

# Meaning of the Paradox

## Part 1 of 2

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March 22, 1971

I propose at this time to take up a subject which may prove to be of profound interest, namely, what is the significance of the paradox. To introduce the problem, it might be appropriate to direct your attention to the story of modern physics. The late Dr. Milikin, who had been president of the California Institute of Technology, in a paper that was published in one of the Smithsonian Institute reports, stated that in 1895 he was a student in Germany, and on that occasion heard a prominent physicist of that time give a paper outlining all of the developments of physics up to that time and advance the thesis that all of the important physical discoveries had then been made and that the future of physics would consist only of refinement in measurement, as it were, to carry determinations down to the sixth decimal, speaking figuratively. It was only one year later that the Roentgen or x-rays, were discovered, and here was something which could not be accounted for on the basis of previous physical knowledge. It was not long until Becquerel had placed a piece of uranium ore upon some sensitive paper in a dark closet and demonstrated that the ore was able to photograph itself. Here was implied the presence of something like light which was not to be accounted for by any of our previous knowledge. From that moment to the present, the development in physics has been virtually furious. The door was opened to what is known as the subatomic form of physics. The old idea of fixed atoms as the ultimate blocks of nature, each element having its own type of atom and that these were indivisible units, fell with the development that followed. The whole story of radioactivity, ultimately leading to the development of the atom bomb and atomic energy, and the conceptions that are so familiar to us who have some knowledge of twentieth century physics, represent a departure completely new as compared to the physics of the nineteenth century. We have, among other things, the theory of relativity, which was a revolution in itself; the development of quantum theory; of the principle of indeterminism; of statistical significance of physical laws, as contrasting to the earlier idea that if one knew enough he could predict the course of every atom in the universe precisely, this idea being necessarily scraped in the light of the new principle of a relative indeterminism and the view that physical laws are only statistical statements, that is, that any event is at best to be determined as probable, not certain—a radical revolution in our thinking carrying implications that have philosophic bearings and involving conceptions that change our whole view of the ultimate nature of being.

Now, in this development there have been certain conceptions that have the character of being paradoxical. Among them is this: that light, as experienced under very finely sophisticated control, has a behavior that in part indicates that in some sense it is a substance, that it consists of particles, particles which we now call photons; but at the same time, light is a wave system. Now, it will be remembered that Sir Isaac Newton advanced the idea that light was corpuscular, but study of light subsequent to his time

indicated that it consisted of wave systems, and that assumption was necessary to account for phenomena such as that of interference. So the corpuscular theory for a time was abandoned; but now in our day it would appear that it is true that light consists of a substance known as photons, and yet at the same time is a wave system. The two notions are in large degree incompatible, apparently; in fact it is said we cannot build up an imaginary image of what light would be. We cannot imagine it, but we can handle it mathematically. This is the only point I'll bring up at the moment just to introduce the fact that as we penetrate into a deeper, subtler knowledge of physical phenomena in terms of the extremely small or the extremely large, we find that the behavior of the material universe is not at all like what it seems when we deal in the intermediate zone of our normal experience. What is the significance of this? Why is it that the simple concepts of our ordinary engineering practice no longer prove to be valid in the extreme zones of the very small or the very large?

In another field, namely, that of pure mathematics, research has been carried down into the very roots of the science. Much of this has been a study of the logical principles which underlie all mathematical thought. Now, it is found that when we deal with these most ultimate conceptions of logic, that we come into a number of paradoxical situations. This is not by any means entirely new, for the Greeks themselves discovered problems of this sort. I need only to mention the paradoxes advanced by Zeno, as of the Achilles and Tortoise race and other items of that sort. An example that comes down from the Greeks that you may go into to present the problem perhaps somewhat dramatically would be the case of the Liar's Paradox. This starts with a sentence, "This sentence is not true." Now, if we let  $S$  represent the sentence, let us investigate the consequences of regarding this statement as either true or false. First of all, let us say  $S$  is true, namely, the statement, "This sentence is not true," is true, what follows? To say that that sentence is true is to imply that it is not true. On the other hand, let us say that  $S$  is not true. The effect of that is to cancel out the 'not' in the original sentence, namely, "This sentence is not true," so that then the sentence becomes true. We have the consequence that if the sentence is true then it must be not true, and if the sentence is not true, then it must be true. This in our own day has been elaborated by the modern logician Godel into a problem of provability, in which he comes to the conclusion that in any system of arithmetic, for instance, there are certain propositions which are true but simply are not provable within that system.

