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ECONOMICS AND ZEN. THE RELIGIOUS QUEST FOR
 SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND ITS MEANING
 IN OUR MODERN TIMES

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Abstract

The economic principles of utility and rationality are among the most pervasive ideals dominating our modern everyday life. They even threaten to reduce the world's spiritual traditions to more or less useful 'goods' competing against each other in the 'market of religions'. My paper redefines this relationship between economics and spirituality in a radically different way. In the light of the Japanese Buddhist philosophy of Nishitani Keiji it shows that Buddhist spirituality is not to blindly accept the ideals of economics as its pre-given foundation. Rather, it is to confront us with the existential question why we have come to believe in those ideals in the first place. Entering into the spiritual path thus is to self-reflectively step back into the hidden ground beneath our very own feet, i.e. to critically elucidate the hidden foundations of our modern obsession with utility and rationality. It is to explore into the 'abyss' which lies hidden at the ground of our economic lives, with the aim, in Nishitani's words, 'of delving into the ground of human existence and, at the same time, searching anew for the wellsprings of reality.'

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Introduction

In the 1950s and 60s, sociologists like Peter Berger propounded the theory that modernization inevitably led to secularization. The history of the last thirty years, however, has not been kind to this prediction. Even Berger himself, in 1998, called his own thesis a 'big mistake' (Berger 1998). Instead of religion silently retreating into the private spheres of our lives, it has returned to take up space once again on the social and political agenda. Thus, questions about what role it should play in our contemporary societies have regained their pertinence. My paper attempts to present one tentative answer to these questions from the perspective of Zen Buddhism, as expounded by Japanese philosophers of the Kyōto School.² My choice here is by no means arbitrary. When Japan opened up its economic system to the West, with all the technological and political consequences that this entailed, the Kyōto School philosophers wanted Zen to confront the newly arising reality head on. Rather than escaping from the often painful process of modernization and retreating into the security of monastic life, they sought to transpose the living and enlightened experience of Zen into the present. Specifically, they set out to critically and creatively examine the sources that lie at the root of modernity as well as the conflicts it created: Western philosophy, science and technology. Through this project, the Kyōto School philosophers aimed to

² The Kyōto School was founded by NISHIDA Kitarō in the beginning of the last century. Nishida was born in Unoke, Japan on May 19, 1870. After studying Western philosophy at Tokyo University, teaching German and engaging in intense Zen meditation practice, Nishida received the appointment of assistant professor in Ethics at the Imperial University of Kyōto in 1910. In the same year, he published his first work, 'Study of the Good'. In 1913, Nishida became a professor of the history of religion, and, in 1914, of the history of philosophy at Kyōto. Among his successors have been TANABE Hajime, NISHITANI Keiji, ABE Masao and HISIMATSU Shinichi.

develop Zen into a true stronghold of free thinking in the midst of modernity by pulling out its creative potential and juxtaposing it to the context of massive changes in the lifestyles of the Japanese population. My paper is conceived not as a history of the Kyōto School, but as a continuation, in their spirit, of examining our modernity from the perspective of the sacred. In particular, I will use Zen to look at one of the most important sources of our modernity: economics. Using a Zen influenced religious interpretive framework, I will examine the meaning of religion in our globalized world of free market competition, and the meaning of economics in our resurgently religious world.

The Economics of Religion

Commonly, we put economics and religion in two separate intellectual compartments, thinking of them as two different *subject matters*, concerned with two distinct spheres in our lives. The former is about the outer world of production and commerce, the latter is about the inner world of meditation, ritual and the soul, and never the twain shall meet. The extent to which Zen practice today has become, both in the East and in the West, solely a path of individual spiritual development might be seen as a possible confirmation of this tendency; but it is a tendency that has been severely criticized by Kyōto school philosophers as mere escapism (Hisamatsu 1990). On the other hand, many economists would surely agree with this common sense perception. However, even within their field one sees signs of an incipient transformation in the way the object of the study of economics is conceived: traditionally, economics systematically reflected in various methodological ways upon a specific sphere of our lives, that is upon the world of trade and markets. But today it has increasingly come to be defined as a certain subjective mode of looking upon the *entire* world. As a

