

## 11 Philosophical Interlude

This chapter picks up some questions suggested by the previous chapter. All the questions support stances. It answers all the questions in favor of common sense.

### Finite Source of Badness

When rationalism prevailed among serious thinkers, between the Classical Age and the Enlightenment, God was infinite, totally rational, and totally good. Badness came from the free will of irrational and finite beings. Badness came from not having the full bounty of God. Badness need not be horrible, but some badness was inevitable in finite beings. For example, humans cannot have the full infinite compassion of God, and we cannot rationally figure out how best to use what modest compassion we do have, so we are a bit selfish, and inevitably we do some bad things, as a result.

After Romanticism, the spirit is creativity. Badness comes from lack of creativity and from opposing the spirit. Irrationality and finitude do not matter as long as they serve the spirit. A bit of badness arising from finitude and irrationality might even be better on the greater stage. True badness is opposing the spirit even when you know it is the spirit, or true badness is deep commitment to false creativity; the two often go together. Other things take the place of infinitude and rationality, as we will see.

Common sense is finite. It is not always classically rational although it is usually biologically rational. Just because humans are confined to finite-sometimes-irrational-common-sense does not necessarily make us good, bad, or prone to either. Badness does not come from finitude or irrationality as such. Badness does not come from lack of creativity or from opposing the spirit. Badness comes because some bad behavior succeeded in our evolutionary past, we are mixed beings, and some situations promote bad behavior now. Luckily, we seem more prone to good than bad, and common sense more often promotes good than bad.

### Common Sense and Science

Common sense is not foolproof. We have to use science in addition to common sense. We have to get help from other people sometimes so as to think right. We can see a lot of science as the determined application of common sense, but, still, common sense and science are not entirely the same. Common sense calls a dolphin a "fish", for good reasons, but wrongly. Common sense says herbal medicines can give us the vitality of the forest and the source plants, when, in fact, sometimes herbal medicines can kill us. Common sense tells us to eat big plates of burned fat when that can kill us too. Outside a few such problems, science and common sense go together well.

### Common Sense and Ordinary Language Philosophy

Especially after Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was active between the two World Wars, a philosophical school arose, called "ordinary language" philosophy, which stressed the ability of ordinary language to handle all philosophical issues; undermined and devalued issues that ordinary language could not handle; avoided

all “metaphysical” questions; and felt it could achieve full clarity by using ordinary language precisely. Whatever was important, they could solve using ordinary language alone; whatever they couldn’t solve, wasn’t important; if something was important and they couldn’t solve it, nobody could solve it, and, in fact, nobody could even talk sense about it. Ordinary language philosophers do not think language is all about accurately describing the world but is more about getting people to act appropriately, although accurately describing the world sometimes is a necessary part of getting people to act appropriately. Language is a game rather than a picture. We do not say “friend” to describe but to offer help, ask for help, or tweak a relationship. Each language is part of a distinct way of life, just as football, golf, tennis, and most games are mutually distinct. The French language goes along with French life just as computer-speak goes along with geekiness. The rules of any way-of-life-with-its-language make full sense only within that way of life, like the rules of a game make sense only within the game. The value of an ace depends on the card game; the meaning of “mother” depends on the way of life. We can appreciate a way of life only within a way of life; but, if we are willing to enter a way of life, likely we can learn to appreciate it. We do not explain ways of life in terms of scientific laws like we explain eclipses. We only explain ways of life inasmuch as we describe their rules and we use art to get across glimpses of what it is to live there. If we really want to know what is going on, we have to enter a particular way of life and participate in it. For ordinary language philosophers, “game” is the new rationality while “way of life” is the new morality and the new spirit. Ordinary language philosophers are not clear if what they do is only a limited relative way of life and therefore applicable only within their community.

My stress on common sense has some points in common with that school, such as avoiding jargon, but my stress on common sense is not the same as that school. I am not nearly as relativistic. Ordinary language philosophers seem to dislike modern biology when it is applied to people. Modern biology stands outside of any particular way of life, and so they disallow that it applies to people. They over-bolster the role of convention. They tend to think that most (nearly all) games are mutually cooperative, and all ways of life are mutually beneficial to the people in them. In making this evaluation, they stand outside all ways of life, but they do not make that point clear. They do not allow that a way of life can be bad because that would require standards outside any way of life. They over-bolster the ideas of a “game” and a “way of life”. They are not fully sensitive to all the ways that people have of dealing with picking apart, bolstering, and the fluctuations of life, especially ways that might have evolutionary roots. Some issues that they try to explain away are real issues after all, or are important issues to regular people who are not philosophers, such as facing God and what is the best moral life. Ordinary language does not solve everything and does not lead to full consistency and clarity. Normal people can’t achieve perfect consistency and clarity while living an ordinary complex and contradictory life. Some confusion can’t be explained away because it is in life. Going into more details would not be useful here.

