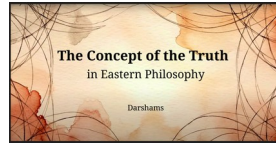


The concept of the Truth in Eastern philosophy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSy0ikaluRI>



The term “Eastern philosophy” does not designate a unified reference or one uniform source. There are several schools, which developed in India, China and Japan, different from each other but still sharing a few general common concepts, such as the perspective of Nonduality, the concept of Rebirth, and also similar views about the concept of Truth, classified into two kinds: Relative and Absolute.

The Relative Truth

The concept of “Relative Truth” provides a comfortable introduction - because it reminds with the familiar notion of Necessary and Contingent truths.

The first mention of the “relative truth” appeared in a 3d century work ⁽¹⁾ of Indian philosopher Nagarjuna (who used also the word “provisional” truth) to describe observations that are *conditionally valid*. Based on Nagarjuna’s work – further development of the concept took place and branched into a considerable number of schools of thoughts.

A clear explanation of the Relative Truth (reminding us with the conditions people lived in the past) - was given by Nichiren - a Buddhist philosopher, of 13th c Japan – giving a simple example ⁽²⁾ of a candle or a torch of fire - used in his time to light a place at night:

- it is true that “fire” can be used as in a burning torch to produce light that can be beneficial at night. This is a relative fact, because fire will not produce this effect in daylight, where everything is already visible.
- but “fire” will burn the matter it consumes - and this is true, whether it is day or night. This is a truth that Nichiren called “Unchanging”; it does not change with occurring circumstances.

The concept of the relative truth agrees with the three theories of truth in Western philosophy (Correspondent, Coherent and Pragmatic), as they offer examples of verifying truthfulness of situations or statements *relative* to specific conditions of perceived reality.

Of interest, however, is the concept of the unchanging truth in time and space. Some sources refer to the unchanging truth as Ultimate or Absolute – but to avoid any religious implication – and which is not of interest in Eastern philosophy - I will use the word “Universal Truth” - as it nicely contrasts with the local or relative truths.

The Universal Truth

is a state of reality that is *valid in all places and in all times*.

Being “always valid” - includes of course this present time and current reality in which we exist. This means that the Universal Truth must have an impact or a trace to be found now in people’s

life, because people's life exists nowhere else but within the reality of existence – which is the domain of the Universal Truth.

Inward investigation of the nature of our life

Everyone's life is of course unique and different– nonetheless, there exists an essence that is shared among all individuals unchanging over the passage of time expressing thus a *universal truth*.

To start the “inward investigation” – there could be no more certain occurrence than the truth of one's birth in this world, and eventual departure at death. Our ancestors experienced this truth and future generation will, without doubt.

The same pattern of birth (or emergence into the world) and death (or withdrawal from the world) – applies to all phenomena in nature. This dramatic pattern of change is valid throughout the inexplicable complexity of all phenomena. Reality is never stagnant.

All events we experience between birth and death express in their background the Truth of Impermanence, or the dynamism of change (in the physical and mental domains).

1. The Universal Truth of Impermanence.

Impermanence is a universal truth – sometimes called the certainty of “*temporary existence of all phenomena*”.

Impermanence is taking place at this very moment in our bodies. Medical science informs us that in each second, 2 million blood red cells undergo replacement and renewal. Geodesic science informs that the Himalaya mountains were part of a seabed millions of years ago. And cosmology informs of constant formation and eventual death of planets and stars.

So, the deepest essence of all what exists in reality expresses the Truth of Impermanence or the *dynamism of change*.

The implication of this Truth is as follows:

1.1. Constant Change

Although it sounds an oxymoron, the expression “*constant change*” – is outstandingly useful. It was the essence of Heraclitus' famous statement: “*Nothing endures but change.*” (3)

Another statement, which makes Heraclitus' views even closer to Eastern philosophy, is:

“*The content of your character is your choice. Day by day, what you do is who you become.*”

This quote resonates with the concept of Karma, as Mahatma Gandhi mentioned:

“*The future depends on what we do in the present*”. (4)

In other words, the current state we live in is not fixed and never stagnant. We have the potential to drive it to changes by our own efforts to produce beneficial results.

