Coming Home

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Since my first attempt in 1975 to cover the gap between Zen and Western psychology, I have returned repeatedly to this topic from various approaches. The present work deals with the alienation of self from environment which prevails nowadays. Fear of death is considered as a primary factor in the abstraction from nature of the civilizing process. Making nature the enemy of humankind, 17th century scientism (science and religion) invented a worldview fixating a late phase of the civilizing process with notions that split human awareness from both environment and body. Rather than relying mainly on traditional Buddhist literature, insights of modern Western writers are used to see through these alienating notions and come home to immediate experience.

*Become aware as leaves are aware
and fine as flowers are fine
and fierce as fire is fierce
and subtle, silvery, tinkling and rippling
as rain-water,
but a man reborn from the rigidity of fixed ideas
resurrected from the death of mechanical motion and emotion.*

*Man knows nothing
till he knows how not to know.*

[from two poems by D. H. Lawrence (1933)]

What’s the Problem?

Many Zen-like sparks can be found in Western literature. Instead of proceeding then from traditional Buddhist literature, let’s begin with such sparks, in this case some excerpts from D. H. Lawrence. Seeking a home outside his native, industrialized England, Lawrence wandered the world while slowly dying of tuberculosis. Early in this wandering he rejected the impression he got of Buddhism in Ceylon. It seemed to deny the struggle, the pain, the two-sidedness of life. It seemed too mechanical, ritualistic, pacifistic, and smug. In time though, he realized that being at home goes beyond liking or disliking one’s surroundings, beyond clinging to what pleases and avoiding what displeases. He penetrated the shallow seeking-for-pleasant-permanence and discovered being at home with impermanence itself. Whatever his realization is called, it points to true Buddhism.

Biographer Geof Dyer (1997) quotes someone who remembered that “Lawrence was always busy, ‘mostly doing housework.’ When he was not building sheds and cupboards, putting up shelves and repairing outhouses he was doing ‘the washing, cooking, floor-cleaning and everything’: making home, in short” (p. 142). Dyer quotes someone else who remembered that Lawrence was able “to absorb himself completely in what he was doing at the moment” (p. 149) and furthermore “knew how to do nothing. He could just sit and be perfectly content” (p. 152). He also quotes Lawrence himself who wrote toward the end of his short life “...sitting in the sun and seeing the easy, drifting life of the place. That’s how I am happiest nowadays—just sitting still, quite alone, with a little friendly life to watch” (p. 165).

O.K. But what does Lawrence mean by “how not to know” in the introductory poem? “Knowing” in the modern sense is primarily a process of
automatically allocating whatever occurs to places in the fixed, memorized system we each regard as “the world.” Knowing is more or less a process of abstraction, of separating oneself from the immediate event, treating it in a piecemeal fashion, substituting aspects of it with preprocessed segments of the past. The more fixed the demands of knowing, the less newness or freshness allowed to any event. Experiencing an event which is not quickly and easily pigeonholed may result in feeling at sea or disoriented. This is not to say that we can live without knowing, only that knowing is not the basis of living. Living includes knowing and a lot more besides.

Being at home requires a sense of unity with all events, favorable or unfavorable. While “seeing the easy, drifting life of the place,” Lawrence is not mere onlooker. He becomes what he sees. He has rediscovered immediate experience prior to knowing. One can never be at home in just knowing because of its divisiveness, distancing, and substitute abstractions. Much of what we regard as freedom depends on sensing that an event originates with “I” or is at least in accord with “I.” The denser and more fixed one’s “I,” the larger “non-I” will seem, and the more like an object one is apt to feel, compelled by events originating from an alien world.

Lawrence is an individual of our time, someone who struggled intensely with the disheartening drabness and ugliness of industrial England and then the horrors of World War I and its aftermath. How does his struggle relate to us? How do we experience the “death of mechanical motion and emotion” which separated Lawrence from coming home and from which he longed to be resurrected? Let’s examine those features in the prevailing worldview (which can be summarized as “scientism”) that reinforce absolute splits between self and world, self and others, mind and body, spirit and matter, and so forth.

**Scientism**

Science per se is a modest activity, the results of which are educated guesses or “the best explanations so far” and which may be amended later or even overthrown. In science proper, there is no denial of the contextual nature of initial assumptions, no claim that its views and methods are the only paths to reality. In scientism, on the other hand, there is a claim that initial assumptions are external givens, or eternal, and unquestionable truths. In scientism, furthermore, other activities with nonscientific assumptions are denied any relevance to reality. Other views are treated as subjective, mystical, or, at best, as mere imitations of science. It is this absolutist aspect which adds the “ism” to science, making it a religion of sorts that belittles any questioning of its tenets.

From his telescopic view, Galileo generalized that only single-eye vision was “objective” in perceiving features of astronomic bodies such as size and number which could be mathematized to describe what he took to be the clockwork universe of God (Master Mathematician). Descartes, Newton and others elaborated this view, assuming that everything in the universe could be reduced to irreducible, immortal bits of matter (miniature planetary bodies or atoms) and relations between the bits could be explained in terms of mechanical laws. The corollary is that human beings are cut off from each other and thus cannot agree on anything that involves the full range of their sensations and feelings. There is no organic or living unity in this view. After Creation (however it’s conceived) there are no single, encompassing events. Uniqueness or quality is pluralized to numerical group occurrences which are mechanically caused and causing.

