

A beginningless universe

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Resumo

Ao contrário das restantes grandes religiões, o Budismo nunca teve uma visão limitada do mundo. Falou sempre em biliões de mundos e num começo sem fim do universo. A doutrina apresenta diversos argumentos para mostrar que esse “nada” não pode tornar-se “alguma coisa” e que um Criador imutável, que seria a sua própria causa, não faz sentido. Comentando a perspectiva budista o filósofo Bertrand Russel escreveu: “Não há razão para supor que o mundo tenha tido um início. A ideia de que deve ter tido um começo é devida à pobreza da nossa imaginação”. Na perspectiva budista, eventos como o “big bang” serão apenas episódios de uma história muito mais longa.

What is the Buddhist perspective on the origin of matter, life, and consciousness? If one assumes that the history of the Universe, from Big Bang until now, is the complete story in time and space, then one has a theory that will continue to be refined but already gives us a satisfactory picture of our world. We have a linear gradation, beginning with a kind of “primordial fire”, and then the slow formation and aggregation of heavy molecules, This allows for more complex molecules, leading to life, which becomes more and more complex, leading up to sentient beings. But if this story is but an episode, a chunk of time and space, then it could be quite different.

All such stories are based on the notion of a “beginning” and, based on our present knowledge, the Big Bang seems the best story to explain the beginning of this universe. Of course, in Western religions also, we mostly find cosmologies that speak of a beginning. The Buddhist perspective has put that notion of a beginning into question, and in a very logical way.

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A true beginning implies that nothing becomes something; otherwise we’re not speaking of a beginning. But how could nothing become something? The Buddhist literature says that a billion causes cannot make something that doesn’t exist come into existence. The reason why “nothing” can’t become “something” is that in order to do so, the “nothing” would be done away with. But how is it possible to get rid of something that does not exist? Nothingness is a mere concept defined in relation with existence. It does not have the slightest reality on its own because it cannot be conceived in the absence of existence. Nothingness cannot be transformed. If something appears, it means that the potential for manifestation was already present. The world of phenomena can’t have come from nowhere. There cannot be an “ex-nihilo” creation, only transformations. The Big Bang must then be a mere episode in a continuum without a beginning or an end.

On another hand, what could cause a beginning to ever happen? A beginning requires a first cause. So we need to examine what that cause could be. Is it a permanent, immutable cause? Where does that first cause come from? Is it its own cause? This does not work: if it is already there it does not need to create itself and one cannot speak of a process of cause and effect. If it has always been there, there one has been no beginning, but in a frozen way, for an immutable cause cannot bring about an ever-changing universe. Does it come from something else? In that case, it is no more the first cause.

There is another problem. If there was a first cause, that means it doesn’t rely on anything else. It has everything included in itself, all the causes and conditions for the universe it’s going to produce. But the law of causality demands that when all the causes and conditions are present, the effect *has* to happen. It some is only when some of the causes or conditions are missing that something does not happen.

Not only that, but if a timeless, self-generated first truly contained all the causes for producing the universe it should constantly create the entire universe. It would be something like a permanent Big Bang. This is indeed not the case.

In addition to this, a permanent and immutable cause cannot give rise to something transient. Creation implies a process, and if it participates in this process the first cause cannot remain immutable. It is inevitably modified, since one can distinguish at least two aspects in this first cause: before and after the creation, the so-called “beginning”.

In short, creation remains a process and any process is incompatible with immutability. This point did not escape St. Augustine himself, who said that the notion of beginning involves an act of faith. Buddhism contends, by contrast, that such an act of faith is unnecessary provided one doesn't cling to the position that there must have been a beginning.

Could then the beginning be without cause? If something could happen without cause, this would mean that anything could happen as a result of anything. Obscurity could come from light; light could come from obscurity. If something could appear without a no cause, then there is no law of causality, and there is no reason why a flower could not bloom in empty space.

Thus there are a number of logical difficulties in accepting the notion of a first cause, of a true beginning to the phenomenal world. What other solution is there? Beginninglessness. Our difficulty in accepting this notion is purely intellectual, not logical. Intuitively, we can accept going back 15 billion years to find a beginning, because we have a story for that. But we insist that it must begin sometime for we cannot just go back in time forever. The Western philosopher, Bertrand Russell wrote, "There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all. The idea that things must have a beginning is due to the poverty of our imagination."

Although we find it very difficult to conceive beginninglessness, from a logical point of view, that's the only possibility that stands on analysis. Every other explanation has deep flaws. There can be indeed "local stories", such as that of the Big Bang followed by the evolution of matter and life in our present world. But that's can only be a small piece of the story.

Given the nature of beginninglessness, we cannot either say that matter came before consciousness, or consciousness before matter. Everything is beginningless. All aspects of the phenomenal world have to be beginningless. Buddhist cosmology never spoke of a limited universe, at the center of which we are. It has always considered billion of universes. He spoke of universes that were like spinning wheels of light, like multicolored curtains of light, like lion's mouths swallowing others celestial bodies, like volcanoes spitting fire, like whirlpools, clouds of flames, rivers of light, tree of jewels, etc.. All these similes can certainly evoke the beautiful photographs obtained through the Hubble telescope. This is simply to say that Buddhist cosmology has a very vast vision of time and space.

