

BACK TO THE ORIGINS:  
ON CHRISTIAN AND BUDDHIST EPISTEMOLOGY

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## Origins

Back to the origins, that sounds like a program. And in this introductory effort to explore relations between methodology, epistemology and cosmology this program will be pursued taking the word "origin" in two senses. Religion has a way of trying to comprehend the nature of the universe, perhaps not the very origin in doing so, but certainly shaping and being shaped by people's minds much before anything called explicit and systematic science entered the arena. And then there is "origin" in the second sense: the origin of the universe, how did it all start?

At that point christianity, and of course judaism and for that matter Islam, is strong and very explicit. The first four chapters of Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament, is a gold mine for anyone who wants to understand occidental thought; a necessary if not sufficient source. And that gold mine, like buddhist teachings, have been with us for more than 2500 years, been transmitted from one generation to the next, subject to enormous amounts of discussion and interpretation and reinterpretation, been read and reread by priests, monks and later on by the population at large--for long periods, in many places unrivaled as a source of understanding of how the universe works, and not only from a moral point of view but also in purely cognitive terms, whatever that may mean. Does it not stand to reason that such rivers of comprehension, with countless tributaries, ultimately forming some kind of Amazonas, one in the west and one in the east are more important in shaping that which shapes our understanding than some minor fads and fashions in some journal of philosophy or methodology? That the latter are, at most, ripples on the waves of those rivers?

Working now at a fairly simple, common sense level of what christianity and buddhism are about. Let us try to come to grips with the basic understanding of the universe from a more cognitive point of view, leaving out most of the moral aspects of the message. Thus, I am less concerned with what the two religions have to say about what is right and wrong, good and bad than with what they say is true and false, not to mention what they hold implicitly to be valid or invalid assumptions about how to arrive at what is true and false. It may be objected from the very beginning that one can not detach the moral messages from two of the world's greatest religions and focus on their theory of knowledge, the epistemology of these religions. But even if this separation might be illegitimate from some theoretical point of view I hope in the following pages to show that it may nevertheless work in practice; in other words that something simple, yet rich, meaningful and recognizable may be gleaned from basic teachings in the two religions.

Christianity

Let me start with christianity. I assume the very first and most basic message (Genesis I:1) simply to be that there is a separation between creator and created. There is God-over-Man; there is Man-over-Nature and by implication God-over-Nature--the implication actually being stated in the very beginning.

From this simple point of origin, in the two senses of that word mentioned above, four relatively rich sets of consequences seem to follow, two of them pertaining to man, two of them to nature. In the schematic overview on the next page the reader will find the

point of origin referred to as CA (C for "christian", A for the first), and the four more or less logical derivatives as CB and CC for those pertaining to man, and CD and CE for those pertaining to nature.

To start with CB: from Man-over-Nature subject-object separation should follow, or at least not be far away. But there is a difference. In subject-object separation something in Man separates from the rest of Man and becomes a permanent, separate subject--a soul or in less religious parlance, a mind. Nature is left behind as an object, but with Nature is now the human body, which then becomes a part of objective reality, something which the consciousness as a part of the mind, is capable of observing and reflecting upon--the beginning of medical science. But within the mind a further separation takes place, between a spirit which then becomes a subject to the mind as an object, capable of reflecting on what goes on in the mind. In other words, the seat of the celebrated self-awareness, by many in this tradition held to be the distinguishing characteristic between human beings and animals. Through this process a relatively steep hierarchy of subject-object separation is established, and this is then reflected in the construction of reality, developed in CD and CE.

The second derivative from the point of origin in CA, CC would have as its point of departure a conceptualization of consciousness as tabula rasa. I am not quite sure that this can be seen as a part of christian doctrine. After all God said, "let us make a Man--

someone like ourselves, to be the Master upon all life upon the earth and in the skies and in the seas" (Genesis I:26, italics ours) and according to Genesis II:7 "God formed a man's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life". Both quotations seem to indicate that man has a consciousness with at least some God-like attributes. But then there is the parable of the Tree of Conscience, giving knowledge of Good and Bad (Genesis II:9) which seems to indicate that at least before The Fall the slate was clean, and innocent. If this is a metaphor not only for phylogenetic but also for the ontogenetic development of the individual then I would stand by the statement. If not, I could argue that only knowledge of Good and Bad (and hence no excuse in making the wrong choice) was implanted in Man.

