

Nonduality – Non/duality – Many-One Duality

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Abstract: This paper explores the fundamental logical and metaphysical difference between first an either-or dualism, which posits a fundamental alternative, divide or antagonism, second what I call an either-or-and-neither nonduality, which posits a fundamental alternative and at the same time negates it, and third a both-and duality, which interprets a fundamental distinction as an ultimate complementarity. More specifically, the holistic “one/many” complementarity, between Being as a whole and the many beings parts of it, is different from the “emptiness/form” nonduality in the Heart-Sutra/Nagarjuna tradition. Even in spiritual post-postmodern, postmetaphysical, integral approaches there still is a major worldview choice to be made about what the spirit or consciousness of Ultimate Reality is: Is it self-conscious, intentional and caring, about its coherence and beauty, worth and life within. Or is it non-reflexive, transrational, “empty?”

Keywords: Buddhist logic, dualism, duality, emptiness, many-one, nonduality.

Among post-postmodern philosophies, many if not most are in the broadest sense spiritual. Not all of these are trying to make strong theses about what spirit ultimately is. Be it Spiral Dynamics, Edgar Morin's complex thought, Hanzi Freinacht's metamodernism, or Jorge Ferrer's enactive Participatory Thinking – they are all, each in their own way, avoiding Ultimate Spirit. One reason for this, I think, is that while unconscious spirit is something of a *contradictio in adiecto*, it nevertheless is very speculative to talk about the spirit, consciousness or even mind which Ultimate Reality may possess. And often speculation only paraphrases dogmas about divine spirit which one happens to have inherited from one's respective religious or mystical backgrounds. Not being a member of any (mono-)theistic creed, being skeptical about Eastern-mystical reductions of the Divine to meditative experiences too, but also believing that we experience the Divine in meditation, I hope to be relatively immune to this kind of bias.

What motivates me personally is the gap that I feel dividing Madhyamaka Buddhist ideas about an “empty” divine spirit (and the many Western-spiritual ideas inspired by it), and my own philosophical intuitions which tell me that a person's mind is “full”, that is, intentional, “directed toward” itself and its place in the cosmos - and that an ultimate spirit encompassing the whole cosmos can only be holist, thus again: not “empty”. Indeed, holism is about a whole “putting in context” its parts. How should an Ultimate Wholeness be able to do this with the body-minds of the persons it encompasses, unless it possesses itself much more consciousness and self-

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consciousness than limited persons' minds can have – more than an “empty” “witness” consciousness in any case?

I do not pretend to be able to find a point of reference everyone can accept – this clearly is impossible. All I try to do in this paper is to, say, remind people that it is not so easy, even in a post-metaphysical worldview family, to eschew the notion of Being-as-a-Whole, nor to conceive this wholeness as “empty” of reflexive, intentional, insightful ... spirit. In my view, a “full” wholeness of Being conscient of Itself is a postmetaphysical option too, beyond the authoritarian, substantialist, deterministic or reductionist ideas we connote with the notions of metaphysics in general, and theism in particular. It's rather a panentheistic “Fullness” which we as natural, limited beings are entangled with, co-creating the world, participating in it.

The concept of an ultimate “Emptiness,” and an “empty” ultimate spirit often is integrated in a bigger picture stating a so-called nonduality of form and emptiness. According to this position, form and emptiness seem to be fundamentally different, contradictory, dualistic from a reasonable, philosophical and scientific point of view – but they really are “paradoxically” one beyond difference, and beyond the mind which cannot help making (up) this kind of differences.

I will try to make the case for a different kind of nonduality, which in fact is a ... duality. I will claim that the post-postmodern and postmetaphysical problem to which nonduality is meant to be the solution, really are not dualities, but dualisms. I will argue that a nonduality of “emptiness” and “form” which is supposed to be ultimately neither of them, in fact is a, say, crypto-dualism itself, opposing the seemingly many persons' selves to the one true or real “empty” self. As an alternative to this seemingly-many-really-one dualism, I will sketch a many-one duality. In this quite different concept of nonduality, which really is a no-dualism, it's not true that we ultimately are all just the same ultimate self; instead we are persons as real as limited beings can be, “with/in”, that is, embedded in and entangled with the one Being, cosmos, spirit, God.