### **Really Real.**

Indo-Europeans link thing-ness and real-ness in a way that leads to confusion. Until we clear away some of the confusion, we can’t ask interesting questions such as about the reality of God. All through this section, where I use “real”, “good”, and “God”, you can substitute “dharma”, “karma”, “Heaven”, “Tao”, and “yin and yang”. The results are the same.

We want to think that goodness and reality are tightly linked: the more real you are the better you are; and the better you are the more real you. We use this connection to argue for what we like and against

what we dislike. To argue that something is better, we argue that it is realer; to argue that something is realer, we argue that it is better. Phony is bad, genuine is good. Rock-and-roll is more real than swing; the blues is more real than pop; gritty is more real than comedy; football is more real than baseball.

This technique works pretty well but it does have problems. (A) Not everything artificial is bad while not everything genuine is good. Cartoons are artificial but some of them are excellent. Poison mushrooms are real. (B) To say something is realer than another thing, we have to compare realness, which is hard to do, and sometimes is incorrect. We cannot always assess things in terms of more real and less real. (C) To compare realness, we need standards of realness. Standards of realness are not easily available. People disagree about standards. Ideas about standards change from time to time; the Enlightenment had different standards than the Romantic era. The West does have some deep persistent standards of what is real but those standards are not useful for all important things and all interesting questions. (D) To set up standards, often we choose one thing as a paradigm. This technique often is indispensable, and works well, but it does not work in all cases, even when we choose well. Too often we choose badly and carry out the technique badly. (E) To make comparisons, we extend ideas of goodness and realness from one case to similar cases. For example, we see that a bird is real and extend the realness of a bird to the realness of a cloud. This technique also is indispensable, and often works well, but can work badly even when we use it well, and too often we use it badly. We have to stop sometimes when we apply ideas of realness and goodness to ask how we got to apply them in this case, and if we might apply them better. (F) Thinkers use the issues of reality to further their own ideas. Thinkers combine picking apart, and bolstering, with issues from reality to further their own ideas. We also have to look for all that when we encounter disputes about the reality of God or about the priority of the mutually dependent relations over the things they determine.

Not only do we link goodness and realness, we also link integrity, beauty, enduring, love, empathy, deep self, logical priority, fullness, independence, freedom, importance, satisfaction, interesting-ness, creativity, simplicity, homogeneity, symmetry, consistency, cumulative-ness, and other features that I cannot think of now. Not all these features are compatible if we do not previously link them to reality and goodness and find ways to make them compatible. Having so many features, some of which are inconsistent, opens the door to abuses and manipulation. In the same way, we link the opposite of these features to badness and not-real-ness, and that opens more doors.

It is hard to use the whole list at once. Instead, we pick a key feature, establish the presence (realness) of that one key feature, and then argue from that one key feature to the realness and close links to the other key features that we like. For example, we argue that the idea of a gene is simple, so genes must be real, and so biological evolution is what we can make of it. We argue that "game" is the key to human interaction, so games are real, so interactions based on games are real and good, and then we make of the other features what we can. In a famous case, in the early history of quantum mechanics, physicists argued for the theory because it was beautiful and symmetric without worrying about its reality or about evidence. Later evidence proved the beautiful symmetric theory correct. From those quantum effects, we got validation for effects at other levels such as in chemistry. This does not happen often. We will see examples that are not so successful.

The following examples illustrate only possibilities that are relevant. They do not amount to a rigorous philosophical argument. You will recognize some of the techniques of picking apart and bolstering; I do not point them out.

In a sense, everything in the world is real: toasters, fleas, ideas, illusions, shadows, etc. In a sense, that is true, but it is not useful. It is not how we use the idea “real” and it is not how we think of the world. We really do distinguish between real and not-so-real. We accept that a cat is real but we think the smile of the cat might not be real; it might be only something we project on to the cat. We call a magician’s trick “only a trick, not real”. The question then becomes whether we think of God etc. more like the cat or like the smile on the cat.

We accept that clouds are real. We are not sure about illusions that we see in clouds. Even if we accept that the illusion is real, we do not accept that the thing we see in the illusion is real. We accept that the illusion of a dragon is real but we do not fear that a dragon will come sweeping down on us. We do not want God to be the dragon in an illusion, but, more than that, we don’t want God to be an illusion even if we accept the reality of illusions.

Suppose we take as a-paradigm-example-of-what-is-real a rock made entirely of one mineral, like a big chunk of quartz. As the rock wears down, it turns into tiny little rocks. We call a pile of little tiny quartz pieces “sand”. Each tiny little piece of the rock is as real as the big rock but is the pile of sand as real as the rock? Is a group as real as a material thing? Suppose we slowly separate the sand crystals so that eventually they are scattered all over the floor with space in between all of them. Is this group of crystals still a pile of sand? Is it still sand? We tend to think that groups with an identifiable persistent form are real, perhaps as real as material objects.

