

**RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS:  
A ZEN BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>  
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**INTRODUCTION**

The economic crisis we have been facing has been almost unprecedented in scope and scale, and, in my understanding, it possesses not only an objective but also a distinctively subjective dimension. Stated otherwise, it is a crisis of reason. We thus need to find ways beyond the closed chamber of economic reason, which has shrunk the scope of meaningful knowledge by describing the current state of affairs solely in terms of computable and controllable „empirical sets of facts.” But how is it possible to do so? Can religious philosophy guide us in our quest for the deeper subjectivity and self-realization we need to successfully cope with the state of affairs? The current discussion seeks to present a possible answer to these questions from the perspective of Zen Buddhism as expounded by the Japanese philosophers of the Kyōto School.<sup>2</sup>

**WHAT IS RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY?**

Especially in the West, we have grown accustomed to putting economics and religion into two separate intellectual compartments, thinking of them as two different subjects that address two distinct spheres in our lives. The former is supposedly concerned with the external world of production and commerce, the latter with the inner world of meditation, ritual, and the soul, and there is properly no contact between the two. The extent to which Zen and other religious practices have become solely ways of individual spiritual development in both East and West could possibly be regarded as confirmation of this tendency, but such views have been severely criticized by the Kyōto School philosophers as mere escapism.<sup>3</sup> Many economists would surely agree with the commonly accepted perception, yet even within their field there are signs of an incipient transformation in how the object of study in economics is conceived. Economics has traditionally been regarded as systematically applying particular methodologies to one specific sphere of our lives, namely, the world of trade and markets. Today, however, it has increasingly come to be defined as a certain subjective mode of looking upon the world as a whole. As a unified conceptual framework, it proposes to provide us with more certain and lasting control over every aspect of our lives. What clearly distinguishes economics as a discipline is thus no longer its subject matter, but rather its intellectual approach.<sup>4</sup>

This role of this approach, which is defined by such terms as „rational choice,” „utility,” and „profit maximization,” is „to analyze an almost endlessly varied set of problems, including the evolution of language..., church attendance..., capital punishment..., the legal system..., the extinction of animals..., and the incidence of suicide.” And insofar as this list is continuously expanding, now

involving such issues as „fertility, education, the uses of crime, marriage, social interactions, and other ‘sociological’, ‘legal’, and ‘political problems’<sup>5</sup> it seems only natural to incorporate religious questions into it as well. Indeed, our religious feelings, our being part of a religious community, and even our belief in eternal life have now come to be understood from a certain perspective as dependent variables of utility-maximizing functions.<sup>6</sup> Even if we were „suicide bombers killing in the name of God,” economists could still quite confidently tell us that we are acting rationally within the framework of the approach they use.<sup>7</sup>

Although such an academic approach to religion might appear to be quite extreme, it nevertheless reflects a fundamental tendency in our modern lives, namely, the tendency for the economic sphere to expand into the inner depths of each person’s self as it seeks to shape all aspects of our lives, including our most profound religious experiences. As ever more of our daily life becomes embedded in the economic sphere, ever more of our thinking takes on an economic cast. We thereby grow accustomed to constantly creating new data by applying computational procedures to our lives, although this proceeds in a mostly unnoticed manner.

But there is a danger hidden in this procedure insofar as its claim to totality blinds us to other sources of creativity. This particularly inhibits our creative capabilities in respect to the framework within which it is possible to make a fundamental critique of our current preferences, search for new ways of looking at the world, and radically change perspectives. Stated otherwise, while economics as conceived in terms of our everyday habitus, or as an exercise of prudential reason, permits us to permanently reconsider and re-evaluate everything outside us, it tacitly makes itself into a pre-given law that speaks to us and shapes us from within. It is logically consistent in such circumstances for economics to answer the question „What is religion?” by considering it to be no more than just another object for maximizing our utility, that is, calculating our advantage.

I wish to argue, however, that religion has a deeper philosophical meaning that is waiting to be explored from the perspective of Zen Buddhism. To begin with, Zen clearly denies that an answer to this question can possibly be given within the framework of the economic approach:

To say that we need religion, for example, for the sake of social order, or human welfare, or public morals is a mistake, or at least a confusion of priorities. Religion must not be considered from the viewpoint of utility, any more than life should. A religion concerned primarily with its own utility bears witness to its own degeneration. One can ask about the utility of things like eating for the natural life, or of things like learning and the arts of culture. In fact, in such matters the question of utility should be of constant concern. Our ordinary mode of

being is restricted to these levels of natural or cultural life. *But it is in breaking through that ordinary mode of being and overturning it from the ground up... that religion becomes something we need – a must for life.*<sup>8</sup>

Although articulating the full meaning of this passage will require the whole of our present discussion, I wish to draw attention to two distinct but interrelated issues it raises, namely, 1) Zen Buddhism calls for a fundamental transformation of our everyday economic mentality and 2) it demands that we critically rethink economics as a science. In respect to the first of these, we can say that, for Zen, religion cannot become an object of our utility calculations – it is non-objectifiable.<sup>9</sup> Nor is it simply a subjective type of mentality that determines how we confront the world. Religion does not reside simply without us or within us. It is rather a transformative power which, by opening up our own inner background, transforms both our subjective mentality and our objective grasp of the environment.<sup>10</sup> Religious philosophy in particular serves to change and deepen our awareness. This occurs „when the mode of looking at and thinking about everything in terms of how it relates to us is broken through, where the mode of our living that puts ourselves at the center of everything is overturned.”<sup>11</sup>