Another case is the famous paradox unearthed by Bertrand Russell which he stated in this way: consider all the sets that are not members of themselves, which he formulates in the form the set of all sets which are not members of themselves. Is this set a member of itself? Bear in mind by the word set we mean any collection whatsoever. This is so abstract it is a little difficult to follow, but the consequence is that you can neither affirm that it is a member of itself or that it is not a member of itself. A stepped down presentation takes the form of what is known as the Postman's Paradox, and this I think you can follow. A postman has the order to pick up all the mail that the people themselves, the addressees, do not pick up, but he's not to pick up the mail that they pick up. He starts out and follows these instructions thinking that they're quite simple until he considers his own mail. If he picks it up, then he is not to pick it up, and if he does not pick it up, then he has to pick it up, and he gets into quite a quandary. I think you may be able to follow that picture. Now, what is happening to our thought at this point where we

arrive at such contradictory situations? That's the question with which we are concerned, and we'll return to that later.

Now we come into a zone that is of really much more importance. This is the contrast between the philosophic positions of Buddhism, on one hand, and of the Vedanta philosophy, on the other. In this, I recall your attention to a basic teaching of the Great Buddha himself which is known as the doctrine of *Anatman* and the associated doctrine of *Nastikata*. These two mean that the Self is not a permanent entity, nor is the complementary opposite, namely, that which we call God does not exist in the final metaphysical reality. Now, this leads to certain consequences that are very characteristic throughout all of the Buddhistic *sutras*, so far at least as I am familiar with them. The Self does not appear as a soul or substance for the Buddhist. It is at most only a sort of epiphenomenon riding on the back of what are known as the aggregates, and by aggregates we may recognize the principles which constitute an entity. These would include items like the physical body, like the mind in its various aspects, like the craving principle commonly known as *kama*, like all of the various qualities which are identifiable in our psycho-physical organism. Upon the back of the association of these aggregates appears the sense of "I am" or of egoism as an epiphenomenon in the Buddhistic analysis. An example of the treatment given by the Buddha, as represented in some of the *sutras*, he likens the aggregates to a candle; the elements that make up the candle represent the various elements that make up the aggregate of a human entity, or any other entity for that matter. You light the candle and the flame corresponds to the sense of "I am." The flame is an effect of the elements that are in the candle. Blow out the candle, melt down the candle, pour the molten material into another mold with its wick of the same size and light that, and you get another flame. And the question is brought up, "Is it the same flame?" And Buddha's answer is, in some respects it is, for it is similar in appearance, and size, and qualities, and so on, but in another sense it is not the same flame. There has been a break, and it is a resultant of the new set of causes represented by the candle. This then suggests that there is a lack of permanence, but that is not the case because there is a causal connection between the one candle and the second candle. That causal connection is known as a *karmic* connection. The second candle is the resultant of the first. There is thus something that continues. And here I think we would have to say, not something that is permanent, but something that continues; that that which the Buddha deals with is to be viewed as a continuum of consciousness, not a permanent substance underlying the consciousness.

And throughout the general Buddhistic analysis you'll find this principle applied. An analysis is made, for instance, of fire. A substantialistic point of view, which was current in his time and has been current all down through philosophic history, is that there is a non-cognized substance of which the qualities of fire, namely, heat and light, are the attributes. But Buddha denies, in his analysis, that there is any such substance, that the whole meaning of fire is contained in what we have called the attributes and that there is nothing more. Such a position is variously known in our present philosophy as nominalistic, phenomenalistic, and positivistic—positivistic in the sense that Auguste Comte used that term. There is, thus, something similar to the thought that emerges from David Hume in this early Buddhistic thinking, save that in the Buddhistic thinking we would have something like the notion of a continuum, whereas, the picture left by David

Hume was more that of a manifold, a sort of an atomic manifold of impressions rather than a simple continuity.

As Dr. Northrop has pointed out in his volume *The Meeting of East and West*, the yogic process in connection with the Buddhistic philosophy is this: that we are given a determinate aesthetic continuum to begin with and what we are seeking is the indeterminate aesthetic continuum underlying it. The aesthetic continuum consists of just the body of the impressions that we have without the notion of a substance underlying them, but there is underlying the determinate form, which consists of the appearance of objects, and so forth, an indeterminate, an incognizable aesthetic continuum, and he who has come into a Realization of this, and of his own identity with it, has attained Enlightenment. The conception is a little difficult for most of us for the reason that in popular thinking we generally assume the substantialistic basis, that is, namely, that there is a soul, that there is an existent underlying the various forms of the appearance of that existent, that the attributes or appearances are something inhering in a soul. That, I would say, is very characteristic of our popular form of Western thought; nonetheless, the positivistic pattern is no stranger to science, or rather to those who have built philosophies upon the base of the scientific kind of determination. This kind of thinking, when critical, leads to the conclusion that all scientific determinations are only positivistic, only phenomenal determinations, and give us no substantial or persistent truth in itself. All of the greater scientists seem to agree as to this principle, but this is not popular, not popular thinking. The same difficulty that we have in connection with the understanding of Buddhistic thought, really also applies to the philosophic understanding of our scientific determinations, so it is not so strange to us, in one way, if we are sufficiently sophisticated.

