

If the truth is beyond words, how can we find it?

An inquiry into inquiries into consciousness

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the Western and Chinese philosophical paradigms regarding their influence on the school's respective inquiries into consciousness, and I contend that the West will be soon be forced to reconsider its paradigm on the basis of scientific research into meditation and psychedelic experience. Specifically, I argue that current Western metaphysics of mind are constrained by the school's paradigmatic reliance on propositional argumentation as an effective net within which to capture facts of consciousness, and that Chinese philosophers are a step ahead in their recognition that language is and will always be insufficient for understanding the mind and its relation to the body. And finally I argue the most fruitful soil in which to plant novel theorizing about the mind is rooted in the burgeoning field of psychedelic science, the rigorous yet thus far largely unexplored study of altered states of consciousness as occasioned by psychedelic drugs.

Keywords: mind-body problem; consciousness; Western and Chinese paradigms; dualism; Zen Buddhism; psychedelics; psilocybin

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1 Introduction

Consciousness surely makes the mind-body problem truly intractable, but only in certain paradigmatic frameworks through which we consider concepts like “consciousness,” “mind” and “body.” For the Western philosopher, the mind-body problem appears ludicrously insoluble, for in explaining consciousness we are tasked in bridging the explanatory gap Chalmers has described as the hard problem of consciousness, the apparent gap in physical neurological function and qualitative subjective experience. [1] But for the Chinese philosopher, the conceptual “problem” of understanding consciousness is no problem at all, for in China it is paradigmatically presumed that facts of consciousness transcend direct linguistic or conceptual expression, meaning any understanding of consciousness is reached within direct experience itself – not via linguistic concepts.¹

In this paper, I will examine prevailing Western and Chinese philosophical paradigms regarding their influence on the school’s respective inquiries into consciousness. Further, I will contend that the West will be soon be forced to reconsider its paradigm on the basis of scientific research into meditation and psychedelic experience. Specifically, I will argue that current Western metaphysics of mind are constrained by the school’s paradigmatic reliance on propositional argumentation as an effective net within which to capture facts of consciousness, and that Chinese philosophers are a step ahead in their recognition that language is and will always be insufficient for understanding the mind and its relation to the body. And finally I shall argue the most fruitful soil in which to plant novel theorizing about the mind is rooted in the burgeoning field of psychedelic science, the rigorous yet thus far largely unexplored study of altered states of consciousness as occasioned by psychedelic drugs.

2 Paradigms

2.1 Definition

A paradigm is a cognitive framework that individuals implicitly rely upon in comprehending and navigating the world. It is culturally conditioned, unchosen, and generally unrecognized and unnoticed by the user. In this way, they can be likened to “a pair of ‘goggles’ one might wear that both colors and refracts all incoming light according to a particular pattern.” [2]

¹That is, there’s no conceptual problem for the Chinese philosopher as they don’t seek to principally reach truth via concepts in the first place!

The concept of a paradigm can be extremely helpful in examining broadly (1) *what* and *how* one perceives, and (2) *what* and *how* one thinks, especially when one's adopted paradigm is contrasted with another's. In this section, I will comparatively lay out the Western and Chinese paradigms and examine how they frame and guide their respective philosophical traditions in seeking Truth. Later, I will argue the Western paradigm presently restricts analytic philosophy from effectively inquiring into consciousness any further than we already have with language, and any further inquiry must step beyond language into direct experience.

Paradigms are uniquely useful for opening up cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, especially between practitioners of Western and Chinese philosophy. These traditions are so wildly different that I would guess many analytic philosophers do not view Zen Buddhism² as being worth its salt, and I know for certain that any practiced Zen teacher would claim the school of analytic philosophy produces more delusion than it does clarity. As conditioned, the Westerner scoffs at meditation as a "waste of time," and likewise the Zen meditator looks to Western philosophy as a gross misapplication of discriminative thought. It is *hard* to bridge these gaps in philosophical methodology. I do not here mean the concepts produced by the respective traditions are hard to connect – theoretically, there are some interesting correlations.³ Rather, I mean it is just plain difficult to understand one tradition while couched within another. Sunglasses are great in the sun, but stink indoors.⁴

In addition, one's reliance on a particular paradigm goes largely unnoticed by the user, and paradigms themselves are usually only reconsidered when one discovers their current paradigm is unable to explain some new finding. [2] It is a result, that when working within a relatively well-insulated⁵ intellectual tradition, the paradigmatic assumptions of that tradi-

²It is an important question to ask whether or not those critical of Zen Buddhism (or any Eastern philosophy, for that matter) even understand that which they are critical of. Zen, as a discipline, is insufficiently considered when only examined theoretically, and the analytic thinker knows little beyond theory. To him, philosophy is nothing else, so Zen amounts to little more than merely sitting around.

³Much of canonical Buddhist cosmology is completely consistent with modern scientific views of our universe. [3]

⁴Unless, of course, you are trying to look *cool*. In which case, indoor sunglasses are most definitely encouraged. Consider socks with sandals, too. But my point is, of course, that as much as a paradigm illuminates the world, it can also close one off to novel modes of inquiry.

