

The Nature of Reality

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The purpose of this article is to explain in simple and understandable terms how we unintentionally mistake the nature of reality. The error is already established when we grow up and become conditioned to the conventions of society, so even though we all end up misperceiving reality, there is really nobody we could blame. But since this mistaken understanding causes suffering in countless different ways, it is perhaps more than proper to explain its origin and its consequences, especially since we know that this is curable and also how the remedy is applied in practice.

The nature of conventional reality

We learn very early on how causal connections operate. Even small babies have a direct knowledge of this fundamental dynamic of reality as they control their feeding by crying. The nature of the knowledge regarding reality is necessarily *causal*. When we claim that we understand reality, it means we claim that we know how certain cause-effect connections operate. Reality manifests itself to us exclusively through these causal connections: When A occurs, it leads to B occurring. When we perceive this causal link, we say that we understand that part of reality. All our knowledge of reality is constructed this way.

The unescapable role of perceiving causality in understanding reality can be shown in the following way: Not a single human being has ever perceived any phenomenon which would have arisen by itself, without any cause. Therefore, we are unable to show any self-arisen phenomenon in the entire history of the universe. This

presence of causality is a necessary condition for the reality itself.

In this article, I will be dealing with *phenomena* quite a bit, so I better explain what they are. The concept “phenomenon” refers to every possible type of object of reasoning, whether it is a thing, animate or non-animate, concrete or abstract. Every thing that we can conceptually perceive about reality is a phenomenon, also you and me are such.

Conventional is nominal

We construct our perception of reality by learning what the names of different phenomena are. By naming separate phenomena we are able to communicate and share knowledge among us. This is the central benefit of naming, that is, of nominating. Our understanding of the conventional reality is based on perception of causal connections between phenomena with representative names.

Each phenomenon has its own name, its features, and its boundaries. We don't mix different phenomena because their boundaries take care of the separation between them. These boundaries are important for us because it is only by them that we can perceive causality to begin with: in order for A to cause B, we must perceive their boundaries because otherwise A would already contain B and no causality could be distinguished.

Nominating phenomena and enforcing their boundaries bring clarity and practicality. Our entire civilisation is based on the simple fact that we have been able to discover causal connections between separate phenomena, and through that we have been able to exploit them in constructing yet new phenomena that have brought us to where we are now (without judging the desirability of that state).

Nominality is misleading

The nominal nature of the conventional reality has its benefits, otherwise the humanity would not have kept practising it. However, it does have its limitations and those limitations prevent us from perceiving the reality without images that are constructed by names of different phenomena. Growing up we become conditioned to perceiving reality through the images that are triggered by the names of phenomena. It is paradoxical that the way by which we perceive causality both within and between different phenomena is in conflict with causality itself. In other words, we understand causality in ways that deny its very existence.

The conventional perception of reality is thus based on the names of phenomena, their unique features, and their boundaries which separate them from others. Specifically, the unique features of phenomena give rise to the boundaries that separate one from another.

Since unique features define a phenomenon and separate it from the rest, these features have to be stable. If they were not considered stable the phenomenon could not remain the way we perceive it through our image. If the features were under constant change, it would be difficult to perceive a phenomenon as the same, to start with.

Therefore, we have an inherent desire to perceive phenomena and their features as unchanging and static. The reality appears recognisable if the features of phenomena, that is, their boundaries remain fixed.

Our demand for stability and permanence comes with a challenge, however, because if any phenomenon or any of its feature were permanent, it could not have been able to arise because arising requires the opposite of permanence, change.

The same problem is with causality between phenomena. If an unchanging phenomenon A caused

another unchanging phenomenon B to arise, how could this happen if they both were unchanging? The static image of the reality we maintain, one that consists of separate phenomena that in some mysterious ways are causally connected, even though unable to influence one another, is incoherent.

Human beings are able to get by under many kinds of paradoxes and the one I portray here is so subtle that most people do not even recognise it. Thus, a fair question can be posed: Why should we become interested in something so indistinguishable?

The answer may be surprising to many: By understanding the nature of reality correctly each of us can attain permanent freedom and peace – and it happens by a way that has nothing to do with faith or beliefs. A childlike faith in something unbelievable is not required. Instead, the solution comes through analysis and by reasoning where no tricks are involved. In contrast, the solution exposes ways by which the conventional reality deceives us. The awakening from this deception requires reasoning and it teaches us wisdom.