The Eastern-inspired, but in reality Western-neo-Eastern notion of nonduality seems to be the translation of the Hinduist notion of advaita, which literally means “not two.” This notion refers to the ultimate identity of Atman and Brahman. But the fathers of Western-neo-Eastern perennialism, like Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts, popularized an idea of not-two-ness which is syncretistic, where all Eastern mysticism, notably Hindu and Buddhist varieties, comes down to one and the same metaphysics and spiritual experience and (kind of) soteriology:

The metaphysic that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all Being – the thing is immemorial and universal. (Huxley, 1945, introduction, p.1)

It is striking how this idea omits differences between Hindu Atman-Brahman unity and Buddhist *rupa-shunyata* (“Form”- “Emptiness”) identity. But it is fair to say that the Form-Emptiness dichotomy is dominating contemporary nonduality thinking, so I will concentrate on this meaning of nonduality, leaving aside Hindu advaita. Let me just say that the idea of Atman-

Brahman unity is not denying personal selves and the intentional and self-reflexive nature of consciousness, the way Form-Emptiness nonduality does. Just compare the teachings of Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna with Hindu thinker Ramanuja's *vishishtadvaita* and even Shankara's *advaita*, both insisting on the existence of the soul/self, and thus the difference between Hindu and Buddhist teachings.

It is interesting to discuss a Buddhist type of nonduality, famously introduced by Nagarjuna, in relation with Immanuel Kant's thing-in-itself, which is supposed to transcend dual categories too. However, Nagarjuna was an anti-philosophical philosopher, whose thinking tried to dissuade people from trying to understand Ultimate Reality, encouraging them rather experience “It” by objectless meditation. Kant, in contrast, claimed that what for him were basic ultimate features of reality like freedom of choice and eternal afterlife, be “intelligible,” grasped at least by practical reason.

This being said, there is one problem common to both thinkers, which can be illustrated by Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself. It is the problem which Kant's contemporary Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi pointed out when he said:

... because I constantly was getting confused by the fact that without this assumption [the thing-in-itself] I could not get inside the system, and with this assumption I could not stay within it. (Jacobi, 1787, p. 304) (translation by myself)

Indeed, if the thing-in-itself is transcending categories of our thinking as radically as Kant claims, then how could it be qualified as just one (“the”), as the one entity (“the thing”) and as the one entity as it is (“the thing-in-itself”)? Similar threats of self-defeat keep on haunting contemporary nonduality teachings leaning on Nagarjuna's ideas, especially its *shunyata-rupa* basis.

I hesitate to say “emptiness-form” basis, which would be the standard translation / interpretation of *shunyata-rupa*, because in the famous Buddhist text known as the Heart Sutra, with which Nagarjuna shares his terminology, these Sanskrit terms rather seem to mean “lack of essence/substance of its own” (*shunyata*) and “body” (*rupa*). Here the latter arguably means simply the human body in terms of what modern science would call its anatomy, physiology and biochemistry. The body is named as merely one of several features of persons (*skandhas*), all of which the Heart Sutra says are lacking essence/substance of their own:

The noble bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, being engaged in practicing the deep transcendental wisdom-discipline, looked down from above upon the five *skandhas* (aggregates), and saw that in their *svabhava* (self-being) they are devoid of substance. (translation from Sanskrit according to <http://www.dharmabliss.org/audio/heart-ikt-audiotext.html>)

It seems to follow that what is not meant here by the word *rupa*, is the whole and structure of manifest reality or the cosmos. Of course, thinkers linking nonduality with a transrational identity of emptiness and form are free to define these terms as they wish; they just cannot, in a

discourse respecting scientific standards, appropriate mystical traditions and their concepts for themselves without critical discussion.

