

DE PRIMIS PAUCIS

“On the First Few”

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I. The Absolute and The Void

One issue that philosophers continue to argue about to this day is the **Mind-Matter Problem**. The question is, in essence, *how many fundamental kinds of things are there?*

The eligible answers to the question when posed this way are “one” or “two,” leading to *monism* and *dualism* respectively. However, there is also *pluralism*, the claim that three or more fundamental kinds exist, and *radical nominalism*, wherein no fundamental kinds exist, i.e., everything is distinct.

Monism and dualism, though, are where the festivities best begin. We have here thinkers such as:

- **Thales, Anaximenes, and Heraclitus**, who each thought early on what matter (which they imagined to be everything) even is. Thales conjectured that all is water, Anaximenes that all is air, Heraclitus that all is fire. All three precede the thinkers **Plato** (pluralist: air, water, fire, earth, aether) and **Democritus** (dualist: *being* and *nonbeing*).
- **Rene Descartes**, a dualist well known for *cogito ergo sum*: “I think, therefore I am.” In Descartes’ view, mind and matter are distinct, since one can be proven to exist by its own mechanism, whereas the rest is unprovable from this first principle.
- **Benedict de Spinoza**, a mind-monist who posited that only Nature/God exists, and that mind and matter are two facets of Nature. This was a direct critique of Descartes’ work.

It is difficult to write about monism without writing about dualism and vice versa, this itself being a metacomment about the issue. As was once written,

...the one begets two;
two beget three;
and three beget the myriad things.

— Verse 42 of the Dao De Jing, by Lao Tsu

Within this essay, we go further, touching on all four aforementioned viewpoints.

I think there is a *honesty* to monism and a *bravery* to dualism. That is, though monism follows the path of experience or known factual data, dualism follows the path of imagination, and to imagine is, to me, the fundamental endeavor of agentic being. Allow me to explain by considering two symbols:



The symbol on the left is what astronomers use to denote the sun of our solar system, we will name it **The Absolute**. The symbol on the right is what mathematicians use to denote the set with zero elements, the closest thing one can get to total emptiness without being null, because the set itself exists. We will name it **The Void**.

The absolute, in this proposed cosmology, exists both temporally and atemporally, i.e. it is both the *parent of eternity* and the *child of the moment*. The absolute is, always was, and always will be.

The void, on the other hand, does not exist, has never existed, will never exist. You can think of it as the result of confusing two facets of the absolute to be distinct parts. The void is mere notation.

The funny thing about notation, though, is once one has at least two symbols, one can then start reasoning about things. Thus, we accept the void as a convenience with which we can tell stories and further understand the absolute.

II. Fun With English: Pointing and Being

We will now take our cosmology and unleash it upon the English language.

Let **that** denote the absolute, and **is** denote the void.

We'll start with the one-word sentences:

(0a) **Is.**

(0b) **That.**

Now, (0a) is inadmissible, i.e. the sentence is not even well-formed: is *what*?

Yet, (0b) can be argued for.

- Suppose a hunter encounters some heinous monstrosity in the wild. He comes back with a spooked expression on his face. His fellow tribemates respond with an incredulous expression on their faces. “What, what the hell is the matter?” they communicate without uttering a word. The hunter then points at what is now swiftly approaching their campfire. *That.*
- Suppose a grandmother is bartering fruit with another elder. The grandmother gestures toward a variety of fruit, as if saying, pick one, which one? The other elder points at a ripe papaya. *That.*
- Finally, there is the thing that rises and sets every day without fail in most parts of the world: the sun. The thing that everyone sees because without it there is no seeing, before the discovery of fire and without occasion of moonlight. Without it, we exist in darkness. *That.*

“Is” works best when there is something to be. So let’s check this out.

(1a) **[Is] is.**

(1b) **[That] is.**

Here we bring in some etymology. To exist comes from the Latin *ex+sistere*, literally “to stand out of.” But how can *being* stand out of anything? It is an abstraction, and thus has no business or quarrel with the world of things that can stand out. This is consistent with how the void isn’t. Hence (1a) doesn’t work. At the same time, (1b) has a real case: deixis presupposes the existence of something that can be pointed at, so any time this sentence is sensibly uttered, it is in service of some thing to which the speaker is pointing. The fact that the speaker/observer has not been shown to itself exist is unrelated.

Another thing worth noting is that “**That is.**” is extensible: any sentence of the form “**That** [*x*], **is.**” is doing real work positing the existence of *x*. On the other hand, “**Is** [*x*], **is.**” sounds like nonsense, even if posed as the question “**Is** [*x*] **is?**”.

Also, “**Is** [**is**]?” does not work (is isn’t), “**That** [**is**]?” works (that is, indeed), and “**That**, [**that**].” seems to also work (emphatically). So nothing is breaking yet. Thus we raise the stakes.