Go back to the quartz rock. We throw it against the ground to shatter it, so we can get smaller crystals to make things, including fire. The simple material object is real. Is the event of shattering real? An event is not a material thing. It might require material things but might not require the same material things. We can shatter glass, rocks, and ice. Most people think events are real but not in the same way as rocks. If events are real but not in the same way as material objects, are they as real as rocks? This situation makes people uneasy. Most people think shattering a rock or a glass is real but are not sure if falling in love or watching a TV show is as real.

Now suppose we have a sand storm in the desert moving along at 50 miles per hour. As the sand storm moves along, it kicks up first the sand here, then the sand there, then the sand even further along, and so on. It does not kick up the same sand all the time. It kicks up different sand grains as it moves along. So the material composition of the storm changes all the time but it keeps roughly the same form. Most people say the sand storm is still real. Most people say that some processes, like a sand storm or a river, are real, and are as real as material things. Anybody who has ever been caught in a big storm thinks this way.

We have extended identity-and-realness from rock to event to process. This is legitimate extending. This extending is not only a question of convention although convention can play a role.

Is God real more like a rock, an event among material objects, an event among ideas, or a process? This question makes people uneasy. They are not uneasy because they think God is not real and because we cannot ask about God's reality but because we are not asking in a way that makes sense. Even if we cannot find a way to ask about God's reality that is rooted in questions that we ask about things in this world, people still feel it makes sense to ask.

It is fun to find conundrums about reality, figure out how they work, how they go right and wrong, and how they relate to questions about God and morality. There are many examples. I don't give many more. The end results are the same. It makes sense to ask the question about the reality of God and morality even if how we ask is not quite the same way as we ask about things in this world. It is a lot of fun, and it is only human to ask. After a while, though, when we see we cannot get definite answers, it is better to ask questions about things that make a difference in this world.

The rock is a lump without much discernable form. But the quartz crystals in the rock do have definite form. Maybe God is like the crystals, in that God is a form of material stuff and events in the world but not necessarily any of the particular stuff and events. Sugar and salt also have forms but different forms. A gas does not have much form. God might be the form not of any particular stuff in the world but for the whole world. Thus it makes sense to ask about forms, and so it makes sense to ask about God even if we do not ask in exactly the same way as we ask about any of the stuff in the world. This answer is along the lines of the traditional answer descended from Greek philosophy, and living in the West in different ways such as in Thomas Aquinas and Baruch Spinoza.

Say we have twenty versions of a traditional English-American song, which happens often enough. Which version is the original real version? It is not necessarily the oldest of which we have any evidence. If the song changed during its history, and a particular version became the root of all later versions, that version might be the original real version afterwards. Not all the songs can be the original real version. Some of the songs are artistically better even though they came later. Should we consider those the real version of the song? People accept that a performance of a version might be real all the time that what is being sung might be a bad imitation and so not quite as real. Bad versions of "When I'm 64" abound, and they seem not as real as the original. People tend to pick one kind of version and think of that as the original real version even though it might have come later and even though other versions might be good in their own right but different. People think that "Franky and Johnny" sung as a straight blues is more real and better because it is a straight blues while versions sung as production numbers are phony and bad even if well done. In all these cases, we know something real is going on but we are hard pressed to say exactly what. This is like when we ask questions about God. God might be the original real version of the "song of the world" to which we no longer have direct access. Tolkien offered an explanation much like this in "The Silmarillion", which takes place as a "pre-quel" to "The Lord of the Rings".

Species persists even if individuals come and go. We can form an idealized version of a species, such as robins, even though individuals vary a lot. We tend to think a species is realer, better, deeper, and more interesting than any individual. The species "tiger" is realer than any particular tiger. Sometimes this way of thinking can be useful. But jumping to the conclusion that a type is more real than the individuals that make it up is often misleading and false. A powerful version of this fallacy is in the social sciences where a society-culture is taken as more real etc. than any individuals that make it up, and controls individuals within it.

Try to find an idea of “real” that applies to all cases in the real non-supernatural world. Try to find an idea of “real” that applies to many cases but does not extend at all to supernatural issues such as God and morality. Try to find an idea of “real” that applies to many cases, and applies without any “stretching” to supernatural issues. Most ideas of “real” do not apply to all cases even in the natural world. Most ideas about “real” stretch to supernatural cases even though the “fit” to supernatural cases is not exactly the same fit as any natural case.

### **The Good Part.**

The importance of these issues might be more apparent with morality than with God. A couple of examples are all we can do here.