And this is rich in implications. What it means is that consciousness has to be prepared, presumably filling it with mediated knowledge, knowledge prepared from somewhere else. Filling consciousness would be like eating the proverbial apple. It would also mean that Man somehow has to learn to think. And for that thinking to be adequate to the reality it is supposed to reflect it has to have some of the same structure as that reality. If reality is contradiction-free, then thought also has to be contradiction-free and thus we get the laws of (occidental) thought: Contradiction-free, and the Law of the Excluded Middle (tertium non datur), and the Law of Identity. With this the basis is laid--on the assumption that God's creation is itself contradiction-free--for deductive thinking leading to deductive tree or pyramids with a low number of axioms on the top and potentially an enormous number of logical derivatives, theorems, at the bottom. If contradictions were to be permitted then anything can

be obtained by *deduction*, and the limiting, narrowing function of deductive, "logical" reasoning, would disappear. After all, God created this world, not another one and reasoning is supposed to reflect precisely this world by making only some theorems true.

That leads us to the reality side, starting with CD in the light of CA again. Reading Genesis reality must have been very much a tabula rasa. Nature space with all kinds of components, ultimately with atoms, building, in that order, cosmosphere (light!), then atmosphere and hydrosphere followed, and after that lithosphere and biosphere. At the end comes homosphere, as if God had read Darwin-- or was it rather Darwin who read the Bible? And only departed from Genesis in a minor way by describing the mechanism instead of the rather sweeping statements made in the first pages of the Bible?

having to pay for that discrepancy, instead of being celebrated for his adherence to christian teachings of the order of the universe!

However that may be God "formed a man's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life", presumably "filling human space with cognitions and emotions" in a terse language of our days. By implication God filled social space with individuals, because (Genesis II:18) "it isn't good for man to be alone; I will make a companion for him, a helper suited to his needs". And God said to the woman (Genesis III:16) "you shall bear children in intense pain and suffering; yet even so, you shall welcome your husband's affections and he shall be your master". In short, not only

social relations but even patriarchal ones, endowing the incipient social space with that structure from the very beginning. And in addition to that the punishment for disobedience ("intense pain and suffering") with another punishment in stock for the man (Genesis III:17): "I have placed a curse upon the soil. All your life you will struggle to extract a living from it" but at this point we are venturing far into the morality of christian faith, beyond its picture of reality.

Fairly quickly a world space emerges in Genesis, filled with societies or nations; in full bloom after the flood, as described in Genesis X (these are the families of Shem, Ham and Japheth---). The basic point, however, is how these spaces have been filled with building blocks, from the bottom up, so to speak.

It does not seem far-fetched to claim that the Bible understands reality as atomistic (at about the same time as the Greeks were working intellectually with that concept), and that this is reflected in both individualism and nationalism as the atoms of social and world spaces respectively, endowed with individual and national ethical budgets (the latter reflected today in the economic conceptualization of the world in terms of national, economic, budgets).

But the basic point in the way I have tried to conceptualize reality as constructed by the creator lies in the time order Prime Mover surrounded by Tabula Rasa, then filling Tabula Rasa with units

(atoms, cognition/emotions, individuals, nations) and only then comes structure. Of course, nature space is structured even before human individuals come to life; human space is structured before social space; and nations are structured before world space. In short, reality is constructed from the bottom up, by building levels of organization. This image of Creation probably is reflected in the strength of atomistic and particle thinking over field and wave thinking in physics; the weakness of biological field thinking (élan vital) in biology, the strength of behavioralism in psychology and linguistics as opposed to Gestalt thinking and deep structure thinking, of the actor-oriented as opposed to the structure-oriented paradigms in sociology and political science which views the world as an inter-state system; as opposed to the view of world structure as primordial in international relations. Needless to say, in referring to such contemporary debates, raging precisely at our time in large parts of the world and not only in academia, I am also indicating that more is at stake than purely intellectual stands and that much of the new thinking will tend to come from quarters outside the christian orbit.