And there is no inside. Everything is cut off from and therefore outside of everything else. So-called objectivity becomes equivalent to being outside, distanced even from one’s own body. Inside experience is questionable at best. A consensus can occur only if human beings accept and imitate the plural separateness of things in the universe via supposedly objective, numerical statements. After the 17th century, God was retired from the picture. Hence all remaining aspects of inside like “life” and “mind” were also subtracted. After Darwin in the 19th century, life became just an epiphenomenon evolving from random associations of matter bits. As useful, temporary simplifications which foster research, there is nothing wrong with such assumptions. It is another matter, however, when they become ends in themselves and are simplistically taken as the true condition of the universe and its contents.
Ironically, quantum physics and other developments since the 1920s have undermined most scientistic assumptions. Atoms are no longer immortal, indivisible building blocks of the universe. Matter (things) and energy (actions) are now interchangeable, and so on. But, despite evidence to the contrary in physics, scientism still prevails, particularly in social sciences trying to ape the “certainty” of 17th century physics. And for millions of nominal Christians, Jews (lately also Muslims and Buddhists), scientism has become the main source of expectations for miraculous answers to human problems, from the curing of all diseases to the discovering of unlimited natural energy.

Science has developed mainly by successive degrees of refining instrumentation in accord with scientific models. Since scientific methods are predominantly abstract and utilize only a small part of human experience, it is scientific monopolization to insist that they are purely “empirical” and other methods are not. Most scientific theory is actually idealistic or several steps removed from the empirical basis with which we are all born. Every event in nature when fully experienced has a unique here-and-now quality. Reducing that unique quality to quantities of one sort or another is actually dematerializing matter for some abstract technological or commercial purpose. To call faith in this quantitative reduction “materialism” is another misnomer, because matter in its natural state is destroyed and abstracted to other ends.

Similarly, what we now refer to as “nature” has become denatured, or gravely impoverished, as worldwide ecological problems recently reveal. But the experience-constricting aspect of our scientistic worldview is concealed from us by abstract, human-made seasons, climate conditions, architectural structures, and other devices with which we have surrounded ourselves. There is no nature remaining as a single expression of multiple relationships. There are as many natures as specialization dictates. Once quantified, each unique event is lost in pluralized samples or groups. A reified group standard by which a person is rated, like an I.Q. test, is more “real” than the person. In the pseudodemocracy of statistical averages, “political correctness” is inevitable. An individual seeking for integrity on her/his own beyond prevailing bureaucratic answers may be suspect of elitism, heresy, or even insanity. Enthusiastic involvement or advocacy is risky because being outside (uninvolved, or “cool”) has become a kind of pseudo-objective group morality.

Formal logic is a denial of time in that it begins with the assumption of pure identity for its entities, and posits (with the law of the excluded middle) that those entities can never become other than the way they are initially defined. It might be objected here that the notion of a variable in mathematics allows for change, but reconsideration will show that once defined, a variable too becomes a changeless thing. A statement like $2 + 2 = 4$ is “eternal,” that is, true in every time and place, because it belongs in a closed, fixed, numerical system that we clever humans have created. That an answer is yet to be found, like $2 + 2 = ?$ can mislead us into thinking the system is open-ended. But once the preliminaries of a question are quantified, the answer already lies somewhere within the numerical system. Finding the answer is only a question of “crunching” the numbers. Many aspects of nature can fruitfully be depicted as quantitative ratios or relationships. Most of those aspects have occurred in the realm of physics, the most successful and therefore envied science.

The scientistic assumption is that the rest of nature can and should be similarly quantified. The catch is the character of numbers. We take it for granted that there is an absolute difference between 0 and 1, like nothing and something, or an absolute difference say between 3 and 4, but in a continuous phenomenon at what point does 3 become 4, when it’s 3.6 or 3.999? We take it for granted that there is an equal distance between any two successive numbers such that $4 - 3 = 1$ and $12587 - 12586 = 1$ but does nature itself function with such ideally equal units?

Regarding scientific research with respect, but far-less-than-holy reverence for numbers, leads to the view that progress has been mainly a matter of learning how far nature will play our game and allow itself to be manipulated via quantified, abstract models imposed on it. In other words, it isn’t so much nature per se that has been revealed as progressive refinements in applying closed, human-made models to nature. Although more or less appropriate to a given natural phenomenon, a scientific model does not
actually “predict” the workings of a phenomenon. The potential answer is already contained in the idealized model which is closed off to everything but certain possibilities. A correct prediction is not a direct manifestation of nature per se but rather the possibility that a very limited aspect of nature is acting (for the time being at least) in parallel to the idealized model.

One could predict human behavior, for example, with very high accuracy if experimental subjects were enclosed in a concentration camp. The more limited the situation and the fewer the alternatives for responding, the greater the certainty of behavioral prediction. Add to this closed situation a total control of life-and-death variables like air, light, warmth, food, water, sleep, cleanliness, private space, dignity, and the certainty is still greater. Torture and the threat of death would just be certainty overkill. Without some appraisal of everything that’s omitted from the closed situation at the outset, prediction per se is a kind of illusion. The ultimate test of any behavior-predicting theory is how well it might work in “the field,” that is, in life itself, with a minimum of freedom-depriving restrictions and unnatural conditions.

The main appeal of tidy measures, closed situation experiments, and mechanistic theories is probably that they are the easiest way to proceed, not the truest way, when all they exclude is reconsidered. It could be argued that with an appropriate model nature will respond “as if” nature were indeed the model itself. Models like those which facilitate interplanetary rocket navigation are remarkably apt. But with scientism, the “as if” is forgotten and the model becomes a “law” of nature. Nature is so extensive and flexible that almost any model will work to some extent like a cookie mold. Aspects of a natural situation which don’t fit a mold are just excised. Cumulatively, however, excised scraps are greater by far than the world presented by cookie molds, and there are limits to the tolerance of nature, as ecological disasters remind us.

