



Modern Zen and Psychoanalysis The Semantic Connection

This paper attempts to locate modern Zen and psychoanalysis in terms of contemporary philosophy of mind, particularly in view of dominant theories of cognitivism that see the mind as informational and material, with meaning being mere information in disguise. Psychoanalysis and modern Zen hold to the contrary view that the mind is “semantic,” not “syntactic,” and that the meanings we have in our heads are not reducible to the physical informational processes from which they have emerged. Meaning, as non-reducible, is infinite and uncaused. However, the structure of meaning entails a split between a knower and what is known. This split creates problems in the mind which can be confronted through more, not less, engagement with the meanings in our minds, until we are self-aware and, perhaps, self-identical, with the mechanisms of consciousness that produce the meanings in our head. Such self-awareness is seen as being self-liberating rather than self-reducing.

KEYWORDS: Zen—psychoanalysis—Kyoto School—mind—language—
information—Nishida—Nishitani—Izutsu—Žižek

John Searle has made use of the concepts of the *syntactic* and the *semantic* in his work on the philosophy of mind.¹ I will borrow these two concepts, giving them my own slant, to chart out an ongoing division in the area of the philosophy of mind and to make the argument that modern, Kyoto-School inspired Zen and psychoanalysis sit together on one side of this divide in their joint espousal of the semantic element of the mind as being the supreme functioning mechanism of the mind.²

THE SYNTACTIC AND THE SEMANTIC

Syntax can be seen as the idea that a language is generated according to certain automatic and consistent rules that are of natural origin. The rules of syntax in natural language have not been consciously created by anyone. These rules can generate texts without, in their purest form, any particular reference to the meaning (the word to world connection) that a text is meant to generate. In other words, language does not need a conscious understanding mind or even a world “out there” to work. Syntax can be described as one paradigmatic case in the world of information processing. Information is the demarcation of difference and, in the final analysis, is reducible to two components: a something (which we could, for example,

1. See COLE 2015.

2. Both psychoanalysis and modern Zen share the same experience of having being sprung from their institutional moorings to become serious contributors to contemporary philosophical discourse. Since both movements start from the empirical, that is, the experiences of the practitioner, this can lead to assertions that both movements are “anti-philosophy” in nature. But, as Žižek remarked about Lacan, “My contestation when Lacan says ‘*Je m’insurge; je suis contre la philosophie*’ is well, welcome to the camp of philosophers!” In short, when you make claims about the world, there is no escaping philosophy. Cf. ŽIŽEK 2010.

demarcate as “1” (one) and everything else in the universe that is not part of this something; perhaps we can call all this “0” (zero). By linking syntax to information we can also link syntax to the wider physical natural world since the arrangements of natural systems in the world can be reduced, if we go far enough down the analytical chain, to the processing of information. The universe is information in process. As Cesar A. Hidalgo has commented:

Most people think that information and computation are new things when in fact they are as old as the big bang. In the beginning, there was the bit, as my MIT colleague Seth Lloyd likes to say... But what is information? Colloquially, people think of information as the messages we use to communicate the state of a system. But information, *which is not the same as meaning*, includes also the order embodied in these systems, not just the messages we use to describe them.³ [emphasis added]

This view of information as being dependent upon rules and non-subjective conditions is reflected in a cognitivist view of the mind where thinking (whether or not in the form of natural language) is an automatic process that can be traced to material (perhaps biochemical) causes. Consciousness is an irrelevancy, a delusional confusion of cause and effect. The human mind is like a computer, a manipulator of information embedded in the material and natural world, which in itself operates on the basis of information computed.⁴

The semantic view is that a language only has meaning when it is “read.” Syntax may be automatic and unconscious, but it only comes to life when it produces semantic content, something that has particular meaning for its reader. This semantic content cannot be reduced back to its syntactic components. This non-reducibility makes each unit of semantic content, or rather, *moment* of semantic content, unique and existing just as it is. However, semantic content is also flowing, generating new content incessantly. Semantic content is always “about something,” it gains meaning through

3. HIDALGO 2015.

4. An example of the cognitivist argument can be found in David Dennett, who writes: “The phenomena of human consciousness have been explained... in terms of the operations of a virtual machine, a sort of evolved (and evolving) computer program that shapes the activities of the brain” (DENNETT 1991, 431).

its connection with something else, something that it is not but which, we could say, it is constantly becoming. Unlike a *bit* of information, a moment of semantic content can never be further described in a way that fully replicates it. The information unit “1” can be reproduced exactly, but the meaning that “1” holds for the reader will always move on, beyond the grasp of any final unified understanding or “reading.” Each moment of semantic content is a shadow and reflection of other semantic content. Extending this semantic model to the human mind, the view here is that the mind is composed of unique (in each moment) but (constantly) flowing conscious states. Conscious states are equivalent to semantic content in that they are momentary, always “about something,” and are part of a wider flow from which they emerge and to which they contribute. The mind cannot be reduced to biochemistry because biochemistry can only work with information, never with the unique meanings such information generates in the mind.

