

WHY THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE UNIVERSE

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I am going to present and expound upon a number of philosophical ideas that can be found in some forms of Buddhism and in systems of secular philosophy that are realist or empirical in nature.

Now, Buddhism, at least in its more early, uncluttered forms, espouses a realist view of 'things as they *really* are.' I like that, for I am at heart a realist, an empiricist, and a naturalist. I reject all supernaturalistic views of reality.

Buddhism, consistent with an empirical view of reality, affirms that whatever exists are 'occurrences'---or 'situations'---in *one* space-time. Things exist 'in situations,' and *never* in isolation. This is known as *situationality*. Further, there is no 'thing' existing or occurring that does not have a relationship with *at least one* other 'thing.' Additionally, at any 'point'---for want of a better word---in space-time there is always (yes, always) a *plurality* of space-time *interacting* situations or occurrences ('complexes'). Indeed, there are literally countless such pluralities, and all these situations exhaust the whole of reality. There is nothing else or supposedly 'beyond' or 'above' all this. Now, please get this---there is also no such thing as a 'totality.' That's right! The word 'totality' is just that---a word we use to refer to 'thing' A + 'thing' B + 'thing' C + 'thing' D + ... *ad infinitum*. Thing A is real. It exists. So do all the other things. But the so-called totality---it is not a thing in itself at all. It's just a word.

Now, things may be distinct---indeed, they are---but they also *connected* in space-time,

and these connections are very *real*. Shakyamuni Buddha reportedly said:

Monks, we who look at the whole and not just the part, know that we too are systems of interdependence, of feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness all interconnected. Investigating in this way, we come to realize that there is no me or mine in any one part, just as a sound does not belong to any one part of the lute.

Situationality and plurality---such is the nature of reality. Never forget that!

The third Zen patriarch Seng-Tsan described situationality and plurality in this way:

One thing, all things:
Move along and intermingle,
Without distinction.

Truth---reality---is never static but always *dynamic*. (That is a damn good reason why we should always avoid creeds and things like that. Creeds and the like attempt to concretize truth, but that can't be done because truth is dynamic---*not* static.) The Buddha is also reported to have said that 'things are different according to the forms which they assume under different impressions'. One could substitute the word 'situations' for 'impressions' without distorting meaning. Here is a typical saying attributed to the Buddha:

The thing and its quality are different in our thought, but not in reality. Heat is different from fire in our thought, but you cannot remove heat from fire in reality. You say that you can remove the qualities and leave the thing, but if you think your theory to the end, you will find that this is not so.

Buddhism recognizes the existence, at any 'point' in space-time, of a plurality or multiplicity of interacting factors that can, at any time, produce a certain *effect*. We are talking about a complex, ever-changing, dynamic system whose parts are mutually dependent. In the 'Fire Sermon' (*Aditta Sutta*), the Buddha is recorded as having said:

The eye, O monks, is burning; visible things are burning; the mental impressions based on the eye are burning; the contact of

the eye with visible things is burning; the sensation produced by the contact of the eye with visible things, be it pleasant, be it painful, be it neither pleasant nor painful, that also is burning. With what fire is it burning? I declare unto you that it is burning with the fire of greed, with the fire of anger, with the fire of ignorance; it is burning with the anxieties of birth, decay, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection, and despair.

The ear is burning, sounds are burning, ... The nose is burning, odors are burning, ... The tongue is burning, tastes are burning, ... The body is burning, objects of contact are burning, ... The mind is burning, thoughts are burning, all are burning with the fire of greed, of anger, and of ignorance.

The Fire Sermon presents, albeit in a highly lyrical way, a plurality of multiple situations that are in continuous process. That *is* causation---processes continuing into one another. Such is life ... wandering, wandering, waxing and waning. We live and die from moment to moment.

The Vietnamese monk, Zen master, and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh uses the expression 'InterBeing' to refer to this state and process of interdependence. It is important, however, to note that Buddhism is not monistic. No form of Buddhism affirms that all things are in reality one. Nevertheless, a single 'logic' applies to all things, for all things exist in the same 'level' or plane of existence and observability.

