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Philosophy East and West, Volume 53, Number 2, April 2003, pp. 251-270  
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2003.0014>



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## RENEGADE EMOTION: BUDDHIST PRECEDENTS FOR RETURNING RATIONALITY TO THE HEART

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In recent years, there have arisen significant protests against the idea that there is a universal form of rationality and against the long-standing assertion of a hard ontological distinction between reason and embodiment. These protests have been lodged, at least in part, because of a recognition that practices of reasoning vary both over history and across cultures, and because a general skepticism regarding mind-body dualism has prompted a closer examination of the ways in which practices of reasoning are rooted in embodied patterns of conduct and bodily metaphors.<sup>1</sup> Along with this has come a readiness both to review the relationship of reason and emotion and to evaluate critically the place of rationality in human flourishing.

A major stumbling block, particularly in this latter work, has continued to be its critically incestuous nature. Far from being neutral with respect to rationality, the primary conceptual and logical tools used in this critical endeavor have consisted of artifacts produced by the very tradition of rationality in question for the purpose of clarifying and furthering its own reach and success. We would not expect software designed to identify and eliminate computer viruses to critically expose malignancies in computational theory and information processing technologies as such. Likewise, we can hardly expect our prevailing critical literacies to expose those of the rational tradition to which they owe their dominant currency. One way or another, we must step outside this evaluative circle.

Here, I hope to affect such a move by offering a Buddhist alternative to the prevailing spectrum of models for how reason and emotion are related. At one end of the spectrum are models that subsume the emotional under the rational. Robert Solomon's early work on emotion arguably exemplifies this view, asserting that emotions arise on the basis of judgments. At the other end of the spectrum are (a much fewer number of) models like that forwarded by David Hume. These maintain that passions have priority over reason, which properly serves the customary, 'self'-centered interests that drive human affairs. In between are typically arrayed models that accord greater or lesser importance to the roles of social construction, biology, and behavior. Nowhere along this spectrum is the absolute distinctness of rationality and the emotions questioned. Instead, consideration is primarily given to establishing properly their individual and essentially separate natures and the hierarchy of their valorization.

The approach to be taken here will be to undermine the categorical distinction of reason and emotion by drawing out the ramifications of the Buddhist (especially Mādhyamika) insight that all distinctions pivot on an assertion of horizons for relevance—that is, on a conventional denial of the emptiness or irreducible inter-

dependence of all things. From the perspective of emptiness, all distinctions—and the identities that they announce and maintain—stand as evidence for ongoing acts of disambiguation. They are, in other words, functions of our *karma* and not “naturally occurring” entities. A significant part of my aim here, then, is to clarify, assess, and hopefully reverse the *karma* by means of which reason and emotion have been set categorically apart by the currently and most widely dominant philosophical and psychological lineages.

More specifically, by working through the implications of a Buddhist understanding of persons and emotions, I want to suggest seeing emotions as relational transformations through which the direction and qualitative intensities of our interdependence are situationally negotiated, enhanced, and revised. With this understanding in mind, I want to offer a set of historically grounded narrative precedents for seeing reason *as an emotion*.

To take a bodily metaphor, this entails seeing reason as related to other emotions in a fashion analogous to the thumb’s relationship to the other four fingers of the human hand. Much as their opposed orientation allows all five fingers, working in concert, to better hold and craft things, the complementary opposition of reason and other emotions allows a refined capacity for taking in and crafting meaning. As the metaphor suggests, however, while reason and emotion are not intrinsically disparate sorts of phenomena, it should be recognized that reason is—because of its particular orientation—both special *and* lacking in both the reach and the degree of articulation evidenced by other emotions. Its “appropriate” position, then, ought to be one of relative humility, and, in many historical eras and cultures, this has indeed been the case. But this is no longer generally true. Through a two-millennia-long series of historical “accidents”—especially evident in the mainstream philosophical traditions of the West—rationality came to take on the role, first, of a renegade emotion claiming superiority over all other emotions and, then, an entirely independent and exalted status.

Unless checked and reversed, the categorical separation of reason from emotion promises disaster: the institutionalization, through the instrumental deployment of rationality in the form of global technological systems, of what can be referred to as dramatic entropy—an erasure not of the possibility of being but of differences that make a meaningful difference. Taken to its own logical extreme, asserting the essential disparity and hierarchic superiority of reason over other particular emotions—literally cutting it off from them—is the commission of a dramatically crippling category mistake.

#### *An Important Prefatory Caveat*

It should be stressed that the forms of rationality I will be taking to task here do not by any means exhaust the full range of human reasoning practices, much less those that might be carried out by other kinds of sentient beings. Indeed, I will be assessing the proper place of only those forms of rationality that turn on a logic of individuation—that is, forms of reasoning that insist on the exclusion of the middle

ground between what 'is' and what 'is not'.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, while I will be making use of Buddhist concepts and critical heuristics to evaluate the role of rationality in human flourishing, it should not be supposed that Buddhism is the only possible resource for mounting such a critique. Buddhism has particularly well-developed conceptual resources and practices aimed at undermining the bias toward existence that is fundamental to the logic of individuation. But one might as easily look to African, Native American, or Aboriginal practices of reasoning for a system of precedents by means of which the limits of existence-biased rationality might be cogently assessed.

### *Questioning the Logic of Existence: A Buddhist 'Copernican' Revolution*

Among the Buddha's central teachings is the injunction that all things should be seen as marked by impermanence (*anitya*), trouble (*duḥkha*), and the absence of any essential nature (*anātman*). This last practice—that is, seeing all things as having no essential nature or self—implies cultivating awareness of the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and interdependence (*pratītya-samutpāda*) of all things. It is the ongoing realization that nothing literally exists or "stands apart" (*existere*) from all else. Indeed, in the formula rehearsed repeatedly in the (Mahāyāna) *Diamond Sūtra*, it is actively to realize that things (*dharmas*) are not really 'things', we only refer to them as "things." That is, what we refer to as "things"—whether trees, persons, or phenomena like histories—are simply the result of projecting relatively constant horizons of relevance or value ('things') and not, as we presume, naturally occurring realities (things). Thus, what we take to be *objects* existing independently of ourselves are, in actuality, compounded or put together (*samskr̥ta*) out of *habitual patterns of interested relationship*.