1.2. Impermanence of Death

If the truth of Impermanence is *universal*, then it must be valid in all situations.

A universal truth must apply to both life and death, because neither of the two states can exist without the other. In this perspective of *Nonduality*, living and death are of course very different - but they are inseparable. If Impermanence is an absolute truth, then death must be also impermanent, leading to Rebirth.

1.3. Heaven and Hell – not permanent

Impermanence is a liberating truth. It implies that the state of suffering cannot last forever. Eastern philosophy offers a different view than the two states of Heaven (the permanent experience of joy) – and Hell (the permanent or everlasting suffering).

Instead of a *static eternity*, the individual will restart a new journey at rebirth. Impermanence implies that the nature of life is like a wave, or a cycle. The new journey can manifest in its quality the essence of either heaven or hell (experienced in various degrees), offering opportunity for transformation.

1.4. No Fixed Soul

The belief in an “*inherent unchanging soul*” contradicts the universal truth of impermanence of all states and phenomena.

Instead of a belief in a “fixed soul” (as a mental energy driving us to action) – the mental energy that empowers one’s life is not fixed but is a dynamic drive of accumulated tendencies (or Karma).

Perception of one’s existence (or self) grows in time and develops. To describe this dynamism, the term “Non-Permanent-Self” or “Non-Independent Self” is used as an essential teaching in Eastern philosophy. It allows for self-development and for aspiration for higher potentials.

Some Eastern schools, however, are fond of making shortcuts, risking confusion, such as referring to the concept of “Non-Permanent Soul” as “No-Self”. The Truth of Impermanence necessitates a dynamic perception of self, striving for self-development.

2. The Universal Truth of Interconnectedness

Inner investigation of one’s and others’ life leads to perceiving its nature as formed by relationships.

Since being in the womb and then cared for by family and society - all people confirm the truth of interconnectedness in all aspects of the term.

The contents of our thoughts and emotions are filled with bonds with others (good or bad) and with the environment. The air we breathe is sufficient to remind us of this interdependence.

Interconnectedness pertains also to the field of intellect and knowledge:

the language we speak, the numbers we use, thoughts and concepts we examine, ... none of which is one’s own invention.

The Truth of Interconnectedness is the backbone of what is shared and what unites. On the individual level, science confirms that 99.9% of any person’s DNA pattern is shared with all other people ⁽⁵⁾. Ignorance of the truth of Interconnectedness manifests in focus on self-centredness leading to conflicts, divisions and discrimination.

The implication of this Truth is the following:

2.1. Nonduality

The Truth of Interconnectedness is the background of the concept of Nonduality. Two different phenomena are interconnected through a binding background that combines both inseparably. Nonduality regards the physical and mental aspects of phenomena (body and mind, or society and environment) as “not-two”, or “two – but inseparable” ⁽⁶⁾

2.2 Eastern Ontology

Eastern Ontology is based on the concept of “Dependent Origination”, which suggests that the origin of “being” of any object is dependent on other “*beings, causes and conditions*”. Nothing can arise in isolation.

“It teaches that no beings or phenomena exist on their own; they exist or occur because of their relationship with other beings and phenomena. Everything in the world comes into existence in response to causes and conditions. That is, nothing can exist independent of other things or arise in isolation”. (7)

2.3. The Eastern “Cogito”

Searching for *certainty* within one’s existence, it is easy to confirm the certainty of Interconnectedness. The “I” of one’s existence is meaningful only within *the group of belonging* of the individual. No individual can claim an “I” independent from others or an “I” identified by self-reference.

Regarding interconnectedness as an essential reference of identity of individual reduces the intensity of focus on personal individualism and the illusion of self-sufficiency. In this regard, the Eastern “Cogito” – (so to speak), is in harmony with the African concept of Ubuntu: “*I exist because of others*”. (8)

2.4. The Field of “Emptiness of individual nature”

Eastern philosophy introduces a specific philosophical concept for knowledge about the true nature of reality, through employing the two truths of Impermanence and Interconnectedness as basic principles for observation of any phenomenon,

We use the senses to identify the properties of observed objects as being different and separate from other objects. Distinction between objects is essential, of course, for identifying individual objects, but it does not give complete information about the true nature of the observed object.