In the fourth derivative from CA, CE the theme is then taken further by emphasizing not the act of creation but the result of creation: a reality fixed, set, presumably forever or as long as it pleases God. There are two basic and rather different conceptualizations: a static universe, not moving, not changing where movement and change are considered transitory to the point of being irreality (the aristotelian concept, Cassirer's Substanzbegriff) and a dynamic universe where movement and change are admitted as



legitimate parts of God's creation, but then according to fixed, set laws (the Galilean concept, Cassirer's Funktionsbegriff). Reality is seen as basically invariant, and contradiction-free; but the laws expressing these mutually consistent invariances may be deep-lying, and require painstaking, restless, efforts to be uncovered. Nevertheless, as there is a Truth somewhere, namely the way in which God set the universe, the search for Truth can be understood in terms of asymptotic convergence to a fixed point, the metaphor being increasingly accurate estimates of the basic parameters of the universe, such as coefficients of attraction of bodies, or the speed of light.

Laws are fundamentally seen as diachronic, as causal chains branching into trees, with the Prime Mover theme being repeated in the shape of "initial" or "primary" causes. The typical causal chain has a beginning and an end. It has to be rooted in something satisfactory to the occidental mind--and it ends in the phenomenon being explored. Thus finiteness of time is introduced together with the notion of linear time unfolding along causal paths, later on to be chopped into equidistant intervals as defined by some celestial (in other words, closer to God) events: years, months, days, hours etc.

The crowning achievement of the dynamic quest for knowledge about an essentially stable (although not necessarily static) universe is the validation of theory with reality. In this confrontation of theory-sentences with reality-sentences, of what is derived from theory with what is observed in reality there is a basic asymmetry. In principle reality is the final arbiter; if theory

does not reflect reality then theory has to yield. Why?--essentially because reality is God-made and theory is man-made, and for theory to get the upper hand man has to place himself above God, an act of extreme blasphemy. I assume that this is at the roots of the basic doctrine in occidental epistemology, empiricism, and from that there is but a short step to positivism which I take to be the doctrine that what is is also what will be in the future, in other words that transcendence is impossible. Knowledge valued today will also be valid tomorrow and the day after. Positivists as the latter-day Christians!

#### Buddhism

Let us then turn to the buddhist side of the story. We are then entering a different world, not to mention a different way of looking at a different world. What certainly remains the same is the problem of adequatio, that consciousness has in some way to be isomorphic to that which it relates to, the rest of reality. And just as for christian epistemology there are many demands for isomorphism in the total system to be presented.

Back to the origins--in the sense of teachings, yes, but one basic aspect of buddhist teaching is that there is no point of origin. Time is unbounded, moving from eternity to eternity. There is no creation ex nihilo, and no separation between creator and created since there is not Creator. That does not mean that creation is not going on, in fact all the time, with creator-created unity as a basic assumption. Buddhists work with the distinction between self, Self and SELF, the self roughly speaking corresponding to that which

disintegrates upon death, the Self roughly speaking corresponding to that which survives, and the SELF to something transcending human beings, and uniting them, which would be the closest to God in christian understanding. But this God is in Man, and Man is in Nature, none of them being above the other. And by implication God is in Nature, with at least live Nature participating at the same level as Man in this dramatic, highly dynamic, continuous series of creation.

In other words, we are, mildly speaking, dealing with a very different conceptualization, leaving aside the problem of whether any single mind, be that the present author or the present reader, is at all able to fathom such a span in conceptualization. (With what kind of mind is that done?) What now has to be explored is not what could be called logical conclusions that follow from the primary position, but other ways of stating the same, presented in such a way as to be comparable to what has been said about christian epistemology. If what has been said so far is BA (B for buddhist) then we shall move on to BB and BC exploring the consciousness side, and BD and BE exploring the reality side, doing so with great hesitation since we are already departing, in so doing, from the basic assumption of consciousness-reality unity.

So let that be the first point in BD: subject-object unity. About this subject, however, there is a particular and important assumption: that there is no permanent, separate subject. There is a Self, but this Self is itself subject to the law of impermanence

to be explored later, the principle of anicca. Applying the principle of anicca to humans one arrives at the principle of anatta, often translated as "no soul" where perhaps a better translation would be "no permanent, separate Self". Maybe it means that to the extent it is separate (from SELF) then it is not permanent, and to the extent it is permanent then it is not separate because it is united with SELF, ultimately in nirvana.

