Editorial

The Possibility of Metaphysics

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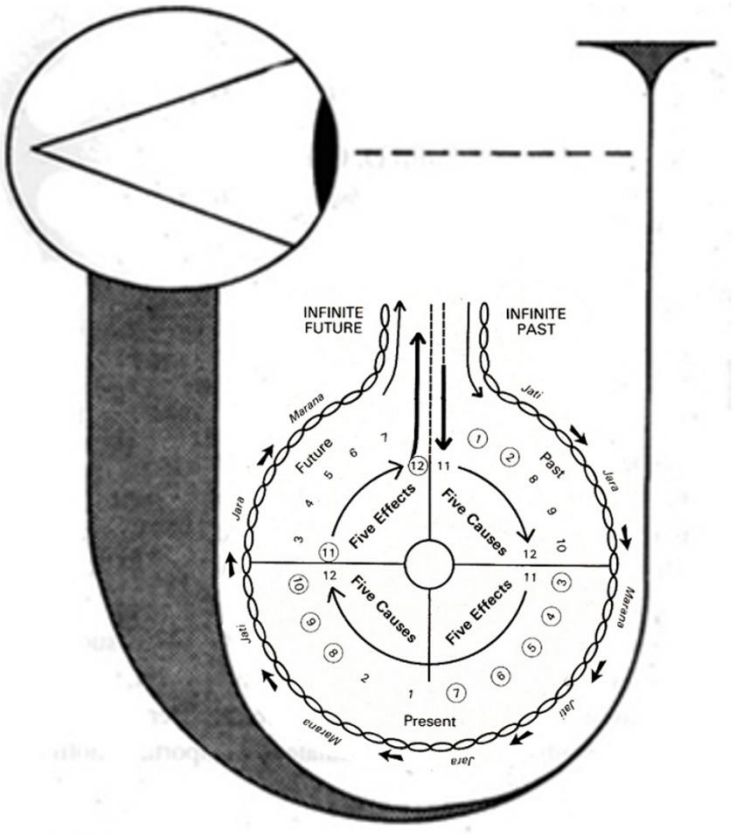

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Although the title of this focus issue is 'The Possibility of Metaphysics' the first part has as its focus not only metaphysics in general but Buddhist metaphysics in particular. This is because the motivation for this focus issue was sparked by an email from a colleague who asked for my opinion of a book written by Robert Ellis. The book is entitled *The Trouble with Buddhism*, and in this book Ellis tells us more or less that all Buddhist practitioners and philosophers are intellectually challenged at best and perhaps imbecilic at worst. Not only this but it seems that most of them had and have a pathological desire, perhaps unconscious, to 'betray their own insights'. Another of the bold claims made by Ellis is that metaphysics of any kind, positive or negative, is mistaken, impossible or both. So according to Ellis not only is Buddhist philosophy confused and mistaken in detail, it is also mistaken in principle.

Whilst reading through these bizarrely confident accusations of incompetence targeted at every member of what is in reality one of the most astonishingly fertile, precise and insightful intellectual traditions the world has been lucky to have in its midst, I have to say that I found some of the claims, and some of the reasoning, absurd, but I assume that there must be people who find them compelling, or at least reasonable. I therefore thought the project of trying to show their absurdity might be worthwhile, even if only for my own clarification.

When I came to his section entitled 'Quantum irrelevancies' I did not notice at first that he refers to my own work as 'foolish', I simply read the statement that Ellis thinks he can philosophically justify the obviously wrong claim (provided that one knows about the implications of quantum physics) that:

> some Buddhists have foolishly pounced on quantum physics as evidence about the universe itself: that Reality is insubstantial in the ways claimed by Buddhist tradition … Quantum physics may cast doubt on some previously-held views about material reality, but it does not tell us anything at all about Reality. Quantum particles may or may not turn out to be substantial in some way, we just don't know.[1]

Whilst marveling at the temerity exhibited in making such a false statement I decided to click on the footnote marker to find out who it was the Ellis considered to be 'foolish' enough to think that quantum physics actually told us something significant about 'Reality', only to find out that the footnote referred his readers to my own website (www.quantumbuddhism.com)!

As far as I know Ellis is relatively unknown outside of the confines of the FWBO (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, now changed its name to TriRatna) within which he found a spiritual home for some time, so if this kind of attack upon Buddhist philosophical competence had been restricted to him it would be of little import. However there are other, more well known and academically more established writers, in the field of attempting to scorn and undermine the spiritual claims of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Probably the most significant is Stephen Batchelor who has recently published a book, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, in which he claims that a great deal of Buddhist 'belief' is thoroughly un-modern and unscientific and needs a corresponding thorough overhaul. Notions such as 'karma' and 'rebirth' must be excised and a completely pragmatic and scientific version of Buddhism needs to be put in the place of the traditional superstitious version.