If life, matter, and consciousness don't have a beginning, they are co-existent since forever, in different ways, with different histories, with

episodes. There are some times when life cannot develop, like in the heat of the Big Bang. But in the vastness of time and space, there is no reason to exclude the notion that consciousness and life existed and exist somewhere else or at other times.

There is an unbroken continuity. The Buddhist notion of interdependence means that those different events of the phenomenal are causally related to each other. Nothing can be totally independent from the rest of the world. Nothing can appear as an independently existing entity, existing on its own, but only through incredibly complex relations between all inanimate and animate phenomena. These relations appear in various ways depending on how we look at them and apprehend them with a type of consciousness that is particular to each kind of sentient being.

That's also why Schroedinger said that one can only observe what one can experience, thus pointing out at the intimate relation between consciousness and the phenomenal world. In that sense, one can say that the state of one's consciousness at present defines our world, that is what we can perceive and understand. The change of consciousness at different levels, from lesser degrees of cognitive ability to higher intelligence determines how one perceives the world in interaction with the world. Consciousness and the world relate like two knives sharpening each other. "Our world", the one we perceive, is in fact the result of the accumulated experiences that consciousness has had. From a strict Buddhist perspective, one will speak of experiences and tendencies accumulated through many lifetimes. The way human beings for instance perceive the world roughly in the same way - what Buddhism calls "collective karma" - is a reflection of the whole history of our consciousness. The world of a human being will not be the same as the world of a bat, or an ant, and it might be totally different from other sentient kinds of sentient beings which we can't imagine in other part of the universe.

To compare the Buddhist notion of "mutual causality" through interdependence with the concept of "emergence", it would be useful to speak of both upward and downward causality. If one were to conceive consciousness as an emergent phenomena, one certainly should also consider the action of consciousness upon the body and the environment in a downward causality, that is as important as upward causality. Such position resolves the Cartesian dualism that has dominated Western thinking about the relation between matter and consciousness. Cartesian dualism envisages the relation

between a truly existing, solid matter and an immaterial consciousness. This leads to an irreconcilable duality with interface between those two.

There are two ways to resolve that duality. The “reductionist” way is the view that consciousness is just a property of matter. It results from the increasing complexity of matter that leads to a capacity of knowing its environment and be aware of itself.

Buddhists resolve the duality by saying that matter and consciousness are of the same nature in lacking intrinsic reality. We could say that they share the same “unreality”. We are not going here to investigate the nature of reality according to Buddhist philosophy here, but let’s just say that, in essence, all phenomena, whether conscious or unconscious, don’t exist on their own as separate entities gifted with intrinsic properties independent of all other phenomena. In that sense, they are devoid of intrinsic, autonomous, permanent existence. From that perspective, consciousness and inanimate phenomena share a common unreality.

Observable phenomena are also related to our “first person experience”. Without it, is impossible to have a full and meaningful picture of the world.

There is one other paradox. Some physicists are convinced that the universe has been somehow been fined tuned for life to appear and for consciousness to witness the beauty of the universe. They consider that some kind of organizing principle must have been present at the beginning of the Universe to allow its future evolution. Their ideas has been inspired by the fact that if any of some fifteen “physical constants” that concern the initial conditions of the universe - among which the speed of light, its initial density and speed of expansion of the universe, the gravitational constant, the intensity of the weak and strong nuclear force, the Planck constant, the mass of protons and electrons - had been slightly different, if the initial density of the universe, for instance, had been different by one number after 60 zeros, heavy atoms would not have formed, matter would not have aggregated and life wouldn’t have appeared. The precision of that tuning is like shooting an arrow at an orange 15 billion light years away. Of course it’s startling for the mind and it’s difficult and tempting to think that these conditions were made in order for life to come. Yet, there are many answers to that.

There may have been many, many Big Bangs and many universes, most of them sterile, and one out of hundreds of billions gave birth to life.

Or there may be countless parallel universes. But what I find quite beautiful about beginninglessness is that if things have always been together, they indeed fit together!

Even the so-called “parallel universes”, cannot be totally disconnected from each other. Such an idea would run against the idea of the global interdependence of all phenomena. What can possibly be “outside” the infinity of beginningless phenomena?

So beginninglessness solves the philosophical question about the fine-tuning of the universe and it makes unnecessary the so-called “anthropic principle”, which postulates that the universe has been tuned by mysterious entity for us to appear. The anthropic principle comes down to picking up two halves of a walnut and saying: “It’s incredible, it looks like these two pieces have been designed to fit perfectly together”. They have, in fact, always been part of a whole.

No if you think of the continuity of the universes, is it therefore not surprising at all that the universe seems fine-tuned for life to appear. If there are multiple Big Bangs, then must be some kind a causal continuity somehow between the former one and the present one. Otherwise we go back to “nothing becoming something” or the Big bang being utterly without cause. That continuity ensures that things remains interdependent and therefore cannot be mutually exclusive. All the elements of the universe are perfectly compatible with each naturally fit together even more precisely than one in a billion times.