Religious philosophy for Zen is thereby is an „essential conversion of our existence, of ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> It is a practice of self-emptying that effects a transition from everyday consciousness to satori (enlightenment). As such, it does not mean to refrain from thinking, but rather to radically transform it. One aim of religious philosophy is thus to calm our ordinary mind by making our thoughts clearer. For this purpose we are to develop methodological procedures that open up higher viewpoints which encompass our previously more limited knowledge in much richer and broader contexts. For example, we usually think of the economy as a sum of things and events outside us that is apparently concerned only with markets, institutions, and goods. We thus pay no attention to our own conscious mediating operations, but exclusively focus on what we come to know through these operations. This holds true both in our everyday life and in the practice of economic science. In contrast, Zen relentlessly calls to mind the maxim that we should know our own knowing so that we can gain mastery over the mediating operations by which both common sense and scientific meaning becomes known. We need to creatively „operate on the operations” in order to gain control over, and ultimately break free from, the conceptual systems that hold us captive.

A Zen expression is that we need to shine the light on what is directly underfoot.<sup>13</sup> This cannot be achieved by simply „stripping off” our everyday modes of knowing through escape into a separate religious sphere – as if there were a separate religious sphere. We are not to negate our own identities as we live and act in modern market economies, but rather self-consciously appropriate those identities. The term „appropriation” (jikaku) literally translates in Japanese as „transformation into the self.”<sup>14</sup> The Kyoto School argues that Zen is the

fundamental method of the self-reflective thinker, that is, one who ceases to take for granted the seemingly unproblematic and begins to question what was formerly unquestioned. As such, Zen is not merely criticism of something that we know, but rather a critical self-discovery of the conscious operations by which we know.<sup>15</sup>

How do we „shine the light on what is directly underfoot” in economics? I understand this as becoming aware of the way in which economics shapes the various objectifications of our human experience prior to our understanding them as expressions of our experience. This is to say that we can appropriate the ways in which „science and scientific technique have permeated every phase of mankind’s personal and social life.”<sup>16</sup> But our project cannot begin with an acceptance of the definition and method of economics as it is taught in university courses around the world, which simply codifies a preconceived notion of human activity that includes such signifiers as the „self,” the „market,” „self-advantage,” and so forth. We instead must seek to fundamentally transform its methodology. Although economics typically analyzes human beings as predictable and calculable objects within the framework of economic language and logic, such an approach is inadequate from a Zen perspective insofar as it overlooks the observer as well as the methods s/he utilizes. What we need to do is introduce another and more fundamental level of meaningfulness – we need to gradually gain an understanding of how and why we use economic concepts by focusing on a methodological critique of both the existing ways of knowing in economics as well as the categories and concepts associated with them.

It becomes obvious at this venture that, for Zen, religion cannot possibly be an object to be controlled within the framework of rational preferences or utility maximization. Religious philosophy is rather a self-conscious activity by which we challenge and transform all ways of knowing, including economics. It is a process by which we learn how to transform not only what we aim to know but also the how of our knowing.

As we have already noted, economists claim that they are able to encompass increasing amounts of new data by applying their methodological tools to ever new objects of inquiry, which may be taken either from daily life or from such varied disciplines as psychology, history, or sociology. However, the conceptual system that justifies this extension of the economic model goes unquestioned, and there is no possibility to critically investigate or transcend its fixed horizon because the latter never becomes a proper focus of attention. In contrast, religious philosophy for Zen serves to free us from this trap by showing us how to exercise our creativity along a vertical axis. That is to say that it guides us to understand the relativity of fixed and pre-given conceptual systems, to become aware of their limitations and, eventually, to transcend those limitations. Religious philosophy thus becomes understood as a dynamic force by which we self-consciously select our existential stance and the corresponding horizon as we critically transcend the limitations of the knowledge system that formerly held us captive. It moves us beyond the

boundaries of a given system of knowledge and thereby opens up further horizons of possibilities so that we gradually come to identify and define new ways of knowing. As such, religious philosophy makes possible the discovery of life-style possibilities and variations that are occluded by the conceptual systems prescribed by economics.

### SELF-REALIZATION IN ZEN AND IN ECONOMICS

Zen demands that religious philosophy fundamentally question the basic premises of economics so as to become the „foundational base of science.”<sup>17</sup> How can religious philosophy achieve this? It does so by guiding us down the rigorous path towards the attainment of self-knowledge. A Zen master once remarked that although Zen shares with many religious traditions the goal of „knowing thyself,”<sup>18</sup> it is not interested in any conceptual grasp of the self. This is to say that Zen practice shifts our focus from asking what the self is in an abstract manner to asking how we know ourselves, thereby introducing an existential dimension to our questioning. This opens up a new mode of reflection in respect to what we know and, consequently, in respect to economics as well.