The problem with Batchelor's work, and those of his persuasion, however, is that the lack of knowledge of science exemplified by their work indicates a complete ignorance of the

dramatic discoveries of modern quantum theory. Instead they operate with what physicist Henry Stapp calls a 'known-to-be-false' conception of the physical world. In fact Ellis claims that knowledge of physical theory is entirely irrelevant to his philosophical demonstration that metaphysics is misleading or impossible.

The details of what I consider to be the mistakes, confusions, and misunderstandings of Ellis, Batchelor and others form one aspect of my three articles in this focus issue. But that is not all there is to the articles. Whilst engaged in elucidating the various issues involved a great deal of ground is covered which is, as far as I know, groundbreaking philosophical work in the field of both the science-religion debate in general and the interconnections between Buddhist metaphysical thought and modern physics in particular. The article '*The 'Epiontic' Dependently Originating Process of Cyclic Existence According to Early Buddhist Metaphysics*' in particular contains insights concerning aspects of the early Buddhist worldview of the Pali Canon in relation to the modern quantum 'epiontic' paradigm (the insight that 'epistemological' acts of perception, operating through the quantum level, 'creates' ontology) which have not been drawn previously. In this article I demonstrate, for example, that the sophisticated Buddhist notions of 'karma' (Pali: *kamma*) and 'rebirth' are entirely consistent with the epiontic paradigm.

The quantum 'epiontic' paradigm, which was instigated by Wojciech Zurek based on inspiration from the much admired twentieth century physicist John Wheeler, is clearly both a physical and a metaphysical paradigm because it tells as about the ultimate quantum 'dream stuff'[2] of reality and the fundamental mechanism which triggers this 'stuff' into manifestation:

> Measurement – perception – is the place where physics gets personal, where our role and our capabilities as observers and agents of change in the universe (and our limitations as entities subject to the laws of physics) are tested - or, rather, where we get put in our place. I believe that quick solutions, and I include both the Copenhagen interpretation and many worlds here, have a tendency to gloss over the real mystery, which is how do we - that is to say, how does life - fit within the quantum universe. I think we have managed to constrain the possible answers (for example, through research on decoherence), but I believe there is more to come. The virtue of the focus on quantum measurement is that it puts issues connected with information and existence at the very center. This is where they should be.'[3]

Thus we see that the ultimate 'stuff' is 'perception' type 'stuff', the kind of 'stuff' that Buddhist philosophy in its Dzogchen (Great Perfection) form terms 'Mindnature', an energetic field of potentiality which has a fundamental cognitive function internal to its own nature. Such a viewpoint, now validated by quantum theory, suggests that the solution to what Zurek calls the 'real mystery' of how life 'fits within the quantum universe' is that life is built into the quantum ground of reality precisely because the universe is a perception machine within which sentient beings unravel the experiential qualities inherent in the field of reality itself. Thus 'epiontic' perception is seen to be the fundamental motive force of reality.

In his important paper 'Law without Law', the paper in which Wheeler's graphic of the "universe viewed as a self excited circuit" has pride of place (see figure 1), John Wheeler wrote that the evidence of modern physics requires that we rule out the 'meaninglessness of nothingness':

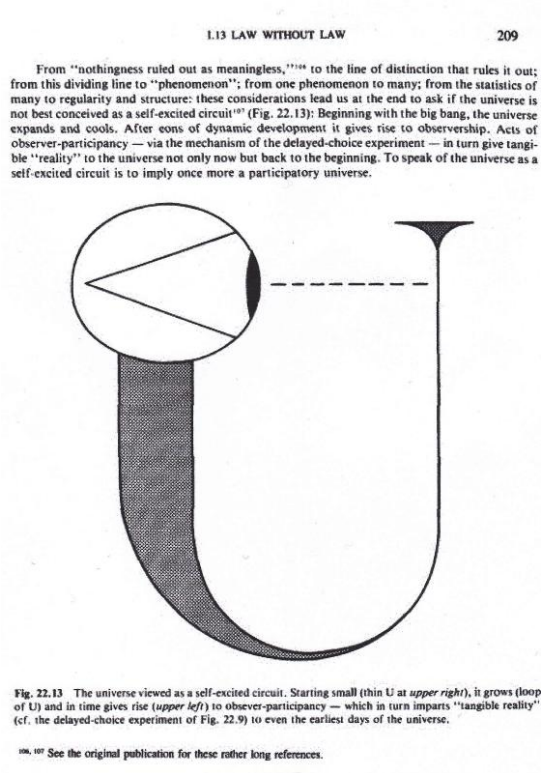
> From "nothingness ruled out as meaninglessness" to the line of distinction which rules it out; from this dividing line to phenomenon; from one phenomenon to many;