Call a statement of the form “[*x*] **is** [*y*].” a *metaphor*, as in, the least rigid notion of equivalence.

(2a) [**Is**] **is** [**is**].

(2b) [**That**] **is** [**that**].

(2c) [**That**] **is** [**is**].

(2d) [**Is**] **is** [**that**].

I would argue (2a) does not work (is isn’t itself, since is itself isn’t), but that (2b) is pure reflexivity of metaphor. Since metaphor is symmetric (if something can be a metaphor for another thing, then vice versa is also well-formed), (2c) and (2d) should be similar. On the surface, we should reject both, since if is isn’t anything, then is certainly cannot be that, nor can that be is – is isn’t! But there might be something deeper here if we step out of our brave dualist frame for just a moment: (2c) and (2d) are basically instances of the monism thesis, that everything is of one fundamental kind, uttered with dualist language, since in the dualist universe, everything is two things, one of which does not exist.

Okay, now let's really dial the volume up.

The question “**Is [that]?**” doesn't seem well formed to me, though it does sort of appear in common English as a sort of half-question that trails into the response of an interlocutor. So since this form is useless to us, let's reappropriate it as a primitive: call an statement of the form “ $[x]$ **is that** $[y]$ ” an *identification*, as in, the most rigid notion of equivalence.

(3a) **[Is] is that [is]**.

(3b) **[That] is that [that]**.

(3c) **[That] is that [is]**.

(3d) **[Is] is that [that]**.

Again, there is no is at all, so there cannot be a particular instance of is for which is could be, so (3a) does not work. On the other hand, (3b) is just confirming that the that we're pointing to is indeed the that that the interlocutor is seeing: “yes, *that* one is the one I'm pointing toward.” The distinction between (3c)/(3d) (which are of course symmetric because equivalence is symmetric), and (2c)/(2d) is that we have a tool for distinguishing is from that, namely existence itself. So both (3c) and (3d) are both cleanly unworkable.

We will end this unhinged digression into English by implementing the two axioms from George Spencer-Brown's work *Laws of Form*:

(4a) **[[That] is [that]] is that [[that] is]**. *A mark beside a mark yields a mark.*

(4b) **[That [[that] is] is] is that [[is] is]**. *Nesting a mark within a mark yields the unmarked.*

Okay, that's enough of that. And is. For now.

$$[[\odot] \emptyset [\odot]] \emptyset \odot [[\odot] \emptyset]. [\odot [[\odot] \emptyset] \emptyset] \emptyset \odot [[\emptyset] \emptyset].$$

III. Implied by the Pair: Boundary or Setting

The problem with the that/is universe of pointing and being, absolute and void, is that it is *static* and *happens nowhere*. To place the absolute within the context of spacetime is to give the absolute a shape: possibly some sprawling infinite shape, but a shape nonetheless. In other words, spacetime creates a boundary for the absolute, and what is outside the boundary is the void.

So, consider the following symbol:



This is, in mathematics, used to denote a *strict comparison*, i.e. a comparison for which reflexivity (for instance, “ $a < a$ ”) never holds. In type theory it can be used for a material conditional, as in $x < y$ reading “If x , then y .” or “ x implies y .” or a dozen other rephrasings. The symbol $\leq$ denotes a *nonstrict comparison*, which allows for reflexivity, but we don’t want that here, since we’re going to use the boundary symbol to cut things.

If the absolute is all there is, and the void is all there isn’t, then the boundary is neither all there is nor all there isn’t. It is the proverbial “some other third thing.” Yet it also denotes setting, so let **there** denote the boundary.

Note: we will *not* be using the symbol $>$ as a thing distinct from $<$.

Henceforth, we will put the symbols right beside the English, for amplification.

(5) **There.** / $<$.

Totally valid, as in “set it there.”

(6a) **There is.** / $< \emptyset$.

(6b) **Is there?** / $\emptyset < ?$

(6c) **There, that.** / $< \odot$.

(6d) **That, there.** / $\odot <$.

All four of these work! Notably, (6a) answers (6b), whereas (6c) and (6d) are similar forms that both *specify a setting*. Which that? That one, there. Furthermore, we can make these forms generic, and what happens is somewhat surprising: “**There is** [x].” gives us a means of *existential quantification (stated)* where as “**Is there** [x]?” allows us to ask the question of whether a particular instance of something is in fact there. Variations include some Yoda-speak and more ways to emphasize the thing to which one is pointing.

(7a) **Is there is?** / $\emptyset < \emptyset?$

(7b) **Is there that?** / $\emptyset < \odot?$

(7c) **That, there, is.** / $\odot < \emptyset$.

(7d) **That, there, that.** / $\odot < \odot$.