All of this is then compatible with the basic idea of consciousness-in-reality. That consciousness is capable of moving/improving with reality in a pattern of two-way causation, meaning that consciousness may be seen as acting on reality, but at the same time reality acts on consciousness. To the buddhist "I walk down the street" is a very incomplete formulation of what is going on concerning the street, acting upon the street. The formulation should be seen as incomplete, the complement being "the street is moving up on me", or something similar. What actually goes on is captured the moment consciousness manages to hold these two complementary visions simultaneously so that a transcendence to a higher vision of reality through some kind of "click" takes place. Something like understanding a coin by seeing both sides at the same time, not only "knowing" that the other side is there, talking about it from past experience, perhaps turning the coin around--even very quickly--to verify statements derived from those past experiences and so on.

But if both consciousness and reality outside consciousness are constantly changing, moving, how then is it possible to come to grips

with what is going on at all? Don't we need some kind of fixed point in the universe? My understanding is that this is where the role of meditation enters in buddhist epistemology. Preparation for the meeting with reality does not take place by filling an empty consciousness with mediated knowledge, but by cleaning an "impure", "noisy", consciousness, making a clean slate so as to open for the stream of consciousness, of unmediated knowledge, presumably by having reality work on consciousness directly. A vulgar simile: a photo is generally considered better when the film receives the impression through a single exposure, not through a second, third or fourth exposure on top of exposures already there.

There are also laws of how thought should be organized, like in christianity; conditions for other adequatio to obtain. And the basic condition is to permit contradictory thoughts, or at least images that at first glance seem contradictory, until some kind of transcendence is obtained (the street example above might serve as an indication). But this process is goal-directed: to reduce suffering (dukkha) and to increase happiness (sukkha). Needless to say this is not only done through right understanding, but also through the other seven parts of the eight-fold path, bringing us far into the morality of buddhism.

The question then arises how understanding should be organized. And here the basic mode in buddhist epistemology is clear: in wheels of connectedness. These wheels will differ from the deductive trees of occidental thought by no insight, no understanding

being above the others. Thus, the "four noble truths" and "the eight-fold path" should not be seen as an axiomatic system, but probably rather as a set of insights all of them related to each other. If reality has unity why should not understanding also have unity, and would not a hierarchical organization of understanding destroy some of that unity, with axioms above theorems, etc.?

Basically, moving now to BD and BE, reality is seen as organically related, from eternity to eternity. There is nature space-in-human space-in-social space-in-world space. The borderlines between one space and the other are blurred. Such borderlines may be useful to thought, but do not reflect reality. Reality can only be conceived of in a wholistic fashion. Thus, although I am also responsible for my own acts I share that responsibility with others because my Self and other Selves form parts of the same SELF. What I do of good also comes to my brothers and sisters because knowingly or not they helped me; what I do of bad also reflects upon them because knowingly or not they did not prevent me from doing so. There is Karma sewing the constituents parts together, not only in the diachronic individualistic sense of "whatever you say and whatever you do, sooner or later comes back to you" (written on The Wall separating the two Berlins, as a very meaningful graffiti), but also in the synchronic collectivist sense of tying together sentient beings at the same point in time.

And this opens for a much more wholistic way of conceiving of everything, be that in nature space, human space, social space and world space, not to mention in the relations among them. The point is, of course, not that people who have grown up in christian epistemology, more or less capable of reflecting upon its implicit assumptions to the point of accepting them are not capable of arriving at wholistic insights. The point is only that in buddhist epistemology such insights come automatically; in christian epistemology they will come through agony and struggle, fighting against the stream (not to mention the mainstream!), against deeply ingrained inclinations segmented in one's own mind.

For reality according to buddhism is always being created, always becoming. The universe is not static but dynamic, and that dynamism is not invariant but transcendent. The laws as they appear to us are impermanent, because reality is impermanent, anicca. And laws about laws in the sense of laws about how laws change would also be impermanent. The only impermanence that is not impermanent would be impermanence itself--one of these contradictions in thought of which buddhists might say "you can live with that one".

Why? Because reality itself is contradictory, a struggle between opposites all the time, and it would be false to assume that a mind incapable of harboring contradictions would be capable of participating in the consciousness-in-reality (or reality-in-consciousness) stream.