> from the statistics of many to regularity and structure: these considerations lead us at the end to ask if the universe is not best conceived as a self-excited circuit: Beginning with the big bang, the universe expands and cools. After eons of dynamic development it gives rise to observership. Acts of observer-participancy … in turn give tangible 'reality' to the universe not only now but back to the beginning. To speak of the universe as a self-excited circuit is to imply once more a participatory universe.[4]

Thus Wheeler answered his own question "Are billions upon billions of acts of observer participancy the foundation of everything?[5] And so a twentieth century quantum physicist came to exactly the same metaphysical conclusion, based upon 'experimental metaphysics'[6], as the fourth century *Yogacara-Cittamatra* (Mind-Only) Buddhist practitioner-philosophers:

> The entire world was created through latent karmic imprints. When these imprints developed and increased, they formed the earth, the stones, and the seas. Everything was created through the development or propagation of these latent karmic potentials.[7]

Within Buddhist 'epiontic' psycho-metaphysics 'karmic potentials' are produced by intentional and perceptual actions.



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From "nothingness ruled out as meaningless,"[106] to the line of distinction that rules it out; from this dividing line to "phenomenon"; from one phenomenon to many; from the statistics of many to regularity and structure: these considerations lead us at the end to ask if the universe is not best conceived as a self-excited circuit[107] (Fig. 22.13): Beginning with the big bang, the universe expands and cools. After eons of dynamic development it gives rise to observership. Acts of observer-participancy — via the mechanism of the delayed-choice experiment — in turn give tangible "reality" to the universe not only now but back to the beginning. To speak of the universe as a self-excited circuit is to imply once more a participatory universe.

Fig. 22.13 The universe viewed as a self-excited circuit. Starting small (thin U at *upper right*), it grows (loop of U) and in time gives rise (*upper left*) to observer-participancy — which in turn imparts "tangible reality" (cf. the delayed-choice experiment of Fig. 22.9) to even the earliest days of the universe.

[106, 107] See the original publication for these rather long references.

Figure 1

Today an unprejudiced and honest evaluation of the evidence can only come to the conclusion that something of this sort *must* be the case and therefore life, mind, consciousness, awareness and so on are central to the process of reality, they are the very reason for reality so to speak. However, despite this it remains the case that there are many who wish to turn the clock back to the materialistic mechanistic paradigm which was central to the Western nineteenth century

worldview through making what are actually ignorant and misleading statements. Thus science writer John Horgan wrote in his article '*Buddhist Retreat: Why I gave up in finding my religion*':

> All religions, including Buddhism, stem from our narcissistic wish to believe that the universe was created for our benefit, as a stage for our spiritual quests. In contrast, science tells us that we are incidental, accidental. Far from being the raison d'être of the universe, we appeared through sheer happenstance, and we could vanish in the same way. This is not a comforting viewpoint, but science, unlike religion, seeks truth regardless of how it makes us feel. Buddhism raises radical questions about our inner and outer reality, but it is finally not radical enough to accommodate science's disturbing perspective.[8]

This view, however, is simply incorrect both in its depiction of modern physics and its understanding of Buddhism. Such ignorant materialist viewpoints, however, are endlessly repeated in modern discourse and media simply because we still live in an intellectual climate of fundamental anti-spiritual materialism.

Because of this the wildly mistaken attempt to reduce one of the greatest spiritual-philosophical traditions of the world to a materialist 'pragmatic' palliative technique of calming the mind in preparation for doing the washing up, as Batchelor portrays Buddhism, must be resisted simply because it is false. The ultimate aim of Buddhism is 'enlightenment', which is the direct and unmediated experience of the qualitative metaphysical depth of reality. And the possibility of this aim requires the metaphysical reality of certain claims regarding the process of reality, 'karma' and 'rebirth' being central in this respect. As the Buddhist practitioner and writer B. Alan Wallace points out in his article *Distorted Visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and Atheist*:

> As Buddhism has encountered modernity, it runs against widespread prejudices, both religious and anti-religious, and it is common for all those with such biases to misrepresent Buddhism, either intentionally or unintentionally. Reputable scholars of Buddhism, both traditional and modern, all agree that the historical Buddha taught a view of karma and rebirth that was quite different from the previous takes on these ideas. Moreover, his teachings on the nature and origins of suffering as well as liberation are couched entirely within the framework of rebirth. Liberation is precisely freedom from the round of birth and death that is samsara. But for many contemporary people drawn to Buddhism, the teachings on karma and rebirth don't sit well, so they are faced with a dilemma. A legitimate option is simply is adopt those theories and practices from various Buddhist traditions that one finds compelling and beneficial and set the others aside. An illegitimate option is to reinvent the Buddha and his teachings based on one's own prejudices. This, unfortunately, is the route followed by Stephen Batchelor and other like-minded people who are intent on reshaping the Buddha in their own images.[9]

One wonders why Batchelor and his sympathizers do not simply try and found their own religion. The answer of course is that it is easier to try and hijack an already existent and popular one.