⁵By "insulated," I simply mean that that discipline has collectively agreed upon particular strictures for rigorous inquiry within that discipline. In science, we seek objectivity, falsifiability, peer-review success, etc. In analytic philosophy, we seek pedigree (!), cogency, etc. Thought which does not conform is ignored.

tion become completely invisible, thereby enabling fluid exchanges in ideas all rooted within that one shared paradigm. This is generally helpful to the discipline in question, as analytic philosophy and modern science have respectively come to fascinating findings on the basis of their reliance on particular paradigmatic expectations for inquiry.

But this insulation can also produce intellectual atrophy. Publishing for points; bickering about absurdly abstract, sometimes unanswerable questions; fighting institutional and departmental bullshit; peddling pedagogical poetry; it seems to me that analytic philosophy, as a tradition, has long lost sight of the proper goal of philosophic inquiry: seeking the Good and True in a world filled with falsehoods and wrong-doing. Isolated from diverse thought patterns, analytic philosophy sinks into an argumentative festival of distraction, doomed to become even less publically relevant tomorrow than it is today. For the sake of the intellectual development of our society, we ought to shake things up a little.

A novel inquiry into consciousness seems like a good place to start, perhaps based upon recognition of the fact our Western paradigm has restricted us to attempting to understand consciousness mainly using language. And to its credit, the analytic tradition has produced no shortage of good-faith attempts to ensnare the essence of consciousness in linguistic expression. But on the other hand, Chinese philosophies have held for millenia that facts of consciousness are ineffable and must be immediately experienced. Many Eastern traditions have already developed extensive methods (typically meditative) for cultivating psychological states of *enlightenment*, the direct realization of facts of consciousness. Perhaps this recognition that language is inherently limited in this way is the first real step to be taken in coming to understand the ultimate nature of the mind.

Between Western and Chinese modes of thought, there are of course numerous areas where prevailing theoretic views converge or diverge. But it is impossible to merely examine Chinese philosophic theory and determine if it has any insight for Western thought without recognition that these traditions have developed, to a large degree, culturally isolated from one another. This historical separation requires a paradigmatic analysis of the schools which might reveal differing motivations and goals which frame and guide each tradition. In this way, we can use paradigms to explore philosophy in a new light. We can, to the best of our ability, step outside our own paradigm by examining our own philosophical conclusions within the context of another, and perhaps therein find motivation to reconsider our most basic culturally conditioned assumptions.

2.2 Western vs Chinese

Heitz identifies the following features as key differentiators between the Western and Chinese paradigms. The Western paradigm is characteristically

1. *Substantive*, meaning it is principally concerned with things, and these things are understood as
2. *Externally-related* to one another, each thing existentially independent in their reality but relationally connected via bridges metaphysically external to the things in themselves, and
3. *“Either/or”* (dualist) in emphasis, suggesting things are either “this” or “that.”

On the other hand, the Chinese paradigm is characteristically

1. *Eventful*, meaning it is principally concerned with processes, and these processes are understood as
2. *Internally-related* to one another, each process existentially dependent on all other parts of the whole and relationally connected via this existential interdependence, with
3. *“Both/and”* (nondualist) emphasis, suggesting no “thing or event can be what it is without not just something else but without everything else.” [2]

In addition, and most relevant to our ensuing discussion of mind, Heitz suggests the Western and Chinese paradigm also differ in their regard for the nature of truth:

4. The Western paradigm considers truth *bound* whereas the Chinese paradigm considers truth *unbound*.

It is difficult to directly juxtapose the two paradigms for several reasons. First, while individuals adopt and utilize paradigms in their philosophy, paradigms themselves are developed and maintained collectively via cultural reinforcement of societally normal modes of thought. Hence, a more complete comparative analysis of paradigmatic differentiations in philosophic thought requires a deeper examination than is possible here, involving sociology, anthropology, history as much as it does ideological philosophy. But nevertheless we may examine a few emblematic cases which may illuminate how the Western paradigm constrains analytic thinkers to utilizing thought

and dualistically propositional argumentation in their philosophic pursuits for truth.

In the West, existence pluralism and substance dualism are widely-held theoretically characteristic examples of Western paradigmatic assumptions. These theories (thoughts) frame the way Western thinkers, be they professional academics or otherwise, interpret and comprehend the world. Existence pluralism is the view that the world is composed of multitudes of independently existent concreta, clearly representative of the Western prioritization of *things* over *events*. In other words, the world is composed of distinct objects metaphysically self-subsistent and non-reliant on other forms for their reality, and we can meaningfully consider reality by addressing it as a collection of things. Bertrand Russell provides a rough sketch of this view with

I share the common-sense belief that there are many separate things; I do not regard the apparent multiplicity of the world as consisting merely in phases and unreal divisions of a single indivisible Reality.

Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1918) [4]

Hence, existence pluralism can be roughly understood as the view that worldly objects are distinct and separate from one another. Meanwhile, substance dualism is the view that the mental and the physical are fundamentally different forms of reality and as such are distinct and separable. While existence pluralism states that objects are separate from one another, substance dualism states that subjects are separate from the world of objects. These views have been theoretically foundational in the development of Western thought. Indeed, Descartes guided the tradition in the establishment that while the self can be certainly real, the "external" world beyond it remains in question prior to further justification of its existence.

