Śaṅkara, and countless other thinkers of his time, found this problematic.

⁶ *Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad-Bhāṣya* on GK 4.22 (p. 477): *nanu mṛdo ghaṭo jāyate pituś ca putraḥ/ satyam, asti jāyata iti pratyayaḥ śabdaś ca mūdhānām/ tāv eva śabdapratyayau vivekibhiḥ parīkṣyete kiṃ satyam eva tāv uta mṛṣeti/ yāvataḥ parīkṣyamāṇaṃ śabdapratyayaḥ vastu ghaṭaputrādīlakṣaṇaṃ śabdāmātram eva tat/ .../ sac cen na jāyate sattvān mṛtprādivat/ yady asat tathāpi na jāyate sattvād eva śaśaviṣāṇādivat/ atha sadasat tathāpi na jāyate viruddhasyaikaśyāsambhavāt/ ato na kiṃcid vastu jāyata iti siddham/*. I accept the variant *parīkṣyamāṇaṃ* in place of *parīkṣyamāṇe*, in spite of Ānandagiri's commentary: *mṛṣaiveti parīkṣyamāṇe satīti sambandhaḥ*.

⁷ Śaṅkara, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* on sūtra 2.1.18, ed. Shastri p. 389, ed. Joshi p. 469: *prāg utpattēś ca kāryasyāsattve utpattir akartṛkā nirātmikā ca syāt/ utpattis ca nāma kriyā, sā sakartṛkaiva bhavitum arhati gatyādivat/ kriyā ca nāma syād akartṛkā ceti vipratīśidhyeta/ ghaṭasya cotpattir ucyamānā na ghaṭakartṛkā, kiṃ tarhy anyakartṛkā iti kalpyā syāt/ .../ tathā ca sati ghaṭa utpadyate ity ukte kulālādīni kāraṇāni utpadyante ity uktam syāt/ na ca loke ghaṭotpattir ity ukte kulālādīnām apy utpadyamānatā pratīyate/ utpannatāpratīteḥ/*

Consider now the following passage. The *Vibhāṣāprabhāvṛtti*, a commentary on the *Abhidharmadīpa*, a text of the Buddhist Sarvāstivāda school, attributes the following position to the Vaiśeṣikas:

The Vaiśeṣika thinks [as follows]: The substance ‘pot’, which is not present in the potsherds [out of which it will be constituted], and the substance ‘cloth’, which is not present in the threads [out of which it will be constituted], come into being as a result of the contact between the potsherds and that of the threads [respectively]. And through secondary thought (*gaunīyā kalpanayā*) **one speaks of the existence of the agent of coming into being**, [existence] which has as object a state [of the pot] which is opposite [to the present].⁸

Here, as before, the problem lies in what we *say*. The passage tells us that, in “the pot comes into being”, *one speaks of the existence of the agent of coming into being*. To a modern reader it is far from evident that the sentence “the pot comes into being” says anything whatsoever about the *existence* of a pot, but the author of the *Vibhāṣāprabhāvṛtti*, and numerous other thinkers of his time, clearly thought it does.

A similar position is adopted in Vyomaśiva’s commentary on the *Padārthadharmasaṅgraha*, called *Vyomavatī*:

One should consider the designation [‘sprout’ in] “the sprout arises”, as well as [‘pot’ in] “make a pot”, **to be metaphorical, because there exists an obstacle to primary [denotation]**. To explain: if one regarded the already existent pot as the object [of the act of making], and the [already existent] sprout as the agent [of the act of arising], arising would be contradicted, and the action of the actants (*kāraka*) would be useless, because [the pot and the sprout] would already exist. ... It follows that, as something existent cannot be the thing that arises, the sprout is metaphorically the agent of its own arising, and [the pot] the object [of the act of making]. **In this way [these] designations are differently established.**⁹

Once more, the problem is here stated to lie in the use of words: the use of the word *pot* in “the potter makes a pot” makes our author look for a pot in the situation described. Since there is no pot, he assumes that the word refers to something else.