These teachings compose a system for dissolving the twin metaphysical myths of existence and substance—a concert of strategies for turning away from the saṃsāric realm of continued conflict and suffering. If the term "Buddhist metaphysics" is not oxymoronic, it is because we mean by it a metaphysics of ambiguity according to which what things *are* and *are not* reflects the current status of jointly undertaken (often ritually constituted) acts of disambiguation, not any sort of inherent essence or nature. 'Things' take their unique shape through our projecting well-maintained horizons for relevance. Doing so effectively foregrounds certain aspects of our total situation, abstracting from it not only such things as 'trees' and 'homes' but our own 'selves'. Only through such a denial of the horizonless emptiness or interrelatedness of all things can we distinguish between what each of these 'is' and exclude, thereby, all that each 'is not'.

We do not do this randomly *or* according to inherently fixed principles. Rather, we disambiguate our situation in terms of our (changing, but patterned) likes and dislikes, according to our motivating values, our needs, our desires, and our strategies for fulfilling them. In a word, we project horizons for relevance—an exercise in ignoring the interdependence of all things—in an expression of our *karma*. This, it should be stressed, is something that we do, together, even if often in open

conflict. Finally, the world in which we find ourselves is not fundamentally factual—something objectively given. Neither is it something subjectively willed into existence. Rather, the cosmos in which we find ourselves is, at bottom, *dramatic*. To say that all things should be seen as irreducibly relational is to say that they obtain—as we ourselves do—only as *participants* in patterns of *meaningful* interdependence.

Suitably condensed, the Buddhist teaching of *karma* comes to this: the topography of our life narratives should be seen as corresponding to the complexion of our own values and intentions. The conflicts we encounter are rooted not in the objective operations of a so-called “natural law” or the capriciousness of chance but in tensions among our own values and aspirations, our likes and dislikes, our desires and dreams. In a karmic or dramatic cosmos, values precede facts. Meaning, far from being either an objective or subjective state of affairs, occurs as that through which all subjects and objects come to be situated as they are.

By eschewing exclusive claims about what *is* or *is not* and directing our attention instead to relationality as such, we embark on a path of enhanced intimacy among all things—a path, that is, of realizing our dramatic partnership with them. But because this refusal to exclude the middle ground between ‘this’ and ‘that’ or between ‘is’ and ‘is not’ takes place in a world that is also characterized by both trouble and impermanence, this partnership is necessarily improvised. Indeed, it can be said that the path of Buddhist practice, minimally conceived, consists of a commitment to the unrelenting improvisation of ways through dramatic impasse. It is a path, in other words, of continuously negotiated shifts in the meaning of our situation away from *saṃsāra* toward *nirvāṇa*. On such a path there is no final or explicit destination, but rather increasing clarity about what it means to realize both appreciative and contributory virtuosity.<sup>3</sup>

Especially as taken up in Mādhyamika-influenced traditions of Buddhist practice, this is a path that broadens immeasurably as we relinquish those habits of ignorance that block the mutual contribution of all things to the meaning of our situation and hence its dramatic furtherance. Seeing all things as empty is, to paraphrase Nāgārjuna, to open ourselves to their horizonless relevance within our situation, freeing them from the hierarchy of our own, typically ‘self’-determining, importances. Buddhist practice thus opens a dramatic space in which all things enjoy the meaningful liberty of *contributing* as needed to the ongoing situational translation of *saṃsāra* into *nirvāṇa*. As stated most forcefully in the Hua-yen tradition, this culminates in realizing the irreducibly relational, interpenetrating, and non-obstructing nature of all things.

Along with this practice comes an increasing inability to maintain an ego-centered understanding of emotion. Just as meditative practice occasions the realization that there are thoughts but no thinker, it also occasions the realization that emotions occur in the absence of any abiding self who has them. Indeed, it is only to the extent that we identify ourselves as or with an abiding self that there arises the constellated experience of feelings, sensations, behaviors, and judgments normally associated with “having an emotion.” Rather than being preexisting elements that

are composed in the realization of emotion, they consist of self-centered abstractions from the whole of our dramatic interdependence as such.

Through the practice of realizing no-self, the experience of *having an emotion* thus gives way, first, to being *continuous with an emotional situation* and, then, to *realizing presence as the situational improvisation of meaning*. Emotions come to be understood, that is, as situational negotiations of the intensity and direction of our dramatic interdependence as such. They arise when and where currents in the patterned impermanence or meaning of a situation become powerfully convergent—when the heading and dramatic velocity of a situation are being actively negotiated. In Buddhist terms, emotions are irreducibly *karmic* events: regions of *dramatic confluence* where the meaning of a relational pattern is being disambiguated.

Emotions thus blur—and when intense enough, entirely dissolve—the distinction between self and other, as well as such correlated distinctions as those between the mental and the physical, the private and the public, or the appearing and the real. Less transitively stated, emotions take place as transformations of the vast middle ground that lies between, surrounds, and ultimately infuses the opposition of ‘is’ and ‘is not’. At once evidencing and conditioning the relational topography undulating between what is ‘self’ and what is ‘other’—between what is identified as the sensing and sensitive ‘subject’ and that which is taken as its ‘object’—emotions articulate the always unique and changing complexion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). They can be the site of turning toward continued and increasingly chronic forms of dramatic crisis or impasse (*saṃsāra*) or toward truly liberating intimacy (*nirvāṇa*)—either a realized instance of hell or a realization of the *bodhimaṇḍala*, the place of enlightenment.