A more complete explication of these theories requires much more than can be spared here, but these theories are largely illustrative of the paradigm, not comprehensive of the concept entirely. These views represent the visible tips of the paradigmatic iceberg – the deeper undercurrents which set the stage for their conception remain unconsidered. To see the deeper undercurrents we'd need to broaden our scope, for the Western paradigm not only characterizes Western philosophy but so too the culture where the philosophy originated from. In other words, paradigms are aspects of cultural and social realities, not merely descriptors of abstract theory. The abstract theory is largely resultant of those realities. To a very significant extent, theory

is the visible result of invisible socio-cultural factors which conditioned the theorizers to think as they did. That is, Western society conditioned the philosophers who developed these theories such that they found them plausible, and their advocacy for these views further reinforces the conditioning of their society

Meanwhile, nondualism is the theoretic cornerstone representative of the Chinese paradigm. In contrast with the dualistic Western view, existence is viewed monistically with all apparent separations resolvable to intrinsic unity and interdependence. Substance dualism is rejected with the assertion consciousness and matter are interdependently inseparable, and likewise existence pluralism in general is rejected in favor of more monistic metaphysics. But the paradigmatic disagreement cuts deeper here too than mere theory – there are, of course, Western thinkers who have rejected pluralism and dualism like many in China have. In comparison, it becomes clear the major differences are cultural rather than theoretic – individuals raised in the Western world are conditioned so as to view the world according to the Western paradigm, whereas those in China are likewise rely upon more Eastern frameworks for comprehending the world. This lifelong conditioning impacts a person much more than mere theory – I personally maintain a metaphysically monistic worldview, but I nonetheless function squarely within the Western paradigm, philosophically as well as socio-culturally.

The philosophical implications of these paradigmatic disagreements are vast. The paradigm within which a thinker functions conditions their entire approach to philosophy, and Chinese philosophers approach philosophy in fundamentally different ways than do their Western counterparts. There are two principle ways in which a thinker's paradigm frames and guides their philosophy: in *practice* and *communicated content*. The Western paradigm prioritizes argumentation for practice and true/false propositions for content, whereas the Chinese paradigm prioritizes inquisitive awareness for practice and the phenomenological reports for content.

If the things of this world exist independently from one another as the Western paradigm assumes, then it makes complete sense to attempt to discover the nature of things "in themselves." But the Western paradigm thereby *binds* truth to linguistic expression, and closes off lines of inquiry which approach things (no pun intended) differently. In particular, as the Chinese paradigm views reality in one indivisible whole, it is nonsense to speak of things "in themselves," for nothing exists independently of any other thing. Truth is thereby *unbound* from language, and the Chinese tradition has accordingly developed an entirely different practice than argumentation for coming to know this truth. But as we shall see, as practiced, the truth

as found is not so much *known* as much as it is *lived*, ineffably placed into motion in accordance with the prioritization of constantly changing *events* over supposedly immutable *things*.

Western analytic philosophy is founded upon the bedrock of propositional argumentation wherein a thinker attempts to wield reason to connect together true premises to construct inferential justification for some final conclusion. This reliance upon thought is encapsulated within the famous sculpture *The Thinker*, in which the depicted individual nobly applies his rational mind to discerning truth. Hidden behind this outwardly logically structured shell is the inner foundational Western paradigm that invisibly frames thought and perception with its definitively characteristic features of substantivity, extra-relationality, and either/or dualism. Consistent with the paradigm, the Western philosopher generally views herself as subject within an objective world, manipulator and judge of a reality dualistically separate from her person. It is paradigmatically assumed that the pathway towards the deepest truths is paved via weaving together externally-related premises which are either true or false, which ultimately constructs some particular view that is either true or false. Hence, the Western paradigmatic philosophic practice is fundamentally argumentative, and the contents communicated via that initially individual practice are true/false propositions that the reader may evaluate for their plausibility.

On the other hand, Chinese philosophy – and Zen Buddhism in particular – foregoes propositional argumentation and prioritizes meditation and direct insight instead. Truth is considered unbound and the things of this world are seen as merely apparent divisions of a unified Whole. And because we are necessarily inseparable from this Whole – we *are* it – it is believed we can come to know⁶ its true nature – *our* true nature. Hence the structure of philosophic practice is not rooted within thought – rather, it is based upon the direct insight into this nature, and incorporation of this insight into one’s life. Argumentation is deemphasized in favor of sharing phenomenological, practical reports. As such, in the realm of mind, Eastern thought is generally concerned with describing psychological states accompanying direct insight into the nature of consciousness and identifying the most efficacious methods for ascertaining that insight, such as meditation. Hence, while Chinese and Westerners alike inquire “what is the ultimate nature of consciousness?” and “who am I?”, they set about answering these questions in fundamentally

⁶This “knowledge,” of course, being phenomenological, not propositional. Although perhaps it finds happy expression in indirect phrases such as “All is One,” these banal platitudes do not directly capture the truth itself.

different ways. While both methods are in a sense practical, the Chinese practice requires less and gives more – one need only pay attention, no argument necessary.