Because impermanence and connectedness engulf the core existence of any object – then viewing object through these truths will give information about the impact of the dynamism in time and the interdependency of object with other phenomena.

For an object to exist in the first place, it must manifest dynamism and dependency.

But we do not have a sense organ to directly show the dynamism of change in objects or their future potential, nor their interdependency and relationships with other conditions – which are essential for their existence.

When the two truths of *Impermanence* and *Interconnectedness* are employed in our observation, the complete image about the observed object is obtained.

Such an approach would rather show not distinction and separateness but connectedness and bond - with the surroundings. It would also trigger images of future potentials of change due to the impermanence of the current state.

Overriding the subjective “perception of reality”: Employing the senses as tools for acquiring information is of course important, yet it may lead to subjective, anthropomorphic perception of the reality of the world.

“Reality” becomes how “we” view the world by our senses. This problem has attracted Kant’s attention, suggesting the concept of noumena and the *Thing-in-itself*, which transcends the senses, becoming - according to him - unknowable.

On this matter, Eastern philosophy suggests that because no object exists beyond the two ultimate truths, then - by viewing the observed object under the light of the two Universal Truths - it is possible to perceive **the true essence of the object**.

The phenomenal observation of an object provides knowledge of its surface appearance and individual distinction from others. This surface appearance resembles an envelope, which contains within its core the essential nature of the object. But if we shine the light of the universal truth (which can penetrate through the surface envelope of individuality) then the core essence of the observed object can become perceivable.

Sunyata: Emptiness of individual nature

Viewing objects and phenomena as *devoid of individual self* is called observing the field of Sunyata, translated as “Emptiness of individual nature”. Sunyata is a field of vibrant information pertaining to the essence of object without being constrained by appearances.

A writing from the Lotus school defines Emptiness as Emptiness of specific individual nature:

*“Emptiness [or Sunyata] is removed from the sense organs and their objects. It represents ‘the ultimate’ in the absence of individual nature.” [The Opening of the Eyes](#),
(9)*

The word “ultimate” in the above quote refers to the *ultimate reality* of the object, bypassing the subjective perception (based on our sense datum),

Instead of the subjective senses and related perception, the concept of Emptiness gives the image of how the impartial truth (or the impartial mind of reality, so to speak) ‘would have viewed’ the object.

The impartial nature of reality would have perceived objects through the two impartial truths (which are the fundamental principles of how reality operates).

The example of observing a tree: For example, let’s take a tree into consideration. Our senses present the tree in focus as a specific - individually existing - object. This view is correct but limited to current appearance. We do not see the truth of the whole life of the tree, starting from its slow process of aging taking place within its tissues and structure at each moment of time.

A complete truth would include the interdependency of the tree on soil, moisture, light and uncountable kinds of insects, fungi, birds, etc. A complete truth of the life of tree should include its’ potentials, such as flourishing in spring and shedding leaves in autumn, or other potentials of what may occur to its existence.

Through Impermanence and Interconnectedness, a rich field of information emerges in our mind with images of many aspects contributing to the existence of the tree as well as to potentialities of its possible future.

From “object” to “function”: Instead of an *individually standing object*, the true essence of the observed tree is perceived by the mind as a *function* of diverse dimensions. One of the diverse functions the tree manifests is being a great factory of oxygen, when interacting with the energy of light. It also expresses being a mechanism constantly transforming soil and moisture from which its existence is inseparable. In addition of being an active organism, the

tree functions as a house accommodating other smaller organisms. The life of tree manifests endurance of a struggling entity aiming to survive against various threats, employing uncounted laws of physics and botanical science.

The field of Sunyata constructs in our mind a dynamic flow of images pertaining to the functions of the observed object, its mutual relationships, impact and future potentials.