Playing with the common Chinese Buddhist metaphor of awareness as an ocean, we can say that emotions arise through the confluence of relatively well-focused dramatic currents or patterns of meaningful relationship. Keeping in mind that, in Buddhism, awareness is a relationship between a sensing subject or organ and a sensed object (with these having the ultimate ontological status of abstractions from that relationship), emotions are topographical features in the relational complexion of interdependence as such. Like ocean currents, emotions are not ontologically distinct things that occur *in* awareness of our situation, but relational dispositions characteristic *of* them.

As the metaphor suggests, whether a situation is emotionally positive or negative has to do with the “angle of incidence” between dramatic currents or patterns of relationship. Currents can complement and deepen one another, can meet head on and result in roiling turbulence, or can begin spinning whirlpool-like around a common center of gravity. At times, all of these types of confluence can be taking place at once—for example, in a situation where romantic love is being confounded with obsessive jealousies regarding a third party and resulting in mutual anger. Also implied in the metaphor is that the differences often claimed to exist among character, moods, and emotions are not substantial in nature. Moods can be seen as analogous to the interaction of a current with an incoming or outgoing tide, and

character dispositions as akin to the ways in which different shorelines (gradual, steep, in the form of open bays or fjords) focus tidal movement.

Like all metaphors and analogies, the ocean metaphor has limitations and eventually breaks down. One need only ask, for example, about the emotional significance of “the bottom of the ocean” or “the sky.” Still, hopefully it helps to make plausible a paradigm shift according to which there are no independent beings or things, in which the world is thoroughly relational and irreducibly meaningful, and in which emotions occur as regions of dramatic quickening where situations—entire constellations of relationship—are changing direction and tempo.

In keeping with the teaching of *karma*, we can say that existence is a function of consistently restricted meaning or dramatic blockage. The Buddhist teaching that existence is troubled or suffering can thus be understood as an injunction to see that it is our systematic ignorance of the mutual relevance of all things—their emptiness—that lies at the root of our troubles, and that the corrective to this ignorance is realizing emotional maturity and dramatic virtuosity.

Traditionally, this is captured in the concept of *upāya*—the capacity of a bodhisattva to demonstrate the inseparability of wisdom and compassion through unlimited skill-in-means—unlimited virtuosity in improvising situational turns from *saṃsāra* (suffering) toward *nirvāṇa* (enlightenment). It is crucial in traditional Buddhist circles, then, that negotiations of changes in situational directions are, by most sentient beings most of the time, not truly improvised and almost never with bodhisattva-like virtuosity. Rather, they are undertaken through the intermediary interaction of those habitual patterns of inattention or ignorance that underlie the self-identities of the persons involved. Because of this, many Buddhist teachers and traditions have urged the practice of emotional discrimination. Hence, emotions or patterns of relational immediacy like those expressing loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity are valorized while those expressing anger, hatred, or jealousy are cautioned against.

The apparent similarity of this polarization of emotions with some more common emotional taxonomies is, however, misleading. In contrast with these views wherein the self is assumed to be the locus of all emotions—for example, both loving-kindness *and* hatred—the Buddhist claim would be that emotions like hatred, lust, and anger occur when the conceit of ‘I’ is being threatened and energetically protected or defended. Such emotions arise, that is, through a further barricading of the self against the realization of dramatic interdependence or *karma*—that is, by fostering its continued existence. The valorized emotions like compassion and loving-kindness express a dissolution of the self’s customary boundary conditions, an openness to the contributions of others, and an appreciation of their relevant differences, bringing with them clearly heightened possibilities for realizing the emptiness or dramatic richness of the present situation. The distinction, then, is between emotions that are conducive to strengthening the exclusivity of the self and further suffering and those that are conducive to liberating intimacy and the practice of having no-self. Either way, however, it remains true that our world has come to be (*yathābhūta*) on the basis of emotion work and must be understood in terms of it.

*Arguing for Narrative Closures: Rationality and the Real as Dramatic Extremities*

As just described, the Buddhist path aims at inverting orders that (especially in the mainstream traditions of the West) have long enjoyed canonical status: the ontological priority of individual beings over relationships, the epistemological superiority of reason over emotion, the dependence of the sphere of value on that of existence, the centrality of the experiencing ego and its interpretation in hermeneutics, and the independence of the known with respect to the process of knowing. With the broad phenomenological, existential, and postmodern turns away from the “myth of the given” and the simplicity of an essentially independent subject, this canon has, of course, been coming under increasing (if mostly unsystematic and relativistic) theoretical criticism. Hence, similarities have been noted, for example, between the Buddhist refusal to accept any assertion that “this alone is true, all else is false” and Derrida-inspired deconstruction.

Such similarities, however, go only so deep. The point of especially the Mahāyāna Buddhist path is not theoretical (and now political) correctness, but corrective practices carried through to the realization of liberating intimacy among all beings. This initially involves a kind of deconstruction aimed at revealing and dissolving the dispositional formations (*saṃskāra*) through which we typically establish the meaning of our situation—habits and rituals that are both personal and cultural. Reasoning is typically admitted to be a useful approach to this work and for counteracting and cooling down such hot emotions as anger, hatred, and jealousy. As an emotion, appropriately cultivated in keeping with the teachings of no-self and emptiness, reason can help direct our situation toward the middle way.

But reasoning is strictly an initial move that will only come to fruition with the realization of appreciative and contributory virtuosity—the demonstration of *upāya*. Here, Buddhism subverts both the postmodern project and that against which it theoretically protests, doing so on grounds that are finally emotional, and that are quite helpful, both in clarifying precisely what is meant by “reason” and “rationality” in the present context and in considering the Buddhist valence of reason as an emotion.

*Seeing Rationality and Rhetoric as Ritual Biases*

As a working definition, we can say that while habits conserve practically useful behaviors (and are, thus, almost entirely personal in nature), rituals socially articulate and conserve shared meanings. In this sense, they can be seen as emotional artifacts that, for present purposes, can be seen as enacted or deployed in accordance with two distinct intentional or karmic biases.