3 Consciousness

3.1 The Western View

Over the last century, advances in science have inspired many to hope that as science progresses it will eventually resolve our most significant quandaries in the philosophy of mind especially regarding the mind-body problem and of consciousness itself. We observe in history a reliable trend of philosophers and theologians alike positing some explanation or another for some puzzling phenomena only to have those explanations dramatically demonstrated mistaken when scientists eventually develop effective methods for observing nature with sufficient accuracy so as to theorize about that phenomena. These observations and their accompanying theories are predicated upon shifting as best we can from a biased, subjective perspective, towards the more universal objective perspective. Such theorizing has provided some answers to our developmental origins in so far as explaining our evolutionary history as well as some rough sketches of the cosmology of the universe, inclusive of the facts we live on a round planet and orbit the flaming plasma-ball over yonder.

Experiment, and accompanying theory, has thus time and time again proven highly effective at discerning truths about the world in which we live. Accordingly, phenomena once thought to require unnatural explanations have their explanations reduced to physical description. Given how strikingly reliable this trend has so far continued, it should be no surprise the number of philosophers who've posited that perhaps explanations about mental phenomena – such as qualitative, subjective experiences, the *what it is like* of conscious experience – will eventually reducibly fold into objective physical description as well. But in *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*, Thomas Nagel argues we should not expect this, and that it perhaps may be impossible. Nagel argues that facts of consciousness (i.e. subjective, qualitative experiences) are irreducible to objective physical description as any such reduction departs from the very subjective features it seeks to describe. [5]

In making his case, Nagel asks us to consider facts of bat consciousness, which intuitively exist if only in the subjective experience for the bat, and argues that by no method could we come to discern those facts for any such method only provides us with second-hand understandings of those facts.

For instance, echolocation is surely a fact of bat consciousness – there is something it is like for the bat to engage in it – but we cannot come to know this qualitative subjective experience for it is private to the bat, inaccessible to us via imitation, imagination, physical description, or seemingly any concept at all. Any physical description or concept of the bat’s consciousness is not what it is like for the bat itself – it is merely referential, symbolically descriptive of an event immediately felt within the mind of the bat.

It is here we come to the most startling aspect of inquiring into facts of consciousness. It is not only the case that features of bat experience are inexpressable in physical terms, rather, we are linguistically limited in our own case as well. Just as we cannot objectively conceptualize the subjective experience of echolocation, similarly we cannot express to each other our own perceptions of redness in objective terms. And yet just as we struggle with this apparent difficulty, nothing is more obviously apparent than the very perceptions we struggle to explain. It is through this unexplained window of consciousness we encounter all other phenomena we take ourselves already successful in explaining. The absurdity here ought to be alarming.

In other instances in which scientific observation produces real insight, such insight is reached on the basis of moving from a "less objective" viewpoint towards a "more objective" one, thus releasing from our view any subjective peculiarities obscuring the objective reality we seek. But Nagel notes, and I agree, that such a move in this case is strictly absurd, for any move towards greater objectivity necessarily leaves behind the subjective facts sought. If subjective facts are truly so to speak, "locked" to one view point, then “any shift to greater objectivity – that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint – does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it.” [5] Hence, subjective facts of consciousness, while real, are inexpressable in objective, physical terms. This much Nagel has argued and this much I agree with. So what are we to do? Can we come to know these subjective, qualitative facts although they are inexpressable in physical terms?

It must be said that Nagel’s case applies beyond both bats and science. That is, not only are we unable to express the subjective experience of bats in physical terms, but *we are unable to express our own subjective experience in any symbolic terms whatsoever*. If we are restricted to only viewing truth as something bound to language, we are stuck. Fortunately, if we expand our scope to consider what other traditions have to say about consciousness, there may yet still be room for our bound knowledge to grow into unbound wisdom.

3.2 The Zen View

We are beings who, for all we can tell upon first reflection, spontaneously bursted forth into existence from nothingness. Simply speaking from my own personal memory, this is all I know to be true. Perhaps this isn't metaphysically right – I can certainly envision a world in which existence has persisted for eternity – but that existence which I take to be "mine," that is, my own subjective consciousness, really did just flip on at some point like a light switch, speaking phenomenologically. At some point, I was not, and then at some later point, say, *now* for simplicity's sake, I *am*. The lights are on where previously, at least as far I as I can tell, they were not. At this very present moment, the here and now, I exist. I am. For lack of a better way to ask: when did this begin?

In reflection upon my past, I search for the moment in which my consciousness was birthed. I consider my earliest memory: playing the tickle game with my mother, running from her, giggling and yelling, only for her to catch me and tickle my little three-year-old self till I nearly couldn't breathe from laughter. Is this the moment "I" came into being? I don't think so, for two minutes prior I surely existed, but my mind inhibits me from trenching up memories before this moment. I must conclude that "I" existed before in moments which escape my present ability to recall.