1 Answer to Scientism: Time

Do we have any right to question the assumptions of scientism unless we are academically qualified cosmologists, biologists, or psychologists? Jacques Barzun in his study of science as “Glorious Entertainment” comments that “all these [scientistic] reasons for distrusting mind...rob man of his supreme pleasure and prerogative, which is to feel himself at once a moral being and a natural philosopher” (1965, p. 303). And he adds: “So deprived, he [man] cannot wonder at the disease of the will and the emotions which plague him, and against which all the signs of control over nature through knowledge and machinery will not avail” (p. 303). Much gratitude is due to academically qualified renegades like historian Barzun (1964), mathematician V. V. Nalimov (1981), and physicist Robert S. Jones (1982), who encourage us to question, as they do, the “reality” of our alienation.

Let’s take courage from the fact that at birth we obviously did not sense ourselves as alienated from the world and others, that the impression of absolute separation is something we picked up on the way to becoming adults. We don’t have to dispute the findings of cosmologists and others who assume the responsibility of telling us what is real. We can remind ourselves that their findings are best-guess human interpretations rather than complete and final structures imposed on us from outside. We don’t have to be overawed by operational definitions and mathematical equations. We don’t have to wait centuries for final proofs or disproofs of this or that theory of existence. We don’t have to regret not living in some future age when a totally controlled nature as promised by scientism will supposedly occur, where we might live in perfect human-made cities on planets in other galaxies without disease, poverty, natural calamities or unpredictable surprises. Here and now we can return to the source of our dilemma which is human thinking alienated in a worldview created by human thinking.

Ecology (like economy, appropriately from the Greek word oikos for “home” or “house”) is doing the best job it can of reminding other sciences about “coming home,” that is, their responsibility for bringing abstract findings back to the living world, back to human discourse in general, back to sustaining life on a planet which may be the only place in the universe capable of life. Beyond ecology however, facing a homeless universe can only be resolved finally by rediscovering the true nature of “self” and immediate experience.
Before we abstract it as a straight line along which events evolve, driven by past conditions in a fixed spatial shell, what is time? Let's take up the paradox of time by considering how we experience a song. As a song unfolds it becomes other than what it has been to become what it shall be. When is a song complete? Only when it's finished and no longer heard. That's obvious. It is not as obvious that this is the case with everything else. But, if we give ourselves over to the question and realize that any “thing” is primarily an event, then it becomes clear that what is identical with itself is in the process of self-change and therefore is not identical with itself. What is itself is also not itself. Just pondering on and living out the implications of this fact alone could liberate us from the tyranny of our reified notions and open us to what might be called immediate experience. The presence of any thing must (at least partially) encompass its absence also. There is no such thing as a pure “something” present all at once and surrounded by pure “non-something” like an island alone in a sea of time/space. Nor is there any such thing as pure “present” since any event is at any moment also partly past and partly future.

There seems to be a predilection in language for dividing experience into two rough categories: more enduring events (nouns, things) and less enduring events (verbs, actions). Verbs are then regarded as less real than nouns, as initiated by and therefore as only potential attributes of nouns. We define something in terms of its attributes (adjectives describing its features, and adverbs describing how it acts). None of the attributes have substance (we think), only the thing. Stripped of its attributes there is nothing left to define the thing, but (we assume) there is a “substance” or “essence” of the thing which somehow endures without attributes (this assumption was the pet target of George Berkeley [1710/1963, p. 10]). The sun, for instance, has substance, but sunrise, sunset, hot, bright, and so on, are all empty attributes of this hypothetical “sun-ness.”

Imagining a change of scale to a much larger (faster) or much smaller (slower) view reveals how arbitrary and flimsy our thing/non-thing basis of reality is. (If a microbe, for instance, could speak English, do you think it would make the noun/verb distinctions we make?) Other linguistic features play into our notions of reality like the fact that many “thing” words are past tenses of verbs, such as “thought” from “think.” Completed or frozen actions become things. “Thing” itself is the result of discussion at a Ting or Ding (Germanic parliament). Or a “fact” is only a completed act (from Latin facere = to make or do). But modern expressions give the impression of actions like done, packaged things on a supermarket shelf: “take a walk,” “take a piss.”

The noun/non-noun separation is useful for everyday human activities, but why have we gone from there to believing this kind of human utility is the way reality is constructed? Why do we deny the human origin of the separation and pretend it has an absolute objective existence, apart from us, and we can only react to its consequences as though imposed from the outside by nature or God? And why then in our thinking is the initial equality of events tilted drastically to one side so that actions (apparently less enduring events) become empty shadows of things (apparently more enduring events)? In short, why this human bias for fixation and permanence?

Scientistic Absolutes as Fixation of the Civilizing Process

By way of comprehending what led to events in Germany just before and after the Nazi takeover, Norbert Elias (1978) studied the development of manners in Europe from medieval times on. The main theme of his work is a progressive distancing from nature, both outwardly and inwardly. Civilizing (from Latin civitas = city) could be called citifying the world and ourselves. In brief, beginning with the revolutionary shift from nomadic hunting and food-gathering to organized agriculture in a specific locale, civilizing involves the life style of saving and accumulating and gradually evolves a complex political hierarchy to account for, control, defend, and expand the surplus. (Note: politics, policy, police, etc. derive from Greek polis = city, parallel to Latin civitas.)

Outwardly, civilizing involves the development of technology to support the system politically and commercially and to overcome natural limitations that might hamper its inherent drive for expansion. Thus technology is also necessary for facilitating military conquest.
Continuing with Elias, the civilizing process inwardly involves distancing oneself from nature by suppressing animal features, needs and functions. The genteel rule that a meal not consist of a whole animal or recognizable parts of an animal distanced eating from the act of killing for one's food. The use of fork, spoon, napkin, and handkerchief in place of one's hands; adopting night dresses, then separate beds, then separate rooms: these are just some of the many details discussed by Elias. Scratching, coughing, burping, belching, farting, wiping one's nose, exposing parts of one's body, relieving oneself in the presence of others: all such things become tabooed, to say nothing of restrictions on the sexual act itself. Strong expression of any emotion becomes "a scene." The body becomes more like a machine in conflict with one's mind. Natural signals of hunger, fatigue, excretory need, and stress are progressively ignored until the body seems like a willful saboteur of one's social activities. With ailments and aging, one's body takes on the semblance of a machine breaking down. This impression is reinforced nowadays with cosmetic surgery, prosthetic devices, and finally organ implants.