Rhetorically enacted rituals may be understood as relational processes by means of which different and potentially divergent dispositions of a situation are brought into meaningful coordination. That is, rhetorical rituals lead to *contractions* of dramatic space that are induced by expressions of affinity, and that give birth not to essences but to new kinds of relationship or narration. Such rituals promise



enhanced conversation among participating subjects. These subjects may, of course, be either human or nonhuman.

Rhetorical ritual establishes a dramatic frame within which those present can smoothly engage one another in turn, in a relatively standard choreography or score that is previously known to all present, but only made familiar (or not) in its enactment. In such enactments, what figures most strongly is *not* the form of conduct enjoined by all involved, but the quality of their performance, the force of their interpersonal offering. As in the performance of a chamber-music piece, for example, what differs from night to night and from ensemble to ensemble are not the notes played, but dramatic quality or enacted meaning. The contributions made by each participant are, in a word, contributions of value.

In rhetorical rituals, then, we witness a combination of relatively stable formal sequences that are improvisationally realized in attention to the changing dynamics of a concrete situation and that serve to specify the meaning of that situation or its way of gathering those present in shared narrative movement. Such rituals create spaces for shared contributions to *how* (but not necessarily *what*) things will be. Thus, the rhetorical ritual of familial grieving at a funeral service will have no effect whatsoever on the factual departure of a loved one; what it may do, if the performance is virtuosic enough, is to bring about a very meaningful catharsis for all present.

By contrast, rationally enacted rituals do not function as vehicles for the shared improvisation of meaning, but rather for *reaching agreement* about situational status. Thus, whereas rhetorical rituals are formally rooted in ordered narrative flows or currents, taking place not only over time but as particular qualities of time, rational rituals are rooted in the assertion of abiding conditions or states of affairs. Rather than involving patterns of attention qualified most fundamentally as “first this, then that,” rituals of rationality begin with the conceptual positing of the strict or deterministic conditional: “if this, then that.”

Rationality-biased rituals thus lead to *abstraction* from lived dramatic space through acts of definition, and produce essences, principles, and procedural canons. It is through such rituals, for example, that logical norms and standards of measurement arise. Because their efficacy depends on acts of definition, either explicit or implicit, rationally biased rituals overlay the fluid given-togetherness or interdependence of all things with one or more ontological matrices. It is with this *definition* of our situation and its “constituent parts” that the ordinal value of ‘reality’ itself comes into being. The scientifically concerted effort to develop clear taxonomies of ‘the emotions’ is the enactment of just such a ritual.

In contrast with rhetorical rituals, rational rituals do not promise enhanced conversation among participating subjects, but the exertion of control by empowered subjects over their (effectively dis-empowered or silenced) objective circumstances. In most societies, this results in a hierarchy of subjects having disparate degrees of power to define themselves, others, and the objects that mediate their respective wants. Although the full performance of rational rituals often involves negotiations of

various kinds, negotiating does not serve as an ideal end to be rigorously conserved, but only as a phase of “reaching agreement” that ultimately results in lasting certainties about how and what things are.

*The Rationality-biased Ritual of Argument and the Birth of Reason*

Reflecting briefly on the history of argument will help to clarify the importance of this distinction for eliciting historical precedents for the hierarchic opposition of reason and other emotions and its eventual claim of independence from them.

Paul Feyerabend (1999) has traced the history of argument back to the use of strict conditionals in the legal circles of the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia roughly a millennium before the common era. Among the foundational moves needed in order to build persuasive arguments was the abstraction of categorical entities—‘slaves’ and ‘owners’, for example—from the dramatic ecologies present in any actual situation, definitively asserting their distinctness and mutual exclusiveness. In the absence of such abstractions from lived experience—a primary instance of what Feyerabend calls the “conquest of abundance”—no universal rulings could be persuasively posited. Laws can only obtain among generalities, and thus, to be bound by law, things (or persons) must be subjected to classification—identified, for all present intents and purposes, only with what *exists* within a well-defined horizon of relevance.

This means, however, that laws can only obtain conventionally—*unless*, that is, *existence* is given or can be *assumed as basic*. As long as existence is *not* taken to be the naturally given status of things, the only kind of demarcations possible between ‘this’ and ‘that’ or between what a thing ‘is’ and ‘is not’ are artifacts in which we find ourselves necessarily implicated. Like the horizon marking the “edge of the world,” barring the presumption of its absolute objectivity, *existence marks the definition of a point of view*—the limitations of our relationship with our situation. Arguments, as a consequence, would best be seen as strategies for corroborating conventional identities, and never as methods for discerning the objective and independent structure of reality. Although arguments may apparently be *about* warranting some objective course of action or truth claim, they are always *for* a particular position or view. That is, arguments are unavoidably reflexive and serve to stabilize preferred (and inevitably preferential) patterns of relevance and relationship. They are, in a word, rhetorical.

Fatefully, Plato followed the pre-Socratics in taking the most fundamental question to be that of determining what things *are*, effectively presuming that existence is simply *given*. Exactly what existence consists of—the precise nature of things and their underlying structure and substance—is an important and legitimate question, but the question is not whether existence is at all possible. Thus, the abstract conquest of diversity—in Buddhist terms, a denial of the emptiness of all things—came to be celebrated by Plato as the necessary first step of any concerted movement away from the “many” to the “one,” from the particulars of opinion (‘appearance’) toward universal, true knowledge (‘reality’).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, arguments were

transformed into purely rational (and no longer simply rhetorical) rituals capable of yielding universal and absolute truths. Reasoning thus came to be associated with arriving at conclusions or situational closure.

Given the Buddhist understanding of trouble or suffering as pivoting on the conceit of existence and Nāgārjuna's claim that the Buddha's entire teaching career was directed toward the relinquishing of all views, the presupposition of existence as a given and the consequent association of reasoning with definition and universally binding arguments must eventually become problematic. In particular, because the rational drive for closure effectively violates the teaching of impermanence, it purports to bring about conditions under which further negotiations of meaning or emotion will be unnecessary. This might seem to be an ideal in Buddhist terms, as it might be interpreted as the end of suffering. But the practice of seeing all things as impermanent is not just conducive to letting go of attachments to loved ones who have died or to the beauty and vitality of youth as they begin falling away. It is also conducive to seeing that no situation is dramatically intractable and that the motive energy for the transformation of *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa* is always available. The absence of any need to negotiate changes in the meaning of our situation would also be the absence of the resources needed to do so—the realization of a dramatic dead end. Wedded to the presupposition of existence, reason is liable to become an ironic emotion set on undermining its own possibility.