single conceptual framework, it proposes to give us a more certain and permanent control over *every* aspect of our lives. What clearly distinguishes economics as a discipline, thus, is not its subject matter any longer but its approach (Becker 1976, 5). This approach, coined by terms such as 'rational choice', 'utility' or '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 as this list continuously expands so as to include 'fertility, education, the uses of crime, marriage, social interactions, and other "sociological", "legal", and "political problems"' (Becker 1976, 8-9), it seems only natural to incorporate religious issues into it also. Our religious feelings, our being part of a religious community, even our belief in eternal life have come to be understood as dependent variables of utility maximizing functions (Iannaccone 1990). Even if we were 'suicide bombers killing in the name of God', economists would still quite confidently tell us that we are acting rationally within the framework of their approach (Weber and Coy, 2004).

The view that *all* human beings behave as prescribed by the economic approach is certainly not a problem of interest to scientific theory only, for it also says something about our *daily mentality*, reflecting a fundamental change in our common attitudes toward religion. In contemporary liberal democracies, we assume the right to freely choose our religion according to our individual preferences; so, given that economics is about preferences, shouldn't we buy into the economist's belief that we go about it in the same 'rational' manner as we chose a car? To my understanding, a fundamental tendency of our modern lives becomes visible here. This is the tendency of the economic sphere to expand *inwardly* into the depth of ourselves, so as to shape all aspects of our lives, including those of our innermost

religious experiences. As more of our daily life is embedded in the economic sphere, more of our thinking takes on an economic cast. Mostly unnoticed by us, we grow accustomed to constantly creating new data by applying computational procedures to all aspects of life. However, there is a danger hidden in this procedure, insofar as its total claim makes us blind toward other sources of creativity. Specifically, it appears to inhibit our creative capabilities along a vertical axis. This is to say, that framework in which it is possible to make fundamental criticisms of our present point of view and our whole notion of preferences. It seeks to close off the vertical search for new ways of looking at the world, to radically change perspectives. Said differently, while economics, conceived in terms of our everyday habitus or, in other words, 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 from within us. We let it shape us from the depth of ourselves, far below the radar of our attention. Given these circumstances, economics is logically consistent to answer the question, 'What is religion?' by considering it to be no more than just another object for maximizing our utility, i.e., calculating our advantage. However, I argue that, from the perspective of Zen, there is yet a deeper meaning of religion waiting to be explored.

Religion as a Critical Path of Transformation

So, what is religion from a Zen perspective? To begin with, Zen surely 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* (Nishitani 1983, 2, my emphasis).

While it will take me the rest of my paper to unpack the full meaning of this passage, in this section I want to draw our attention to two distinguishable, yet interrelated facts: First, to Zen Buddhism's call for a fundamental transformation of our everyday economic mentality; and, second, to its demand for a critical rethinking of economics as a science. Taking up the former issue first, we can say that, for Zen, religion cannot become an object of our utility calculations. It is nonobjectifiable (Nishida 1999, 245). Neither is it simply a subjective mentality determining how we confront the world. For Zen, religion does neither lie simply without nor simply within us. Rather, it is a *transformative power*, which by means of opening up our own inner background transforms both our subjective mentality and our objective grasp of the environment (Nishitani 2004b, 126). Religion operates to change and deepen our awareness. It 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' (Nishitani 1983, 2-3).

For Zen, religion is an 'essential conversion of our existence, of ourselves' (Nishitani 2004b, 126). It is a practice of self-emptying that effects a transition from everyday consciousness to *satori* (enlightenment); a transition that in turn requires practice or cultivation. We are, by means of seated meditation