A VIEW FROM EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

It is said that science is the *view from nowhere*, in that science discovers knowledge that is not dependent on the observer of this knowledge. $1 + 1 = 2$ everywhere in the universe, no matter what one’s vantage point. But rather than seeing science as a view from nowhere, it is perhaps better to see it as the view from everywhere. The ideal of science is not to be a neutral observer, since observers are themselves phenomena of the universe, but to attain observation without the medium of the observer. Such an observation can only be attained at a level of totality outside the world, where all is monitored at that place where all laws work as instant, eternal truths without the interference of observer parallax. A view from everywhere means one never has to position oneself within to get the “meaning” of a situation, a moment of time, an instance of phenomena, but can remain without, observing the information that forms the whole that transcends all particular moments.

The syntactic or informational view, in its cognitive guise, sees consciousness as irrelevant, perhaps non-existent. The universe moves through the dynamics of information, the constant reconfiguration of differences that the unconscious laws of the universe have generated and govern. There is no need for a conscious creator or God to explain the mysteries of human

consciousness since the laws of nature (information being processed) do this adequately.

In many ways, it would seem that a syntactic view of the mind could be made commensurable with Buddhism. Buddhism is a world religion with no belief in a personal creator. Buddhism sees the world as the flow of karma, a process of change governed by laws (rather than divine intentions). One Buddhist account of consciousness, which reduces it to the functioning of the *ālayavijñāna* (the great storehouse of consciousness) could, arguably, be made analogous to an evolutionary cognitivist model of the mind, in the sense that the seeds (*bīja*) stored in the *ālayavijñāna* are informational, rather than semantic, awaiting reorganization through the karmic dynamics of the mind. Our consciousness, which reads the world for significant stand-alone particulars (semantic content) is built on a differentiating function that fails to see the world as it really is: the constant rearrangement of bits of information which mean nothing in themselves. For example, Buddhism, which espouses the idea of One Mind with two aspects (one pure and one defiled), as we see in *The Awakening of the Faith*, could be seen to cohere with this view. There is no God, no self, no true meaning in the mind, just the pure suchness of information in its organized totality, which only looks like meaningful phenomena in motion because it is being seen from the illusory semantic visions, the *māyā*, of the mind in its deluded aspect.⁵

5. Batchelor describes well how the Buddhist view coheres with a naturalist view:

We have been created, molded, formed by a bewildering matrix of contingencies that have preceded us. From the patterning of the DNA derived from our parents to the firing of the hundred billion neurons in our brains to the cultural and historical conditioning of the twentieth century to the education and upbringing given us to all the experiences we have ever had and choices we have ever made: these have conspired to configure the unique trajectory that culminates in this present moment. What is here now is the unrepeatable impression left by all of this, which we call 'me.' Yet so vivid and startling is this image that we confuse what is a mere impression for something that exists independently of what formed it. (BATCHELOR 1997, 82)

Owen Flanagan does take up the question of how much Buddhism can be aligned with a materialist view. He feels, though, after an examination of various statements by the Dalai Lama, that Buddhism is unable to go the whole way with Darwinian and cognitivist materialism, and the view that life is a biological accident. Buddhism is still too attached to information having a meaning. Flanagan comments:

There is no longer any need for bewilderment, befuddlement, or mysterianism from Buddhism or any other great spiritual tradition in the face of the overwhelming evidence that all