For the sake of the argument, however, I will leave aside these authenticity and legitimation reservations, and grant “form” (*rupa*) to be a name for all of the cosmos with all its coherence and meaning, history and individuals. Indeed, this is what Nagarjuna himself seems to have had in mind ... or would have had in mind, had he possessed our basic modern natural philosophy vocabulary. I will also grant that *shunyata* can be taken to mean not just a lack of essence/substance of its own, but an ultimate reality which is “empty” of consciousness, that is, lacking intentionality, reflexivity, personhood. I dispense myself from proving or attesting that Buddhism, Madhyamaka and Nagarjuna make such a claim, which seems more than plausible. I think this is fair enough, given Nagarjuna’s evasive and at times, by modern scientific standards, arguably sophistic argument:

If I had any position, I thereby would be at fault. Since I have no position, I am not at fault at all. If there were anything to be observed through direct perception and the other instances [of valid cognition], it would be something to be established or rejected. However, since no such thing exists, I cannot be criticized. (Brunnholz, 2004, p.218)

With the above interpretation of *shunyata* and *rupa*, we get one famous and central Heart Sutra phrase, “Emptiness is form, and form is emptiness,” as a statement about Ultimate Reality and Spirit. A more cautious reading, in my opinion, would be “The human body is lacking essence/substance,” that is, in isolation, apart from the whole of Being; which is unproblematic, almost trivial in any post-postmodern/postmetaphysical context trying to transcend Aristotelian or theist or materialist or otherwise substantialism and essentialism.

The empty-spirit-cosmic-form(s) reading, in contrast, is a very strong and questionable one indeed. Questionable not only because it seems to conceive as *the* ultimate reality what *prima facie* is a withdrawn, disidentified, “self-forgotten” state of mind induced by a special kind of meditation. Questionable also because this Ultimate *Emptiness* is claimed to be identical with a cosmos *full* of forms, among them life forms with a consciousness not only shaped, but partly constituted by their body and environment and – in the case of persons – also formed by their self-view and worldview. How should the living “forms” which are part of the cosmos be able to know, understand, self-reflect, “view the world” in a way the supposedly “empty” cosmic spirit cannot? This limitation put on what spirit ultimately is seems evident, given the opposition against all person-like divine qualities which is essential to all the Buddhist (and Buddhism-inspired contemporary) spiritual teachings built on the foundation of *shunyata*.

In its Nagarjuna version, the emptiness-form dichotomy becomes even stranger, an infinitely regressing apophatic oscillation: neither emptiness, nor form, nor both, nor neither, nor both and neither, nor both nor neither, nor ... – an oscillation which is supposed to hint at some ultimate nonduality of emptiness and form.

Philosophically and logically, this may be stranger even than Kant's thing-in-itself. And the infinite regress, a bottomlessness which in Western thinking is considered an ultimate logical vice, here is considered as a ultimate translogical virtue. We are left with a no/thing (or

anti/concept). This should alert at least scholars of Western humanities, however sympathetic with meditative awareness. Is this nondual no/thing tractable at all by founding and linking concepts and by justifying and testing arguments? But after all, nonduality arguably was designed as kind of an anti-philosophical koan, not so surprisingly after all, coming from Buddhist Nagarjuna. The purpose, quite obviously, was to discredit “form” qua language and concepts and philosophy, suggesting that these just cannot grasp ultimate reality.

Yet, the nondual neither-nor premise cuts both ways so that, ex hypothesi, “emptiness” qua objectless meditation cannot grasp ultimate reality either. This is quite a problem for both Buddhist logic and Buddhist emptiness non/metaphysics. Not only are we dealing with a neither-form-nor-emptiness argument, but also with a closely related epistemic neither-reason-nor-meditation argument. It was certainly not Nagarjuna's intention to attack emptiness as experienced in meditation, but to defeat reason, logic, and philosophy with its own weapons. His aim clearly was not to relativize emptiness/meditation in the same way he tried to relativize form/reason. His strategy was to show, in a first move, that basic worldview concepts had basic counterparts, so that the pairs were contradictory, either-or, just one of them, and hence NOT NEITHER. But then he also tried to show that NEITHER of them could reveal qualities of Ultimate Reality.