#### *Rational Independence and the Beginning of the Universe*

We can begin to unpack this claim by noting, along with Feyerabend, that at roughly the same time that argument and logically grounded repartee were beginning to define the work of philosophy in classical Greece, they were also being worked into the popular mind through public demonstrations of argumentative acumen. There are accounts, for example, of people gathering to witness the banter of logical combatants much as we might today stop and listen to the verbal gymnastics performed by street-corner rappers. Argument at this point was, among other things, an entertaining novelty, an improvised verbal play performed in much the same rhetorical spirit as tragedies and comedies—only, in the case of argumentative performance, the appeal lay in seeing how any and all apparently important differences of opinion could be summarily reduced to matters of indifference. Like jokes mocking authority, the performed trumping of any and all customs would have been broadly popular.

There was, of course, more to the appeal of such rational rituals than laughter. With the skilled use of existence-grounded argument, it was possible to realize maximum control over the disposition of a situation by applying absolutely minimal force. In other words—and this lies at the root of the condemnation of Socrates for impiety—the rise of rationality-biased rituals like definition and argument marked a political coup in the government of the cosmos. With the power of rational argument, it was no longer the case that either the gods or their representatives were needed to play central roles in establishing what things could and would mean. By

assuming the exclusive authority to discern what a thing is and what it is not, humans were justifiably able to turn their backs on the contributions of both the gods and the rest of the animate world, making their own potentially universal sense of things.

The effect of this paradigm shift on the perception of emotion can be glimpsed by considering the role of emotions in the politics of the then-extant mythic cosmos—a cosmos that systematically came to be eroded by succeeding centuries of rational countercurrents. Like many other narratives of similar antiquity and literary sophistication, the Homeric epics depicted humans and divine beings sharing in the negotiation of the course of things in a world that was irreducibly teleonomic—full of directions or meanings, but absent anything like a perfect origin or end. For Homer, intense emotions especially were often the pivotal *events* linking the human and the divine in such *dramatic community*. Indeed, emotions served the dual purpose of acting as arteries through which the consanguinity of the natural and the divine was articulated and conserved and as coercive organs linked to the imposition of divine authority and the human subjection to fate.

The fractious and often capricious nature of Olympian negotiations of the meaning of things was very much a part of Greek lore when the philosophical ascendance of reason was being cultivated in the Athenian academies. Challenging the authority of Olympus would, inevitably, entail also challenging the authority of the prevalent emotions through which partnership with Olympian divinities was enacted and expressed. As made clear by Plato's accounts of his mentor's critical performances, the scandalous potential of rational argument rested on its capacity for rendering piety—the prevailing ritual forms through which humans shared responsibility with the gods in negotiating the meaning of things—ultimately irrelevant. The promise of doing so, of course, was that the meaning of things no longer needed to be improvised—again and again, with or (mostly) without virtuosity. It could simply be discovered or determined, freely and forever. Thus, the cosmos—with its great dramatic and contributory diversity—could be reduced to a (law-abiding) universe.

In light of such a project for realizing dramatic closure, the continued activity of other emotions—or at least those not able to be subsumed into the rational project—would represent at best a distraction and at worst a significant threat. Plausibly, it is this that underlies Plato's very jealous assertion of the special nature of reason and his complementary and quite general renunciation of the representational and performance arts: in effect, they offered *competition*. Their danger lay precisely in affording dramatic and epistemic alternatives—meanings beyond and often contrary to those offered by reason. It is thus deeply significant that Plato represents unadulterated reason as the culmination of a movement begun, perhaps, under the auspices of *eros* or love, but completed on its own terms. His description of the philosophical journey as erotic, far from being merely a metaphor, brazenly asserts reason's proper place as the very crown of emotion. The exercise of rationality meant cultivating a *special kind of felt relationship* to being—at once a movement toward (involving

emotion) and a being overcome by (involving passion) the clear and certain purity of existence. The philosopher's journey was undeniably one of pathos, but a pathos holding itself apart from all others and announcing, finally, their epistemic inadequacy and pathology.

Importantly, at the same time that this shift was taking place in the fortunes of rationality, great progress was being made in mapping invariant features within the fields of applied mathematics and geometry. Originally taken as analogues of the certainties promised by the definitive and argumentative exercise of reason, they seem also to have come to suggest the possibility of discovering invariant features in such fields as politics and education—hence, according to some readings, the composition of Plato's dual-purposed *Republic*.

Against the backdrop of a world fraught with intense political and economic factionalism, deeply contested claims to authority, and divisive loyalties, the rapid shift in the status of rationality—begun by the pre-Socratics and formally inaugurated by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—was undoubtedly tied to its unique capacity for engineering “objective” agreements. The rationality-biased rituals championed by this burgeoning philosophical movement were not just intellectually captivating. They promised a lasting consolidation of political and economic practices and power across the typically divisive boundaries of communally felt relations.

Contrary to the heated emotional complexion on Olympus and in the public spaces of Greek city-states—the tenor, that is, of working out changes in the intensity and direction or meaning of things—rationality transpired as a persuasive and yet cooling force. Among the emotions then common, reason stood out as a literally sophisticated alternative that brought clearly to light the pettiness and dramatic vacuity of other, typically customary, practices for negotiating meaning. If these practices—for example, the Athenian rituals of piety—had remained authentic modes of realizing shared dramatic improvisation, the rituals of rationality promoted by Socrates and his heirs would likely not have had the leverage required to unseat them. At the same time, the evident inadequacy of the prevailing emotional repertoire might also have been redressed by its extension and refinement, triggering an emotional renaissance rather than serving as an occasion for summary dismissal.