However, whilst Buddhism purports two aspects of the mind, and declares one to be pure and unborn, and the other to be plagued with delusions based on differentiations (which, to stay consistent with my argument, can be described here as that which appears as meaning in our everyday mind), Buddhism also asserts the importance of not eradicating (or in philosophy of mind terms “eliminating”) this non-permanent mind and the differentiated semantic experiences it encounters. The *Śūraṅgama sūtra* asks: “There is the pure Tathāgata, so why immediately rivers, mountains, earth?” (清淨本然伝可忽生山河大地). Why indeed? As Izutsu Toshihiko points out, “A really concrete individual must be, for Zen, an individual-concrete which is permeated and penetrated by the absolute-universal, or rather which *is* the absolute universal.”⁶ In other words, our being in the world cannot be analyzed away. Tang dynasty Zen master Linji’s “true person without rank” is not without being (or let us say “becoming,” should “being” sound too essentialist). In Linji’s world “... the person here listening to the Dharma has no form, no characteristics, no root, no beginning, no place he abides, yet he is vibrantly alive.”⁷

What is at issue here is the inadequacy of a view from everywhere. Any ideology that excludes accounts of conscious moments as having any meaning in themselves suffers a poverty of explanatory power. The view from everywhere cannot explain why moments of absolute particularity—views from somewhere—arise. In the view from everywhere, all the 1s and 0s that make up the information of our universe must be equal, there cannot be any 1 that is more meaningful than other 1s, since this would create a breakdown in the laws of syntax, the computation of information. Through this equalizing vision, the sciences, both natural and social, with their collective view from everywhere, have a universalized and totalizing reach. And yet, as Nishitani Keiji points out “There remains, however, one basic question: what on earth is this man himself who is endowed with, among other abilities, the very capacity of inquiring in so scientific a way into the mechanisms

experience takes place in our embodied nervous systems in the world, the natural world, the only world there is. (FLANAGAN 2011, 90)

6. IZUTSU 1982, 49.

7. WATSON 1993, 36.

of nature, society and human consciousness? To this question these sciences are unable to answer.”⁸

If, however, we reject such a view from everywhere, and assert an alternative view, a view from nowhere, a view that sees the semantic as an authentic and eternal phenomenon of our universe that cannot be reduced to anything else (there is no other something behind it), then perhaps the view from somewhere is less of a mystery. I wish to argue here that this view from nowhere is a view based on a semantic model of the mind, and that it is the view that psychoanalysis and modern Zen, as opposed to cognitivism, can be seen to share.

To begin with, I want to broadly summarize the common trajectory that modern Zen and psychoanalysis find themselves following. It is a trajectory based on a number of assumptions about the mind and the Self that both movements hold. Firstly, both Zen and psychoanalysis see the self as being composite and hence impermanent. This is the truth of *anātman*, the rejection of any philosophy that espouses an essentialist notion of a coherent Self. However, the composition of the Self does not occur along the lines of simple modules being fitted together to produce a seamless system of consciousness. Instead, the view is that the mind is composed of intricate layers or zones of consciousness, which are not laid out in neat segments, but have an utterly unavoidable tendency to leak into one another. Trying to describe the source and symptoms of such leakage is what has propelled much of the divisions in contemporary psychoanalysis. The overriding metaphors used to describe the assembled structure of the mind (Is the mind like Freudian hydraulics or Jungian geology?) may be hard to grasp, but the core idea remains the same: the mind is operating in different (semantic, non-physical) modes, and only some of these operations ever make it to explicit consciousness.

Both psychoanalysis and Zen do afford consciousness a knowing function, a self-reflectivity, which can turn back on the unconscious and subconscious compositionality in a way that re-endows the conscious Self with a momentary agency and empowerment that a cognitive model of the mind would instinctively wish to dismiss. For both traditions, the truth about the mind is accessed from within, through introspection and manipula-

8. NISHITANI 1965, 106.

tion of conscious processes, rather than from without, through neurological enquiry. This search from within is based upon a philosophy of the mind that coheres with what I am arguing to be the semantic view, the idea that conscious states have meaning that cannot be reduced to the syntactic vehicles of information that gave rise to them.

Both Zen and psychoanalysis take their start not from the first *bit* of information after the Big Bang, but in the hereness and the being-in-the-world nature of existence. In contrast to the view from everywhere, which sees the world in all its information, without the distraction of personal meaning, Zen and psychoanalysis have a view from nowhere. This is the view that looks at the world from within, where meaning (semantic content) can be seen (or “read”). This vision is from a standpoint so localized and immanent to its own hereness that there is nothing further within upon which it can be grounded. It is in this sense that it is a view from nowhere. This semantic standpoint is based on two positions that, being contradictory, describe a dialect. Firstly, meaning is impermanent (viz., 1 is never really not 0) and, secondly, meaning is infinite (viz., when meaning arises, that is all that arises, a meaning-experience is self-contained, pure, and absolute).