Since its origin as a scientific discipline in the eighteenth century, economics has assumed that it proceeds with models that reflect the „true nature” of man. As its claims began to determine our social space, its image of man clearly influenced what we have come to think about ourselves. But we need to keep in mind that economics has only ever been concerned with a conceptual understanding of „economic man.” It invented various God’s Eye frames of reference in order to observe this theoretical creature from a distant and presumably disinterested vantage point.<sup>19</sup> Economists are implicitly trained to present themselves as outside spectators sitting in judgment over other humans so that they will be able to predict their behavior and advise on how to control it.

But insofar as we thus make ourselves into „no-thing” – treating the entire world solely as a fixed totality of external objects – we expect to find answers to the question of the true nature of the self outside our own selves. For Zen, on the contrary, „the self is never some kind of substantial object, something over against us that we can find.”<sup>20</sup> It is not something to be known, but rather the very activity of knowing. And because this knowing activity „takes place of itself before any conscious thought,”<sup>21</sup> the answer to the question „Who am I?” can be found only in the way we fundamentally are, not in some reified concept of ourselves.<sup>22</sup>

Abe illustrates this point by retelling a story found in the Lin-chi Lu.<sup>23</sup> A very handsome young man looked into the mirror every morning and smiled at his image. One morning, however, he mistakenly looked at the wrong side of the mirror and suddenly found that his face was no longer reflected. In his surprise he believed that his head had been lost. He began to search desperately for his head, but then came to realize that it had always been with him. What he had been searching for was the very thing that had been doing the searching. Abe comments that

The point of this story is that that which is sought is simply that which is seeking ... Our real head ... is by no means something to be sought for in front of us, but is something that always exists for each of us here and now. Being at the center of one's searching, it can never be objectified.<sup>24</sup>

Inquiring into the nature of man „is simply the discovery of something within the self.”<sup>25</sup> However, this „something” is not an entity in the strict sense of the term, but rather a process, namely, the process of our own knowing. And because this process always takes place prior to what is objectively known, one of its parameters must always remain unknown, although it is at the same time a not-yet-known or a yet-to-be-explored. Consequently, our quest for self-realization does not lead to the discovery of something, but rather to nothingness, or mu:

We call this thing mu or „nothing” because it is not something objective. It is called „nothing” not because... our heads are missing, but because our heads are now functioning as living heads. As such they are nonobjectifiable.<sup>26</sup>

As economists try to grasp human nature conceptually, they overlook the fact that a basic experience – Nishida would call it pure experience – underlies their very actions. We may speak of such experience as a field of nothingness (mu no basho in Japanese) which is „the given-in-intuition prior to the analysis and expression of objectification.”<sup>27</sup> Economists can therefore neither encompass, nor represent pure experience by means of scientific reasoning because pure experience provides the already given background for such reasoning. The economic method of thinking thus leads to an infinite regress. Since reasoning cannot create an object upon which it reasons and be that object at one and the same time, at no moment can reasoning be made wholly known to itself.<sup>28</sup>

One might remark at this stage of our discussion that this Zen insight does not add much that is new to the (Western) philosophy of science. But once we take a closer look, we find a great difference between East and West – and thus between Zen and economics – in regard to the „true nature” of this field of nothingness.<sup>29</sup> Generally speaking, both scientists and philosophers of the West have maintained a foundationalist approach whereby they think of the field as an „unshakeable foundation” or substratum pre-given to all our understanding.<sup>30</sup> As an a priori it can never be made knowable, however, and because it lies utterly „beyond” us, our sole alternative is to accept it as correctly representing an independent and unchanging reality.<sup>31</sup> Ludwig von Mises has expressed this point very clearly in respect to economics:

The characteristic feature of a priori knowledge is that we cannot think of the truth of its negation or of something that would be in variance with it. What the a priori expresses is necessarily implied in every proposition concerning the issue in question. It is implied in all our thinking and acting.... The a priori categories are the mental equipment by dint of which man is able to think and experience and thus acquire knowledge. Their truth or validity cannot be proved or refuted as can those of a posteriori propositions, because they are precisely the instrument that enables us to distinguish what is true from what is not.<sup>32</sup>

Stated otherwise, within economics we conceive of the field of nothingness as something, albeit something which we ultimately cannot know. The meditative traditions of the East, including Zen, consider such foundational approaches as problematic, to say the least, for they provide no basis for any inquiry into the ground or possibility of the occurrence of the a priori itself.<sup>33</sup> The latter is simply accepted as unquestionable truth. Nishitani states in this regard that

Present-day science does not feel the need to concern itself with the limits of its own standpoint.... Science thus seems to regard its own scientific standpoint as a position of unquestionable truth from which it can assert itself in all directions. Hence the air of absoluteness that always accompanies scientific knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

I do not consider this to be a problem with science alone, but with our common awareness as well. As long as we remain stuck in conceptual reasoning, we do not allow ourselves to inquire into the place from which all its arguments arise and, as a result, our activity of knowing becomes severely restricted. We implicitly assume that „it is quite supererogatory to waste time upon controversies concerning the a priori” because „nobody denies or could deny that no human reasoning and no human search for knowledge could dispense with what these a priori concepts, categories and propositions tell us.”<sup>35</sup> But we thereby overlook the fact that there is something entirely unscientific lurking underfoot, something we ultimately only believe in. „The nihility lying beneath the self is obscured.”<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to traditional scientific views, Zen emphasizes that we must go back even to the point before the world came into existence, plunging ourselves headlong into the very midst of nothingness. An appropriate Zen expression is that we are to become a „single Great Doubt” in which not only everything known, but also the givenness of the a priori of our own knowing is called into question.<sup>37</sup> In this process we question the grounds of what is

commonly taken for granted, turning our attention to what we do not yet know from our present standpoint. We are to confront ourselves with the uncomfortable and unfamiliar within us, even if we may have been taught to think of this as being entirely unreasonable and unintelligible.

