

Being Together, Becoming Sustainable. CERES Conference. May-June 2011.

If Less Is More, Nothing Is Everything.
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“I have nothing to say and I am saying it. And that is poetry.” - John Cage.ⁱ

*“A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well...”* - T. S. Eliot.ⁱⁱ

Philosophy originally meant and should still mean the “love of wisdom” (from Greek *philia* and *sophia*) where wisdom also implies *arête* (excellence/virtue) and *eudemonia* (being in good spirits from within): happiness from wisdom. There is this implication in the word: a high degree of *independence* and *self-reliance* in emotional wellbeing. This wellbeing – not affluence and consumerism, we may note – is taken as the real path to “the good life”.

Similarly Buddha advised us to “take refuge in yourself.” That is: find “nirvana” in daily practice of enlightenment. Nirvana can translate as “no winds blowing” – inner wellbeing in which the stormy winds of thought and desire and have calmed and ceased to be troublesome. There is a meditative stillness, and a peace and natural free beauty arising in and from that stillness.

As wisdom/enlightenment promotes self-reliance, simplicity, and thereby an ecologically sustainable lifestyle, it is worth exploring the Greek and the Buddhist ideals – better still if we can amalgamate them and argue for a global approach drawing on East and West. There is a strong point of similarity if we focus on Pyrrhonian Scepticism in Western philosophy, and Nagarjuna’s “shunyata” concept in Eastern philosophy. So let’s do that.

1. Pyrrhonian Sceptics.

The best textual source we have for ancient Greek Pyrrhonian Scepticism is the book, *Outlines Of Pyrrhonism*, by Sextus Empiricus (c160-c210).ⁱⁱⁱ

It seems that Sextus was both a philosopher and a physician – a point of some significance. He frequently uses medical metaphors in his text, and while he regards philosophy as being mainly an honest and relentless critical inquiry into truth, he finds it is also something that turns out to be therapeutic in effect, conducive to inner wellbeing (*eudemonia*). Naturally, he finds this to be of no small medical relevance.

The first job of philosophy is simply to critically inquire, for its own sake, into the real truth of things. What is truth? Is it possible to attain it? Has real truth been found in any of the dogmatic systems of philosophy? Sextus’s answer is: It seems that truth has not yet been found, so the proper “sceptic” keeps on openly inquiring.

Why has truth not been found yet? As it would take too much space to go into the details of the text it will have to suffice to consider two general arguments.

1. Something may *seem* to be so but that does not prove that it actually *is* so. We could be misled by the appearances. This might happen if, e.g., the appearances are relative to different minds, or

to the same mind at different times, or if the appearances are some kind of hallucination, or illusion, or dream, or deception generated by an unknown agency, natural or supernatural. They might well be, for all we know, as we cannot get outside of *the order of appearances* to discover how things really are *in themselves* – that is, to know the actual truth or reality of the situation.

Dogmatists talk as if they are God. For one would have to be some kind of omniscient being to be able to rule out the possibility of radical deception. Assuming we are not omniscient, it seems we do not know whether there is a deception or not. If so, then we cannot establish truth or reality. We can talk only of the appearances, how things *seem*.

Dogmatism is undermined, as any truth or reality could be deceptive. Hence, we cannot establish the validity of any of the great “isms” of philosophy, such as materialism or idealism, or theism or atheism or scientism, or dualism or monism, or solipsism or non-solipsism, or mysticism or shamanism, or moralism or utilitarianism or pragmatism, and so on. Even memory and temporality is in doubt.

Logically, we cannot get out of possible deception, as any attempt to get out could be a part of it. Given this, Sextus readily acknowledges that his own pronouncements are problematic too, but this only adds to the doubtful nature of the situation as such. It seems that nothing at the moment can be proved to be true, not even Pyrrhonian Scepticism. But that is precisely the Pyrrhonian Sceptic’s point.

We should note: it is not even a matter of probabilities. No probability can be established for or against the possibility of deception as anything we might take as a basis for erecting a probability argument (e.g., the past) could be part of the deception. Therefore probability is out.

2. Another general argument is summed up by Sextus in Book 2 Section 4 where the question is raised: “Does there exist a criterion of the truth?” Sextus notes that there has been a lot of dispute among the dogmatists about what the true criterion of the truth is – e.g., Empiricism? Spiritual scriptures? Mystical experiences? Drug experiences? Intuition? Rational self-evidence? – Etc. He points out that, *“in order to decide the dispute that has arisen about the criterion, we have need of an agreed-upon criterion by means of which we shall decide it; and in order to have an agreed-upon criterion it is necessary first to have decided the dispute about the criterion.”*

This is circular. Therefore, there is no way to prove a proposed criterion of truth is the true criterion. If that is so, we have no basis on which to establish truth or even “the correct decision procedure” for finding one. If so, then it seems impossible at the moment to decide on any knowledge or truth or real reality, even of the most basic sort, such as that yesterday really existed, or that there is a real material world out there, or that one is not a brain in vat, or that there is no deceiving God, or that “I think therefore I am” – etc. One sees that thought is by its very nature doubtful. Anything asserted is voidable.