Toward a consistent reality

A reality based on the images we construct, where independent, separate phenomena are somehow causally connected to other similar entities, is in many ways obscure. On the one hand, it is unrealistic since, as we earlier concluded, it breaks against its own foundations as causality must appear without causality. On the other hand, it is functional enough as the humanity has been able to construct all kinds of things, even if it does not portray reality very accurately.

I provided reason why it is beneficial for us to learn the nature of reality correctly. I said that proper understanding sets us free and brings peace, which makes the rest of our lives wondrous. But it brings also something else which is

slightly more difficult to comprehend without prior knowledge. I will reveal it here because my aim is to show its causal link in this article as clearly as I can: The correct perception of reality necessarily leads to the correct perception of death because analysis will unravel the conventional conception of death completely and without any trace. When one's analysis is finished, freedom from death is permanent. Nothing less.

Recognising reality as merely nominal

The first step toward correct understanding is taken when we accept the unavoidable fact that our perception of the reality is constructed by nominal phenomena and that this sharing of labels is nothing but our own conceptual and linguistic effort by which we make sense of the world. Thus, it is not any more real than what labelling and sharing labels in general are. The reality does not nominate itself or is interested in defining boundaries between phenomena.

Surrendering to the above is beyond the capabilities of many because many of us have invested their entire lives into altogether different meanings of reality, and those who come and spoil the party are of course not celebrated. It is obvious that this first step is beyond many people, which naturally limits the number of those who can make it to the other shore.

Let's see what happens when we start disentangling the conventional, that is, nominal reality. What does such a reality look like in which causality operates consistently and where we refrain from labelling efforts?

Since everything we can know about reality has its cause, we already know something striking about every possible phenomenon: every single one of them and their features are under constant change, that is, *none* is permanent. We know this because causality itself forces every single phenomenon to manifest only if the conditions

for its arising are there (i.e., the necessary causal connections that are required for the arising). If this was not the case, a phenomenon could arise without cause and therefore it could never arise since it should already exist forever (something we have never witnessed).

Every phenomenon manifests only if the conditions for its arising are fulfilled. Thus, a phenomenon arises as a result of necessary causes. In addition to being the result of causes, every phenomenon itself operates as a cause for the arising of other phenomena. Therefore, every phenomenon manifests simultaneously as a cause and result in the network of causality. This omnipresent, endless network is called *Dependent Origination*, under which all phenomena in the universe are born, endure, and cease. No phenomenon or its feature can exist independent of other phenomena, instead all phenomena arise and cease *together* with other phenomena.

The necessity of selflessness

When we come to think of it, we already know that the Dependent Origination portrays the reality accurately. This is because its alternative would require that no such network exists, which in turn would mean that all phenomena existed disconnected to other phenomena, thus we could not perceive causality and therefore could not discern reality at all (or that type of reality would not resemble ours). All phenomena would exist permanently forever and none could ever arise at any point in time.

Thus, all phenomena and their features depend on other similar entities. A concept of “big” cannot be understood if no concept of “small” exists. In the same way each phenomenon and its definition depend on each other, and neither can exist independent of the other. The features depend on the phenomenon, which in turn depends on its features.

When we go through all possible types of phenomena, their features, and connections to other phenomena, we soon realise that we cannot find any one that would not be dependent on others. This means that in reality no phenomenon is independent and therefore no one can have a permanent and independent selfhood or self-nature.

The lack of permanent selfhood is the central observation of the second step in our journey. All phenomena, including ourselves, are composed by components and features, which all depend on other phenomena. Not even in ourselves can be found any permanent or unchanging core, instead every feature in us depends on other phenomena, the composite depends on its parts which in turn depend on the composite.

Even though this lack of permanent and independent selfhood is a necessary result of the very nature of reality as a network of Dependent Origination, under which the entire universe has evolved – so this should come as no surprise to anyone – presenting these very natural but inescapable conclusions may cause some unexpected reactions by some readers.

You can think of the setting also as follows: the more bizarre these principles seem to you, the more distant to reality your understanding has so far been. Since the counterparts are the reality vs. a person, and since we know that the reality has no interest whatever in us, it becomes obvious who is the one that needs to abandon false views.

Perceiving the reality correctly

Perceiving the reality correctly leads to freedom and permanent peace. It is not about any singular a-ha moment, instead it is a process which advances in time by various methods, and during which the person is metaphorically reborn again and again approaching the reality both conceptually and experientially.

Permanent peace requires also that a correct understanding of deathlessness has been reached. This is attained through the learning process as perceiving selflessness both conceptually and experientially leads to dissolving a false conception of a unit that in reality cannot be found.