A remarkable fact of such attempts to fashion Buddhism according to a more Westernized, supposedly scientific point of view is that they are actually unscientific. Thus the physicist/philosopher Bernard d'Espagnat points out that:

> The doctrine that the world is made up of objects whose existence is independent of human consciousness turns out to be in conflict with quantum mechanics and with facts established by experiment.[10]

It is this aspect of the 'experimental metaphysics' of quantum theory which is examined in detail in the first essay *The Matter of Mindnature: Bell's Theorem Tolls for Dogmatic 'Middle Way' Scepticism and Rings Out for 'Experimental Metaphysics' and Quantum Mindnature'*. The Buddhist metaphysical viewpoint tells as the nature of ultimate reality is best understood as a fundamentally interrelated and interpenetrating field of Mind-like energy, or Mindnature, and such a view is clearly supported by the quantum violation of Bell's inequalities. In this article I examine Ellis's notion of the impossibility of metaphysics in the light of both philosophical considerations and the implications of the quantum evidence.

The next article '*Taking the'Meta' Out of Physics'* is Ellis's response to my criticisms of his work. I leave it to readers to come to conclusions without further comment from me. It is my hope that there will be feedback concerning the issues raised as I am personally convinced that Ellis's position is untenable but am curious to know whether my viewpoint is widely held. Certainly the last two articles from James Kowall, '*What is Reality in a Holographic World?*', and Brian Whitworth, '*Introducing The Virtual Reality Conjecture*', seem to support my position.

The last of my articles '*The Quantum Truth of the Buddhist Metaphysics of the 'Two Truths' or 'Two Realities*'' examines Steven Batchelor's assertion that the Buddhist 'Two Truths' metaphysics is gravely mistaken and shows that once again Batchelor is digging his own intellectual grave by ignoring the clear evidence of quantum theory that the apparently material world is ultimately an illusion created out of quantum 'dream stuff' through epiontic perception. There are in fact two levels of reality: quantum and 'classical' and these correspond to the Buddhist doctrine of the 'conventional' reality of the apparently material world and the more ultimate realm of quantum Mindnature. It is because of such clear indications from quantum theory that d'Espagnat, in his book *Physics and Philosophy* writes that:

> …it is thus reasonable to conjecture that concerning Being, affective consciousness sometimes provides us with genuine elements of information-which are not obtainable from other sources since science essentially informs us on nothing but phenomena. Where may we hope to come across such elements? I for one have three domains in mind: mysticism, poetry and music … To speak of mysticism would only be possible on the basis of an experience but very few people have. Moreover, having it would hardly be of any help since all mystics assert their actual experience is ineffable. Does meditation yield some glimpses?

Which is perhaps a suitable subject for a future focus issue.

[1] http://www.moralobjectivity.net/Twb_Quantum_irrelevancies.html
[2] Barrow, John D., Davies, Paul C. W., Harper, Charles L. (eds) (2004). *Science and Ultimate Reality*. Cambridge University Press. p136 – Wojciech H. Zurek: 'Quantum Darwinism and envariance.'
[3] Schlosshauer . M, (ed.) (2011) p159
[4] Wheeler, J (1983), 'John Archibald Wheeler: Law Without Law', Princeton Series in Physics, Princeton University Press, p209
[5] Wheeler, J (1983), 'John Archibald Wheeler: Law Without Law', Princeton Series in Physics, Princeton University Press, p199
[6] A term coined by Abner Shimony – see Ghirardi, Giancarlo (2005): *Sneaking a Look at God's Cards* p226
[7] Thrangu Rinpoche, Kenchen (2001). *Transcending Ego: Distinguishing Consciousness from Wisdom*. Namo Buddha Publication., Boulder, Colorado p28
[8] Horgan, John – Why I Ditched Buddhism – Slate Magazine Feb 12, 2003 (http://www.slate.com)
[9] Wallace, A. - Distorted Visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and Atheist
[10] d'Espagnat, Bernard, `The Quantum Theory and Reality' Scientific American, Nov. 197