This situation too comes from Aristotle: Fannie is foolhardy, Bonnie is appropriately brave, and Kathy is cowardly. Is Bonnie more integrated and real than Fannie or Kathy? Because Bonnie is appropriately brave, sometimes she is as foolhardy as Fannie and sometimes as cautious as Kathy. So her identity is more mixed than either Fannie or Kathy. It is easy to undermine mixed personalities. That does not mean we say Bonnie is less integrated and so less real. What Bonnie does depends more on her world than what Fannie or Kathy do. Does that mean Bonnie is more dependent, and therefore less real? Most people would say “no”. Maybe Bonnie is more in tune with her world because she better adjusts herself to situations, unlike Fannie or Kathy, who tend to act in stereotyped ways. Bonnie is more integrated into the interdependent net of the world that determines her actions, and thus more real. Again, most people would say “no”. Being caught up in an interdependent mutually determining net does not necessarily make something more real. We can apply ideas of integration and reality to Fannie, Bonnie, and Kathy only in some strained and unusual ways. It just does not make sense to say that any one is more real than the other two. It can make sense to say one is more integrated than the others but we have to clear what we mean. It can make sense to say one is better than the others but again we have to be clear about the situations and the overall long term. We like to think there is a connection between integration, morality, independence, and realness but that is not necessarily so.

Is suffering more real than happiness? If we do not pursue either happiness or suffering, then likely we will meet more suffering than happiness, and it seems suffering is constant and enduring while happiness is irregular and fleet. So suffering should be more integrated and real than happiness. Buddhists came to that conclusion. But that seems odd. Unless we want to personify and integrate suffering, it is not an integrated thing. We are asking the wrong questions because we are asking them about things to which they do not apply. The same problems come up with good and bad.

We are beset with problems about thingness and reality. Reality always has a hole in it, and that keeps us from getting to the heart of some important questions. Even so, we carry on with life, and can find some satisfaction.

“My bucket’s got a hole in it, I can’t get no beer  
 What’s the use of working so damn hard when I got a woman in the boss man’s yard?  
 My baby and me bought a brand new Ford, and now we’re standin’ on the runnin’ board”

## **Bolstered Interdependence**

In the classical era, rationality and infinite-ness were good while finitude and irrationality were the sources of bad. Since World War Two, overcoming subject-object dualism has become the new rationality while living in an interdependent net, within which subject-object dualism has been vanquished, has become the new infinite. Disconnection and subject-object dualism are the new sources of all evil. Don't worry if you don't know what that means yet.

Classical thinkers were wrong to find badness in emotions and finitude, and modern thinkers are wrong to find badness primarily in isolation and subjectivity.

According to stereotypes of interdependence, nothing is self-sufficient, nothing has an essence, nothing has an identity by itself, everything comes to be only in relation to other things, everything maintains only in relation to everything else, and the net of interdependence is realer than any particular thing in it. The net of interdependence is the only truly real thing. Individuality is only an illusion. These ideas show up in many schools. The modern versions that I have in mind appear in "Structuralism", "Postmodernism", "Deconstructionism", and "Phenomenology". Interdependence is allied to schools that focus on process. I do not treat process schools.

The ideas of interdependence came out of some good motives and good insights. No living thing by itself makes full sense. We can't understand a living thing except in the context of its normal way of life in its normal ecosystem, full of other living things, and dealing with the weather. Even the weather is subject to variations in the sun. We can't understand a wolf primarily by killing it and cutting it up on a table. We have to go out, live with wolves, and see how they live. We can't understand an amoeba without seeing it engulf food and then run from other small animals that want to eat it. "Kill, tag, bag, and cut up later" is not how to know most of the world. We don't understand a person unless we know something of his-her family life and work life. We don't understand the military in the United States unless we know something of its history and about how the United States works. Even an apparently obvious word like "food" doesn't make full sense by itself. We have to know that some people consider hamburgers the only food group while other people think they are poison. We tend to see whole scenes rather than an isolated part of a scene; we tend to see the cat-in-the-tree rather than the isolated cat or the isolated tree. "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts". To repeat for physics buffs: even basic particles such as electrons, photons, and quarks can be understood only in the context of their fields and in the context of the virtual particles that exist all around them all the time.