Should I then look to my physical birth, that moment in which infant-Alex took his first breath, as the spark to the fire of my consciousness? Again, I think not, for two minutes post-birth and two minutes pre-birth, what is the difference? All the physical matter which composed my approximately eight pound body remained much the exact same before and after my birth – even down to the (presumably) relevant neural structures. We could then look even further back, to my embryonic and fetal development, but you know as well as I do that such an inquiry seems fruitless. Hence "I" am "here," with absolutely no explanation of how I "got" "here."⁷ Hence the past is unhelpful, and the future is unknown, yet still "I" am. Left with only

⁷I take what is laid out in these few paragraphs to be the core of my motivation for caring about philosophy in general, and this thesis in particular. The question has obsessed my mind for well over one thousand days straight, now: just who the hell am I?

I have enclosed "I," "got," and "here" in quotes for I am unconvinced of the reality of their referents, hence the statement comes close to being absolutely meaningless. That is, I don't believe in an individualized subjective self, nor do I believe that self "got" anywhere, in an absolute sense. Nor do I believe there's anything ultimately real beyond the absolute Here, which is of course not the relative "here." I include all this here in a footnote because I feel it necessary to maintain the nuance, but a deeper explication of my meaning is duly warranted.

the present moment to consider, it is here and now that we look to Zen.

Thus far we, with you as my reader and myself as the writer, have cooperatively engaged in what we believe will henceforth contribute to the intellectual advancement of our species. Our motivation is this: in lobbing ideas back and forth using symbols we imbue with meaning, slightly modifying and improving upon these ideas incrementally over time, we hope to eventually come to develop ideas we believe to be *true*.⁸ The Zen Buddhist does not do this.⁹

In my understanding, the thrust of Zen Buddhism, distilled into language, is the synthesis and practical application of three claims:

1. Consciousness, fully understood, is Buddha-nature (i.e. enlightenment)
2. The substance of Buddha-nature is *ku*, or *shunyata* (i.e. emptiness)
3. The practice *zazen* leads one to direct realization of (1) and (2) [3]

There is significant nuance to these claims, and I would be foolish to say I will be able to explain Zen to the extent (or frankly, the accuracy) deserved. Nevertheless, when Nagel's conclusion in *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* is placed within the context of Zen philosophy, and the Chinese paradigm more broadly, I believe some remarkable conclusions can be drawn. In particular, Nagel's conclusion is just the form of the conclusion Zen is designed to draw one towards early in meditative practice. To juxtapose the two, I'll rely heavily on teachings from Zen master Yasutani-roshi as compiled by Philip Kapleau in his book *The Three Pillars of Zen*.

Whereas we in the West search for true ideas, a foundational Zen tenet is that ideas are generally unhelpful when seeking truth. Worse than unhelpful, ideas are likened to the crashing waves of the sea during a great storm which violently rock any ship attempting a voyage across the waters. Enlightenment is the opposite: "the mind of a Buddha is like water that is calm, deep, and crystal clear, and upon which the "moon of truth" reflects fully and perfectly." [3] Random ideas are pretty harmless, but "ideologies, beliefs, opinions, and points of view, not to mention the factual knowledge accumulated since birth (to which we attach ourselves), are the shadows which

⁸And we both justifiably assume it won't actually be us, but perhaps our intellectual progeny who stand on our shoulders to continue the work we do now.

⁹Presumably, Zen practitioners would charitably admit beliefs can be true in some limited, conventional sense, but not in the more absolute sense. And Zen, as a philosophy, is really only concerned with the absolute, directly-felt, Truth, not the conventional truths which frequently distract one in their meditative practice.

obscure the light of truth." [3] Yet the mind of an enlightened one is not thoughtless, nor lacking in creativity – the enlightened mind is merely free from delusion in the form of mental attachment to concepts which obscure full awareness of the present moment.¹⁰

Unsurprisingly, the Buddhist antidote for such delusive thought is *not* more thought. If a deluded person is told more ideas, the deluded person will simply attempt to understand those novel thoughts on the basis of their presently-held delusions. Such a consideration cannot be one productive of understanding. Rather, that which absolves delusion – that is, attachment to misguided thought – must therefore be practical, or experiential. This is *zazen*. Translated literally as "seated meditation," *zazen* as a meditative practice is a particular form of sitting and attending to one's breath (or other focal perch), but it is also more than this. Kapleau writes:

For with the ordering and immobilizing of feet, legs, hands, arms, trunk, and head in the traditional lotus posture, with the regulation of the breath, the methodical stilling of the thoughts and unification of the mind through special concentration, with the development of control over the emotions and strengthening of the will, and with the cultivation of a profound silence in the deepest recesses of the mind – in other words, through the practice of *zazen* – there are established the optimum preconditions for looking into the heart-mind and discovering there the true nature of existence. [3]

The three key aims of practicing *zazen* are (1) the development of concentration (*yoriki*), which aids one in attaining (2) enlightenment (*kensho*) in which one "[sees] into [their] True-nature and at the same time seeing into the ultimate nature of the universe and "all the ten thousand things" in it." [3] And the third aim is (3) *mujodo no taigen*, "the actualization of the Supreme Way throughout our entire being and our daily activities." [3]

Hence, the practice of *zazen* is more a method of proper observation (or attention) than anything else, the fullest cultivation of which enables the enlightened individual to fully implement their acquired insight into their life as they live it. In the aims of *zazen*, we see several aspects of the Chinese paradigm made explicit: that truth, unbound from language, rests not in understanding of certain symbolic expressions, but in one's life as it is *lived*, not merely *known*. In the words of the Buddha:

¹⁰If anything, the mind of an enlightened one, free from bondage to any particular ideology, is more able than any other to freely consider and create novel thought forms.