(*zazen*), walking meditation (*kinhin*), or a material art such as *aikido*, *karate*, or *kendo*, to 'still the ordinary mind in order to access what lies beneath it, ... to allow that which resides beneath the chatter of ordinary consciousness to surface in the quiet stillness of the moment' (Carter 2001, 149). This emphasis on practice and cultivation often leads to the assumption that Zen completely negates all theoretical reflection. Proclaiming that thinking in all its forms is nothing but a reality distorting set of inferences, *non-thinking* in a negative sense is referred to as both the goal and the means of spiritual enlightenment. In contrast to this approach, the Kyōto-School philosophers emphasize a different meaning of Zen practice: it does not mean refraining from thinking but rather the radical transformation of it. It is to still our ordinary mind by making our thoughts clearer. We are to develop *methodological procedures* that open up higher viewpoints, which include our previously limited knowledge in much richer and broader contexts. Usually, we think of the economy as a sum of things and events *outside* us. It seems to have to do only with markets, institutions and goods. Thus we pay no attention to our own conscious mediating operations, but exclusively to the contents that become known through these operations. This holds true both in our everyday life and economic scientific practice. Zen, on the contrary, relentlessly points us to the maxim that we should *know our own knowing*. Thus, we gain mastery of those mediating operations by which common sense and scientific meanings become known. We have to creatively 'operate on the operations', so as to gain control over, and ultimately break free from, the conceptual systems that hold us captive. Using a Zen expression, we have to *turn the light to what is directly underfoot* (Nishitani 1983, 4). This cannot be achieved by simply 'stripping off' our daily modes of knowing by escaping into a separate religious sphere – with its assumption that there is a separate religious sphere. We are not to negate our own identities

as we live and act in modern market economies, but self-consciously *appropriate* those identities. In Japanese, the term 'appropriation' (*jikaku*) literally translates as 'transformation into the self' (Nishitani 1991, 102n). Zen, according to the Kyōto school, is the fundamental method of the self-reflective thinker, the one who ceases to take for granted the seemingly unproblematic and questions the formerly unquestioned. As such, it is not only a simple criticism of anything that we know but a critical self-discovery of the conscious operations by which we know (Krebs 1977, 4-17).

How do we 'turn the light upon what is directly underfoot' in economics? I understand this as a becoming aware of the way economics shapes the various objectifications of our human experience *prior* to our understanding of 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 man's personal and social life' (Krebs, 24). However, our project cannot begin with accepting the definition and method of economics as we find it being taught at university courses around the world, which simply codifies a preconceived idea of human activity that includes such signifiers as the 'self', the 'market', 'self-advantage,' etc. Rather, we seek to fundamentally *transform* its methodology. Usually economics analyzes human beings as predictable and calculable objects within the framework of economic language and logic. From a Zen perspective this approach is insufficient, insofar as it does not pay attention to the observer nor to the methods he is applying. What we need is to introduce another and more fundamental level of meaningfulness: We are to gradually gain an understanding of *how* and *why* we use economic concepts by focusing on a *methodological critique* of economics' existing ways of knowing, as well as the categories and concepts that are associated with them.

It becomes obvious here that, for Zen, religion cannot possibly be an object to be controlled within the framework of rational preferences or utility maximization. It is, rather, a self-conscious activity by which we challenge and transform all ways of knowing, including the economic one. It is a process by which we learn how to transform not only the *what* of our knowledge but also the *how* of our knowing. Economists, as we have seen above, claim to be able to encompass more and new data by applying their methodological tools to ever new objects of inquiry, taken from daily life, or from various disciplines (psychology, history, sociology, etc.). Here, the conceptual system in which this extension of the economic model is justified goes unquestioned. There is no room of critically investigating or transcending its fixed horizon because this horizon never becomes a proper focus of attention. For Zen, religion frees us from this trap by showing us how to exercise our creativity along a *vertical axis*. 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. Religion thus becomes understood as a dynamic force by which we self-consciously select our existential stance and the corresponding horizon, critically transcending the limitations of the knowledge system that formerly held us captive. Moving us beyond the boundaries of a given system of knowledge, it opens up further horizons of possibilities so that gradually new ways of knowing begin to be identified and defined. As such, religion makes possible the discovery of life style possibilities and variations that are occluded by the conceptual systems prescribed by economics.

Self-Knowledge in Zen and Economics

Zen demands that the religious attitude *fundamentally questions* the basic premises of economics, in order to become the 'foundational base of science' (Nishida 1999, 244). But how can religion achieve this? By guiding us down the rigorous path of attaining *self-knowledge* in the light of Zen. As a Zen master once remarked, Zen shares with many philosophical and religious traditions the goal of 'knowing thyself' (Kasulis 1981, 1). However, 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 any abstract manner to asking *how* we know of ourselves, thus introducing an *existential dimension* to our questioning. This opens up a new mode of reflection within the realm of economics. Since its origin as a scientific discipline in the 18th century, economics has assumed that it can proceed with models that reflect the 'true nature' of man. As its claims began to determine our social space, its image of man surely influenced what we have come to think about ourselves. However, economics has always been concerned solely with a conceptual understanding of 'economic man'. It invented various God's Eye frame of references in order to observe this theoretical creature from a distant and presumably disinterested vantage point (Brodbeck 2009). As economists we are *implicitly* trained to present ourselves as outside spectators sitting in judgment over other humans, so as to predict and advise on controlling their behavior. Because we thus make ourselves into 'nothing', treating the whole world as a fixed totality of external objects only, 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' (Stambaugh 1999, 2). It is not something to be known, but the knowing activity itself. And this knowing activity 'takes place of itself before any