THE SEMANTIC VIEW FROM NOWHERE

Let us explore further the justifications for the claim that meaning is infinite but utterly impermanent.

The most unusual thing about meaning is that it arises in the mind *ex nihilo*. According to Kalam’s law of causality, “whatever begins to exist has a cause.”⁹ This is true for everything in the universe—except meaning in mind. Cause-effect descriptions, such as the cognitive model, can explain the conditions in which conscious meaning will arise (the existence of certain neurological structures, brain chemicals, and so on), but it cannot explain the actual link of a brain condition (the third-person view) to conscious meaning (the “I” view) link. As Nishida Kitarō wrote:

Even if modern physiological psychology advances to the point where we can physically or chemically explain each of the functions of the brain at the

9. CRAIG 2008, 111.

base of consciousness, will we thereby be able to assert that phenomena of consciousness are controlled by a mechanical law of necessity?... So-called spiritual meaning cannot be seen, heard, or counted; it transcends the laws of mechanical necessity.¹⁰

The cognitive view provides correlational descriptions, not casual ones. We know this because the same cognitive explanations used to elucidate consciousness through cause and effect models also work for artificial nonconscious devices, such as super-computers, and for the zombies of contemporary philosophy of the mind, *Gedanken*.¹¹ A moment of meaning in the mind defies causal explanation. It is extraneous; it appears out of nowhere.¹² As such, it defies explanation from a view from everywhere. It can only be viewed from nowhere.

Meaning can also be described as “infinite.” I use this word to relate the sense that a moment of meaning has an absolute quality to it. A moment

10. NISHIDA 1987, 97–8.

11. KIRK 2015.

12. My assertion that meaning in the mind as experienced by the knowing “I” has no cause would probably not upset too many Zen adherents for whom cause-effect is a projection onto the world from our minds. However, psychoanalysis may not like the transcendentalism implied in this view. Psychoanalysis tries hard not to venture beyond science. However, former, and now anti-Lacanian Dylan EVANS claims (2005), psychoanalysis has been eclipsed, perhaps even disproved by modern neuroscience, and only still exists as an intellectual movement through its adherence to a (possibly anti-scientific) Romantic humanist vision. Psychoanalysis still holds out for the existence of a self-conscious self *beyond* our neurological hardwiring. Asserting this meaning-knowing self and, at the same time, keeping within the bounds of scientific respectability (through conformity with cognitivist and materialist beliefs) involves intricate ontological and epistemological moves that, in fact, do start to sound like Linji Zen in modern lingo. For instance, here is what Žižek has to say: “The ‘mental’ itself explodes within the neuronal through a kind of ‘ontological explosion.’” And again:

“Self” is the elementary form of escaping the “control of solid earth” through self-relating. As such, it underlies all other forms: the self-relating of the agent of perception/awareness, as it were, creates (opens up) the scene on which “conscious content” can appear; it provides the universal *form* of this content, the stage on which the preprocessing work of mediation can collapse into the immediate “raw” givenness of its product. The magic trick of self-relating lies in the way my very “decenterment”—the *impossibility* of the I’s immediate self-presence, the necessity of what Derrida would have called neural *différance*, of the minimal detour through the past mnemonic traces

However, such images of ontological explosions and magic tricks of self-relating suggest quite strongly the real “*impossibility* of the I’s immediate self-presence”: the impossibility of explaining the I’s actual existence in terms of its neural wirings. See ŽIŽEK 2006, 210, 213.

of meaning is self-contained, it is pure. For something to be meaningful it must be understood on absolute grounds. Even when something appears to us as vague and half-understood, we still have absolute understanding that something has appeared to us vague and half-understood. Meaning can only work if our moments of meaning are pure. Otherwise, meaning is not taking place. If meaning is not infinite and pure, then all we have are random, unreadable phenomena that have no “meaning,” that are mere information in computation.

These two aspects of meaning, the fact that it has no cause and the fact that it is infinite point to the nature of meaning as irreducible to any other phenomenon in the universe. It is, in itself, without phenomenal form. It is empty.