However, there is a figure that may suggest the Buddhistic position. Imagine a soap bubble. As is characteristic of soap bubbles, you can see images in the soap bubble, images of the environment. You may see various color effects—blue, red, and otherwise—a sort of breaking up of the spectrum of light. Let these images represent the determinate aesthetic continuum. Then in imagination, remove the images and there is left the indeterminate aesthetic continuum represented by the colorless soap bubble. The thing that represents persistence here is a continuum, not a substance. It's for this reason that in the Buddhist *sutras* they never speak of an immortal or persistent soul, but rather of the consciousness principle, or, we might say, the conscious continuum. Consciousness is held together, as it were, by a law of *karma* that persists, but there is no persistent entity behind it. The stream of consciousness is. The entity is not.

This is the reason why so many of the Buddhistic *sutras* formulate a philosophy which is known as an Emptiness or Voidness philosophy. All is called *Shunya*, which means Voidness. And this we may understand in the sense that there simply is not predicated as behind the phenomena of actual experience a substance, a depth, something that might be represented by a three-dimensional quality. Thus, in the figure of the soap bubble, the very thinness of the bubble is the significant fact. If there were a substance behind the appearance, we would have to use a figure such as a solid glass sphere—the solidness representing substantiality; whereas, the soap bubble, being a thin film, suggests the thinness of mere phenomena. Thus, what we have in our world, from this

point of view, is an endless streaming, an endless stream of appearance with nothing behind it.

Now, this is not so foreign to modern thinking. If one studies the philosophic implications of Dr. Carl G. Jung's psychology, we arrive at essentially the same consequence. What we experience is the psychical given, and not a metaphysical matter standing behind. There may or may not be a metaphysical matter, but that we do not know; what we know is these psychical representations that form the body of our experience. Thus we know, for instance, that there is in the psyche a God *imago*. That is a fact of actual experience in the science of psychology. But we do not know that there is corresponding to that God *imago*, an actual metaphysical existence which we would call God. And this applies to the whole of our life. It applies to the whole conception of a physical universe in the ordinary perceptual sense. We have actually perceptual images—visual, auditory, and otherwise—which we know to be facts of psychology, but we do not know that there is a physical universe beyond, which are represented by these psychical images. If one really understands the thinking of Dr. Jung, he will have a considerable introduction to an understanding of the Buddhistic thinking as presented by Gautama Buddha himself and by the philosophers that followed him continuing in the same discipline. However, the Voidness conception is not the whole of Buddhistic thought. This was advanced by Ashvaghosha, the writer of *The Awakening of Faith*, and Nagarjuna in his contributions. But there is one known as Aryasangha, who is said to have been a disciple of Buddha directly, who founded the first Yogacharya School, and here the name of that principle which is viewed as ultimate reality is called *Alaya Vijnana*, which may be translated as Root Consciousness—a consciousness which is not something possessed by a Self which cognizes, nor is it something that is merely a relationship between a self and a cognized object, but is to be viewed rather as a pure self-existent Consciousness.

We are now prepared to understand a form which recurs again and again in the discourses which are attributed to Gautama Buddha. When discussing what is the ultimate reality, he affirms, for instance, that it is not being, but at the same time it is not non-being. This pattern is used with respect to conception after conception, and elaborated over and over again. In terms of our modern logic, we could state it in this way in the form of our universe of discourse. If we assert, for instance, that the universe of discourse is divided into two parts consisting of *a* and *not-a*, meaning that all that is, is to be found either in the department called *a* or the department called *not-a*, then the Buddhistic pattern is this: a denial first that ultimate reality is *a*, whatever value one may give as the meaning of *a*, and equally it is not *not-a*. This gives the impression of a denial of any existence, or existent, or of any reality behind the scenes. It suggests to one an absolute nihilism, and it has been so interpreted as a historic fact. But this is not a true understanding of the meaning intended. Let us consider what we are dealing with. We are not dealing with ultimate reality. We're dealing with the universe of discourse. The universe of discourse is simply a conceptual construct, and what is really denied is the validity of any conceptual construct as an ultimate truth. In other words, conceptuality as such cannot capture within its fold ultimate reality, but deals only with a construct, which, while it may have pragmatic value with respect either to the world of experience or with respect to a transcendent reality, but is not itself capable of capturing ultimate reality. And if we analyze this universe of discourse, I think we can begin to see what is

involved here, that there is something not captured in the two domains of the dichotomy. The universe of discourse is a construct which lies before my consciousness. I who cognize it am not contained in that construct. That construct contains only the sum total of all possible objects of cognition, but no object of cognition can be the reality in itself. It is, therefore, a destructive critique of the whole process of cognition in which a cognizer stands opposed to the cognized. This is a very important, though subtle, point. This critique does not imply that there is no existence in any sense, that there is no real however understood, but that the real in itself is not that which appears before our understanding. The distinction is quite subtle and very profound. We may sum up by saying, what Buddha has given to us is not a critique of reality, but a critique of cognition.