We can conceptually approach this in the following way. Let's take the aforementioned counterparts again. On the one side we have the reality which operates under principles of causality, and on the other side we have us, the humans, who operate under the principles of nominality. Let's go back to the question of what the reality looks like without our labelling efforts. Our attention becomes focused on a feature or its absence. It is easy to recognise that since no phenomenon exists independently, none has permanent selfhood. Strictly speaking, without labels phenomena cannot exist in the way we usually think of them, independent of us.

The reality without activities imposed from our side is genuinely *empty* because if names no longer exist, no boundaries or features can exist either. Perceiving this kind of emptiness does not happen overnight, and I assume that many readers have great difficulties even in imagining what a reality of this kind could feel like.

And yet, the perception of precisely this side of reality is the key to freedom. When we realise that the conventional reality is nothing more than labelling and disseminating labels among us, we begin to see the distorted nature of our nominal reality. There is no "supreme" unless "insignificant" exists. Our own desire to classify things creates our perception of reality, and this reality we create on our own. Not many of us would enjoy a sport where the athlete judges their own performance – and yet the conventional reality operates just this way.

Perceiving the reality free of distortions is possible, however. The portrayal above provides hints to the fact that

such an understanding does not come without effort, and it does not come for all of us. Even though we all have our unique paths to travel, we know something crucial about the nature of reality which dictates certain basic principles under which liberation is attained by everyone. The journey takes concentration, patience, and persistence.

First of all, the practitioner needs to understand *conceptually* the nature of conventional reality, and also how it differs from the reality where we are not nominating things. This is trained by examining the dialectic of the Middle Way. At the end of this article, I will refer to two books, which help in the learning process. Unfortunately, neither of them is very easy for an unexperienced Western reader, but with time and patience, and perhaps with some guidance, things will find their correct places.

Conceptual knowledge alone is, however, not enough for establishing liberation. In order for knowing to be born and to stabilise in us we need meditation as a tool. This is because we need two distinct techniques of meditation and their integration which, as time passes, gives rise to the type of knowing that is required for liberation. The first technique is analytic meditation in which thought processes stabilise certainty of the object (emptiness). The second technique trains wordless experience where emptiness manifests itself without the nominal side of reality. As time passes, these two techniques integrate, from the point on the practitioner lives both realities as one.

Reaching this point the practitioner understands both sides of the reality and death no longer exists in the same form as it does for others. Thus, we use the term “deathless”. The practitioner has become free of suffering and nothing can truly harm them.

How to travel on such a path?

Some form of initial insight probably is needed for a reader to become interested in the nature of reality and its ability to set us free, without any artificially produced comfort. We know that the humanity has for the entire history of its existence fabricated stories and fairytales to pacify existential anxiety. Even today most people on the planet manifest a childlike desire to believe and have faith in unreal fantasies. The need to find comfort is so strong that reason, which these people are claimed to possess, has no role to play. Our practice is in direct contrast with this. It is about dismantling and abandoning all fabrications. This requires courage and some capabilities as well.

Those who embark on a journey of discovery of this type, will create their own paths and carve their own signs in the world. Entirely independent on how they succeed externally, these people fulfil the ideal by which our species is named: *Homo-Sapiens-Sapiens*. They live and die as knowing and they know exactly that which needs to be known – the *undeceiving* nature of reality. There is no higher form of knowledge than becoming free of suffering by knowing.

Literature

I have arranged two sets of books here. The first presents us the simple fact that the Buddha's teaching is a *psychology*. By going through these books, the reader learns a new and more profound way of understanding the workings of our mind (as compared to the Western psychology). I have set these books in a reading order, so one can start perhaps with the first one and continue from there.

The second set consists of two books on how The Middle Way needs to be understood in order to attain liberation. They are a bit more demanding, but with time they benefit readers who are less fearful.

Buddhist psychology

Olendzki, Andrew (2010) *Unlimiting Mind. The Radically Experiential Psychology of Buddhism.*

Dzogchen, Ponlop Rinpoche (2010) *Rebel Buddha. A Guide to a Revolution of Mind.*

Tashi Tsering, Geshe (2006) *Buddhist Psychology. The Foundation of Buddhist Thought* Vol. 3.

Kornfield, Jack (2008) *The Wise Heart. A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology.*

Hanh, Thich Nhat (2006) *Understanding Our Mind.*

The Middle Way

Garfield, Jay L.: *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika.*

Komito, David Ross (ed.), *Nagarjuna's "Seventy Stanzas". A Buddhist Psychology of Emptiness.*

Further information available at: <https://jukkakaisla.fi>