Interdependence is a good correction against bad habits of isolating and reducing. The problem is that interdependence goes too far. It picks apart the parts and bolsters the interconnected net. It overlooks any autonomy of the parts and the fact that the whole is often made up out of the interaction of the parts. Often the whole is not greater than the sum of the parts but is only the sum of the parts if you also take into account interaction. Identical twins raised in different environments do act much more alike than the average two people, even if their different family lives made a difference. Your stubborn little sister might be stubborn even if you treated her differently; she does have her own personality, as so many TV ads make sure she knows. An electron is an electron; you can't turn it into a photon without doing something drastic to it and without having some leftover parts. When an electron flies through a magnetic field, it changes the field. If you took a tiger out of India and put it in the wilds of North America, it would not

suddenly become a vegetarian or turn into a wolf. A car can be turned into a petunia planter but mostly it is still a dead car. A red light can mean anything we want it to mean but a big open outstretched hand with palm against us usually means “don’t”. A shaking fist is pretty clear even if a particular tradition might alter the meaning in limited contexts. The orbit of the Earth is influenced slightly by the orbits of all the other planets but mostly it is an affair between the Earth and the Sun. All individual academic proponents of interdependence (except maybe the Bourbaki School of mathematics) insist that they are really smart individual people, and deserve their high salaries; they have earned their respect and their ability to influence student minds.

The modern version of interdependence developed partly as a critique of capitalist ideologies: everyone can get rich; all rich people are self-made; all rich people have more talent than other people; social and political connections play no part in success; the system arises entirely out of individual effort; the system is best run by individuals selfishly pursuing only their own desires; the system automatically leads to the greatest welfare for everybody through selfish pursuit; workers are not capitalists because workers are too lazy or are too cowardly to invest, not because they never had a base from which to launch further investments; there are no socio-economic classes, only different levels of ability and effort; etc. I do not have to spell out the errors in this ideology. As a corrective to this kind of self-serving ideology, the idea of interdependence is necessary.

As with the other good motives listed above, interdependence goes too far in its critique of capitalism. It refuses to recognize the good that does come out of the system (along with the bad), see the freedom that individuals do have in capitalism compared to alternatives, and see the importance of individuals in making the system work. In going too far, I fear that proponents of interdependence support the fascism that they think they criticize.

The idea of interdependence sounds like the Hindu of “you are that”, for which see the next chapter on the Self. I have not seen much sympathy of academics who promote interdependence for traditional religious ideas. Mostly they are skeptical and critical (scornful) of traditional religion except when they use it to denigrate modern capitalist life. The idea of interdependence appears in many traditions, including elsewhere in Indo-European traditions other than in modern Western academia. I do not know enough to make further discussion along these lines worthwhile.

To any common sense person, the balance lies somewhere in the middle between analysis and holism, between total self-determination by individuals and total domination by the system. Individuals have their own innate dispositions. Those innate dispositions are shaped by the system. The individual in turn shapes the system; and so on. There is nothing surprising about this, although the outcomes can be mysterious for a while. Many of the same techniques that common sense people can use as defense against picking apart and bolstering, they can use to figure out the proper relations between parts and wholes. Just as we evolved to fight back against undermining, we evolved to find the most effective way of looking at parts and wholes.

Few modern scientists advocate “kill, tag, bag, and cut” anymore. Even skilled anatomists are acutely sensitive to the limitations on what they can learn that way, and usually are modest in their claims. We do still need skilled anatomists. Nearly all modern scientists recognize the interplay between part and whole. The modern study of animal life is an amazing beautiful exercise in appreciating animals in their natural



lives, working back-and-forth between seeing animals as individuals striving for evolutionary success, seeing the interplay between individuals, and seeing how it all takes place in an ecological context. The best corrective to ignorant ideas about interdependence is to read some of the material that has come out on animals since the 1960s. Since the 1970s, several scientific fields have grown up that are almost devoted to questions of individuals-and-interactions, with catchy names such as “complexity theory”, “chaos theory”, and “fractal geometry”. One of my favorites among these new fields studies how separate things acting individually can come into “synch” such as the glow of fireflies, the roar of frogs, or the tick of clocks.

### **Dependent Origination.**

“Dependent origination” is an idea in Buddhism, and so predates by over two thousand years modern ideas of interdependence. It is similar to interdependence but stated in another way. I do not know the historical relations between the two ideas.

Nothing in the real natural world comes into being by itself and persists in being by itself without any help from other things and despite other things. Nothing is self-subsistent and fully independent. Everything is subject to natural laws. Everything is entirely determined by natural laws. Everything is the sum total of the natural laws that have acted on it through its life history. The Buddha included karma, dharma, right, and wrong as natural laws. As we will see again in the next chapter, the Buddha argued for dependent origination to correct wrong ideas about the soul and the self, that the self is eternal, self-originating, and ultimately autonomous from the illusory external world. The next chapter on the self describes these ideas in more detail. For now, think of it like this: If there is an immutable eternal soul, then it cannot change, and it cannot decide to be better and to strive for spiritual enlightenment-release. Only if the self can change does Buddhism make sense – in fact, only if the self can change do most religions make sense. If the self can change, then it has to be subject to natural laws. Accepting that the self is subject to natural laws makes us less egotistic and makes us more amenable to correct thinking about morality and seeking spiritual release.