Is this merely an academic exercise? Where does it get us? To this Sextus could reply: it does not have to get us anywhere. For critical inquiry is a matter of basic intellectual honesty, wonder and curiosity. One has a critical mind; therefore one inquires. It is not initially a matter of what the so-called “practical” outcome may or may not be.

Secondly, he could say that the thought that it ought to get us somewhere is itself a voidable assertion. After all, who knows what is “practical” to do? To know this presupposes one knows what the real reality is. Thus, e.g., if Islam is true, then it is practical to pray five times a day facing Mecca. Otherwise it is not – etc.

Third, the question where it gets us relates to the secondary aspect of Sextus' philosophy, i.e., where he discusses an effect that seems to him to be medically beneficial – although he says he wasn't initially seeking this effect and it surprised him. He tells us in Book 1 Section 12 that, as a consequence of thought cancelling out thought through critical inquiry, the mind was suddenly stymied and brought to a spontaneous "suspense of judgement" (*epoché*) and that the effect of this suspense, maintained for a period, was *ataraxia*, i.e., a tranquillity of mind. This was followed by a calming influence on the whole affective system – i.e., mood, desires, feelings, emotions, etc.

Why might this be so? Well, if one is agitating oneself over the big picture, over where one has come from and where one is going to, or what one should or should not do or be, or what the meaning of it all is, and so on, then if one suddenly realises that all such thoughts are instantly voidable and the mind is stymied, brought to a suspense of thought and judgement, it might well happen that the agitation is replaced by non-agitation. Mind spontaneously *lets go* and a natural peace gathers. I'd like to propose this as *the naturally green peace state*.

Suspense of judgment leads to green peace, which then leads to non-dogmatic desiring and action in the world. What is this? It is a kind of peaceful and playful form of action where one pursues one's preferred goals (as they now are in the wake of the greater peace and wellbeing one enjoys) but without being dogmatically attached to the goals being right or wrong or really necessary to attain. For one does not know this. One is acting in a kind of open-minded way, experimentally, open to what might happen, open to other people's views and experiences, hence open to discussion and negotiation rather than dogmatically insisting on things being done in some set way. Pyrrhonian Scepticism seems to make one more flexible, more in harmony with what is, including others, and so seems to make one generally more *empathic* and *receptive*.

2. Buddhism: Shunyata/Nothing.

The Madhyamika philosophy of Nagarjuna (c150-250) is crucial here. There is no space to go into the details, but basically the Madhyamika philosophy performs much the same function in the agitated human mind as Pyrrhonian Scepticism.^{iv} That is: through a sustained process of critical inquiry into truth, one proposition about the nature of reality is posited and opposed to another in such a way that in the end they all cancel one another out. The mind reaches an impasse where thought is stymied – much as happens also in response to a Zen koan (paradoxical question). Judgements are found to be voidable – *shunyata* – usually translated as empty, open, or void, like a kind of nothing (no-thing-ness).

Whatever is said or thought about anything, even shunyata, can be nullified – including, we might note, calling it no-thing-ness. *Words* are only used provisionally. In any case, in using such a term we are not talking ontologically as if talking about the true nature of being or reality, but referring to a state of mind, namely, a meditative state in where judgment is understood to be voidable, easily suspended in a kind of mysterious nothing or openness. The mysterious beauty of the immediate nothingness just is – without further comment.

The situation is non-dualist. That is, it is not a case of a separate ego-self facing off against some kind of blank nothingness out there. Rather, everything usually assumed to exist is suspended, including the self as a real separate entity. There is then just the profound mystery of the nothing in voided judgment.

Why might this be considered helpful in a Buddhist context? Because the Buddha said that *dukkha* – our suffering in life – is occasioned by *tanha*, i.e., ignorant clinging and craving or attachments. Radical non-dogmatism enables non-attachment, hence ameliorates suffering.

For example, suppose you are non-dogmatic about the need to have your coat, and someone steals it. It is no big emotional problem: if non-dogmatic you can let it go fairly easily. In Buddhism this applies to everything. So, for example, if you are non-dogmatic about the need to have your wealth or status, or youth, or health, or lover or spouse, or family and friends, or even life itself, and you lose them in the impermanence, this will no big emotional problem either. You will be able to face life and death with an open mind – which is, according to Plato anyway, exactly what Socrates did. He was non-dogmatic about death, and this enabled him to face unjust execution with an unusually high degree of equanimity.

3. Getting More Positive.

So far we've been mainly talking in terms of voidance, the mysterious nothing, the amelioration of suffering, etc. Can we be a bit more positive? Yes, because, first of all, it seems that in this meditative openness, with judgment suspended, a sense of the rich beauty of the nothing tends to flower. It's a kind of opening of wonderment at the sheer strangeness of what is, rather as if discovering things for the first time. There is *freshness* to the experience, which is why it could be called naturally green.

Coming at it from the angle of aesthetics, philosopher Kant said something similar in his book *The Critique Of Judgment*: when the faculties of mind are “in suspense” and one is not out to cognise or act pragmatically on things, one becomes much more receptive to “free beauty” – a kind of beauty available in the environment if one approaches free of judgement.^v The free beauty does not seem to mean anything: it is not tied to a concept. It just is, and seems pleasing in its non-cognitive immediacy.