conscious thought' (Carter 1997, 107). The answer to the question, 'Who am I?' thus cannot be found in some reified concept outside ourselves, but only in the way we fundamentally are (Abe 2004, 67). Abe illustrates this point by retelling a story of the *Lin-chi Lu*. A very handsome young man looks into a mirror every morning, smiling at his image. One morning, he mistakenly looked at the wrong side of the mirror. Suddenly, he found that his face was not reflected in the mirror any more. In his surprise he believes his head to be lost. After desperately searching for his head, he comes to realize that his head had always been with him. What he had searched for was the very thing that *had been doing the searching*. Abe comments:

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 (66).

To inquire into the nature of man 'is simply the discovery of something within the self' (Nishida in: Carter 2001, 166). Strictly speaking, it is not a 'something' in the sense of an entity, but a process: the process of our own knowing. And because this process always takes place prior to what is objectively known, one of its parameters must remain unknown, which is at the same time a not-yet-known, or a yet-to-be-explored. Therefore, our quest for self-knowledge does not lead to the discovery of something, but of no-thingness, *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 the *living* heads. As such they are *nonobjectifiable* (Abe 2004, 66).

When economists try to grasp human nature conceptually, they are overlooking the fact that a basic experience – Nishida would call it pure experience – underlies their very act; accordingly, they cannot encompass or represent pure experience by scientific reasoning because it provides the already given background of such reasoning. They would fall, technically, into an infinite regress. Reasoning cannot at the same time create an object upon which it reasons and be that object; at no moment can reasoning be wholly made known itself to itself (Nishida 2005, 188). We can speak of such experience as a field of nothingness (jap. *mu no basho*), which 'is the given-in-intuition prior to the analysis and expression of objectification' (Carter 1997, 32).

One might, at this stage of our discussion, point out that this insight of Zen does not add much new to the (Western) philosophy of science. However, once we take a closer look, we encounter a great split between the East and the West – and thus between Zen and Economics –, in regard to the 'true nature' of this field of nothingness (Carter 2001, 152). Generally speaking, both scientists and philosophers of the West have so far maintained a *foundationalist* approach to this field. This is to say that they think of it as an 'unshakeable foundation', a substratum pre-given to all our understanding (von Mises 1949, 230). As an *a priori* it is never to be made knowable. Lying utterly 'beyond' us, we are to accept it as correctly representing an independent and unchanging reality (Taylor 1995, chapt. 1). Within economics, Ludwig von Mises has expressed this point most clearly:

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 (von Mises 2006, 15).

Expressed differently, within economics we perceive of the field of nothingness as *something*, albeit something which we ultimately cannot know. The meditative traditions of the East, and with them Zen, consider such foundational approaches as problematic to say the least, for they contain no basis on which to inquire into the ground or the possibility of the occurrence of the a priori itself (Nishitani 2004b, 112). The latter is simply accepted as unquestionable truth:

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 (Nishitani 1983, 78).

Again, I consider this not as a problem of science only, but also of our common awareness. As long as we remain stuck in conceptual reasoning, we do not allow ourselves to inquire into the place out of which all its arguments arise. As a consequence of this, our knowing activity becomes severely limited behind our back, so to speak. 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' (von Mises 2006, 16). Thus we 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' (Stambaugh 1999, 102).

Over against this, Zen emphasizes that we must go back even to the point before the world came to exist, plunging ourselves headlong into the very midst of nothingness. Using another Zen expression, 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 (Stambaugh 1999, 102). In this process we question the grounds of the common, the taken for granted, turning our attention to what, from our present standpoint, we do not yet know. 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 (Nishitani 1984, 180).