If everything is subject to natural laws, and natural laws pervade the world, then everything is connected to everything else through natural laws, and we arrive at something like interdependence. Dependent origination need not necessarily imply full interdependence because it does not specify in advance the relations between quasi-autonomous things. It only says they are connected and that nothing is fully autonomous. It does not rule out quasi-autonomy. The sun is the sun but the sun is not the neighboring star or any other star; the sun is subject to gravity from the neighboring star and all the other stars.

In modern terms, we might express the same idea through a focus on individual decisions: individual persons have to decide, only individuals can decide, we are the source of all our decisions, we have to consider external things but external things don't make up our minds for us, we have to bear all the rewards and punishments of our decisions, and we have to live with what happens for all eternity. It is the idea that we have an eternal soul with free will.

For non-persons, for all-natural objects, there can be no doubt that dependent origination is largely true for the same reasons listed above for interdependence. Even the sun is not eternal and self-subsistent. The universe came into being with the Big Bang about 14 billion years ago but the sun is only about 5

billion years old, and will live for only about 5 billion more years. Every living thing on Earth evolved as a result of natural laws. Every living thing on Earth was made through a process in which many things contributed to its being made. The sea is an ever-changing thing that is the result of rain, evaporation, running water, sediments, below-surface volcanoes, sunlight, etc.

Unfortunately, thinking that the self can change and that the self is subject to natural laws leads to another set of problems, similar to the problems with free will and determinism in Western philosophy; I do not solve those problems here. Buddhists want people to be able to make good decisions such as to act morally and to strive for spiritual release-enlightenment while at the same time they say all decisions are conditioned (determined) by previous events operating under natural laws. You can't have it both ways. I don't think the Buddha was irrational in teaching dependent origination but I have to say a bit more before explaining why I don't think so.

Even in the modern form as "the decider", we can see problems, especially with persons. I always found it strange that people who stress the individual as the source of decisions also stress the consequences of those decisions on family members and society. It is as if we have to make decisions but other people cannot make decisions, so we do it for them when we make decisions for us. I have heard parents talk to their children about the importance of making decisions and about the impact those decisions will have on their siblings (meaning, of course, "don't have sex or take drugs") while at the same time the faces of the children show that they see the contradiction. "If I have to decide despite all the influence from the rest of the world, then why can't my siblings do the same thing, and why don't they have to do the same thing, no matter how I decide; why do I have to be responsible for them as well as me?" This is a problem in dependent origination too.

With the Big Bang, we can see a point of origin. Someone who insists on determinism in the Western sense can, at least in theory, trace it all back to the Big Bang. Buddhists taught dependent origination before anybody knew about the Big Bang, and so they don't have that option. Either there is a starting point about which we don't know or else everything goes back forever to a mysterious nothing. In either case, there is no role for people making good decisions.

Buddhists want people not to obsess about things. They want people to focus on acting correctly and on seeing how the world works. Part of the purpose of the idea of dependent origination is to get people off ideas like heaven, hell, forever, essential immutable me, and how immutable me changes. In that sense, dependent origination is correct. On the other hand, Buddhists do not want people to obsess over questions of free will and determinism, the ultimate beginning of the chain of dependent originations, and over possibly infinite chains of determinate origins. That second obsession is the danger in getting rid of the eternal changeless me. It is a question of lesser evils at the time, and of which chance you want to take so as to get people to act better and to focus on the right things. For his time, the Buddha's decision to focus on beneficial change, and away from the eternal me, was correct.

I doubt the Buddha thought we could not make independent decisions and that we are locked in infinite chains of determination, like a drop of water constantly moving between evaporation, rain, river, and ocean. Although "dependent origination" is an English phrase, the name gives a clue to the intent of the Buddha. "Origination" can mean that things do originate, even if they also depend on their surroundings when they do originate, as an orange tree creates oranges even when transplanted but the soil affects

the taste in particular locations. We can decide on a new course. I think the Buddha meant the idea of dependent origination to argue against both the eternal changeless soul and rigid determinism.