This same conviction finds expression in Vātsyāyana’s *Nyāyabhāṣya* on *Nyāyasūtra* 2.2.62:

⁸ Abhidh-d ad kārikā 310, p. 274 l. 5–7: *vaiśeṣiko manyate: kapāleṣv avidyamānaṃ ghaṭadravyaṃ tantuṣu cāvidyamānaṃ paṭadravyaṃ kapālatantusaṃyogād utpadyate/ gaunīyā ca kalpanayā viprakṛtāvasthāviṣayā janikartṛsattā vyapadiśyata iti/*. The word *viprakṛta* is obscure. The editor, Padmanabh S. Jaini, suggests an emendation into *viprakṛṣṭa* ‘distant’, but this does not improve much. Apte’s dictionary gives *viprakṛta*, among other meanings, the sens ‘opposed’ which seems to fit more or less both here and two lines further down where the word is used a second time.

⁹ Vyomaśiva, *Vyomavatī* vol. 2 p. 129 l. 19–27: *yac cāyaṃ vyapadeśo ’nikuro jāyate, ghaṭaṃ kurv iti ayam api mukhye bādhakapramānasadbhāvād bhāktō draṣṭavyaḥ/ tathā hi, yadi vidyamānasyaiva ghaṭasya karmatvam anikurasya ca kartṛtvam iṣyotopattir vyāhatā syāt, vidyamānatvād eva kārakavyāpāravaiyarthyaṃ ca/ .../ tasmād vidyamānasya utpattiyarthāsambhāvād upacaritam anikurādeḥ svajanikartṛtvam karmatvaṃ ceti vyapadeśasyānyathāsiddhatvam/*

The expression “a word can be used also with reference to something that is not its real meaning” means that the word designates something that does not correspond to that word.

...

“As a result of purpose”: When grasses are arranged in order to make a mat, we say “**He makes a mat**”.¹⁰

This passage is about words and nothing but words, and ‘explains’ expressions like “he makes a mat”.

Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* criticizes an opponent whom it calls a *śābdika* ‘someone who relies on words’. He does so as follows:

This [opponent] **who relies on words** should be asked the following question: “Based on what does something come into being, is it present or future? If something present comes into being, how can it be present if it has not come into being? Alternatively, if there is coming into being of something that has already come into being, there will be infinite regress. But if something future comes into being, how can something that is not there be established as agent? Or is there an action without an agent?”¹¹

This is the well-known problem that we discussed above. Vasubandhu offers a solution that does not interest us at present. What counts is that he considers his opponent as “someone who relies on words” and as being misled by words. Vasubandhu himself knows how to interpret sentences. For him there is “therefore **no deception in conventional expressions**” (*tasmād acchalaṃ vyavahāreṣu*). His opponent, on the other hand, is deceived by ‘conventional expressions’, i.e., by words.

These and other examples show that a usually unexpressed conviction underlies the problem of coming into being. I have elsewhere called it the *correspondence principle*, and have provisionally characterized it as the conviction “that the words of a sentence correspond rather exactly to the things constituting the situation described by the sentence” (Bronkhorst 2011, p. 1). This correspondence principle makes sense of the problem that Indian thinkers encountered in situations described by sentences like “the potter makes a pot” and “the pot comes into being”.

There is however more. The correspondence principle is *not just one possible way* to make sense of the problem discussed. It is safe to claim that *it is the only one*, that it is the very reason why these thinkers thought that the situations described by these sentences posed a problem. The justification for this assurance is that the authors concerned repeatedly state in so many words that verbal usage is responsible for the problem. This we have seen.

¹⁰ NBh on sūtra 2.2.62, pp. 663–664: *atadbhāve 'pi tadupacāra iti atacchabdasya tena śabdena abhidhānam iti/ ... tādarthiyāt: kaṭārtheṣu vīraṇeṣu vyūhyamāneṣu kaṭaṃ karoti bhavati.*

¹¹ *Abhidh-k-bh(P)* p. 138 l. 10–17: *idaṃ tāvad ayaṃ praṣṭavyaḥ śābdikaḥ/ kimavastho dharmah utpadyate vartamāna utāho 'nāgata iti/ kiṃ cātaḥ/ yadi vartamāna utpadyate/ kathaṃ vartamāno yadi notpannah/ utpannasya vā punar utpattāv anavasthāprasaṅgaḥ/ athānāgata utpadyate katham asataḥ kartṛtvaṃ sidhyati (the edition has sidhṛtva) akartṛkā vā kriyeti/ ... tasmād acchalaṃ vyavahāreṣu.*

Consider now the following verse from Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (1.6). It deals with an issue related to the same problem.