Where *ratio* is pushed to its true extreme, the „irrational“ shows up. Where meaning is pushed to the extreme, „meaninglessness“ shows up. And yet what thus appears as paradox, irrationality, or meaninglessness, is truly absolute reality. It is the living vitality of „life“ itself. To say here that life as such is meaningless is to say that life is truly living itself. It is, in other words, a point where life transcends all meaning, albeit a point where all meaning is able to be constituted as „meaning“ only in relationship to that point.<sup>38</sup>

Science is correct in proposing that we can know nothing about the foundations of our conceptual knowledge, but this is true only as long as we remain trapped inside such knowledge. It is utterly wrong, however, to maintain that we have finished with the topic of knowing once we have indicated the limits of our knowledge. Once we push our intellect up against its own limitations, tracing its steps back to where it has not yet even begun its work, a deeper form of awareness will bubble up.<sup>39</sup> We will then come to understand that what we formerly accepted as the pre-given and inexplicable foundation of our knowledge is in truth nothing but an inability to think otherwise. We will then come to see it not as a foundation, but as a limitation we unconsciously created as we shaped our self-concept in the past, and we can modify or even abandon it at the moment we truly become aware of it. Our self-knowledge thus turns from the created to the creative. It then moves through a trajectory that takes it from a more limited perspective to a broader and more inclusive one, and as such it traverses ever deeper realms of inner awareness.

### RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AS A METHOD OF CONVERSION

Our discussion of becoming a Great Doubt has been abstract to this point. But how is our true self to emerge in concrete terms? Furthermore, what effect will it have on a society that is completely embedded in the rules and assumptions of economics, as the modern world seems to be? I now wish to outline a method by which we can fruitfully explore these questions.

It is important to note that I employ the word „method“ here in a sense quite distinct from its common scientific meaning. The latter usually designates an orderly procedure that is established in order to carry out certain tasks in a systematic and efficient way, and it involves following a set of pre-given rules for solving a problem.<sup>40</sup> For example, economic textbooks usually teach us how to provide solutions for problems by learning a specific set of rules, typically mathematical in



character, without explaining why such rules work. Method in its religious sense, however, takes on an entirely different meaning. Flangan states in this regard that

Method. .. refers not only to the operations required to carry out a project and the orientation that normatively directs these operations, but also to you the operator who performs the operations.... The method is intended to guide you toward an ever-expanding awareness of your own knowing, choosing and loving, and of how you operate in and through these operations to achieve certain goals.<sup>41</sup>

Method in this sense is an exercise in realizing what we truly are as well as what we could become as economic agents. It is not to reject or negate any particular objectified economic expression about human beings, but rather to open up such expressions and to deepen and enrich them.

We will begin with a consideration of mainstream economics, that is, positive and objective economics, which in an important sense is characterized by a strange disengagement from our human nature. This is the case because mainstream economics forces us to look only at things and, consequently, away from ourselves. And „to look away from one’s self is always to see things merely as objects, that is, as ‘external’ things outside the ‘internal’ self.”<sup>42</sup> Knowledge thereby comes to be regarded as purely objective in nature and, as such, dealing only things and the relationships between them. We thereby perceive the economy as a type of second nature, existing in and for itself, which is completely independent of our ways of knowing it and supposedly ruled by „blind and ineluctable forces of nature” that operate independently of our will.<sup>43</sup> We thus come to think of our economic lives as „governed according to strict laws, like those of nature,”<sup>44</sup> and they thereby appear to be determined by external forces utterly beyond our control.

We could say, as a result, that we have made ourselves into nothing through the power of our conceptual apparatus. Rather than thinking of ourselves as self-determining agents, we have come to believe that we are subject to an „invisible hand” that externally imposes mechanical patterns of behavior upon us. To use a metaphor from classical economics, we do not act by ourselves, but rather by the will of the „Great Mechanic,” or God. Adam Smith expresses this by comparing ourselves to cogs in a machine:

The wheels of the watch are all admirably adjusted to the end for which it was made, the pointing of the hour. All their various motions conspire in the nicest manner to produce this effect. If they were endowed with a desire and intention to produce it, they could not do it better. Yet we never ascribe any such desire or intention to them, but to the watchmaker, and we know that they

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are put into motion by a spring, which intends the effect it produces as little as they do.<sup>45</sup>

Even though the worldview of modern objective economics has abandoned the idea of God, it still considers us to be governed by outside forces beyond our control, that is, by the pure mechanisms of the market.<sup>46</sup> As Schumpeter explains, „Mankind is not free to choose... Things economic and social move by their own momentum and the ensuing situations compel individuals and groups to behave in certain ways.”<sup>47</sup> The best we can do is to make such momentum work for us. Walras observes in this respect that „We can either resist it or give it free rein, whichever we please, but we cannot change its essence or its laws.”<sup>48</sup> From this perspective, our role as active human beings is stripped away from us, and we are reduced to nothing more than „atoms” or „molecules of the social system.”<sup>49</sup>