"Then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, there's no you in that. When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

The Buddha, *Bāhiya Sutta* [6]

In this famous excerpt, the Buddha teaches a student to see without self, in other words, without a subject: in what is seen, there is only the seen, as opposed to that and the seer seeing. If there is a seer to see, then the seer interprets what is seen according to their notions of self and their subjective preconceptions of the world so long as attachment to those subjective notions remain. In this light, it is clear the Buddha's mission aligns squarely with Nagel's mission to develop a perspective on consciousness "less attached to a specific viewpoint," for it is quite explicitly the Buddhist's mission to overcome subjective biases clouding their perception. Of particular interest is that in the course of Buddhist practice one comes to release even notions of subject and object, instead recognizing such linguistic differentiations are merely conventional, ultimately unreal in the world as it is.

As such, when we consider Nagel's ideas within a Buddhist context, we can observe a remarkable convergence. In his paper, Nagel concludes that explanations for consciousness are irreducible to physical terms and perhaps there are facts of this world inconceivable by humans, and in any event more thought should be paid to the more general problem of subject and object before considering the mind-body problem in particular. Within analytic philosophy, these conclusions are pretty much show stoppers. But within the context of the Chinese paradigm and Zen Buddhism in particular, these conclusions could be the very first steps one takes towards true wisdom – a wisdom that is *lived* and not merely *known*.

4 Paradigms, revisited

4.1 The value of experimentation

For all that the Western and Chinese traditions differ in their approach to seeking truth, both paradigmatically agree upon the paramount value of observational experiment. This is plainly obvious in the West, with our high epistemic regard for science, and for good reason. Western science has revealed deep insights about the world we live in that, through the technology we have developed thereupon, have significantly reduced human suffering. Thanks to advances in Western medicine, we generally lead healthier and longer lives. Thanks to advances in communication technology, I am able to stay in touch with my friends and family who live across the globe.

We know from Western scientific success that observational experiment works. But us Westerners are hardly the first to engage in such a practice. To continue with the illusory mind-body split a little longer: if the Westerner observes and practices science in the world, the Buddhist observes and practices science in the mind. I would even propose Western science is to "objective" observation as Buddhist meditation is to "subjective" observation. In addressing the skeptic people of Kalama, the Buddha said:

"Of course you are uncertain, Kalamas. Of course you are in doubt. When there are reasons for doubt, uncertainty is born. So in this case, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering' — then you should abandon them."

The Buddha, *Kalama Sutta* (AN 3.65) [7]

In another sutra, the Buddha advises a student to evaluate their actions for insight via "repeated reflection" over which actions are borne of insight (i.e. alleviate suffering) and which are borne of delusion (i.e. inflict suffering). [8] In other words: place your commitments into practice and determine thereafter what is insightful and what is not. The practice is in this way doctrinal as well as individual – the Buddha advocates for one to simply experiment, try things out, and see what works for developing proper

insight into reality.¹¹ In this, I see the Buddha advocating for observation and experimentation: observe yourself, and experiment with your actions to determine which are insightful and which are not. In *zazen*, pay attention and observe the mind without intervention in thought. In life, examine your actions, and via these self-experiments, seek the truth for yourself.¹²

Perhaps you disagree with me that *zazen* practice might take one towards direct insight into the nature of reality. Even so, if Nagel's point is sound, then we are still left with the conclusion that the facts of consciousness are inexpressible using symbols. Yet we are convinced these facts are real, for each each and every single one of us perceives, in every single waking hour, our very own subjective world.¹³ If we wish to come to these facts, and

¹¹I can imagine someone saying, "so the Buddhist just gets to do whatever they want? What's stopping the thief from stealing a bunch of cash and finding that it produces great happiness for them?" In this case, clearly subjective biases are not addressed. But the Buddhist view is that that which makes the thief suffer is not some direct worldly consequence of their actions, but rather that their delusions entrap them and make them suffer, whether they're aware of it or not, in their lack of liberation.

I can further anticipate the response: "well who cares about liberation if you've bought your own private island using your stolen money?" Here I would reply the thief surely would care if they understood liberation and thus was made aware of the self-harming nature to their actions, but I imagine an enlightened individual would dismiss this further concern as overly abstract, beyond the practical concern of Buddhist philosophy. In continuing on with impractical hypothetical inquiry, we simply ensnare our minds in further delusion, distracting us from our cultivation of appropriate attention... or so might say the Buddhist.