The question (7a) is false, since if is isn’t then is certainly isn’t there, since it isn’t anywhere. The question (7b) is asking about the existence of the absolute, which we declared true by fiat. The statement (7c) is asserting the existence of a thing that happens to be over there. Works. The statement (7d) is the most emphatic form of the spooked hunter we’ve seen so far, which is to say it works.

Perhaps even more interesting is that $<$ is, due to (7d) working, able to split the absolute into different parts: one would only emphasize “that, there, that” to clarify, which presupposes more than one there to which that can be assigned. Which is to say, from these three primitives we may generate many many more.

Here is our final round of “there/that/is” sentences:

(8a) **[That [is]] there.** / $[\odot [\emptyset]] <$.

(8b) **There [that [is]].** / $< [\odot [\emptyset]]$.

(8c) **[Is that] there?** / $[\emptyset \odot] <?$

(8d) **There [is that].** / $<[\emptyset \odot]$.

All of these work, and they are kind of like “edge-cases” in that the boundary symbol isn’t being flanked on both sides by other symbols.

IV. Stillness Flows into Non-Stillness: Setting as Direction

The saying “stillness flows into non-stillness, non-stillness flows into stillness” is applicable to pointing/being/setting. The setting is flow, and stillness is the void, and nonstillness is all there is, i.e. the absolute.

Of course, there is also the fact that non-stillness flows into non-stillness. Unenlightening, but true.

However, stillness, being still, can only flow in and out of non-stillness, i.e. stillness flowing into stillness without going through some intermediate phase, is nonsense.

Thus, for the (7x) sentences, only one of them does not work, and the three others do, though one of the three others is basically tautological.

Now is as good a time as ever to mention that a lot of what we’ve been exploring maps neatly onto Buddhist cosmology. Here is a table:

Symbol	Lexical Primitive	Action Primitive	Buddhist Concept
⊙	That	Pointing	Dharma
∅	Is	Being	Dukkha
<	There	Setting	Samsara/Nirvana

I equate Samsara and Nirvana because there is, in my view (and I am not alone here) no clear distinction between the two beyond the mood of the observer, which is of course qualified and thus impermanent.

V. From Three Arise the Myriad: Consequence or Turning

We hinted before that $x < y$ can be read “If x , then y .” But what about “From x we may deduce y ?”

As in, material conditional is a logical connective, but what about a law of inference in the style of modus ponens? This is exactly the distinction Lewis Carroll was getting at in his short story with the tortoise and Achilles.

Consider the following symbol:



This is the necessity modal from second order logic; it is used to denote when something is accessible via some operator (like, for instance, $<$) across all possible worlds. We will think of this as **consequence**, as in the consequence of having three things already existing is the myriad coming into being. For our game of English we will let the word **all** denote consequence.

In the sentences we build with $\square$, we will only use it as a prefix. Prefixing the empty string is okay.

(9) **All.** / $\square$.

Perfectly fine, and now we have a quadrifecta of single symbol sentences. The only one that's inadmissible is “**Is.**” while all the others are doing similar but distinct things: one can think of “**There.**” as a “local that,” “**All.**” as a “global that,” and “**That.**” itself as an act of deixis whose scope is yet to be determined, if need be.

Now check this out:

- (10a) **All, is.** / $\Box \emptyset$.
- (10b) **All there.** / $\Box <$.
- (10c) **All that.** / $\Box \emptyset$.
- (10d) **All all.** / $\Box \Box$.

Only (10a) works! The rest are not sentences. Further, “**All is** $[x]$ ” is a statement of *universal quantification*, complementing the existential quantifier derived earlier.

We could keep going. But, reader, you are either at this point energized enough to rederive the rest yourself, or begging for me to stop already. So we’ll conclude this section with the following koan:

All that there is, is that that there is.

$$[\Box [\odot < \emptyset]] \emptyset \odot [\odot < \emptyset].$$

VI. To Turn is to Re-Turn: Direction vs. Motion

One final note. We said earlier that setting is direction is there. Why didn't we use the word motion? Well, because consequence is motion is all. That is, consequence in our Buddhist analogy is *karma*.

The distinction between direction and motion is subtle but not nonexistent. Think of a hot mug of coffee sitting on a table. It isn't going anywhere unless a force acts upon it, yet is it still? Arguably not, since the kinetic energy of the liquid within the mug is high enough to dissipate heat. So there is a difference between motion and nonstillness, and nonstillness is a form of direction that need not move through space.

So if consequence is karma, and karma is the motion through which the wheel of samsara and nirvana turns, then where do we end up? Back at the absolute.

For if there are no equivalence classes, if everything in the myriad is its own thing, than nothing is its own thing, hence everything is one thing. Thus, our brave dualist cosmology, if taken to its logical terminus, leads us back to honesty after all.

THE END