In this version, dependent origination does not differ too much from common sense. Common sense accepts that we make decisions that are not entirely determined by our surroundings. We can decide between apples and oranges in the grocery store without worrying whether some amazing long chain of determining causes led us to the “choise”. At the same time, we also accept that our situations influence our decisions, that we are not entirely free, and that the past still influences us now. I once had a good experience with German Jewish immigrants and that experience still colors my views. Living in the American South now, I have to try hard not to let my experiences of several races and social classes get under my skin and make me prejudiced – sometimes I fear I am losing. The great comic Lenny Bruce had a monologue about tough guys who thought they could withstand any torture, and challenged them to take “the hot lead enema”. Astute military commanders know that anybody can be broken in time. At the same time, even in prison camps, or in the middle of racial hate, people act with empathy, and they reach out to do good to the other side. We have a fairly accurate sense of how much pressure people can take, are happy when people exceed our expectations, but we don’t expect it, and we don’t hold it too much against them when they don’t. Long experience improves our sense of how it all works and what kinds of people there are. Scientists can proceed as if the will were determined without worrying for now if it really is or not. Some scientists can specialize in trying to figure out this problem – sometimes I enjoy their books. Legal people can proceed as if we were almost free. We can appreciate events of the past that made us better people and can struggle against events that made us worse. We can decide to be better people and to focus on important topics. Exactly how all this works, I do not know. Nor do I offer any theories. I cannot offer foolproof arguments against either determinism or eternal changeless me. I just go along with how it seems after reasonable consideration.

### **Subject-Object Dualism**

The topic of subject-object dualism also is like the Hindu idea of “you are that”. It has always played a part in Western thinking but did not become prominent until the rise of Romanticism. It is closely related to interdependence. I don’t know the relations between all three ideas.

A “subject” is a being who knows about the world, and usually acts on the world. An “object” is a thing in the world. Subjects know about objects; subjects act on objects; objects act on other objects. An object is not a subject when it acts on another object. Whether subjects act on other subjects can be a matter of debate. These ideas partially line up with familiar distinctions in grammar: A subject is like the subject in a sentence; actions are like verbs; and objects are what gets acted on. When an object acts on another object, it can be the subject in a sentence, but we should not confuse gramamtical usage with the status of the object in the world. When “the rock hit the window”, the rock is the subject of the sentence but it is not a subject as in “Jack threw the rock” or “Jack understands about rocks”. An animal can be an object, and an idea can be an object.

Keeping a strong distinction between subject and object can lead to problems in both understanding and behavior. A strong idea of the subject can bolster the idea of the eternal autonomous me, against which the Buddha warned. We get confused, think we are more than we are, and act like it too. We think we are properly in the world if we merely intellectually understand the world. We forget we are in the world

too, and we have to interact with other things that are in the world. We forget that other things affect us, often more than we affect them. We forget there are experiences, and that some experiences are very hard to put in terms of subjects knowing objects. We think that a subject can take in the whole world, and forget that any one subject is finite and so cannot take in the whole world. We think we own the world, and can do with it what we want.

If we think everything that is not us is an object, we treat other things improperly and badly. We take as our example of an object something that reduces the features and complexity of most objects, such as a rock or a crystal. We see everything as if it were a simple inert rock, waiting to be broken apart to be understood and used. We see only isolated parts within which are more isolated parts. We “objectify” and sometimes “demonize” too. We forget about interdependence and relations. This attitude reinforces the idea that we own the world, and spreads the attitude to include every particular thing in the world. We cut up animals. We reduce ecosystems to sources of energy. We cut up the economy, thinking we can cure all problems with tax breaks for the rich or massive spending financed by debt.

Whatever is not us, we treat as “an other” or an “other”. Whatever is not like us is altogether foreign and cannot be treated as we treat ourselves and as we wish ourselves to be treated. We cannot apply the Golden Rule to what is not us. What is not us can be known from the outside, and can only be known from the outside, because it does not have a real inside like us. We treat people of other groups as if they were objects and “others”. We treat people of other groups as things, and as hostile things too. As the sole subject in the world, we feel isolated. We cannot make up for the isolation by interacting with others because they are no real others. So we acquire objects to make up for the isolation we feel; we indulge in mindless consumerist spending. We go into crazy debt. Nearly all the problems of capitalism can be seen as manifestations of a strong subject-object duality. Nearly all the social, economic, and ecological problems of the world can be seen as variations on a strong subject-object duality.

Subject-object dualism is the new irrationalism at the heart of darkness.

At least some of this analysis is true, although it is strongly overstated. The overstating makes normal people overlook the true part, and leads them to retreat back into the comfort of the false part.

What can we do about subject-object dualism? The only consistent answer I have ever read is that we should use “the dialectic” from European philosophy instead of analytic reasoning. This is not possible, for many decisive reasons that I do not go into here. It is not clear what thinkers who invoke the fear of subject-object dualism want us to do. It is not clear if they want us to merge into our world, our objects, and our others, so as to make everything one grand unity. It is not clear if they merely want us to stress the dualism less, and how they want us to do that. It is not clear if they want us to stress interaction more, and how they want us to do that. They are good critics, but being a good critic who does not offer a solution is really another manifestation of subject-object dualism. In stressing subject-object dualism without offering a cure, they actually bolster subject-object dualism. Critics do not tell us what the right balance is, and they do not tell us how to get there from here in any realistic way that normal people can follow. They do not improve on the good common sense that we get from friends and doctors. Quit eating junk food, get up off the couch, get into nature, learn, get out on a golf course, or get out into the garden, and do things instead of just watching them on TV.