Charitably, perhaps that was a hope underlying Plato's quest for knowledge and Aristotle's stress on the cultivation of personal virtues. As it happened, though, the early association of reason with argument, the derivation of universal and eternal principles and laws, and the presupposition of the intelligibility of independent existence led eventually to the transformation of reason first into the preeminent emotion and then into something of an essentially different nature.

By the sixteenth century in Europe, rationality and reality came to be seen as intrinsically related. The dramatic shift thus realized—that is, the change in how the meaning of things was determined—marked a denial of the *ultimate* relevance of context. If the axioms of reason were not customary in nature but necessary, the clear and proper exercise of reason could be seen as a revelation of the structure of reality, and the conclusions thus arrived at—regardless of when, where, or by

whom—would properly be binding both locally *and* universally.<sup>5</sup> In the context of European monotheism, such a view of reason became an ultimate warrant for asserting its transcendence of the body, the phenomenal world, and emotion along with them.

### *The Theoretical Obsolescence of Emotion*

Thus, rationality came to be considered the key to realizing dramatic certainty—a way of rendering obsolete the need for jointly and continuously improvising the meaning of things. Such a view was *not* the outcome of an internal and inexorable logic playing out historically. In a karmic—rather than an either fully deterministic or teleological—cosmos, that is simply not possible. History does not have the logical structure of “if this, then that,” but the much looser narrative form of “first this, then that,” where “then” serves only to link courses of events that are meaningfully related but never necessarily so. In the absence of an overarching metaphysics of existence or being in the strict and essential sense, of strict commitments to monotheism, and of a linear construction of causality, the discourse (or flowing apart) of reason and emotion might never have occurred in the West, and argument might not have come to dominate the epistemic exercise of being human.

But this was not the case. Anachronistically assigned a genealogy stripped of passionate ancestors and tied to the generation of abstract mathematical and geometric truths, rationality has come to seem rooted in the nonnegotiable and unchanging, and to promise not only an end of enslavement to the particulars of lived experience but also an eruption into a cosmos naked of any drama but that which we elect to create.

Performed rigorously and with sufficient dedication, rituals of rationality effect the realization of a “universal” perspective on reality. As beautifully illustrated in Plato’s Socratic dialogues, this was not originally a solitary endeavor, but rather something realized through a particular kind of interpersonal conversion—a relationship in which reason performed the critical role of assessing the meanings given to things through other forms of emotional engagement. As an emotion, reason ironically brought about a felt sense not of cooperation or mutual contribution but of essential independence—a freedom from the gravity of tradition and custom, but also from the thicket of particular perspectives and opinions characteristic of situations framed through more common and resolutely personal emotions.

Existence-biased rationality brings about the *feeling of objectivity*—a cultivated sensibility characterized by cool indifference and not being *subject* to unwanted influences. The exhilaration that attends a first major shift in this direction is, of course, stunning. Through the consistent exercise of reason it is possible to stand effectively apart from our situation, regarding it calmly in a demonstration of controlled presence. With sufficient scientific and technological support—a primary product of consistently exercised rationality—it is possible at least to dream of entirely invalidating the unexpected and the exceptional, virtually prohibiting their capacity for generating unwanted and yet insistently meaningful consequences.

The felt autonomy of being fully rational is thus arrived at by disengaging from

the horizonless diversity of our situation, by cutting ourselves free from the full range and depth of meaning currents presently arisen and arising. If our situation is understood in dramatic terms as a confluence of various currents of meaning given directly in conduct, we can see the rational commitment to existence as anchoring us against the possibly confounding contributions of others. In effective isolation from these currents that are not of our own making or selection, the perceived “objectivity” of our situation is simply a mirror of our achieved “objectivity” of perspective. Rationality is an *objection* to emotional difference and dramatic diversity.

In this sense, rationality has close affiliations with other emotions of resistance: anger, frustration, envy, and hatred, to name just a few. It is not coincidental that there are apparently convincing arguments for being envious or angry or hateful, and surprisingly few, if any, for being in love or filled with sympathetic joy. Anger, to pick the most common and powerful form of dramatic resistance, arises when the meaning of a situation—its present narrative heading—is vehemently objected to, and a refusal to participate further in it is categorically lodged. At its most extreme, this resistance manifests as hatred—the absolute refusal to engage in any open negotiation of a *fully shared* meaning for the situation.

Unlike these emotions, however, rationality does not begin with the identification of a particular against which objections are raised and then sedimented. On the contrary, it has among its initializing movements an appeal to apparently common cause in the face of shared difficulty. But in common with emotions like anger and hatred, rationality exhibits an explicit focus on curtailing dramatic negotiation. Existence-biased rationality aims us in the direction of unbroken consensus or the absence of any need for dramatic improvisation. It is the realization of a space in which differences within our situation make no demand on us to conduct ourselves differently.

The experience of independence—literally, the achievement and maintenance of existence apart from the particularities of our dramatic situation—is conducive to ignoring our meaningful interdependence, the ground of compassion. It is warrant to believe that “If I’m okay, you must be okay.” Taken to its logical limit, this is to deny in principle and in practice the Buddha’s first noble truth and his injunction (in the teaching of the three marks) that every situation should be seen as characterized by trouble or suffering (*duḥkha*). It is to ignore the inevitable dramatic costs of individual gain or pleasure. To be fully and solely rational is thus to ignore completely all other emotions, all other modes of meaning-making relationship. Those rare and frightening individuals who have been driven into such dramatic seclusion and extremity have taken not the Buddha path of liberating intimacy among all beings but the autonomous and conscienceless course of a sociopath. Thus the serial killer can—without any implication of inconsistency—be referred to as a rational mastermind, a genius.