In any event, I find it silly to levy objections against Buddhism for its potential for misapplication. People cheat and steal on the regular, invoking some theory or another as justifying for their actions, be it Buddhism, deontology, or anything else. "A wrongly perceived emptiness ruins a person of meager intelligence. It is like a snake that is wrongly grasped or knowledge that is wrongly cultivated." – Nagarjuna [9]

¹²An objector may reply this practice would bring one to determine what is true merely for them, an inherently subjective result. But such an objection is more indicative of the objector's attachment to subject-object dualism than the Buddhist's. The goal in this self-driven practice is to identify where attachments produce pain and entrapment, with the aim of attaining insight thereby releasing oneself from these delusive binds to suffering. A step along that path is the overcoming of attachment to subject-object dualism, which Buddhists see as a delusion infictive of suffering.

In other words, this hypothetical objection I have raised is reliant upon subject-object dualism in its premises, but the Buddhist practice is rested upon the premise that meditation erodes attachment to subject-object dualism itself. Admittedly, this is a frustrating claim for one not already on board with the basic claims of Buddhism. It is a concern worthy of further attention.

¹³Of course, I still believe the subject-object distinction is ultimate unreal. But as a Westerner, it makes no sense to me to use a term other than "subjective" when referring to our individualized perceptual experiences.

symbols are ultimately not the way to them, what is the way? I see no other viable suggestion but direct experience.

Fortunately, there exist naturally occurring chemicals which, when we ingest them, lead us to directly experience the strangest things. I am, of course, speaking of psychedelic drugs. These chemicals provide us with a unique avenue for exploring what is possible within direct experience, possibly illuminating what sorts of wisdom might be found beyond that which can be put into language. Indeed, a common report of psychedelic experience is that it provides experiencers with ineffable insight into life problems as well as reality itself. Moreover, users commonly report experiencing the dissolution of the regular perception of oneself as a separate self – i.e. the subjectively felt notions of subject and object. I believe this suggests we can effectively utilize the psychedelic experience as a model for inquiring into the broader utility of these notions in the context of the philosophy of mind. If we have these drugs which (1) invoke strong feelings of ultimate truth and (2) erode the subjectively felt split between subject and object and (3) promote positive psychological functioning,¹⁴ I see no better basis on which to ground future inquiry into the nature of consciousness.

4.2 The paradigm shift to come

The inevitable incorporation of psychedelic drugs into mainstream culture and public awareness will carry with it profound shifts to the Western paradigm in the philosophy of mind in particular as well as the more general sociopolitical Western world. When the phenomenological effects of psychedelic drugs are observed from the objective perspective, i.e. through the lens of Western science, some remarkably Buddhist results seem to emerge. [10, 11]

In recent studies, psilocybin,¹⁵ when administered in high doses under the right conditions, has been shown to reliably occasion mystical-type experiences (i.e. experiences of ego loss,¹⁶ synesthesia (senses merging), of a dreamlike character, of visions of a revelatory nature, etc). [12] These high doses have been shown to very effectively treat nicotine addiction in smokers looking to quit [13] and end-of-life depression and anxiety in cancer patients. [14] Further, preliminary trials indicate psilocybin will also effectively treat alcoholism and treatment-resistant depression and general/social anx-

¹⁴As will be discussed, recent scientific inquiry has revealed all three of these are hallmarks of the psychedelic experience.

¹⁵The active psychoactive alkaloid present in so-called "magic mushrooms."

¹⁶That is, the loss of one's subjective sense of self-identity – the psychological and phenomenological attachment to a subjective point of view.

iety. [15, 11] Trials expanding upon these extremely promising early results are currently underway. And in all of these studies cited, these psychedelic treatments have been more effective than any other treatments we've developed¹⁷ to date.

Most fascinatingly, psilocybin appears physiologically benign. [10] That is, the specific mechanisms by which psilocybin treats these conditions are psychological and phenomenological. No doubt they alter brain chemistry and form novel neural connections – but to claim this is their primary function is absurd. To reduce the therapeutic effects of psilocybin to mere "brain chemistry," as if such a reduction were sensible, is in my view an overly acrobatic attempt to avoid engaging with the facts as discovered in the research. In every study cited, those who experienced the greatest relief for their symptoms were those who experienced the deeper mystical-type experiences. That is, the alleviation of suffering correlated directly with just how significantly one (temporarily) lost their sense of self. It can hardly get more Buddhist than that.

What's more: when psilocybin sessions are combined with a meditative practice, psilocybin even more reliably occasions mystical-type experiences, thereby promoting even greater positive psychological change. In a 2017 study, participants undergoing two high-dose psilocybin trials and receiving instruction on meditation showed "large significant positive changes on longitudinal measures of interpersonal closeness, gratitude, life meaning/purpose, forgiveness, death transcendence, daily spiritual experiences, religious faith and coping, and community observer ratings." [16] Furthermore, long-term meditative practice and psilocybin appear to affect the brain in (at least some) neurologically similar ways. Both appear to affect changes to perceptions of self via modulation of the "Default Mode Network," the brain region which has been shown to be "implicated in self-related thinking and mind wandering." [17, 10]

And psilocybin is just one psychedelic of many. So far relatively few studies have been conducted with psilocybin, and even less scientific attention has been paid to the many others. The LSD trials of the 1950s and 60s were the catalyst for the discovery of the neurotransmitter serotonin and our current most effective medicative treatment for depression – SSRIs. [10, 11] chemical n,n-DMT, hypothesized to be endogenously synthesizable in the human brain, appears to phenomenologically model the near death experience by blasting one into "hyperspace," where contact with other sentient