Processes are synchronic, not in the sense that they do not unfold in time, but in the sense that they take place at the same time in any part of reality. The causal chain or tree (a chain with branches) of christian epistemology is unsatisfactory because processes are organized along a linear time dimension. In buddhist epistemology there is cause and effect, but then always two-way. There is always actio and reactio like in any dialectical thinking, not only actio. The expression "multi-causal webs" covers this to some extent, but more felicitous expressions could perhaps also be found.

This view has a very important, and highly practical consequence. How does one go about changing reality, from the point of view of christian and buddhist epistemology? From the starting point of christian epistemology the logical procedure would be to find something corresponding to the Prime Mover, some lever or button that can be pressed or pushed, starting a chain of processes. This is what liberals do when they conceive of social change in terms of economic growth and economic growth in terms of saving and investment (which in turn would have some preconditions). And this is what marxist do when they conceive of social change in terms of revolution and revolution in terms of class consciousness and class mobilization, under the leadership of the Party (as Prime Mover)--again there would be some preconditions. But the buddhist approach would be to look for a number of processes that should be engaged in simultaneously, working at reality from a high number of angles and corners at the same time, so to speak. Better some progress on fifteen dimensions than



great progress on one, not because that might be the wrong one (a position that would only lead to the search for another Prime Mover), but because proceeding that way you will end up not getting all fifteen, ~~and~~ not even the one on which you started (since the non-change on the other fourteen will cancel your "progress").

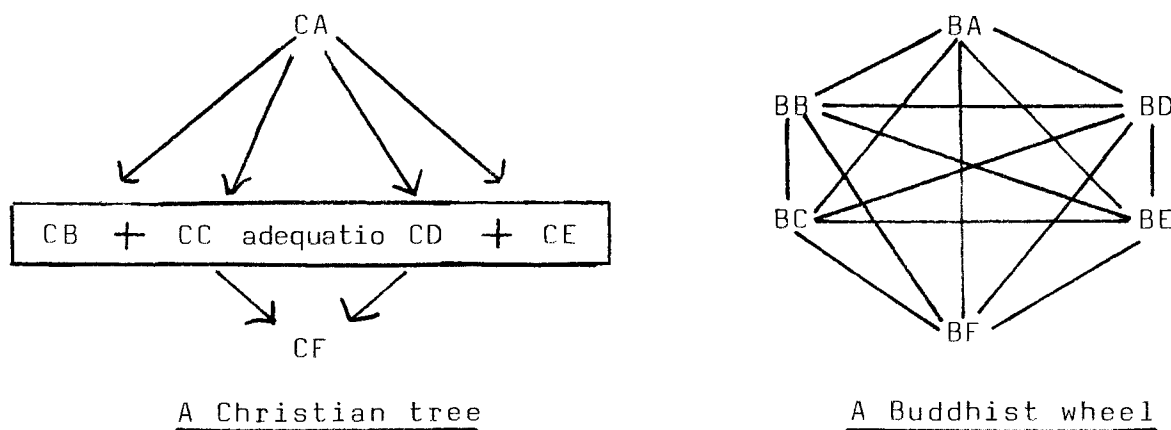
How then, do buddhist validate their understanding? The basic form of validation does not necessarily differ from the one found in christian epistemology: something is compared with, held up against something else. But whereas within occidental cosmology theory would be validated with reality, on the assumption that theory would have to change if it does not correspond to a pre-set reality, in buddhist cosmology reality would be validated with value, on the assumption that reality would have to be changed if it does not correspond with value. And the basic values have already been given: decreasing dukkha, increasing sukkha. The value orientation applies to all sentient beings, thereby introducing an arrow and an idea of progress into the universe--but not with the assumption that progress will come automatically, or is likely to come. Time is cyclical in this conceptualization of reality, it goes up and down at the individual as well as collective levels. But the moral light shining from the Buddha serves as a guidance in this seemingly highly disorganized, ever-changing, ever-transcending reality-with-consciousness. So, where christian epistemology finds its expression in empiricism and even in positivism, buddhist cosmology will find its expression in criticism (and the four noble truths are already an expression of that criticism) and constructivism (and the eight-fold path is an expression of that constructivism).