Science is right in proposing that we cannot know anything about the foundations of our conceptual knowledge *as long as* we remain trapped inside such knowledge. However, it goes utterly wrong when believing that, having pointed to the limit of our knowledge, we have finished with the topic of knowing. Once we push our intellect against its own limitations, retracing its steps and putting itself back to where it has not yet even started its work, a deeper form of awareness will bubble up (Suzuki 2004, 90). We will come to understand that what we formerly accepted as the pre-given and inexplicable foundations of our knowledge is in truth nothing but an incapability of thinking otherwise. It is seen through as a limitation we unconsciously created in shaping our self-concept in the past, but that we can

modify or even abandon in the moment we truly become aware of it. Thus, our self-knowledge turns from the created to the creative. It moves through a trajectory taking it from a limited perspective to a broader and more inclusive one and, as such, traverses ever deeper realms of inner awareness.

Religious Method as Conversion

So far, we have talked about becoming the great doubt in the abstract. But how is the true self of ours to emerge, and what effect will it have, in a society totally embedded in the rules and assumptions of economics, as the modern world seems to be? In this section I suggest a rudimentary for a method by which we can fruitfully explore these questions. It is important to notice that I employ the word 'method' here in a sense entirely different from its common scientific meaning. The latter usually names an orderly procedure that is established in order to carry out certain tasks in a systematic, efficient way. It means following a set of pre-given rules to solve a problem (Flanagan 1997, 262). For example, economic textbooks usually teach us how to provide solutions by learning a specific set of rules (especially mathematical ones) without explaining why such rules work. 'Method' in its religious sense, however, takes on an entirely different meaning:

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. (Flanagan 1997, 262)³

³ Flanagan here refers to 'method' as being expounded by Bernard J. F. Lonergan. See Lonergan's *Method of Theology* (1973) for more

'Method' is an exercise in realizing what we truly *are*, as well as what we *could* become as economic agents. As we will see, it is not to reject or negate any particular objectified economic expression about human beings, but to open them up, to deepen and enrich them.

Let us start with taking a look at mainstream economics, that is, positive and objective economics. In an important sense, this field of economics is characterized by a strange disengagement from our human nature. This is so because mainstream economics makes us look at things only and, thus, look 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' (Nishitani 1960, 29). Our knowledge is considered to be purely objective and, as such, to deal with things and relationships between things only. We perceive the economy as a second nature, existing in and for itself, completely independent of our ways of knowing it. It is governed by 'blind and ineluctable forces of nature' operating independently of human will (Mirowski 1989, 220). Thus, we come to think of our economic lives as being 'governed according to strict laws, like those of nature' (Menger 1968, VIII). They appear to be determined by *outer forces* utterly beyond our control. We could say that we are making ourselves, by the power of our conceptual grasp, into 'nothing'. Rather than thinking of ourselves as self-determining agents, we believe ourselves to be subjected to an 'invisible hand', which externally imposes mechanical patterns of behavior upon us. Borrowing a metaphor from classical economics, we are moved not by ourselves but by the will of a 'Great Mechanic', that is by God. Adam Smith expresses this by comparing ourselves to cogs in a machine:

detail. In fact, I consider Lonergan's work to be a possible starting point for comparative studies between Buddhism and Christianity. However, this topic would take us far astray from the themes of this paper.

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 are put into motion by a spring, which intends the effect it produces as little as they do (Smith 2000, 126).

Even though it has abandoned the idea of God, the modern objective economic worldview still considers us to be governed by outside forces beyond our control, that is, by the pure mechanisms of the market (Brodbeck 2000). 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' (Schumpeter 1976, 129). What we can do, at best, is to make such momentum work for us. Comparing the 'law of value' to the law of gravity, Léon Walras, an influential 19th century French economist, suggests:

Any value in exchange, once established, partakes of the character of a natural phenomenon, natural in its origins, natural in its manifestations and natural in essence. (...) This does not mean that we have no control over prices. Because gravity is a natural phenomenon and obeys natural laws, it does not follow that all we can do is to watch it operate. We can either resist it or give it free rein, whichever we please, but we cannot change its essence or its laws. It is said we cannot command nature except by obeying her. This also applies to value (Walras 1969, 69).

Within such worldview, our role as active human beings is stripped away from us. If anything at all, we are no more than 'atoms' or 'molecules of the social system' (Samuelson 1972, 3).