From a Zen perspective, we are to treat such expressions seriously without falling into the trap of taking them as complete representations of ourselves. It is true that they make us aware of an important part of our modern self-perception – the impotence and powerlessness we feel as we are dominated by the anonymous powers of the market economy – but in and for themselves they are utterly inadequate. The question we must now address may be stated as follows: Even if we were to accept the objectivity of the laws of the economy, „on what horizon are these laws encountered and on what dimension are they received?”<sup>50</sup> Once we focus on this question, however, we find that it cannot possibly be answered within an objective framework because we cannot demand that objective knowledge turns itself inside out so that the knower itself becomes an object to be known. This would in fact negate the key principle of objectivity, namely, that the knower must remain disinterested in, and thus apart from, its object.

We often conclude from this logical state of affairs that it is utterly impossible to inquire further into the givenness of the laws underlying our economic existence. For example, Adam Smith states that it is not for our human knowledge to grasp that „which in reality is the wisdom of God.”<sup>51</sup> We thereby end our fundamental questioning before it has even started, claiming, as mainstream economics does, that we simply „have to research the law of social cooperation as the physicist researches the laws of mechanics” – and nothing more.<sup>52</sup> We continue to insist on constructing all our knowledge upon this law even though we regard all questions about its own „truth” as ultimately unanswerable. That is to say that we simply believe in it in the sense of a personal conviction.

It is precisely at this point that Zen finds science „to be no longer scientific.”<sup>53</sup> But instead of hastily turning away from this finding, it wants us to look directly into this scientific abyss.<sup>54</sup> We are to penetrate to the point where „the essence of science is questioned on the same dimension as the essence of human existence, and in which the fundamental attitude of science itself is taken up as an existential problem.”<sup>55</sup> Stated otherwise, we are to turn inward in order to open up a deeper field of awareness where we can pose the question of how and

why we came to believe in the objective worldview of economics in the first place – we are to turn our attention to our own subjective consciousness. One way in which to do so is to carefully examine the various expressions and objectifications of this consciousness that have been formulated by subjective economic theories as they have been developed by, for example, the Austrian school of economics. This is far from the end of the matter, however, because in the light of Zen we will see that we cannot identify ourselves with any of these objectifications and expressions. We must instead discover ourselves by transcending all categories that we use to describe particular, objectified selves. We are to transcend „in the depths of the self to a more profound and adequate level that both grounds the particular self and expresses itself in the particular self.”<sup>56</sup>

Various categories have been constructed within economics by which we are supposed to understand ourselves in terms of some form of economic common sense. Without going into any detail here, I feel it safe to suggest that they all can be understood as certain objectifications of an individual self or ego.<sup>57</sup> That is to say that once we accept them as appropriate descriptions, we come to perceive ourselves as independent, fully-autonomous, and self-interested beings quite capable of sustaining ourselves without the help of others.<sup>58</sup> While from a strictly objective perspective we sought the „ultimate foundation” of our behavior outside us in the market, from this additional economic perspective we find ourselves searching for it internally. For example, economists expect that if we use appropriate psychological methods, we will discover that „certain acts of consciousness are performed with a feeling of necessity.” Every one of us is thus supposed to „hear the voice of the law clearly speaking within him- or herself,<sup>59</sup> with introspection then revealing some type of fundamental anthropological constant that governs us from the depths of the self. Economics has conceived of this constant as evident either in the workings of our rational intellect, or in our unalterable desires, preferences, and insatiable greed for more, that is, in our passions, which Hume referred to as our „original existence.”<sup>60</sup> However, if we proceed in this fashion, we still come to think of ourselves as static substances – as intellectual or emotive selves – that simply have certain properties by default, none of which results from of any existential act.<sup>61</sup>

Economists usually emphasize that there is no benefit to inquiring into the ultimate principle by which our individual nature is controlled. Because such principles „govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it.”<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, we can do nothing but obey, for

The laws of the universe about which physics, biology and praxeology [subjective economics – S.G.] provide knowledge are independent of the human will, they are primary ontological facts rigidly restricting man’s power to act.... With regard to the laws of the universe any doubt of their suitableness is supererogatory and vain. They are what they are and take care of themselves.<sup>63</sup>

A part of our ego is thus turned into an „unshakeable foundation” that serves as a ground for all we can know about both ourselves and the apparently external world. While Zen would surely agree that this expresses an important characteristic of our modern obsession with individuality, it nevertheless regards this obsession as an abstraction or a truncated version of our true self. This is so because it fails to account for the real character of our self-consciousness, which is not something merely to be known or objectified because it is both knower and known. Zen wants us to truly know ourselves by further inquiring into the „ultimate given” within us. It calls us to search into the true ground from which all objectified self-knowledge arises, rather than simply accepting that such a ground exists.