The civilizing process could be likened to a very complicated form of toilet training as the things we possess take possession of us, and machines (our supposed slaves) become our masters. Anything that can't be used in the construction or fueling of machines or machine-like social arrangements must be disposed of. Reminders of mortality, animality, or scientistic imperfection must be put out of sight if they can't be exterminated. Human excretory products are no longer recycled with the processes of nature, but dumped or burned, indiscriminately polluting the atmosphere in parallel with the indiscriminate disposal of industrial wastes. Old age becomes just a linear dead end, no longer the completion of a cycle and the beginning of a new cycle which grandparents can celebrate with their grandchildren. The poor, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the chronically ill, the mentally retarded, the psychotic, are segregated from urban and suburban life. Thus, out of sight, the imperfections or excreta of our age are out of mind.

Elias showed that hygienic reasons (which enter later) can't account for such changes in the
past. Nor can the changes be attributed to Christian morality because they appear with numerous variations in non-Christian civilizations. A hierarchy develops and to avoid being regarded as lower class (within the city) or barbarian (outside the city) one must adopt (or at least emulate) manners of the higher echelons. Not only is kinship with animals taboo, all suggestions that one has something in common with humanity in general become putdowns like ornery (= ordinary), cheap, common, vulgar. In place of heathen (heath-dweller, i.e., outside a city), savage (forest-dweller), villain (village-dweller), naive (native), we now have putdowns for outside-the-city like hayseed, rube, bumpkin, okie.

ELABORATING ELIAS’ theme, I’d like to point out that the hierarchy of the civilizing process evidently derives from the three dimensions of the human body. Up (top), right, and front are “good,” while down (bottom), left, and back are “bad.” There are reversals of polarity here and there, but for the most part the values associated with the three dimensions are consistent. In the world picture of medieval Christianity, heaven is above, hell below, the righteous sheep (saved ones) sit at the right hand of Jesus, the less than righteous goats (Jews, etc.) sit at the left hand of Jesus, the glorious illumined front belongs to God, and the dark and dank backside is the territory of Satan. The macrocosmos of God and Satan, and the microcosmos of the human body are mirror images of each other.

The east side of the medieval church is the head where the altar is located and the masculine clergy preside. The west side is the portal where one enters the church (a womb) and daubs oneself with holy water. Men used to sit on the north side (right hand of the church viewed from above as a prone figure), women on the south or left hand side. As might be expected, if nature is regarded as feminine, insofar as the civilizing process is antinature, the negative dimensions of down, left, and back will also be identified as “feminine.” As the world becomes depleted of its innate features in the civilizing process, nature must appear more and more uncivilized, immoral, wild, chaotic, antihuman. Perhaps because of Judeo-Christian monotheism with its patriarchal bias, nature (as lifeless, formless, aimless matter) must be shaped and controlled by externally imposed, masculine laws. (Note: “matter” and “material” are cognate to Latin mater = mother.)

With the 17th century worldview, God’s laws were replaced with scientific laws, usually in the form of mechanisms not otherwise found in nature, thereby deifying human rationality: creator of the machine and technology. In the Taoism of China and Buddhism of India, the same polarities developed but were not split into absolute, good/bad values. Nature, in those worldviews, retained its innate features and therefore did not need a deus ex machina to form and control it. Hence there are self-regulating “principles” in or of matter rather than Western style “laws” imposed from the outside on formless, chaotic matter.

What about time in this three-dimensional picture? Time (like life and consciousness) is the joker in a deck of cards; it belongs and yet it doesn’t belong because it can transcend the hierarchy of the deck. Time can be spatialized to a certain extent only, beyond which it is lost and with it all movement and life. It appears in civilized hierarchies in various ways, like moving from left (past) to right (future), or from front (future) to back (past), but this varies between civilizations. With our 17th century world view, time almost disappeared altogether in spatial dimensions like the x-axis of Descartes’ analytic geometry.

Furthermore, once time became linear only, it is either progressing or regressing; there is no other dimension of movement. And, with the bias for front, for youth (equivalent to immortality), we like to imagine that despite occasional setbacks, things are always getting better. This fits the accumulative, expansive thrust of technology and the civilizing process. The latest is the best and there is little respect for the past, other than commercialized nostalgia. Since getting something for nothing is built into our worldview, it doesn’t usually occur to us that there must be compensation for getting better, that things could be getting worse at the same time in other ways. In Eastern worldviews, on the other hand, time resisted total spatialization,
retaining its beginningless, endless character, along with nonlinear cycles.

3rd Answer to Scientism: Human Senses

Returning again to Elias’ observations, in the civilizing process there is top-heavy bias toward the eye and visual phenomena at the expense of the other senses, and (understandably) a corresponding bias toward heady, abstract rationality at the expense of intuition, emotion, or all other experiences which seem more closely related to bodily functions (especially lower body). In Galileo’s one-eye metaphysics, the visual attributes of color and texture are only subjective, that is, totally different from one individual to the next. All other sensory experience is likewise subjective (like personal noises obscuring the clarity of objective signals) along with the gamut of feelings. Thus, but for a very narrow range of vision’s possibilities, every human being is cut off from the world by a bodily closet of obscuring subjectivities. The only escape to “reality” is peering through a hole with a human-made lens (nowadays reading some gauge or dial) to that which alone is assumed to be interindividually identical and can be delimited, fixed, and enumerated for logical treatment.