¹⁷Or, as the case might more appropriately be, *discovered*

beings is commonly perceived.¹⁸ [18, 19] The chemical ibogaine, sourced from an African root, has been anecdotally reported to effectively treat addiction to heroin and methamphetamine, but very little rigorous study has been performed with it due to its illegality. [20]

What has been demonstrated of experiences on psilocybin (and as predicted, what will soon be demonstrated of other psychedelics) ought to be nothing short of remarkable. I believe they should principally indicate to us two things: (1) that the Buddhists have been onto something all along, and (2) Western thinkers ought to re-evaluate their intuitions in the realm of the subjective and the objective to accommodate and explain these findings. That is to say, the psychedelic experience ought to serve for Nagel, and others, as the neuroscientific discovery of our era illuminative of the dire necessity to commit more philosophic inquiry to the drugs themselves as well as to the general problem of subject and object. It is no wonder users of psychedelic substances tend to gravitate towards Eastern religion – their traditions have built entire phenomenologies capable of making *some* sense of psychedelic ego loss. We, on the other hand, have merely built... concepts. Lots of them.

We cannot cite stigma and keep our heads in the sand any longer – these substances are set to ignite drastic societal change in unprecedented ways. The scientist and the man of God have long looked to each other as intellectual adversaries, oftentimes appealing to differing epistemic sensibilities in the scientist preferring the "objective" and the pious preferring the "subjective." Here we have a phenomenon which promises to erode this divide – conceptually, phenomenologically, and in my prediction, societally. The Western world can come together in fascination of one thing: these chemicals exist, they occur naturally, and they produce within humans the most extraordinary experiences¹⁹ which seemingly treat our most difficult²⁰ psychological ailments.

In 1996, the state of California was first to legalize marijuana, a mild

¹⁸This is by far *the* strangest finding within the psychedelic literature. I still don't know what to make of it – it sounds almost *too* far out to be real. But all true findings were once zany suggestions, right?

¹⁹In many of the studies cited, individuals were asked to rate their experiences in personal significance. Overwhelmingly, individuals responded their psilocybin journeys were among the most significant experiences of their lives, ranking comparably to or oftentimes *above* births of children, deaths of family and friends, etc.

²⁰And lethal! Tens of thousands of individuals take their own lives due to the despair of living with depression, and smoking addiction and alcoholism kill thousands as well. The legalization and destigmatization of psychotherapeutic psilocybin treatments will literally save thousands of lives.

psychedelic, for medicinal purposes. Twenty three years later, medical marijuana is now legal in 33 states across the country, and more and more Americans are waking up to the plant's long over-looked psychoactive value. As we have ignored cannabis, so too have we ignored psilocybin and other psychedelics. But social forces are changing: as of May 9, 2019, an initiative passed in Denver to decriminalize psilocybin cultivation, possession, and usage. [21] I predict that, similar to cannabis, it is only a matter of time before psilocybin captivates the public wonder.

5 Conclusion

For millenia, Western society has viewed reality according to a rigid paradigm which favors dualism and propositionally stated truth over nondualism and ineffably lived truth. This paradigm has thus far framed (and constrained) Western philosophic inquiry into matters such as consciousness, where it would seem a nondualistic and ineffable approach is significantly more suitable for pursuing fruitful inquiry. I have argued that if Nagel's point holds that facts of subjective conscious experience are irreducible to physical expression, then he has furthermore shown that no symbolic expression can capture those facts. Yet those facts are undeniably real, even most basically for the individual. Can those "subjective" facts come to be known from an "objective" point of view?

While failing to illuminate how we can objectively speak of bat consciousness, I contend that for our own case the answer is yes, in so far as "objective" understanding is understanding with "less attachment to a specific viewpoint." [22] My central point is that, when considered with the Chinese paradigm in mind, Nagel's conclusion is rather obvious: *of course* facts of consciousness transcend language and subject-object dualism. Placed within the context of Zen Buddhist practice, Nagel's conclusion can be likened to one's first basic steps into releasing one's mind from attachment to subjective views in general, as well as the delusive view that is subject-object dualism altogether. Furthermore, in recent research on the psychedelic experience, we see plainly that phenomenological transcendence of the ego leads to hugely positive psychological outcomes, especially when psychedelic sessions are combined with meditative practice.

While these considerations do not in tandem, nor independently, spell the death knell for dualism, I claim they are undoubtedly the breadcrumbs indicating where future philosophic effort will be most fruitful. The Western world only *very* recently discovered psychedelics even exist, and what

we have found out about them thus far is already striking. Likewise, the cultural divide between Eastern and Western philosophic traditions is still vast, and many Westerners fail to take seriously these traditions which may prove deeply insightful to Western attempts to understand the mind. Nagel writes we ought to question more deeply subject and object before taking up the mind-body problem – to that end I put forth Zen Buddhism and the psychedelic experience as philosophic guideposts on the path forward. For if the facts of consciousness are truly ineffable, we must seek out and dive into illuminative experience, lest we will certainly remain in delusory darkness.

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