A cause of something non-existent makes no sense; a cause of something that exists already makes no sense either. Which non-existing thing has a cause?
And what could be the purpose of a cause for something that exists?¹²

This verse, too, is about something—e.g., a pot—that comes into being. When a pot comes into being, there is something out of which it arises, viz., the clay out of which it is being made. That clay is the material cause of the pot. The present verse claims that it is nonsensical to have a cause (i.e., a material cause) of something that does not exist.

As said, this verse is about a pot (or something else) that comes into being. However, it is not the sentence “the pot comes into being” that is responsible for the difficulty here. Another sentence describes the situation dealt with in this verse, one more like “the clay is the cause of the pot”. And one might think that here, too, it is the correspondence principle that is behind the problem. But is this certain? In the discussions around “the pot comes into being” (or similar sentences) we saw that language use was repeatedly invoked as a factor that played a decisive role. But none of the passages known to me that deal with sentences like “the clay is the cause of the pot” make explicit reference to language use.

The two sentences “the clay is the cause of the pot” and “the pot comes into being” may refer to the same event, but as sentences they are rather different from each other. The former states that there is a certain relationship, viz. causality, between the clay and the pot; the latter does nothing of the kind. One might therefore maintain that the belief that causality has to connect *existing* things is behind the puzzlement of Nāgārjuna and his contemporaries. The problem would then have nothing to do with the manner in which we use language. Seen this way, the difficulty connected with the observation that the clay is the cause of the pot would have nothing to do with language.

This alternative explanation is not possible. Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist, and Buddhist thinkers thought about causality fundamentally in terms of successions of elementary entities, the dharmas. Dharmas succeed each other; they do not overlap.¹³ Causality, in Buddhist thought, does not connect simultaneously existing things. From a Buddhist point of view, it is not at all surprising that something is the cause of something non-existent. Quite on the contrary, this was precisely the way Buddhists thought about causality.

Why, then, does Nāgārjuna protest against a cause of something non-existent? Since the concept of a causality that supposedly connects existing things would be an anachronism, we cannot but fall back on the correspondence principle, which we know he and many of his contemporaries adhered to. He therefore protests against a cause of something non-existent for the same reason he protested against the coming into being of a pot. Just as there is no pot in the situation described by “the pot

¹² MadhK(deJ) 1.6: *naivāsato naiva sataḥ pratyayo 'rthasya juyjate/ asataḥ pratyayaḥ kasya sataś ca pratrayena kim//*.

¹³ See Bronkhorst (2009, 93 ff).

comes into being”, there is no pot in the situation described by “the clay is the cause of the pot”. In other words, it is the correspondence principle that is responsible for the puzzlement.

Recall at this point that we are not looking for the ‘real’ difficulty associated with observations such as that the clay is the cause of the pot, or for the difficulty that modern philosophers or linguists may find in them, but rather for the reason why the Indian thinkers we are dealing with were puzzled by them. We now know that those Indian thinkers held—explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously—the conviction which we call the correspondence principle. We are therefore entitled to invoke that same principle to explain their puzzlement in the face of sentences like “the clay is the cause of the pot”.

This is not Brendan Gillon’s opinion. In a recent article (2012) he proposes to interpret Nāgārjuna’s last quoted verse (1.6) with the help of a different principle, the *concurrence principle*, which he describes as follows: “if a relation obtains, then all of its relata obtain simultaneously with it” (p. 390).¹⁴ Gillon is careful to point out that he himself does not believe in the general validity of this concurrence principle (it is indeed hard to believe that anyone does or ever did), but he does think that it is presupposed in some of Nāgārjuna’s arguments, including the one in verse 1.6.