The Christian tree and the Buddhist wheel

In short: two different words, two different ways of conceiving of two different worlds. Can one use the laws of thought of one in order to try to come to grips with the reality of the other? I think so, but one will of course see other things than what is built into the epistemology under the assumption of adequatio. Reduce the adequatio and a tension, even contradiction, arises that in itself may be fruitful. This point, however, will be explored later.

At this point I would like to end the present exercise.

FIGURE 1. Two different ways of organizing two different ways of looking at two different worlds



The figure to the left gives the Christian tree of christian epistemology, rooted in the assumption that at some place validation has to take place with consciousness and reality coming together in a sense of correspondence, and that this is made possible by the adequatio between consciousness and reality. But all of this derives from the basic assumption at the top of creator-created separation.

To the right in the figure is the Buddhist wheel of buddhist epistemology with six insights linked together in a web of inter-relations. The reader may take all fifteen if he wants and find all of them expressing some kind of basic correspondence, some kind of adequatio. The basic adequatio from an epistemological point of view is in the BC-BE relation. But there are other themes that fill the wheel with content, on the one hand the anicca-anatta assumption of impermanence, and on the other hand the dukkha-sukka assumption of directedness, of perfectibility. These two assumptions are related: how can there be perfectibility unless there is impermanence? Would not the assumption of permanence, of basic invariance, contradict the assumption of perfectibility? Is not an assumption of basic transcendence necessary?

Christian epistemology may be said to resolve this dilemma by making the soul infinitely capable of transcendence but the body not; buddhist epistemology by having much less of a separation between soul and body and making both of them capable of transcendence. And that transcendence, of course, is what religion is basically about: union with that which is above. God in the christian universe, SELF in the buddhist universe. From a religious point of view what is here referred to as "epistemology" is like a scaffolding to support the structure that leads to deeper religious conclusions. But they are outside the present concern which is precisely with that scaffolding--the epistemologies themselves.

TABLE 1: Two worlds, two ways of looking at two worlds

CHRISTIANITY:

Some epistemological tenets

BUDDHISM:

Some epistemological tenets

CA	<p>Creator-created separation            God-over-Man            Man-over-Nature            God-over-Nature</p>	BA	<p>Creator-created unity            God-in-Man            Man-in-Nature            God-in-Nature</p>
CB	<p>Subject-object separation            Permanent, separate subjects;            soul            Consciousness capable of observing and reflecting stable reality</p>	BB	<p>Subject-object unity            No permanent separate subject; <u>anatta</u>            Consciousness-in-reality; capable of moving/improving with reality in two way causation</p>
CC	<p>Consciousness <u>tabula rasa</u>            Prepare by filling with mediated knowledge through study            Basic rule: Laws of thought; <u>adequatio</u> with reality            Contradiction-free, <u>tertium non datur</u>            Basic mode: deductive trees</p>	BC	<p>Consciousness "impure", "noisy"; to be "bleaned"            Prepare for unmediated stream of consciousness through mediation; also study            Basic rule: Laws of thought; <u>adequatio</u> with reality            Contradictory, transcending; decreasing <u>dukkha</u>, increasing <u>sukkha</u>            Basic mode: wheels of connectedness</p>
CD	<p>Reality originally <u>tabula rasa</u>, then            Nature space from atoms            Human space from cognitions, emotions            Social space from individuals            World space from nations            Reality <u>atomistic</u>; individual ethical budget</p>	BD	<p>Reality <u>organic</u> from eternity to eternity with            Nature space-in-            Human space-in-            Social space-in-            World space            Reality <u>wholistic</u>; collective ethical budget, <u>Karma</u></p>
CE	<p>Reality fixed through creation; <u>being</u>            Static universe: Aristotelian, <u>Substanz</u>            Dynamic universe: Galilean, <u>Funktion</u>            Reality basically invariant and contradiction-free            Laws diachronic; causal trees            Time Linear; finite, bounded            Prime Mover</p>	BE	<p>Reality always being created; <u>becoming</u>            Universe not static; but dynamic            Dynamism not invariant; but transcendent            Reality basically impermanent, <u>anicca</u> and contradictory            Processes synchronic; multi-causal-webs            Time cyclical; actio-reactio, endless, unbounded            No Prime Mover</p>
CF	<p>Validation of theory with reality            Empiricism, positivism</p>	BF	<p>Validation of reality with value            Criticism. constructivism</p>