Most of the primary characteristics of logic are closely related to vision. Vision is the only sensory mode that allows us to assume what we see is just there without visual participation having any part of what’s seen. With hearing, and the other “lower” senses, we are constantly reminded of subject/object interaction, or our participation. As with vision, logic is prone to regard itself as not requiring any basis other than itself, taking the initial closed framework within which it reasons or argues as if it were not based on assumptions, but on given, self-evident verities. Vision is the only sensory mode which permits an impression of simultaneity, as though it operates in a spatial shell given all at once within which change occurs. Logic likewise excludes time or subsumes time as a mere change of position within a closed and fixed spatial frame.

Unlike the lower sensory modes, vision allows us to ignore its medium (air, water, or that in which, through which, we see). Vision therefore can give us the impression that the gaps between its presented objects are empty. Logic functions in a similar manner, insisting on absolute presence or absence of an entity with nothing between it and some other entity (law of the excluded middle). Vision is highly directional and insists that the reality of its objects depends on their locatability. This, like the either/or aspect, manifests in logic as the assumption that anything real must have a definite form (delineating it from everything else) and be located in a specific place.

As this feature evolved further, it became the denial of all negative aspects by abutting them to sites next to and dependent on positive features: nothing to something, absence to presence, future to past, known to unknown. Finally it emerged as the binary 1 and 0 of digital computer switches, a very handy device but hardly a model for existence. On the other hand, in hearing, one can differentiate between all sorts of tone pitches and textures without any specific location whatsoever. And it cannot be claimed that sounds are any less real than visual objects, but logic prefers to ignore experience deriving from other sensory modes. (Victor Zuckerkandl’s [1956] phenomenological study of how we actually hear music is an excellent antidote to the habitual crippling sensory and emotional experience by our visual-rational dominance.)

If we could see a periodic series of photographs of any apparently fixed thing, a mountain say, from its appearance to its disappearance, it would be visually clear that it is actually an event. As we usually experience seeing, however, there is a simultaneity of things that hides the changing of space itself. While giving lip service to things having origins, logic follows vision in assuming that the space of all its events is just there, that is, does not come into existence. When we talk of eternity, it’s usually thought of as proceeding from now on. We fail to allow for a preceding eternity, or the likelihood that an unending universe has no beginning either (unlike the Eastern world views mentioned above). Here too, our Judeo-Christian tradition may be influential, in that it maintains that the beginning of everything occurred with the biblical Genesis. Similarly, in the worldview we inherited from Descartes, it is assumed that given the initial
conditions of Genesis (now the cosmological Big Bang), all subsequent events can eventually be mapped out.

Time is therefore reduced to a linear railroad track on which potential events contained in the initial fixed space are unrolled in a strictly causal manner. Logic is not applied to the conditions contained in its initial assumptions. Until the advent of cybernetics with its feedback loops, all cyclic phenomena or events with backward affecting “aims” were ignored or denied. The old notions of an event “arising” or “befalling” or of the future (unknown) pulling one on with hope or curiosity, have been supplanted with the notion of the past driving the present like a rear-end locomotive. Meanwhile, several generations have agonized about how there can be any “free will” if life is only the mechanical working out of preordained circumstances, whether ordered or random.

Revisiting Descartes’ Century

In his study of the 17th century in Europe, Steven Toulmin (1990) showed that Descartes’ picture did not become the worldview of the West because of its purely scientific features, but rather for its emotional or (more broadly) religious features. In an era when famine was prevalent because of a series of bad years climatically, when thousands of people were dying or being displaced in battles between Catholics and Protestants, when people were interpreting these and other painful events as omens for the end of the world, Descartes’ picture promised a rational certainty. In effect, it idealized and mathematized the civilizing process, offering to unify opposing factions by setting up nature as the common enemy of humanity. Nature was to be overcome by the divinely appointed faculty of rationality in the form of science and technology. Additionally, Descartes’ picture of nature as lifeless matter offered the leading powers of Europe a moral-free justification for overseas expansion and exploitation of the flora, fauna, and people of the New World. And with acceptance of this picture, scientism came into being.

Coming back to the theme of the civilizing process, whence comes the human longing for permanence, predictability, and so forth? Why was Descartes’ promise of rational certainty so appealing in the 17th century, and why does its scientistic form still prevail? Summarizing the religious origins of Western philosophy from the ancient Greeks to our time, Bertrand Russell (1945) said, “Religion seeks permanence in two forms, God and immortality” (p. 45). And, although he had an antireligious orientation, Russell was forced to admit on the next page that in seeking “a permanent substratum” science also tries to transcend or even deny time. If the idealistic goal of predicting everything could actually be achieved, all events future and past would be laid out like points on a vast map, reducing time to a single picture of all events simultaneously, lifeless because timeless. To rephrase our question then, why is time or change such a threat? A general explanation offered by Ernest Becker (1979) and others is the denial of death.

Denial of Death

We tend to accept time with the proviso that it stand still once it has produced whatever we value. We forget that the beauty of flowers is related to the fact that they soon disappear. Rocks, or enduring things can be beautiful too, but not with the same poignancy of flowers. Awareness of mortality is realizing the vulnerability of life, its briefness, hence its value. The young of any species are “adorable” because of this vulnerability; their death seems particularly tragic. Protecting oneself, one’s mate, one’s children, one’s house, or one’s reputation is natural. But beyond a point, trying to protect or ensure the future of anything becomes a denial of life. Any style of life which entails amassing (whether it be food, money or knowledge) is in danger of becoming a denial of life. The more one has to protect, the more one is likely to become obsessed with protection as an end in itself. The extolling of poverty in Christianity and other religions is not a denigration of wealth per se, but a reminder of the smug but fearful and combative attitude which tends to accompany a thing-cluttered, thing-protecting existence.

