

# Toward a Middle Way Between Modern Absolutism and Postmodern Nihilism

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The trouble with most poetry is that it is either objective or subjective.

—Basho

**Has Postmodernity devoured itself?** In the Postmodernism of Nietzsche, Bohr and the Quantum Theory, the Deconstructionists, the Pragmatists and the Neopragmatists we have witnessed a profound revolution in philosophy, religion and science. A foundationalist philosophy of first principles based in a fundamentalist epistemic foundational Realism and/or Materialism/Physicalism is dead. The 2,500 year old project to construct an absolutely certain knowledge foundation for an objective independently given real material world—from the Pre-Socratics through Plato and Aristotle, to Descartes and Locke—is now kaput! The sinister “myth of the given” is forgiven. An objectively certain “God’s eye view” or “view from nowhere” was never rationally, empirically or psychologically possible, and most philosophers, and quantum physicists and quantum cosmologists know it.

Further, no one can take more than a moderate “healthy” Humean skepticism (*epoche*) seriously and remain credible in a post-Kantian, post-metaphysical world. Radical Pyrrhonic epistemic skepticism is dead. This leaves an opening for a pragmatic Middle Way view that combines human reason as inferential valid cognition (*anumana pramana*) with contemplative practice—in both the Science and the Spirituality paradigms, and thereby new hope of a cross-paradigm *rapprochement* between them.

Moreover, scientific *explanatory* reductionism is dead. The emergent complexity of neurobiology is far too complex to be reduced to chemistry and then physics. But *ontological* reductionism—the reduction of human beings to Lewis Carroll’s (Alice’s) “pack of neurons,” and then that pack to molecules, atoms and quarks—is alive and well. Ontological relativity: Quine and the Buddhist middle way *Madhyamaka Prasangika* and *Ati Dzogchen* have shown that the nondual emptiness base—the Absolute Spirit that is Ultimate Reality—cannot be reduced to its mere arising physical form. Yes, “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” These two truths—these two paradigms—are an ontological prior unity. So it’s not all just pre-given form. Physical form appears, and it’s real, yet it is empty of any independent, intrinsic existence or identity from its own side. “What there is”—Being, Reality, ontology—is relative to our intersubjective linguistic, cultural, informational “web of belief,” our conceptual and belief systems. The stuff of reality is not independently absolutely real (Realism), nor is this all merely physical (Physicalism/Materialism). This, at least, is determined.

What to do in a radically perspectival Postmodern world? Resplendently, the Cartesian demon of our logocentric grail quest for absolute objective deductive certainty is slain, and the dualistic, realistic epistemic and ontic foundational architecture of our human cognition—the Modernist metaphysics of our conceptual knowledge and belief systems—is shaken to its core. Because we limit ourselves most by our attachment to our present concept/belief systems, psychospiritual evolution demands that “all that can be shaken, shall be shaken” (Dōgen/Suzuki Rōshi). But has the antinomian beast of radical Postmodern skeptical deconstruction and pathological pluralism devoured itself? What remains? And now what shall we do?

**Knowledge and liberation.** Let’s begin with three more questions. Is human knowledge

and liberation wedded to an objective foundational Realism and Materialism? Is our deep cultural background preconscious cognitive commitment to a permanent, independent, separate, absolutely existent physical/mental self, perceiving its pre-given absolutely independently existent phenomena, a cognitive condition from which we can liberate ourselves? And if so, how? We shall see that the answer to the first question is a big “no.” To the second question, a big “yes.” The “how” question shall be the concern of the remainder of our exploration.

According to Richard Rorty and the Neopragmatists, philosophical and psychological absolutist theories of truth—whether realist or antirealist—are all wrong-headed. Why? Because they all require that we somehow transcend or leap out of our perpetual conceptual “ego-centric predicament,” our preconscious habitual egoic attachment to the naïve fundamentalist Materialism and Realism that is our deep cultural background “web of belief,” or “form of life.” Buddhas and *Mahasiddhas* can do that. Most of us won’t. The dualistic psychic cognitive dissonance of this precarious preconscious pretense to a permanent independent, absolutely existing separate Self in an absolutely existing “real world out there” (RWOT)—in the face of this cognitive unconscious denial of our impermanence, along with our superconscious awareness of the prior interdependent luminous unity of this world—has resulted in an individual and collective schizoid reality, and thereby terrible suffering. Our Great Wisdom Tradition teaches that the transformation of this egoic mind of Narcissus—our liberation from the fear of our personal death that animates the anger and aggression that is human alienation and evil—is the gradual cultivation of a compassionate altruism that spontaneously arises as we surrender this mistaken independence, this presumption of a separate self in a separate reality (ignorance/*avidya/hamartia/sin*). Psychospiritual growth-steps in fear and trembling, to be sure.

For the Pragmatists and Neopragmatists, Pragmatism’s Theory of Truth is a denial of our need for an absolute objective foundational Realism. We saw that the answer to our first question above is no. Human knowledge and liberation is not bound to foundational Scientific and massmind Realism/Materialism. Platonic and Neoplatonist spirituality, the teaching of the nondual Gnostics (Theodus, Valentinus), and Eastern Idealism works too. So we’re in realist/materialist recovery. And that’s OK. A journey of a thousand miles begins with that first step.

The truth of the Postmodern reaction to Modernity? Truth is not absolute but conventional, cultural, nominal, contingent and pragmatic, as in the Eastern idea of truth as *Aletheia*—uncovering, revealing—as we shall see. This notion of truth is derived from our perennial Great Wisdom Tradition’s idea of the “Two Truths,” exoteric, relative-conventional pragmatic truths, and ultimate or Absolute Truth that embraces it, and in which everything arises and participates. And these two conceptual truths are an esoteric ontic prior unity. This conceptually, but not contemplatively ineffable unity we have seen is the transconceptual, transpersonal nondual one truth—“one truth that is invariant across all cognitive frames of reference” (Wallace). This is the singular truth that all arising reality—physical or mental—is absent any shred of its own *independent* intrinsic nature, inherent existence, or essential identity, but is rather *interdependently* interconnected (*pratitya samutpada*) within a vast causal nexus that is its basal source condition. More on this below.

East is East and West is West. Let us see how it is that the wisdom of the East and the wisdom of the West come to meet in a noetic matter/mind/spirit integration of Premodern, Modern and Postmodern truths through our emerging Noetic Revolution.