This *reductio ad absurdum* strategy might make sense, if indeed he were trying to suggest that we better let go of basic concepts altogether, and open to *shunyata*. But according to the Heart Sutra, *shunyata* itself is one of the basic worldview notions, indeed the most important:

Here, O Sariputra, all phenomena of existence are characterized by voidness.
(Sanskrit original: iha śāriputra sarvadharmāḥ śūnyatālakṣaṇā. Translation according to <http://www.dharmabliss.org/audio/heart-skt-audiotext.html>)

Concerning the translation, mark that the *dharmah* (plural of *dharma*) the Sutra is talking about are all kinds of factors of truth, existence, phenomena, ideas. But if so, then how can *shunyata* escape the fate of other basic worldview concepts? Because it isn't a concept, but a practice? It may be useful for zen meditation to lead reason astray in the iterations and oscillations of (what is called) Buddhist logic, in order to get aware of emptiness. But logically, it doesn't matter if you call emptiness a concept, a practice or otherwise. Once you use it in logical phrases like “(n)either form (n)or emptiness,” you have to accept the logical consequences, or ought to refrain from logical arguments altogether.

I am not sure whether Nagarjuna was aware of how self-defeating, how close to sophistry his strategy seems to be: neither form, nor emptiness, nor both, nor neither Certainly Nagarjuna didn't have in mind a non/entity named nonduality missed by both form and emptiness, which Ken Wilber recently has tried to, say, point at or give directions to:

But the Ultimate is different, precisely because it is not different from anything. It is the only 'referent' that has that quality (although that quality, too, is formally denied to it). The reason is that any mental concept makes sense only in terms of its opposite (spirit vs. matter, form vs. formless, light vs. dark, infinite vs. finite, conscious vs. unconscious, etc.).

But ultimate Nonduality has no opposite, and thus no concept can accurately represent it in principle (including that one). (Wilber 2012, p. 32, 33)

Instead, I suspect that Nagarjuna, in contrast, being an emptiness believer anyhow, was only interested in deconstructing philosophical reasoning from within, not caring if his either-or-and-neither paradox formally hit emptiness too, nor if it formally entailed an Ultimate beyond emptiness and form.

If Nagarjuna really had wanted to do justice to form and reason too, he could have tried to show how emptiness and form complement in Ultimate Reality, how the Ultimate is both emptiness and form and more ... a both-and which precludes either-or and neither-nor. Why not try to unveil a both-emptiness-and-form duality behind what seems an either-or-and-neither nonduality? Nagarjuna and Wilber don't even seem to consider what is sometimes called a many-one duality, which is polar, complementary, interdependent, and therefore anything but a dualism. Understandably enough, since as I already emphasized, it is quite difficult to explain why and how an “empty” ground of being and ultimate consciousness should complement with all the forms and cosmic coherence of beings, and especially with the intentional mind of human persons and even the environment-oriented sentience of living beings, both of which, whatever they are, are not empty.

The idea of an ultimate self-conscious spirit, so different from Ultimate Emptiness, surely is difficult too. And I will return to this question briefly in a concluding reflection. Let me first prepare it with a number of considerations, some of them a bit logical, about the difference between duality and dualism, which is crucial for my argument. I will set out the concept of a both-and duality in contrast with either-or dualism and a what I call either-or-and-neither nonduality.

Since we are talking about basic logics, let me begin with an analogy taken from modal logics. The concept of necessity can be “defined” by possibility (plus negation): Something is necessary if and only if its opposite is not possible. But possibility can be “defined” just as well by necessity (plus negation): Something is possible if and only if its opposite is not necessary. What we really have are two terms defining each other, with any reduction in one direction being arbitrary and misleading. Also, some call “dualism” the wave-particle duality in physics, where position and momentum can only be co-defined, context-defined. Again, what we are dealing with here, isn't an either-or dualism, but a both-and duality.