The view of an object as a function penetrates its apparent individual aspect. Functions are devoid of individuality.

Together with the phenomenal (sense-based) perception, illuminating observed object by the universal truths gives the complete knowledge about the object, both as a distinguished physical identity and as an informational dynamism of functions devoid of individual identity.

This view complies with the scientific observation of phenomena as manifesting functions described by the laws of reality without them possessing inherent individuality (or a separate self of their own). A law of science applies to all involved objects in its domain. For a law of science, the individuality of involved objects is transparent.

3. The Universal Truth of Natural Order

While the World is extremely dynamic, it is not random; it manifests a natural Order. The natural Order prevents occurring changes from being chaotic and controls the *extent of change and its consequent impact* within certain patterns or laws.

Both universal truths (of change and connectedness) together necessitate the existence of the Natural Order (called Dharma in Eastern philosophy). Our own life exists nowhere but within the Dharma.

In the physical domain, science describes natural phenomena through laws, which are basically about the bond between causes, conditions and effects.

In the psychological domain, instead of a strict law of causality, Eastern philosophy views the effect of actions as based on various “patterns” of motivations.

For example, a cause of action based on compassion leads to consequences or effects different from an action based on arrogance or bullying. Also: it is a natural to grief at losing a loved one (the loss is the cause, grief is the effect) – or to feel joy at meeting a loved one.

Whether in the natural world or in mental activities, we can verify the emergence of effects of applied causes either directly or after a passage of time – pending availability of conditions.

Differently from simple or linear *action-reaction* cases, in non-linear systems (such as living entities equipped with memory) the effect of an applied cause of action depends on the history of the system.

The Law of Cause and Effect

Because of the complexity of phenomena, specifying what is the cause of a certain situation can be a very difficult task.

But even the sceptics, such as Hume, acknowledge the truth that there *is* order in the world. Order is what governs the way causes of changes create effects. Hume did not deny the Law of cause and effect, even naming it a “*necessary link*” (10)

Scepticism (or unpredictability surrounding this subject) is caused by lack of sufficient knowledge of the observer. Science can specify the “necessary connection” between a cause of change and its future impact in well-studied phenomena to an amazing degree of correctness.

Most importantly, awakening to the necessary link between our causes of actions and their consequences on ourselves and others – is what characterises wisdom and harmonious existence. In fact, the quality of our relationships - and life in general - reveals the degree of one’s awareness of the bond between causes and their effects.

The benefit of awakening to the truth of causality: Observing the truth is not a mere intellectual exercise. Awakening to the link between causes and effects is awakening to how life operates (making it possible to avoid wrong actions leading to problems).

An insight, experienced in one’s mind of how the impartial Law of Cause and Effect operates - leads to tangible benefit, because one’s life is a series of decisions in form of causes of actions and their consequences (or impact on self and others).

“... the law of cause and effect underlies the workings of all phenomena [both in the natural and mental domains]. [In the mental domain] Positive causes (thoughts, words and actions) create positive effects in our lives, leading to happiness. On the other hand, negative thoughts, words and actions—those that in some way undermine the dignity of life—lead to unhappiness”. (11)

Conclusion

The Truth in Eastern philosophy is viewed as being “relative” when conditioned by certain circumstances, or ‘universal” when referring to knowledge that is valid in all time and place.

Seeking the Universal Truth can start from observing the patterns in one’s life that are shared and experienced by all people. This approach leads to distinguishing the Truth of Change (also called Impermanence), and the Truth of Interconnectedness of all phenomena, whether physical or mental.

Despite the dynamism of life and the diverse impact of changes (affecting the surrounding) – the reality of the world expresses order creating proportional balance, which links causes of change to their consequences. The Law of Cause and Effect is a necessary manifestation of both truths of interconnectedness and dynamism of impermanence, being thus *the* Universal Truth that governs reality of all what exists, our own life included.

The ultimate reality of life that our ancestors experienced, and our future generations will experience is the truth of dynamism, interdependence and the bond of cause and effect – operating within the flow of everyone’s life.

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