Without disappearance there can be no appearance, and without death there can be no life. When death is regarded in the broadest
sense, it becomes impossible to segregate it from life. When you exhale, go to sleep, experience a sexual orgasm, forget something—all these are types of disappearance necessary to life. Without disappearance there can be no genuine newness or freshness. Without experiencing the contraction of weakness, failure, pain, and other “down” phases, one cannot realize compassion and the intensity of existence. To deny death therefore is to deny life. Statements like “I’ll never love again” or “I’ll never trust so and so again” are denials of life in the attempt to protect oneself from the pain of change. One might as well desire to be a million-year-old sun-baked desert rock instead of a sentient, vulnerable being. Some people try to remain immortal by not growing up. Others deny their gender in the illusion that the animality of gender is the beginning of aging and death. Others believe they can insure a long life by spending just a little life each day. The ways of denying death are numberless.

Downward, leftward, backward, pastward, darkward, smallward: All the apparently “negative” dimensions must be readmitted equally to one’s awareness. Living-dead, zombies, vampires, ghouls, ghosts: what monsters popular imagination has created in trying to deny disappearance. It is as though something horrible is better than what seems to be the only alternative to deified something, namely oblivion or nothing at all. Modern living transcends ghosts for the most part, but fear of emptiness, silence, and such is present everywhere, like densities of city building, background music in stores, and other distractions. In a literal interpretation of the Bible, death is the penalty for the sin of Adam and Eve. But then what? Hell is not disappearance; it is a place of endlessly repeating the same inane scene. Punishment is not so much the fire and pitchforks of hell; it’s the lifeless and deathless monotony of mechanical immortality. And it bears a remarkable resemblance to the final consequences of scientism.

It might appear that I’m saying all human problems result from the civilizing process as epitomized in scientism, hence that I advocate turning back the clock. No! Like Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the civilizing process is inevitable. This is not to say it’s a process which has no perils and can be trusted mindlessly to progress forever upward. The process of abstracting is all right as long as the end is a return to life. Its danger lies in the tendency to become an end in itself, denying its origins, replacing living.

The civilizing process is like scaffolding being erected to build a house, then becoming so huge and elaborate that the end, living in the house, is forgotten. A healthy world view must encompass and allow a proper place for everything beneath and prior (or primitive) in human experience. This means a balanced view that’s not deluded by something for nothing and allows for necessary compensation of all events in their relevance to living. Rationality and science are here to stay and, when relating modestly and equally with other human activities, are irreplaceable. But a technology with worldwide destructive potential in the service of a lopsided view of nature and human nature—that is the scientism we must see through.

**A Buddhist View**

Buddhism begins with complete affirmation of time or impermanence, and an emphasis on the misery we human beings undergo because we cannot finally escape time by inventing a deathless realm anywhere. Buddhism also affirms the urge for permanence but (unlike most religions, philosophies or sciences) insists that permanence must be realized with impermanence, not in the denial of impermanence. Likewise life must be realized with death, (whether death is conceived as down, left, behind, past, dark, or nonexistence).

A Zen Master looks for the doubt which stems from your longing for an absolute, unchanging (or immortal), all-encompassing ground, versus your skepticism that none of your emotional investments are indeed the absolute you seek. A Zen Master pushes you back into that doubt when you try to quell it by insisting you’ve already found it in this or that religious object, scientific formulation, or true love. He bastes you in the hot oil of your doubt when you flee to amusing distractions or cover up with rationalizations. Of course, most people can’t abide Zen Masters for very long. To sustain the necessary awareness of doubt entails great faith, and there’s a paradox.
Faith in what? Perhaps it could be called faith that there is a satisfactory resolution to the basic questions of existence. But this faith must proceed with the constant caveat that the resolution cannot be located in any object or idea apart from oneself and, further, that one’s “self” is not an object or thing.

With a Zen view (or in immediate experience), there is no such thing as a thing, that is, no event-entity which is completely isolated, fixed, permanent, immovable, and independent of internal changes and external influences. Yet we usually define what’s “real” in terms of being fixed, permanent and so forth. With a Zen view not only is everything inextricably related to everything else, each apparent entity is itself a relationship. There are no ultimate, irreducible particles of existence for scientists to finally discover because each particle is itself a relationship, and each relationship is changing internally and externally. There is no ultimate, vast, completely simultaneous entity like “universe” which remains forever the same like an overall container of changing event-things. What we take to be the universe is changing along with all it contains. Indeed, with a Zen view every part of any whole contains that whole, as exemplified in the modern hologram where the whole picture and all its parts are somehow contained in each part. There is no eternally enduring entity apart from the holistic network of relationships. Likewise, there is no pure nothing any more than there is a pure something. Something/nothing is a temporal relationship rather than a mutually exclusive antagonism.

With a Zen view, it might be said that “ego” is one’s total worldview, including one’s notion of “I.” It is the totality of our notions about existence as well as how we regard ourselves in that picture. It consists of more or less fixed notions about existence (good/bad, right/wrong, etc.) which act as a filter for immediate experience. It is mainly a learned system of preselections or prejudices into which all experience is allocated. The more rigid its categories the more constricting its effect on immediate experience. Since it includes external phenomena it is just as much outside as inside the human body. Psychology then has no proper basis unless all aspects of a worldview are acknowledged and explored, especially those features which became fixed in the attempt to cast “mind” in the mold of Newtonian physics.

The sense of “I am” and the sense of everything else (or not “I am”) have neither a fixed location in a brain nor are they functions limited to a brain. Brain, nervous system, organs of perception and so forth are necessary aspects of “am/am not” but none by themselves are a sufficient explanation of our experience. While any theory of existence can hold up an aspect of our experience as necessary, no theory can legitimately be advanced as complete and therefore self-sufficient. (Here lies the aforementioned difference between science and scientism.) It is usually assumed that “I am” lies only on this (the body) side of the subject/object polarity. But “am/am not” is actually the interaction of both subject and object.