Once we take up this task in earnest, we may well find that we are incapable of expressing this ground under the sign of individualistic methodology. We can grasp no substratum upon which we could securely ground our ego – at least this is the lesson the history of economic thought could teach us if we read it critically. History is replete with economists who have tried to pinpoint an ultimate reality within our individual consciousness as the ground of all certainty. But another economist would then invariably question whatever ground was identified, indicating that doubt on the ontological level was indeed possible. In this sequence of assertion and falsification, the pattern was for one economist or school to insist that some feature of the self was vital and definitive, with some successor then demonstrating that the previous account was insufficient and incomplete insofar as it could not account for all we can and in fact do know about ourselves.

Even if we gather together the efforts of all economists in this regard, we still find no final answer to our fundamental questions. As Nishitani states,

What on earth is this man who is himself, among other abilities, endowed with the capability to inquire in so scientific a way into the mechanisms of nature, the mechanisms of society, and human consciousness? To this question, the sciences are unable to provide an answer.<sup>64</sup>

In spite of this inability, subjective economics nevertheless insists on the existence of an ultimate law deep inside of us that tacitly controls our experience beyond our control.<sup>65</sup> It seems as if

our consciousness works unconsciously and cannot give an account of why the facts arise in it and disappear again; there exists something below the barrier of our consciousness, on which it depends, but that we do not rule and that appears as extrinsic and foreign to us as does physical nature.<sup>66</sup>

What becomes visible here is the reductionist tendency to explain man solely in terms of a material process of the world.

A confusion has arisen and still prevails today, in virtue of which those sciences all too often mistake man himself for a mechanism. These sciences in turn have led man to make the same mistake about himself, and in this way have played a role in dissolving the substantial form of „man,“ in annihilating the essence of man.<sup>67</sup>

But why such annihilation? Has our culture not taught us that we are autonomous and independent human beings? Nevertheless, once we truly penetrate into the depths of the self, we necessarily come to terms with what Zen calls the Great Doubt and what the Kyōto School has proposed to be the central issue in all religious thought, namely, that the self, in its very essence, is empty. At this point we come to doubt not only the existence of some ultimate law governing our economic lives from without, as have certain unorthodox economists before us, but also that such a law could possibly rule us from within, which translates us beyond economics into the realm of religion. We simply can point to no substance upon which such a law could be grounded – neither in our intellect, nor in our emotions, nor in our will.

In nihility both things and the subject return to their respective essential modes of being, to their very own home-ground where they are what they originally are. But at the same time, their „existence“ itself then turns into a single great question mark. It becomes something of which we know neither whence it comes nor whither it goes, something essentially incomprehensible and unnameable. Each and every thing, no matter how well acquainted the self may be with it, remains at bottom, in its essential mode of being, an unknown. Even should the self itself, as subject, seek to return to its home-ground, to its very existence as such, it becomes something nameless and hard to pin down. This is what I meant when, speaking of the Great Doubt, I said that the self becomes a realization of doubt.<sup>68</sup>

We of course quickly attempt to turn away from such fundamental doubt in our daily lives. Mainstream economics has also refrained from further inquiry into this issue, which seems to stand outside the boundaries of the paradigms of both preferences as well as mechanical models. In both cases we simply keep on believing that „the I is the unity of the acting person. It is given without question and cannot be dissolved through any thought.“<sup>69</sup> Economists thus continue to insist that our quest for self-realization must come to a successful conclusion on the subjective level.<sup>70</sup>

For Zen, however, the Great Doubt is not the end but rather the starting point for discovering our true self, that is, the „non-ego” or the „formless self.” But we have to note very carefully what Zen wants us to find in this respect. Many intellectual traditions have blamed economics for giving us a false account of human nature, and they have attempted to provide new and better explanations that could replace „economic man.” Zen, in contrast, does not provide some account of human nature in order to replace homo oeconomicus, but instead proposes the project of penetrating into its very depths. We are to plunge ourselves headlong into the Great Doubt in order to self-consciously become economic man and existentially converse with it. Abe states that

The non-man-centered nature of Buddhism. .. do(es) not imply, as is often mistakenly suggested, any denial of the significance of individualized human existence. In fact, it is precisely the other way round: the very act of transcending man-centeredness is possible only to a human being who is fully self-conscious.<sup>71</sup>

Encountering the Great Doubt is analogous to „the brandishing of a religious sword of death and a demand to annihilate one’s self.”<sup>72</sup> While this might appear to be utterly nihilistic and pessimistic, the reverse is in fact the case, for „the sword that kills is here at the same time a sword that gives life.”<sup>73</sup> That is to say that our quest, which takes shape in respect to economic man, is what allows us to suddenly break through the limitations of the self assumptions under which our awareness formerly operated. From beneath our individual ego there will arise a deeper form of reality, „wherein the self is in itself at the point that it has stepped over itself.”<sup>74</sup> We will let go of our ego so that may give way to a „self-expressive, creative subject” that „knows itself ‘clearly and distinctly.’”<sup>75</sup>

## OUTLOOK

Religious philosophy must take up the task of bearing witness to that „deeper reality” we have encountered, for, in Nishitani’s words, we continue to have „need for a more elemental mode of reflection.”<sup>76</sup> I thus wish to put forward a preliminary sketch of a path forward along which Zen might guide us toward such a mode of reflection in what seems like the most secular region of the life world, namely, the region of production and commerce. I will limit myself to making four points.