From a Zen perspective, we are to treat such expressions seriously without falling into the trap of taking them as being com-

plete representations of ourselves. True, those expressions make us aware of an important part of our modern self-perception – that is of our impotence and powerlessness as we feel dominated by the anonymous powers of the market economy – but in and for themselves they nevertheless prove to be utterly inadequate. The question we have to face here is: 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?’ (Nishitani 1983, 79). Once we begin to focus on this question, we find that it cannot possibly be answered within an objective framework. The reason is this: we cannot demand that objective knowledge turns itself inside out, so that the knower becomes an object to be known itself, as this would negate the very definition of objectivity, which is that the knower has to remain disinterested in, and thus apart from, its object. Often we conclude from this logical state of affairs that it is utterly impossible to further inquire into the givenness of the laws underlying our economic existence. It is not for our human knowledge to grasp, says Adam Smith, that ‘which in reality is the wisdom of God’ (Smith 2000, 126). Thus, we stop 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 (von Mises 1940, 2, my emphasis). We insist on building all our knowledge upon this law while regarding all questions about its own ‘truth’ as ultimately unanswerable. Said differently, we simply *believe* in it in the sense of a personal conviction. Precisely at this point Zen finds science ‘to be no longer scientific’ (Nishitani 2004b, 116). And rather than hastily turning away from this finding, it wants us to directly look into this ‘abyssal’ and ‘bottomless’ dimension of science (Nishitani 2004b, 122). 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’ (Nishitani 2004b, 116). Expressed differently, we are to turn *inwardly* so as to open up a deeper field of awareness; a field in which we can pose the question of *how* and *why* we came to believe in the objective worldview of economics in the first place; we have to pay attention to our own subjective consciousness. One way to do so is to carefully examine the various expressions and objectifications of this consciousness as they have been formulated by subjective economic theories as they have been developed, for example, by the Austrian school of economics. As we will see, this is far from the end of the matter, because in the light of Zen we will find that we cannot possibly identify ourselves with any of these objectifications and expressions. Rather, we are to discover ourselves by transcending all categories that we use to describe particular, objectified selves:

It is not a transcendence aimed at a self that lies somewhere beyond the boundaries of the particular self, but a ‘transcending 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 (Wargo 2005, 180).

Within economics, various categories have been constructed by which we are supposed to understand ourselves in terms of some form of economic common sense. Without being able to go into them in any detail here⁴, I feel safe to suggest that they can all be understood as certain objectifications of an individual self, or *ego*. This is to say that once we accept them as appropriate descriptions, we come to perceive ourselves as independent and self-interested beings. We think of ourselves as being fully autonomous, capable of sustaining ourselves without the help of others (Nishitani 2004a, 17). While from an objective perspec-

⁴ I have done so in: Graupe 2007, 81-95.

tive we sought the 'ultimate foundation' of our behavior outside us in the market, here we find ourselves searching for it *internally*. By means of psychological methods, for example, economists expect us to find 'that certain acts of consciousness are performed with a feeling of necessity'. Every one of us is supposed to 'hear the *voice of the law clearly speaking within him- or herself*' (Wieser 1929, 17, my emphasis). By means of introspection, we shall find a fundamental anthropological constant governing us from the depth of ourselves. For example, economics have thought of this constant to persist in either the working of our rational intellect or in our unalterable desires, preferences and the insatiable greed for more; that is in our passions, which already Hume referred to as an 'original existence' (Hume 1888, 415). Thus we come to think of ourselves as *static substances*, intellectual or emotive selves, which simply have certain properties by default, none of which are the result of any existential act (Wargo 2005, 159).

Economists usually emphasize that there is no benefit to inquiring into the ultimate principle by which our individual nature is controlled. Because they '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' (Bentham 1970, chapt. I, sect. I). Ultimately, we can do nothing but *obey*:

The laws of the universe about which physics, biology and praxeology (i.e. subjective economics – SG) 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 suitability is supererogatory and vain*. They are what they are and take care of themselves (von Mises 1949, 755-756, my emphasis).