Nāgārjuna’s Dialectic

Anyone who engages in Zen meditation will soon realize how strongly entrenched and resistant to alteration the categories of one’s worldview are. This is especially the case with the subject/object split. Enormous effort including much intellectual work is needed to clear away the pseudoabsolutes of one’s mental clutter and accompanying emotions. “Man knows nothing till he knows how not to know” says Lawrence (1933), and the outstanding demonstration of this is the classic thesis by Nāgārjuna, a 2nd century A.D. Mahayana Buddhist author (see: Garfield, 1995; Murti, 1980; Ramanan, 1966; Streng, 1967).

Instead of attempting to resynthesize what had been pulled asunder by the nit-picking logicians of ancient India, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, he took logic as his tool and turned it on logic itself. Logic is a closed process and cannot proceed without assuming an initial (unprovable) framework like a chessboard where events are regulated by well-defined rules. Disproof of any hypothesis is demonstrated by logically uncovering a contradiction of some sort, proof by showing there is no contradiction. Nāgārjuna therefore takes every conceivable notion of reality discussed in his time, and, by extending it a few steps further than its proponents have, demonstrates an inherent contradiction. He shows, for instance, that once we have settled on a plurality...
of any kind, we can never logically change it to a unity, or vice versa.

The net result of Nāgārjuna’s endeavor is the realization that all our notions of “reality” are just that, notions, or metaphors, not reality per se. For common everyday activities, notions like quality-reduced quantities or linear causality are quite useful. But, as soon as we objectify or thingify any notion to an eternal attribute or law of the universe, forgetting its human origin, regarding it as imposed on us from the outside, we err grossly. In Judeo-Christian terms, we create an idol, thus violating the Second Commandment about not depicting God in any manner whatsoever. (With a Zen view, however, the biblical description of God as masculine, favoring one group of people over another, acting with revenge, and so on, is already idolatry.)

That which contains all events, that from which all events arise and disappear to, must be completely neutral, with no bias whatsoever. Whether we personify it as “God” or de-deify it as “Universe” doesn’t matter as long as we understand it is finally unknowable in the sense of trying to stand outside and grasp it as a conceptual object. This is not mysticism. Nothing is hidden. Indeed, because it is the most obvious and intimate quality of our experience, we constantly overlook it. So, instead of lopping off all experience that doesn’t fit idolatrous models of rationality, coming home means bringing rationality back to the family of our other faculties, inducing it to take its proper place as a modest sibling rather than a headstrong, “self-made” despot.

Can human beings live without reifying notions as idols? Can there be lovers who don’t idolize their lovees? Can there be mothers who don’t idolize their children? Can there be merchants who don’t idolize money? Can there be government leaders who don’t idolize power? Can there be actors and athletes who don’t idolize public acclaim? Probably not. It seems that a necessary aspect of growing up involves centricity. Whatever one can identify with (or hope to identify with) will tend to be idolized in some manner. My family, my town, my team: they are the best. Scientism is supposed to have rescued us from such “primitive” centricity by showing, for instance, that the sun is the center of our planetary system, not the earth. But scientism substituted a much more dangerous idol. The danger is not in satisfaction with one’s identifications. Followed through in growing up, one can come to appreciate other places, other peoples, other styles of living, without necessarily giving up one’s initial preferences. The danger lies in assuming badness, or, even worse, the nonexistence of whatever is not idolized.

Like Socrates, Nāgārjuna’s style is dialectic. He does not try by argument to convince one that any side is better than another side. Argument is a rational game which rarely changes the deeply held convictions of people. (No major scientist has ever abandoned his prime theory in the face of arguments from contrary evidence.) Nāgārjuna’s dialectic is a dialogue prompting whoever participates to accept the consequences of his/her own notions. One is exhorted to cleave to immediate experience and not be confined or misled by the words of others, not even the revered sutras of Buddhism. Western philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer who encountered this radically empirical, highly personal, logic-defeated-by-logic theme in Buddhist literature, arrived at the mistaken conclusion that Buddhism is essentially pessimistic, even nihilistic. They didn’t realize that the intent is learning how not to know (prejudge) so that knowing can rediscover its true source.

It could be protested that if all notions are metaphoric, not literal references to (of) ultimate reality, then Buddhistic terms (of which there is a plethora) are also metaphoric. Nāgārjuna not only admits this, he emphasizes it, probably to the dismay and even horror of those Buddhists of his day who (like fundamentalists in any religion) wanted a personified deity and eternally sanctified tenets. Nāgārjuna does not deny any experience of sanctity; he denies only that it can be located in any object apart from oneself and then captured in words or rituals and copyrighted as the exclusive property of a particular religion or sect.

*Bateson’s Koan*

**Immediate experience** is not a copyrighted feature of Zen or any other Asian practice. If Buddhism is universally relevant then it must be rooted in experience that is common to and
therefore potentially realizable by human beings of all cultures. Since space here doesn’t permit many illustrative pages which careful attention to Nāgārjuna’s work would demand, let’s conclude with another Western writer of our time, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who brings up a question that can be taken as a sample of Nāgārjuna’s approach, or as a modern Zen koan.

Bateson (1979, p. 98) makes a chalk dot on a blackboard and draws attention to the difference between the dot and the blackboard. Then he asks his audience where the difference is located. If the answer is that the difference is there on the blackboard, the next question might be, “In the dot or in the blackboard?” One is faced with a logical conflict if one locates the difference in either place to the exclusion of the other. To the answer that the difference is at the border between the dot and the blackboard, the next question might be, “Suppose I lift the chalk dot off the blackboard and move it away, say a foot, or a mile, or a thousand miles, where then is the difference?” With only a foot separation, the answer might be that it’s in the air between the dot and the blackboard. But when the distance is extended, the inadequacy of the answer becomes evident. So the next answer might be that difference is located in the mind of the answerer.