To be sure, this is an iconoclastic and (for some) an irresponsibly confrontational claim. Is it not passion that blinds us to all but our individual impressions of good and ill, and is it not reason alone that opens a clear path to conceiving and acting on universal good? There is certainly some empirical basis for this objec-

tion. To the extent that rationality depends on the logic of individuation that underlies its bias toward existence, the cultivation of rationality will bring about a capacity for adopting a generic position with respect to any given situation—a capacity to gaze upon our circumstances with what are called “dispassion,” “objectivity,” and “freedom.” But this capacity is purchased at the high price of attending to our situation in increasingly generic fashions, instituting increasingly secure horizons for what we will allow as relevant to defining or identifying our situation and our place within it: in Buddhist terms, a progressive denial of the emptiness of all things.

Achieving what Thomas Nagel has referred to as the God’s-eye “view from nowhere” is, finally, to block the unique contributions offered by others to the meaning of our situation. With sufficient technological support, the perfection of rationality allows the exercise of adamant control over the content and nature of experience, permitting the unlimited valorization of both autonomy and equality. Ironically, however, this amounts to the realization of dramatic entropy—a state of affairs in which there are no differences that can truly make a difference, and in which meaning-making has effectively come to an end.

#### *Why We Might Simply Prefer to Differ, Seeing Reason as an Emotion*

Our proximity to this “end of history”—one very different from that recently announced by Francis Fukuyama (1992)—can be sensed by bringing briefly into the foreground Buddhism’s implicit critique of the technological lineage that has at once been a product and a validation of existence-biased rationality. Doing so will have the salient effect of directly pointing toward some of the practical historical consequences of the severance of reason from emotion and (hopefully) generating a felt sense of the imperative to begin their inversion.

The bone of a Buddhist critique of technology can be stated in four steps. First, if we resist the reduction of technologies to tools, it is evident that the former can only be usefully studied and evaluated as patterns of conduct or relationality embodying strategic values and rendering them ambient throughout a society. Secondly, because technologies institutionalize values and patterns of intentionality, they are karmically relevant. Third, because technologies are karmic in nature, they must be seen as affecting the present and future modality of our interdependence as such, doing so in such a way that they are liable to cross the threshold of their own utility, at which point they begin reproducing the conditions of their own necessity. That is, technologies start producing problems of the sort that they are effectively able to solve. Finally, when a technological lineage that is biased preeminently toward control crosses its threshold of utility, it begins reproducing societal conditions under which control is increasingly precise, incisive, profound, and necessary—a maximally controlled environment that is constantly getting just out of control.<sup>6</sup>

Such is the case with our dominant technological tradition. Among the results of this historically has been the institutional valorization of autonomy and equality—



autonomy because of technological enhancements of our capacity for doing and getting what we want, equality because the geopolitics of control as an ambient value require a continuous balancing of the interests and values of individuals vis-à-vis both one another and the societies in which they reside. But the resultant paired valorization of autonomy and equality is viable without irreconcilable conflicts only when the exercise of autonomy by each individual has a minimal effect on that exercised by others. In other words, the coexistence of autonomy and equality depends on realizing what amount of solipsistic conditions under which the meanings I attribute to our situation do not require any improvised adjustments on your behalf. Under “perfect” circumstances, no direct negotiations of the meaning of a situation need take place because, in a strict sense, there would be no situations that are ever truly *ours*, but only yours and mine, alone together.

Such conditions are not yet widely prevalent. And currently, most critics would cite substantial evidence apparently to the contrary. Fears that technological ubiquity and the globalization of politics and the economy would bring about a totalizing dehumanization, an erasure of cultural and regional differences, have turned out to be misplaced. Never has cross-cultural travel been greater. Never has information from and about other cultures been more varied and easily available. Awareness of differences has not decreased, but rather increased.

Increased variety, however, is not the same thing as increased diversity. Indeed, it often works *against* the realization of truly diverse relations and is a useful index of dramatic entropy. That the present degree and direction of political and economic globalization is geared toward an ever-increasing production of dramatic entropy can be noted in the massive amounts of attention devoted worldwide to surrogate dramas in the entertainment and news media; in the prolongation of emotional immaturity through adolescence and well into adulthood; in the epidemic use of prescription and nonprescription pharmaceuticals and psychoactive substances for the management of experience; and in the deepening commodification and marketing of cultural values and legacies.

Were it not for the incestuous relationship among the technological systems enabling this historical development, the critical resources we bring to bear in evaluating them, our rational allegiance to the logic of individual existence, and our political valorization of autonomy *and* equality, it would be increasingly apparent that the information age of postindustrial economics is ending and that we are rushing headlong and “happily” into an era of the colonization of consciousness itself. It is an era characterized by the global institutionalization of subsistence needs, in which attention itself is rapidly becoming the single most important resource commodity in the global market, and in which increasing varieties of experience and information are being readily and willfully consumed in lieu of the much more difficult practices associated with developing dramatic refinement, maturity, and virtuosity.

Already, emotional simulacra are being marketed as core commodities in a global, experiential economy. Similar to emotions in almost every formal sense, such simulacra differ only in being events in which meanings are *consumed* rather than

negotiated. In an experiential economy, the heart can and, indeed, must be managed, just like any other resource (Hochschild 1983). And as is true of all consumer products, the only thing standing between emotional simulacra and the waste dump is the consumer—the individual asserting his or her autonomy by getting what is wanted, more or less when and as wanted.

Indeed, it is rare today that anyone seriously and consistently resists the universal achievement of such freedom over the contents of experience *unless* they subvert the critical commitment to individuals—whether personal, corporate, or national—as the natural unit of evaluation, working out instead the critical implications of taking as basic relationships or dramatically patterned interdependence as such. It then becomes apparent that a technological lineage that is biased toward control and guided by critical literacies rooted in the exercise of existence-biased rationality will systematically deplete our relational capacity for shared meaning making. In spite of increasing sensory variety, we will find ourselves in situations that—in dramatic terms—are ever more profoundly impoverished. This is true regardless of the content of the meaning commodities being consumed in managing our experience.