Thus a part of our ego is turned into an 'unshakeable foundation', which is to ground all we can know both about ourselves

and the world exterior to us. While Zen would surely agree that this expresses an important characteristic of our modern obsession with individuality, it nevertheless sees through this obsession itself as an abstraction, a truncated version of our true self. This is because it fails to account for the real character of our self-consciousness, which is not something to be known or objectified but the one who is, as well, 'doing the knowing'. Zen wants us to truly know ourselves by further inquiring into the 'ultimate given' within us. We are to search into the true ground out of which all objectified self-knowledge arises, rather than simply supposing such ground to exist.

Once we really give ourselves to this task, we might find that we are incapable of expressing this ground under the sign of the individualistic methodology. We cannot grasp at any 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. That history is replete with economists who have tried to pinpoint an ultimate reality within our individual consciousness as the ground of all certainty. However, invariably, another economist would query this, showing that doubting at this ontological level was indeed possible. In this sequence of assertion and falsification, the trend was for one economist or a school to insist on some vital, defining feature of the self, and its successor to show that the account was insufficient and incomplete in as much as it could not account for all we can, and in fact *do* know about ourselves. Even when taking all efforts of economics together, there is still no final answer to our fundamental quest, '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' (Nishitani 2004b, 132).

Despite of this inability, subjective economics nevertheless insists on the existence of an ultimate law in our depth, *tacitly* controlling our experience beyond our control (Friedman 1953, 40). 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 (Wieser 1929, 18).

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 (Nishitani 2004b, 132).

This annihilation might, of course, give us a surprise. Hasn't our culture taught us that we are autonomous and independent human beings? However, once we truly penetrate into the depth of the self, we necessarily must come to terms with what Zen calls the *Great Doubt*, and what the school of Kyōto has proposed as the central pattern of religious thought: the thought that the self, in its very essence, is empty. We doubt, here, not only the existence of some ultimate law governing our economic lives from without (in which we follow the path of certain unorthodox economists before), but also that such law could possibly rule us from within (which, beyond the purview of most economists, translates us into the realm of religion). This is because we simply cannot point to any substance upon

which it can 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 und 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 (Nishitani 1983, 111).

Of course, in our daily life we hastily attempt to turn away from such fundamental doubt. Also, the mainstream of economics has refrained from further inquiry into this, which seems to stand outside the boundaries of the paradigm both of preferences and of 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' (von Mises 1940, 34). We insist that our quest for self-knowledge *must* conclude on the subjective levels (White 1984, chapt. 6).

For Zen, however, the Great Doubt is not the end but the *starting point* for discovering our true self, that is the 'non-ego' or 'formless self'. Yet, we have to carefully note what Zen wants us to detect here. Many intellectual traditions have blamed economics for giving us a *false* account of human nature. Thus they have attempted to find new and better explanations that could be substituted for 'economic man'. In contrast to this, Zen does not propose some account of human nature with which we

could replace *homo oeconomicus*; but instead, Zen proposes the project of penetrating into its very depth. We are to plunge ourselves headlong into the Great Doubt, so as to self-consciously *become* economic man and existentially converse with it:

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 (Abe 2004, 150).

Metaphorically speaking, to encounter the *Great Doubt* is like 'the brandishing of a religious sword of death and a demand to annihilate one's self' (Nishitani 2004b, 120). While this might sound utterly nihilistic and pessimistic, actually the reverse is the case: 'the sword that kills is here at the same time a sword that gives life' (Nishitani 2004b, 120). This is to say that our quest, which takes shape immanent to economic man, is what allows us to suddenly break through the limitations of the self assumptions under which our awareness formerly operated. From below or 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' (Nishitani 1983, 68). We will 'drop' our ego so that it gives way to a 'self-expressive, creative subject'; a subject that 'knows itself' clearly and distinctly" (Hisamatsu in: Stambaugh 1999, 156).

Outlook

Let me, at this point of our discussion, suggest that for Zen to develop into a true stronghold of free thinking in our time, it will have to put itself to the task of bearing yet clearer witness to that 'deeper reality' we just encountered. We are in 'need for a more elemental mode of reflection' (Nishitani 1983, 69). Cer-

tainly, this need confronts us with a demanding task. Herewith, I propose a preliminary sketch of a path forward along which Zen might guide us in what seems like the most secular region of the life world: that dealing with production and commerce. I will limit myself to making four points.