All of this is very profound---but also very simple. Delightfully so. Truth is like that, you know.

Now, the *Samyutta Nikāya* ('Connected Discourses' or 'Kindred Sayings') is a Buddhist scripture, the third of the five *nikāyas* (collections) in the *Sutta Pitaka*, which is one of the 'three baskets' that compose the Pāli Tripitaka (or 'Pāli Canon') of Theravāda Buddhism. The Pāli Canon is the earliest collection of Buddhist teachings and the only collection of sacred texts formally recognised as 'canonical' by Theravāda Buddhists. (Of course, as any 'good' Buddhist knows---or ought to know---Buddha himself affirmed, 'Believe nothing because it is written in ancient books.')

Now, here is a most illuminating sutra from the *Samyutta Nikāya* known as ‘The Sutra on Totality’:

Monks, I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully to it and I will speak.

What, monks, is totality?

It is just the eye
with the objects of sight,
the ear with the objects of hearing,
the nose with the objects of smell,
the tongue with the objects of taste,
the body with the objects of touch
and the mind with the objects of cognition.

This, monks, is called totality.

Now, if anyone were to say, ‘Aside from this explanation of totality, I will preach another totality,’ that person would be speaking empty words, and being questioned would not be able to answer. Why is this? Because that person is talking about something outside of all possible knowledge.

The Buddha was a radical empiricist. He taught people how to realize for themselves enlightenment---by direct experience. He encouraged his followers to ‘come and see’ (*ehi-passiko*), that is, to investigate for themselves whether or not his teachings worked – as opposed to placing reliance on blind faith. Yes, investigate for yourself and then make up your *own* mind based upon the evidence. Buddhism is a very down-to-earth set of teachings. In one sense, Buddhism is very Aristotelian (as opposed to Platonic). At the risk of over-simplification, the essence of Buddhism is this---what you see is what you get. That is all there is, but it is more than enough!

The Sutra on Totality makes that point *perfectly clear*. The ‘totality of life’ is the sum total of what you see, what you hear, what you smell, what you taste, what you touch, and what you think. Now what could be more ‘empirical’ than that? Yes, Buddhism, in its philosophy, is a form of radical empiricism.

The Buddha affirms that if someone *preaches*---I love his use of that word---‘another reality,’ that person is speaking ‘empty words.’ Well, all I can say is that there are a lot of

preachers speaking 'empty words,' and that includes all those preachers---Christian or other---who would have you believe there are 'higher' and 'lower' levels of reality as well as 'natural' and so-called 'supernatural' existence. Buddha says, in effect, if people affirm the existence of such things, they are talking about 'something outside of all possible knowledge.'

My favourite philosopher, John Anderson, said as much when he wrote that any notion of there being different orders or levels of reality or truth was 'contrary to the very nature and possibility of discourse.' Such thinking (if that be the right word for it) was, according to Anderson, 'unspeakable'---indeed, meaningless. Anderson referred to this as the 'problem of commensurability.'

It is important to note that Buddha was agnostic on whether there was 'another reality.' (Buddha was also agnostic as to the existence of God. He also never actually *denied* the existence of the 'self,' for to do so is itself *arguably* an act of self-identification.) According to Buddha, there may be 'another reality,' but if there is, we can have no knowledge of it. Such a reality is, therefore, unspeakable.

'Empty words'---sadly, that sums up most theology---*and* a lot of philosophy as well. My advice---gratuitous it may be---to you all is this. Stick to what is tangible, that is, occurrences in time and space. *That* is where you have your everyday existence. *That* is where you are grounded – even where you are mindfully unaware of it.

Now, to get finally to the title of my address---There is no such thing as the 'universe.' That's right! It follows logically from all that I have said thus far. Just like the word 'totality,' the word 'universe' is just that---a *word*. It simply means the sum 'total' of all there is.