First, we should in the light of Zen inquire more deeply into the economic meaning of the „unconscious.” As we have seen, economists have thought of the unconscious as in fact something extrinsic and foreign to us. It is „seen as ‘other’ – alien, unknowable, even threatening.”<sup>77</sup> In contrast, Zen agrees with certain innovative schools of psychology and psychiatry that

there is no such thing as The Unconscious; there are quite simply facets of awareness that go unnoticed. These facets are not hidden in some receptacle that is in principle unavailable to us. If we can defocus our selective attention, they are available.<sup>78</sup>

Zen thus does not regard the unconscious as a problem beyond our understanding, but rather as a provisional parameter of the awareness we bring to bear on our egotistic consciousness. Being provisional, it can be overcome by a further deepening and broadening of our awareness.

Second, as we address the necessity of such a deepening or broadening, we should carefully note that certain economists have further inquired into the true a priori of our individual consciousness regardless of their insistence that human beings are in general incapable of doing so. Although the method of economics has typically led to a retreat from this area of focus, we can use their work to find in the unconscious both an a posteriori „personal unconscious” and an a priori „impersonal conscious.” The important issue in this regard is that the true a priori for economics apparently does not reside within each of us individually, but rather within a „collective unconscious.” The „voice of the law” that we think of as clearly speaking from within us tacitly arises out of a field of common experience, and it speaks to everyone in the same voice. Beyond both our objective grasp of the world and our subjective grasp of ourselves lies „the fund of experiences that are the common possession of all who practice economy. There are experiences that every theorist finds within himself without having to resort to special scientific procedures.”<sup>79</sup> The expressions by which we have to come to think of ourselves and the world around us are what they are „because they are the terms in which others think and the terms in which all of us act. This correspondence is grasped intuitively or introspectively.”<sup>80</sup> Stated otherwise, in ordinary everyday experience we are always living and acting together in common in modern market societies prior to our minds beginning their dissecting business. Only out of our living experiences within the socio-cultural context of market economies do we continually form our truncated and abstract understandings about these experiences. We might say in metaphorical terms that

Just as a fist can only form out of the neutral basis of an open hand, the grasping of ego can only assert itself out of non-ego, out of nongrasping awareness. Without this neutral nongrasping ground to arise from and return to, ego’s activity could not occur. This neutral ground is what is known in Buddhism as egolessness, open nondual awareness, the ground against which the figure of ego’s grasping stands out.<sup>81</sup>

Third, Zen needs to find ways of expressing the true reality of such nongrasping awareness without assuming it to be a substratum in and for itself. The latter is, at the very least, the trap into which many scientists who have explicitly thought that the world lies entirely „beyond” our egos have apparently fallen.<sup>82</sup> Evolutionary economists such as Hayek have thus regarded our individuality as being unconsciously shaped against the background of given market institutions. We appear to be dominated by unconscious action and blind adherence to the social institutions of competitive markets that work from deep within us. Hayek calls our attention to

the necessity. . . of the individual submitting itself to the anonymous and seemingly irrational forces of society – a submission which must include not only the acceptance of rules of behavior as valid without examining what depends in the particular instance on their being observed but also a readiness to adjust himself to changes which may profoundly affect his fortunes and opportunities and the causes of which may be altogether unintelligible to him.<sup>83</sup>

Insofar as Zen philosophers speak about „the surrender of intellect to something greater and stronger than the self,”<sup>84</sup> we must be careful not to misunderstand them as speaking about conformism in any sense of the term. We must keep in mind that Zen ultimately rejects the entire idea of a substance or unchanging substratum that underlies all our experiences. The Kyōto School philosophers regard such accounts of the „world of history” as Hayek’s as nothing more than a denial „of our personal Self, from the depth of ourselves.” It penetrates us demonically and deceives us under the mask of truth because it allows for no „formation” or „creation.”<sup>85</sup> It permits no movement from the formed toward the forming.<sup>86</sup>

Fourth, economics has, either explicitly or implicitly, taken it to be completely impossible „to think of change without implying the concept of substratum that, while it changes, remains in some regard and sense constant in the succession of various states.” The conclusion is has drawn concerning the theory of human knowledge is that „there is certainly something that it cannot help considering as permanent.”<sup>87</sup> We are thus driven in both theory and practice to think of ourselves as being ultimately controlled by some forces over which we have no power in return. And since what lies underfoot seems to have been created by the past, we conceive of the present as if it had already been decided upon. It is precisely this standpoint that Zen wants us to existentially controvert in all its facets. „Dare we conceive of a mode of being that is neither subjective nor substantial? However difficult it may be to think in such terms, we must.”<sup>88</sup> Once we cease to think in conceptual terms about the world upon the basis of something given, we are free to act within it and



thereby become creative parts of the creative, self-determining world.<sup>89</sup> The emptiness Zen talks about is, in the final analysis, not something to merely contemplate, for we must plunge ourselves into it. We must change from being observers to movers, from being victims to creators, in order to become both *creatus* and *creatans*.<sup>90</sup>

Suzuki tells us that

Instead of staying in the world and looking back at its beginning, we must leap back at once and spot where *atman* stood when the world had not yet been created. That is, we must go back even to the point the world came to exist, and plunge ourselves into the very midst of nothingness.<sup>91</sup>

For Zen, religious philosophy cannot stop short at the point of view that our lives have been determined once and for all by the historical formation of market institutions. The true formless self of Zen „realizes itself in wondrous, free activity, but does not remain confined to history. It is free to go in and out of history, now actualising itself, now retreating to the root-source.”<sup>92</sup> It is certainly true that our selves are determined, but it is we, together with all sentient beings, who do the determining. We consequently find the foundationalist approach of economics, in all its variations, to be in error as such, for in the final analysis it is nothing but an illusion. It is a truncated abstraction of the nonobjectifiable and dynamic world we continually create even as we are created by it. From a Zen perspective, however, we will not be able to „convert” other people to this point of view, nor can we argue them into changing their foundationalist assumptions. We can only invite them to join us in our quest for self-realization.