The *karma* of control is that the entire *cycle* of wanting and getting what we want is deepened. The life of an expertly enabled consumer is eventually one of chronic want. And because so much of what *is* wanted is a sense of *meaningful* placement and engagement—especially in societies where the dramatic distance needed to sustain both autonomy and equality is well instituted—consumers in the experiential economy are unavoidably subject to intensifying dramatic poverty. Through the colonization of consciousness there takes place a depletion of precisely those resources for appreciative and contributory virtuosity that are needed in order to realize meaningful (and not merely factual) resolutions of conflict or trouble. Not only individuals but communities as well are thus “freed” into virtually complete dependence on the provision of corporate and governmental welfare commodities covering the full range of subsistence needs from food, clothing, and shelter to education, health, and spiritual comfort.

From the perspective of a Buddhist critique of our technological biases, then, our society-wide commitments to control-biased technological solutions for our troubles and for meeting our subsistence needs can effectively be seen as matters of (unhealthy) temperament. Strictly speaking, technologies are not themselves emotions since they function to institutionalize particular ways of establishing meaning. Technologies are not, that is, patterned negotiations of meaning as such, but rather socially, economically, and politically embodied *strategies* for realizing the conditions under which a particular meaning or meanings can (and even must) obtain. If rationality is best seen as an emotion, technologies biased toward control are best seen as prevailing complementary moods mirroring particular tropes within rationality’s unique dramatic constellation.

Much as moods affect us as individuals in global ways, technologies biased toward control establish ambient dispositions to perceive the meaning of our situation as ready-to-be-determined-by-me—even if this is practically true only through

the generic provision of consumer choices. Such technologies, therefore, bring about a degradation of the dramatic or emotional environment that is analogous to what happens when an ecosystem—say a rainforest—is replicated in an artificial setting like a zoo. Although the absolute number of species might not vary between the two settings, the rainforest is a self-sustaining and evolving system in which all the species present contribute both directly and indirectly to one another's welfare, while the zoo is an environment essentially dependent on outside support because the species present in it can no longer support themselves. Indeed, only the expert care of zoo employees and benefactors makes it possible for zoo animals to stay alive at all. With the spread of control-biased technologies, variety is actually increasing while true diversity—both local and global—is ever more deeply compromised.

Given that rationality is institutionalized as a cultural temperament through the ubiquity of control-biased technologies, it is possible to see the myth of technotopia—a narrative crucially related to that of scientific progress—as a myth of the domestication and eventual commodification of all other emotions. It is a myth that, if we esteem the realization of dramatically liberating intimacy among all beings, we should do our best to dispel. In technotopia, meaning will never need to be negotiated. First, all experiences will be available more or less on demand. Secondly, when things are “as good as it gets,” our primary concern could never be what things may or may not mean—that is, where they may lead us—but only how we can stay right where we are. In the state of dramatic entropy that characterizes technotopia, there can be no differences that really make any difference at all, no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and thus no Buddhist enlightenment.<sup>7</sup>

The wide respect for rationality is undoubtedly a function of its power (unrecognized as such) as an emotion: a power to generate agreement. But since its power is based on a basic denial of the middle ground for continuing dramatic improvisation, it is a power that *on its own* is dramatically limiting and, unless complemented, self-defeating. Held, for example, to undermining the basic conditions of rage or jealousy, rationality's capacity to “trump” other emotions can be extremely valuable. But, like Western allopathic medicine—wonderfully suited to crisis intervention, notoriously less adept in the treatment of chronic disease or developing prevention practices, and deeply liable to crossing its own threshold of utility in a proliferation of ‘diseases’ and ‘conditions’ requiring treatment (Illich 1976)—rationality is only with great risks assumed to be a panacea.

Given our history and present circumstances, the restoration of reason to its appropriate (and relatively humble) place among the emotions is a political, economic, social, and (for lack of a better term) spiritual imperative. Such a restoration entails the concerted cultivation of emotional refinement aimed at ever more fully and attentively situating ourselves in the emptiness of the “middle” way, cultivating appreciative and contributory virtuosity, and realizing ever more extensive and profound dramatic diversity. Preferring to differ may well be our best chance of restoring and revitalizing not just meaningful community among the emotions, reason included, but among ourselves as well.

## Notes

- 1 – See, for example, Lakoff and Johnson 1999.
- 2 – There are also hybrid forms of rationality that reject the logic of individuation, but that otherwise accept the basic axioms of Western rationalism in asserting the ultimate utility of reasoning and its legitimate authority over the emotions—for example, current appeals to “fuzzy logic” as a means of extending the reach of reason to include such formerly “irrational” domains as chaos and intuition.
- 3 – The preeminent example of the Buddhist path as here described is, of course, the many-life narrative that “culminates” in our present world age with the teaching career of Siddhārtha Gautama, the “historical” Buddha. This narrative, running from the time of Dīpankara Buddha through to the death of Siddhārtha, describes a dramatic cycle from the initial determination to realize enlightenment through the realization of a successful and enlightening teaching career. It is a cycle for which we have more or less complete recordings as it was uniquely performed by other buddhas and their karmic ensembles.
- 4 – Put in formal terms, the utility of any conditional having the general form “if p, then q” rests on the basis of first—and axiomatically—asserting “p or not-p.” Failing to make such a sharp distinction—that is, failing to define more or less precisely how “p” exists and therefore “stands apart from” all other things—there is no way to distinguish absolutely between what follows from the assertion or truth of “p” and what follows from the assertion or truth of “not-p.” In other words, from the premise “p,” anything at all and nothing at all would follow quite equally.
- 5 – The most obvious effects of this way of thinking can be seen in consolidation of the scientific method with its practical exclusion of the anomalous, the unpredictable, and the exceptional.
- 6 – For an extended critique of our dominant technological lineage from a Buddhist perspective, see Hershock 1999.
- 7 – Hence the many criticisms within Buddhism of the dangers of misconstruing the Mādhyamika claim that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not even a hair’s breadth apart. The Mādhyamika point, I think, is best understood as directing our attention to the dramatic nature of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. They are not individual states, but *directions* for the meaning of all things.

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