Christian apologists keep asserting that the universe *must* have had a cause. Really? If there is no one 'thing' as such as the universe, there the statement that the universe must have had a cause is---well, meaningless. At any rate, the argument that everything

had a cause and that God, who did not have a cause, was the 'first cause' is self-contradictory. The major premise of the argument, 'everything has a cause', is contradicted by the conclusion that 'God did not have a cause'. You cannot have it both ways. If everything has a cause, then there could not be a first cause. In addition, if it is possible to think of God as uncaused, then it is possible---indeed, much more logical---to think the same of the universe itself. You see, if one is willing to think that God is uncaused or self-caused why not, as the Unitarian Charles Darwin pointed out, think of the universe itself in such terms?

Now, in an attempt to overcome these difficulties some Christian apologists argue as follows:

- i. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
- ii. The universe began to exist.
- iii. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

However, this argument commits what in logic is known as the fallacy of equivocation. What that means is that the word 'cause' is used in a different sense in the first premise, *Whatever begins to exist has a cause*, than it is in the conclusion, *The universe has a cause*. In the case of the first premise, the word 'cause' is used in the sense of scientific cause and effect, whereas in the conclusion the word 'cause' is used in a metaphysical sense (a proposition of supernatural theology).

In any event the argument fails to support the thesis that the God of traditional theism exists or that *that* God is the cause of the so-called universe's beginning to exist. Even if the universe (assuming for the moment there is such a 'thing') had a cause---and the preponderance of scientific evidence is to the contrary---we have no reason to believe that the cause is the God of traditional theism, or the God of the Bible or the Qur'an. We have no reason to conclude that this 'creator thing' has any of the properties that the God of traditional theism supposedly has. All we have reason to assert is that the supposed cause is slightly more powerful than its effects. We have no reason to assert

that this supposed cause is omniscient, and no reason to believe that it is omnibenevolent, and no reason to believe that it is omnipotent.

In any event, the proposition that whatever has a beginning to its existence must have a cause is *not* a self-evident truth nor can it be deduced from any other self-evident truth. All of our observations of causation relate to pre-existing things changing from one state to another; we have no consciousness or experience at all of things coming into existence.

Be all that as it may, there is an even more fundamental problem---the one I have already referred to and expounded upon at length. The so-called totality of all things---that is, the so-called 'universe'---has all the hallmarks of being a 'closed system.' That is how Buddhists see it---as well as many of the world's leading scientists and cosmologists. What that means is this. Each 'thing' is a cause of at least one other 'thing' *as well as being* the effect of some other 'thing,' so every thing is explainable by reference to other things in the system. End of story. Buddhists refer to this teaching as 'dependent origination' (also known as 'dependent arising').

Hence, all theological talk of the supposed need for some 'first cause' is---well, nonsense! As Professor Anderson pointed out in his famous 1935 journal article 'Design,' 'there can be no contrivance of a "universe" or totality of things, because the contriver would have to be included in the totality of things.' In any event, the entire notion of a supposed 'Being'---the 'contriver'---whose essential attributes [eg omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience] are *non-empirical* is unintelligible. Further, why would a supposedly *supernatural* 'contriver' bother to 'create' a *natural* universe---assuming for the moment it was created?

Anderson, himself an empiricist, wrote of the 'facts of complexity and interaction,' and the 'influence of the other things with which [things] come in contact.' Buddhists refer to this interconnectedness of all things---Thich Nhat Hanh calls it 'InterBeing'---as

'dependent origination' (or 'dependent arising'), and it makes much more sense than certain alternative worldviews.

As most of you know, I'm into mindfulness, which is a wonderful way to be fully 'connected' to the 'totality of things' as things unfold from one moment to the next. You see, there is *only* life, and living things living out their livingness as occurrences in time and space. That is the 'way of being.' The *fact* is that each one of us is such an 'occurrence,' and mindfulness is simply the *immediate* and *direct* awareness of occurrences as they happen---live and in full colour!

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