There can be no doubt that, logically speaking, one can ‘understand’ verse 1.6 with the help of Gillon’s concurrence principle. The concurrence principle is, in fact, no different from the theoretical possibility discussed (and discarded) above, viz., that a relationship like causality must connect existing things. We saw that this principle cannot possibly be imputed onto a Buddhist thinker, because Buddhist thinking about causality is not like this. Nāgārjuna cannot have asked of his Buddhist readers to be convinced by an argument based on an assumption that made minced meat of their traditional convictions.¹⁵ He *could*, however, ask them to be convinced by an argument based on a fundamental belief shared by all Buddhist thinkers of his time: that language and phenomenal reality are two sides of the same coin. Ever since the scholastic innovations of the final centuries preceding the Common Era in northwestern India, Buddhists had come to believe that phenomenal reality was ultimately unreal, and due to the words of language. King Milinda’s chariot was nothing but a word, and the same applies to all objects of our experience, as Buddhist texts repeat *ad nauseam*.¹⁶ Buddhist readers of Nāgārjuna would therefore easily be taken in by the correspondence principle, but not by the concurrence principle. Since, in theory, both can account for verse 1.6 and various other parts of Nāgārjuna’s work, these readers would opt for the correspondence principle without even realizing that they had made a choice.

But also Brahmanical readers would be taken in. The close correspondence between language and reality is fundamental to Brahmanical thinking, and covers

¹⁴ Gillon points out (p. 390) that Claus Oetke has already tried to explain this and other verses with the help of another principle. Oetke’s explanation has the same weaknesses as Gillon’s; see Bronkhorst (1997).

¹⁵ His *conclusions* may have been in disagreement with their traditional convictions, but the *arguments leading to these conclusions* cannot but have been of the kind that might convince his readers.

¹⁶ See Bronkhorst (1996).

words and sentences alike. Thought about causality came about later, probably at least in part as a result of the puzzlements discussed above, and took different forms¹⁷: the upholders of the *satkāryavāda* (Sāṃkhya, Advaita Vedānta) might sympathize with Gillon's concurrence principle (at least in theory), the followers of the *asatkāryavāda* (Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika) would not. If Nāgārjuna's arguments had depended upon the concurrence principle, he would have lost all of his Buddhist, and most of his Brahmanical readers.

I sometimes feel that Indian studies could learn from the property market. As is well known, there are three crucial factors to keep in mind when buying a home: location, location, location. Adjusting this mantra to Indian studies, one might say that there are three crucial factors to keep in mind when interpreting an ancient Indian author: context, context, context. Studying Nāgārjuna without trying to figure out in what intellectual world he lived is in danger of leading to serious misunderstandings. As far as I can see, the correspondence principle does justice to Nāgārjuna's intellectual surroundings, and solves difficulties in the interpretation of altogether different authors from that time as well. I have not yet seen alternative interpretations of the verses concerned that do the same.

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Abbreviations

Abhidh-d	Abhidharmadīpa with Vibhāṣāprabhāvṛtti, ed. P. S. Jaini, Patna 1959 (TSWS 4).
Abhidh-k-bh(P)	Vasubandhu, Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, ed. P. Pradhan, rev. 2nd ed. Aruna Haldar, Patna 1975 (TSWS 8).

¹⁷ For details, see Bronkhorst (2011).

- GK Āgamaśāstra of Gauḍapāda, ed. V. Bhattacharya, 1943; reprint: Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1989.
- MadhK(deJ) Nāgārjuna, Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ, ed. J. W. de Jong, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras 1977.
- NBh Nyāyabhāṣya. Edition used: Nyāyadarśanam with Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya, Uddyotakara's Vārttika, Vācaspati Miśra's Tātparyatīkā & Viśvanātha's Vṛtti. Chapter I, section I critically edited with notes by Taranatha Nyaya-Tarkatirtha and chapters I-ii-V by Amarendramohan Tarkatirtha, with an introduction by Narendra Chandra Vedantatirtha. Second edition: Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi 1985.
- TSWS Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series, Patna.
- Vkp Bharṭṛhari, Vākyapadīya, ed. W. Rau, Wiesbaden 1977.