Meaning arises in the mind of a knower. But this knower must be effaced, must remain unknown for meaning to emerge. The knower cannot be included in the moment of knowing. To include the knower would create incoherence, an infinite regress as knower knows that they know that they know, and so on. There must be no consciousness of the knower for a moment of meaning to arise. However, this effacement of the knower is based on the delusion that the knower is not part of the structure that is creating the knowing. It is based on the delusion that an essential knowing subject can operate in a world without that world touching upon the knower and undermining the assumed essentialized and detached nature of the knower’s subjectivity.

The problem, then, is that meaning in the world is generated by something being left out, namely oneself. One description of this process, for example, is Alenka Zupančič’s account of Lacan’s impossible choice between “being and meaning.”¹³ This removal of the knower is essential to meaning but it is also, both Zen and psychoanalysis would argue, the source of our woes. This is because the split between knowing subject and known object is a delusion that is never fully overcome. It may remain repressed, covered over by soothing ideology that magically wipes the split away through assertions that one’s detached and alienated view is really one of objectivity, reason, and common sense. However, the split from the world we experience in our acts of knowing the world, creates alienation from the world which

13. ZUPANČIČ 2008, 22.

haunts the mind of the knower in background unconscious traces that can reemerge in symptoms of dissatisfaction with the world: *dukkha*, existential *ennui*, and so on.

LIBERATION THROUGH SELF-AWARENESS

Both psychoanalysis and Zen will have, at some point in their diagnosis of our ills, a soteriological vision of our potential to overcome such ills through acts of radical self-awareness of ourselves in the world, that is, authentic awareness of ourselves as being both the generator and the victim of our acts of alienation.¹⁴ It is as if by simply being aware of the machinery of this dualistic, scissarous (to borrow Lacan's adjective) meaning-generation semantic structure that functions in our minds, we can embark upon our first steps towards wholeness (i.e., a reconnection with the world) and freedom (i.e., space to be, apart from a world that interpellates us, makes us what Linji calls a *true person without rank*). The point is that this act of liberation is not achieved through a negation of meaning or transcendence of meaning but through a (meaningful) awareness that meaning in our minds

14. Alan Watts summarizes this convergence between Zen and psychoanalysis (although he uses the broader terms “Eastern ways of life and “Western psychotherapy”):

The main resemblance between the Eastern way of life and Western psychotherapy is in the concern of both with bringing about changes of consciousness, changes in our ways of feeling our own existence and our relation to human society and the natural world. The psychotherapist has, for the most part, been interested in changing the consciousness of peculiarly disturbed individuals. The disciplines of Buddhism and Taoism are, however, concerned with changing the consciousness of normal, socially adjusted people. But it is increasingly apparent to psychotherapists that the normal state of consciousness in our culture is both the context and the breeding ground of mental disease. A complex of societies of vast material wealth bent on mutual destruction is anything but a condition of social health. (WATTS 1969, 15–16)

This view of the power and necessity of self-awareness for liberation from self-enslavement is also to be found in Eric FROMM (1950). Žižek may be said to lean towards a similar position in arguing that when we achieve psychoanalytic awareness as to how we are determined we also see how we are free. He concludes: “Lacan's maxim ‘Do not compromise your desire!’ fully endorses the pragmatic paradox of ordering you to be free: it exhorts you to dare” (ŽIŽEK 1999, 118–19). On the Zen side, D. T. Suzuki quotes Tang-period Zen master Huineng as saying “When Prajñā with its light reflects [within], and penetratingly illumines inside and outside, you recognize your own Mind. When your own Mind is recognized, there is emancipation from you” (SUZUKI 1969, 127).

is the most fundamental ground of our humanity but one that needs to be engaged with further.¹⁵

Obviously, the liberation that Zen and psychoanalysis advocate comes in many guises: suburban feel-good therapy, psychological recovery, social revolution and Bodhisattva-hood. The point, though, remains the same. We can rearrange the meaning in our lives by looking hard at the meanings we impose on our world. It can all begin in the mind—from nowhere.

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15. This idea of liberating self-awareness as embracement of world in its full meaning, rather than the negation or transcendence of meaning is captured well in Nishitani Keiji’s idea of *emptiness* as opposed to *nihilum*:

Truly authentic and original knowing establishes itself in emptiness as the absolute this-side.... Here the self is truly on its home-ground. Where plants and trees are radically and simply plants and trees... and self-identically with this fact, the self is radically the self. This is the knowing of unknowing, a self-awareness which is none other than the field of emptiness. (NISHITANI 1972, 97)

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