It seems that if one dwells for periods in the stillness of shunyata, this naturally green free beauty arises more easily more often. As beauty becomes available all around us there is less and less need to go off pursuing beauty here or there, e.g., in expensive consumer items, or expensive holidays that use up more jet fuel, or long trips in cars up mountains, etc. Consumption tends to become redundant if beauty is free and a matter of using the mind meditatively to tune into it where you already are. Everything begins to seem rather novel and amazing. As a Zen saying goes, “*Miraculous power and marvellous activity: drawing water and hewing wood!*”^{vi}

Meditative beauty puts one in good spirits with a mind of gentle and playful appreciation toward what is. It is notable that even Kant, a arch-rationalist type not much noted for sentimentality, said this beauty tends to inspire a sentiment of affection: for we tend to love what seems beautiful to us. So if we begin to open up to seeing everything as beautiful then we can develop a more loving feeling toward it – i.e., become more universally loving. We naturally develop this kind of basic warmth or goodwill. I would propose this as naturally green *virtue*.

It can all become more positive still. We can learn from philosophers such as Nietzsche and Baudrillard. They are both Pyrrhonian types insofar they realise that thought and theory “autodestruct” – as Baudrillard puts it – and that out of this “implosion” we can more freely create a preferred positive “perspective” on life: a Yes-saying attitude (as Nietzsche would say) or a “pataphysics” (as Baudrillard would say). By this he means a kind of playful metaphysics as a preferred “imaginary” (pataphysics being rather ironically defined as “a science of imaginary solutions”). What they mean is that, if there has been a critical “twilight of the idols” of theory,

then *art* can step in to create a view – which, in principle, one can make as *magnanimous* and *re-enchanting* as one likes. The magnanimous optimistic re-enchantment of life becomes viable in and from shunyata liberation.

Responses to Zen koans operate in a similar spirit. It is not a matter of finding a correct theoretical answer, as there is none. It is a matter of realising the nothing – called “mu” in Zen – and from there creating Zen “wa” – affirmation of a harmonious whole. In this spirit Zen Master Bunan (1603-1673) responds with a short poem:

*“Die while you are alive,
And be absolutely dead.
Then do whatever you want:
It’s all good.”*

It is all good – becomes a typical response if one has been emancipated via shunyata to make it. The “great death” of Zen *mu* is completed by the “great beauty” of Zen *wa*.

One can even exercise the ultimate in artistic magnanimous optimism and posit that all is divine and God, or Dionysus or Brahman: Buddha-mind as the one Transpersonal Self of everything and everyone without alienations or exclusions. (It is the *love of all* that matters though, not the mere words used to describe it.)

In sum: *less is more to the point where nothing is everything*. For through the nothing one re-enchants everything as one and good – just so. Why not? Then, essentially, all problems are solved.

Of course there are still many games to play in life, such as promoting ecological sustainability or correcting global warming. However, whatever happens, success or failure, if one is big and strong enough (sufficient in magnanimity) it is all still one and good. One gives it “unconditional positive regard” accordingly (as that great psychotherapist of empathy, Carl Rogers, put it). This doesn’t mean one has to *agree* with what people say or do. One can still play for *changes* if one feels like it, as one probably does, acting in magnanimous goodwill.

Suppose we want to be green folk. Well green folk love nature, they say. But from nothing we can regard everything as natural. As Shunryu Suzuki Roshi taught, “*Something which comes out of nothingness is naturalness...from true emptiness, wondrous being.*”^{vii}

Often it seems the most natural thing of all is just to sit in the sun of your being and enjoy it. That is surely the ultimate in simple good living. You are like nothing and don’t need anything but celebrate everything! No need to pursue happiness here and there and use up more of the earth’s scarce resources. No need to look for the grass that is supposedly greener on the other side of the hill when green peace, beauty, and love is here-and-now where you are. Everything is the one Garden. So to use an antique expression: just sit and dig it.

Sustainability and *empathy* would become easy and natural for us. That is the point we want to get to, I assume, when we think of “*being together, becoming sustainable*”.

ⁱ John Cage, from *Lecture On Nothing* (1949) & cited in Thomas Moore, *The Re-enchantment Of Everyday Life*, Harper, N.Y., 1997.

ⁱⁱ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets, 4: Little Gidding* & cited in Stuart Holroyd: *Krishnamurti*, Element Books 1991.

ⁱⁱⁱ See *The Sceptic's Way: Outlines Of Pyrrhonism*, trans. with comm., by Benson Mates, Oxford Uni, Press, 1995.

^{iv} See Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study In Religious Meaning*, Abingdon Press, NY., 1967

^v Immanuel Kant, *The Critique Of Judgment*, trans, James Creed Meredith, OUP, 1952, Pt 1, St, 1 ff

^{vi} Alan Watts, *The Way Of Zen*, Penguin Arkana, 1990, pg 153.

^{vii} Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*, Weatherhill, 1972, pg 103-106