Before I contrast this both-and idea with emptiness/form nonduality, I will contrast it with the either-or idea of dualism in its classical meaning. There are very few dualisms which are balanced, that is, which really put two “realms” on an equal footing, and which are fair and honest in the sense that the pairs of concepts they oppose to each other are really meant as balanced opposites. Normally, dualisms are biased from the outset, one side of the dualism being considered as illusion, epiphenomenon, mere abstraction, by-product or dependent creation. (Manicheism may be one of the rare exceptions.) For instance, a body-mind dualism normally is advocated by people who either think that body/matter is secondary, or conversely, that mind/spirit is.

At any rate, in any remotely coherent, let alone holistic thinking, a balanced and pure dualism, that is, contradiction or antagonism or mere incidental contact or indifference between essentially independent “realms,” just doesn’t make sense. That is one reason, I think, why most so-called dualisms are intended as choices to be made (“either-or”), leading to some kind of monistic reduction. Since pure monism, however, is just as counter-intuitive as pure dualism, most often this will be carried out as a near-reduction resulting in a near-monism, that is, an overwhelming dominance of one side with a total submission of the other side, rather than its annihilation.

In current Western spiritual thought, one such near-monistic example is the talk of the real divine self (or emptiness) versus the merely seeming egos, which are seen as mere “perspectives” of the one self. Many think they can avoid an – arguably just absurd – monist nonduality, by explaining that in the absolute realm, there *really* is only one self, but in the relative realm, there *really* are many selves. In order to distinguish this view from a nonduality proper which doesn’t accept any kind of ultimate twoness, be it complementing or antagonistic, I will call “non/duality” this view, which grants a many-one duality but supposes it to be relative-absolute.

Yet I think that even this non/duality idea of the absolute Ground of Being looking onto itself from many relative perspectives ultimately is a reduction, leading to a near-monism. One essential of many-one thinking as I see it, is to deny any such reductive metaphor, which the talk about “perspectives” just seems to be. After all, perspectives don’t add anything to the overall picture. And if in our context of divine self personal selves are supposed to be more than literal perspectives, why call them “perspectives” at all, with the inevitable reductionist connotations? I admit that I am unable to make sense of this idea.

Mind you, I don’t advocate here a pre-modern and pre-postmodern, theistic divine person, into which we project the limitations of humans persons, due to our human condition. What I am advocating instead is a not-less-than-personal Spirit of Being, of the cosmos itself, in terms of understanding itself, of making sense of itself, of framing all that is, of caring about all that is.

Let me now try a conclusion, or maybe better, prospect. Why is it so evident to so many spiritual people that Ultimate Spirit is “empty”? I think that the problem is not a supposed emptiness/form near-monism or nonduality in Ultimate Reality itself, but rather a contemplation/thought dualism in many people’s minds, something which, I suggest, we can learn to ... heal, make whole. However, this would mean radically rethinking some major Western-neo-Eastern mystical premises. What we experience in the dreamless state (if indeed there is such an experience of ours), in objectless meditation, in a partial withdrawal from personal self-consciousness, would not be all of the Ultimate, although we are getting in touch with it most intimately.

In modern and postmodern and most post-postmodern thinking alike, the notions of a totality of Being and of a personal Ground of Being are thought to be relics of a premodern metaphysics, are almost anathema. I think we ought to reconsider this supposed common place. Thinking and envisioning and feeling ourselves as beings entangled with and participating in a self-conscious wholeness of Being can be a postmetaphysical option.

I am well aware that it is a daring program to develop an idea of an ultimate, all-encompassing and self-conscious spirit which is consistent with modern, postmodern and post-postmodern insights and knowledge. But I think that Buddhist-inspired emptiness / nonduality option too has to be challenged so that it starts to deal with essentials of Western both classical and modern philosophy of mind/self/soul (and Hindu too, by the way), some of which I have tried to emphasize in this short paper.

One last perspective beyond the scope of this paper: I do oppose an either-or-and-neither nonduality of emptiness and form, but not any kind of a both-and duality of emptiness and form. Indeed, a complementarity of the freedom/emergence/random nature of the beings embedded and entangled with/in the coherence/timelessness/necessity of Being makes very much sense to me. Thus, the “emptiness” aspect of ultimate reality could be linked to the beings, seen as the many “meshes”, and the “form” aspect be linked to Being, seen as the one “knitting pattern” of Being.

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