This leads to new problems. “Are you saying that the difference is just subjective, that it has no existence outside of your mind?” Very few people, least of all a scientifically-oriented person, would be content with such a solipsistic conclusion. Unless difference has some “outside” existence, each human being would be totally isolated. There would be no dependable relation between inside and outside phenomena. Life as we know it would probably be impossible. But, if the answerer persists with locating difference in the mind only, the next question might be, “Where in your mind is the difference?” This could lead to all sorts of answers inviting further questions which would only reveal in detail the inadequacy of the location.

Another question might be, “Since you locate this difference in your mind, where do you locate the difference between what’s your mind and what’s not your mind?” To solve that logical pretzel, a few answerers might make the “mystical” leap of George Berkeley (1710/1963, p. 29) and say that everything is in the mind of God, therefore that is where difference is located ultimately. People of “primitive” cultures might say that everything in nature is alive, albeit on different levels, therefore “mind” is everywhere, actually or potentially, so difference is both inside and outside. However it is phrased, what this answer says in effect is that difference, any difference, is actually not locatable in the usual, specific sense of locating objects.

Most Western people nowadays, having absorbed the scientific view more or less while growing up, would probably move on to the stage of answering that difference is located in the dot, the blackboard and the mind of the observer. Some might refine that answer and say the difference is located in the space between the dot/blackboard and the observer, as in light traveling from the former to the latter. But further questioning will elicit the inadequacy of these answers also. For example, “Where is the difference located when you can no longer see the dot on the blackboard?” Or, “Where is the difference located when you and the dot and the blackboard are in different parts of the world?” Ultimately the question becomes patently unanswerable when it is expanded to, say, the location of the difference between dozens of dots on dozens of blackboards in dozens of locations. Or if that is not sufficiently stumping, the devil’s advocate of time can be brought into the equation with a question like, “Where was that difference before I made the dot on the blackboard?” and “Where did it go after I erased it?”

Some people might conclude then that difference does not really exist, that it is just an illusion. If they gave such an answer to a Zen Master they might get hit with his stick and then asked, “Is this real or an illusion?” Most people would probably agree finally that this or any other difference cannot be definitively located, therefore that no difference exists in the usual sense of a locatable thing. Important consequences stem from this observation. First, note that difference is the complement of similarity or identity, that both together constitute relationship, hence all relationships are ultimately unlocatable for the same reasons that held for difference. Because of the emphasis on separation
in scientism, difference per se or “divide and conquer” became the basis of its metaphysics. Holistic approaches which emphasize relationship in the form of unity and similarity became at best inept science. Note then that difference is no more solid and specifiable than similarity or unity. So how can it be maintained that “mind” is located solely in the brain when the very basis of such a notion is unlocatable, when it is impossible to specify exactly where mind differs from body, where subjective differs from objective, or even where something differs from nothing?

The point of any koan is thinking with one’s whole body, thinking until thinking reroots itself in the totality of one’s immediate experience. The usual manner of rationality is to push a problem away and make it an object, thus perpetuating the subject/object split and reinforcing the arrogant hegemony of rationality. In koan work, the questioning process itself must become the whole world, including oneself the questioner in all everyday activities. One cannot escape the apparent paradox of a koan by leaning to either side. Great perseverance is needed to remain in the middle of what seems a hopeless trap. All one’s habitual preconceptions about the nature of existence lose their absolute character if one can persevere in the center which is zero and infinity at the same time.

How odd it seems that for centuries opposing armies in Europe prayed to the same God for victory, as if that God played games offavo:ritism. And with the atheistic view of scientism. And conflict between Christianity and scientism might don’t have to be stranded with an objectified God or an objectified Machine. Thus, while Buddhism is not theistic in the Judeo-Christian sense, it is not to be confused with the atheistic view of scientism. If Buddhism entertains a deity (or deities), He or She or It must manifest in a totally neutral manner allowing all possible polarities a free play. Thus, while Buddhism is not theistic in the Judeo-Christian sense, it is not to be confused with the atheistic view of scientism. And while it does not hold the “vitalistic” notions of some of Darwin’s critics, it is not fixed in the opposite view that mind is just an epiphenomenon of inanimate or dead matter. The centuries-old conflict between Christianity and scientism might be resolved with a Buddhist-like view that we don’t have to be stranded with an objectified God (Mind) on the one hand, or an objectified Machine on the other hand. (Feeling your heartbeat, for example, cannot be explained away in terms of polar extremes like animate vs. inanimate, intended vs. unintended, designed vs. random.) Finally, while meditation and koan practice is intensely individual, the compassion engendered brings one back to everyday life, to concern for others and everything else in the world.

Coming home is rediscovering “true self” or the eye of the hurricane from which all events arise and to which they return. It means experiencing the fresh, unique quality of any event before it’s objectified, compared or quantified. It means realizing how you disappear and come forth again and again HERE, before you were born, and after you die. In Christian terms it means experiencing what Meister Eckhart (Blakney, 1957) called “The Godhead,” before there is a separation of God (Creator) and World (Creation, Creatures). Your adult memory, knowledge, and concerns don’t vanish; they are simply no longer the assumed basis of your life. You can speak from your “true home” but you can’t actually define it, since it is no longer apart from you, hence Zen expressions like “fire cannot burn itself” and “water cannot soak itself” and (so that you won’t idolize oneness either) NOT TWO, NOT ONE.

References


Bird
AT THE CLOWN MONASTERY, .02 SECONDS BEFORE ENLIGHTENMENT