Firstly, 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 something extrinsic and foreign to us. It is 'seen as "other" - alien, unknowable, even threatening' (Stambaugh 1999, 96). In contrast to this, Zen agrees with some innovative schools of psychology and psychiatry that 'there is not 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' (Stambaugh 1999, 93). Thus, Zen does not treat the unconscious as a problem beyond our understanding, but as a provisional parameter of the awareness we bring to bear on our egotistic consciousness. Being provisional, it can be overcome by further deepening and broadening our awareness.

Secondly, in order for such deepening or broadening to occur, we should carefully note that some economists have further inquired into the true *a priori* of our individual consciousness, despite their insistence on human beings' general incapability of doing so. Although their position has generally 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 true *a priori* for economics does not seem to lie within each of us individually but within a '*collective unconscious*'. The 'voice of the law' that we think of as clearly speaking from within ourselves *tacitly* arises out of a field of common experience. It speaks to everyone in the same voice. Beyond both our objective grasp of the world

and the 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' (Wieser in: von Mises 2006, 78). 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' (von Mises 2006, chapt. 1.7). Expressed differently, we are always *in* ordinary, everyday experience, commonly living and acting together 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. Metaphorically speaking we could say:

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 non-grasping 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 (Welwood and Wilber in: Stambaugh 1999, 93).

Thirdly, Zen will have to find ways of expressing the 'true reality' of such nongrasping awareness without assuming it to be a substratum in and for itself. This, at least, is the trap in which, apparently, many scientists have fallen, who have explicitly thought that this world lies entirely 'beyond' our egos (Graupe 2006, 78-99). Thus, evolutionary economists such as Hayek have considered our individuality as being unconsciously shaped against the background of *given* market institutions. We appear to be dominated by unconscious action and blind adher-

ence to the social institutions of competitive markets that work from deeply within us. There is, says Hayek,

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 (Hayek 1980, 24, my emphasis).

Insofar as Zen philosophers speak about 'the surrender of intellect to something greater and stronger than the self' (Abe 2004, 94), we have to be careful not to misunderstand them to be talking about conformism, however it is presented. This is to say that we are to point out that Zen ultimately rejects the *whole* idea of a substance, of an unchanging substratum underlying all our experience. For the Kyōto School philosophers, an account of the 'world of history' such as Hayek's is nothing more but a *denial* 'of our personal Self, from the depth of ourselves'. It penetrates us demonically and deceives us under the mask of truth (Nishida 1958, 223). This is because it does not allow for any 'formation' or 'creation'. There is no movement 'from the formed toward the forming' (176).

In order to make this point at least somewhat clearer, let me, fourthly and finally, refer to what I consider the most fundamental difference in the methodological procedures of Zen and economics. Explicitly or implicitly, economics so far has taken it to be entirely 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'. And it has concluded from this that for our theory of human knowledge 'there is certainly something that it cannot help considering as permanent' (von Mises 2006, 1). Thus, it

makes us, both in theory and practice, to think of ourselves as being ultimately controlled by some forces over which we do not have power in turn. Because what lies underfoot appears as already created by the past, we conceive of the present as if it were 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' (Nishitani 1983, 112). Once we stop to conceptually think of the world upon the basis of something given, we are free to *act within* it so as to become creative parts of the creative, self-determining world (Nishida 1958, 230). The *emptiness* Zen talks about is, in a final account, not something to look at. We are to plunge ourselves right into it. We are to change from observers to movers, from victims to creators, so as to become both *creatus* and *creatans* (Carter 2001, 46).

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 (Suzuki 2004, 86).

Zen does not stop short at the point of view that our lives have been determined by the historical formation of market institutions once and for all. 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' (Stambaugh 1999, 142). Our selves are determined, this is true, but it is ourselves, together with all sentient beings, who are doing the determining. Thus we find the foundationalist approach of economics, in all its variations, to be in error *as such*. This approach is, in a final account, nothing but an illusion, a truncated abstraction of

the nonobjectifiable and dynamic world we continually create while we are created by it. However, from a Zen perspective 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-knowledge.

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PART III

ASPECTS OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

BUDDHISM AS A STRONGHOLD
OF FREE THINKING?

Social, Ethical and Philosophical
Dimensions of Buddhism

Edited by
Siegfried C.A. Fay and Ilse Maria Bruckner

edition ubuntu

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Siegfried C.A. Fay Ilse Maria Bruckner

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