Sometimes it works really well to see the world not in terms of one merged subject-object but as distinct things that we can know intellectually, as distinct things that interact, and as distinct things that gain more from the interaction that they would if they merged. We can't become the rock. We have learned a lot from post-mortem dissection. Sports are a lot more fun when we have an opponent who is not us, even if the opponent is a material thing like a golf course or a mountain. If we try to see an ecosystem as one big unified subject-object, we miss the interaction between predators and prey, and between plants and animals. A sportsman becomes one with his-her opponent for a while; but not really. A good driver becomes one with his-her car or bike for a while; but not really. A swordsman becomes one with his-her sword, but not really, and only for the short time needed to use it; otherwise, the sword is best left in the scabbard.

In "Star Wars", the interaction that good humans have with machines might represent the good merging of the subject-and-object. The interaction that bad humans have with machines represents this idea taken too far, especially when machines take over from the organic. When Anakin Skywalker interacted with his machines, he was better off. When Darth Vader became more a machine than a person, when the machine and the human tightly merged, he was worse off. General Grievous was really an organic being that had been taken over by a machine, to the point where machine and organism were entirely merged, and he became evil as a result.

### **Bolstered Subject-Object Dualism**

This section is dedicated to "Pale Fire" by Vladimir Nabokov.

The opening line from Donovan's song is:

"First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is..."

The line is adapted from Zen Buddhism. It is usually attributed to Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin:

"Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once again mountains and waters are waters".

(From David McMahan, *Empty Vision*, New York: Routledge, 2002, page 43. Quoted from D.T. Suzuki, "A Sense of Zen", in *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, William Barrett, editor, Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1956, page 14.)

The version of Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin reminds me of Heraclitus and Cratylus. A simple interpretation is: "At first, we naively think there are mountains just like what we see without knowing how much we add even to simple perceptions. Then, through study of the dharma, we see that nothing is as it seems, so there can be no such mountains. Finally, through more study, we see that undermining is not better than naïve reality, so we accept the world as it is, and with a better attitude."

This interpretation is pretty good if it stays simple like this, although it can be a mistake to add the ideas about perceptions and naïve reality right away, and to refer to dharma study right away.

The problem is that the interpretation doesn't stay simple. It gets sophisticated, half-right, and therefore totally wrong. Annoying theoreticians complicate things and make unsolvable problems by interjecting their theories. One sophisticated interpretation says the enemy of right thinking is subject-object dualism. We are wrong in the first phase because we are the victims of subject-object dualism. We improve in the second phase because we overcome subject-object dualism. In the third phase, we return to chastised subject-object dualism as a way to get along but we are a lot wiser about it.

The sophisticated interpretation introduces a point-of-view-and-problem where there is none. It is another way of interjecting a bolstered self. Humans seem desperately to need idealized explanations, especially ones that go back ultimately to their own bolstered self; and sometimes we have to allow it; but, if we can avoid it, we might as well do so. There is no need to invoke subject-object dualism only to overcome it. To do so only bolsters subject-object dualism, and thus adds another problem on top of the problem of how to deal with the world properly. Rather than allow our minds to range over all the issues that might get in the way, and to overcome them naturally as they arise, invoking subject-object dualism forces our minds to focus on the non-central problem of subject-object dualism, and so prevents us from finding natural action. If subject-object dualism is one of the intrinsic problems that get in the way, we will meet it and deal with it when it arises, as long as we are not primed to obsess on it.

If you think in strong subject-object dualities, even if your intent is to overcome them, then you have mired yourself in subject-object dualism (undermined and bolstered yourself), even if you think you will escape at the end. You bring the problem of subject-object dualism to the question of mountain-no-mountain and water-no-water, and then are amazed when you still find issues with subject-object dualism. If you bring subject-object dualism to simple moral questions such as "should I help my neighbor with the groceries?" then you and the neighbor never help each other.

The correct attitude is not to get trapped in any ideology at all. Just accept that first there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is. Accept what we do to make mountains, unmake mountains, and remake mountains every day. Accept what we do to make ourselves, unmake ourselves, and remake ourselves, every day. Accept what we do to make other selves, unmake other selves, and remake other selves, every day. If later you wish to put this ability into ideological terms as a way to have fun, and maybe to help the intellect, go ahead. If later you wish to use dharmas and sutras, the Western study of perception and evolution, or the ideology of subject-object dualism, to help you understand the ability and to put it in various contexts, go ahead. But don't expect everybody to follow you.