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#### NOTES:

1. This article is a condensed and slightly revised version of my „Economics and Zen. The Religious Quest for Self-Knowledge and Its Meaning in Our Modern Times,” which will be published in Gerhard Preyer (ed.), *Buddhism as a Stronghold of Free Thought* (working title).

2. The Kyōto School was founded by Nishida Kitarō at the beginning of the last century. Nishida was born in Unoke, Japan, on 19 May 1870. After studying Western philosophy at Tokyo University, teaching German, and engaging in intense Zen meditation, Nishida received the appointment of assistant professor in ethics at the Imperial University of Kyoto in 1910. He published his first work, „Study of the Good,” in the same year. Nishida became professor of the history of religion in 1913

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7. Weber, J. and P. Coy (2004) „Economists are Getting Religion. Can Organized Faith be Explained by Supply and Demand? They Think so.” *Business Week Online*, 6 December 2004.  
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11. Nishitani 1983, pp. 2-3.
12. Nishitani 2004b, p. 126.
13. Nishitani 1983, p. 4.
14. Nishitani, Keiji (1991) *Nishida Kitaro*, trans. Yamamoto S. and J. W. Heisig. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 102n.
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16. Ibid., p. 24.
17. Nishida 1999: 244.
18. Kasulis, Thomas P. (1981) *Zen Action / Zen Person*. Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, p. 1.
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20. Stambaugh, Joan (1999) *The Formless Self*. Albany, NY: SUNY, p. 2.
21. Carter, Robert (1997) *The Nothingness Beyond God. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, p. 107.
22. Abe, Masao (2004) „Man and Nature in Christianity and Buddhism.” In *The Buddha Eye. An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries*, ed. F. Franck. Bloomington: World Wisdom, pp. 147-155, p. 67.
23. The *Lin-chi Lu* is a collection of the recorded sayings, encounters, and travels of the great ninth-century master Lin-chi, who is perhaps better known outside of China by his Japanese name, Rinzai. The *Lin-chi Lu* has been an essential text of Chinese and Japanese Zen Buddhism for nearly a thousand years.
24. Abe 2004, p. 66.

25. Nishida, as quoted in Carter, Robert (2001) *Encounter with Enlightenment. A Study in Japanese Ethics*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, p. 166.
26. Abe 2004, p. 66.
27. Carter 1997, p. 32.
28. Nishida, Kitarō (2005) „The System of Self Consciousness of the Universal.” In *The Logic of Nothingness, A Study of Nishida Kitarō*, trans. and ed. Robert Wargo. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p. 188.
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31. Taylor, Charles (1995) *Philosophical Arguments*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, chap. 1.
32. von Mises, Ludwig (2006) *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, p. 15.
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36. tembaugh 1999, p. 102.
37. Ibid.
38. Nishitani 1983, p. 180.
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40. Flanagan, Joseph (1997) *Quest for Self-Knowledge: An Essay in Lonergan's Philosophy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 262.
41. Ibid. Flanagan here refers to „method” as expounded by Bernhard Lonergan. For more detail see Lonergan, Bernhard (1973) *Method in Theology*. New York: Herder and Herder. I consider Lonergan's work to be a fascinating starting point for comparative studies concerning Buddhism and Christianity, but this is a topic for a separate discussion.
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50. Nishitani 1983, p. 79.
51. Smith 2000, p. 126.
52. von Mises, Ludwig (1940) *Nationalökonomie, Theorie des Handelns und Wirtschaftens*. Genf: Éditions Union, p. 2.
53. Nishitani 2004b, p. 116.
54. Nishitani 2004b, p. 122.
55. Nishitani 2004b, p. 116.
56. Wargo, Robert (2005) *The Logic of Nothingness. A Study of Nishida Kitarō*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p. 180.
57. For a discussion of this point, see: Graupe, Silja (2007) *The Basho of Economics, An Intercultural Analysis of the Process of Economics*. Heusenstamm: Ontos.
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61. Wargo 2005, p. 159.
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64. Nishitani 2004b, p. 132.
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67. Nishitani 2004b, p. 132.
68. Nishitani 1983, p. 111.
69. von Mises 1940, p. 34.
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75. Hisamatsu, as quoted in Stambaugh 1999: 156.
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77. Stambaugh 1999, p. 96.
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88. Nishitani 1983, p. 112.
89. Nishida 1958, p. 230.
90. Carter 2001, p. 46.
91. Suzuki 2004, p. 86.
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INTEGRITY AND DIALOGUE**

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