



Sacred Appellations

Secular Zen, New Materialism, and D. T. Suzuki's *Soku-hi* Logic

The logic of *soku-hi* is presented as an articulation of a post-Kantian view of reality that embraces the truths of science with the assumption of the transcendental subject. As such, *soku-hi* represents the philosophical posture of both the secular Zen of the Kyoto School and the new materialists of contemporary continental philosophy. It describes how material reality is not all even though there is nothing else.

KEYWORDS: D. T. Suzuki—secular Zen—*soku-hi* logic—new materialism—Slavoj Žižek—Louis Althusser—Nishida Kitarō

Science can never be defeated. It points at what is actually there and nothing other, and will keep pointing regardless of how much we may wish away what we see before our eyes. There is no argument against direct empirical pointing. The myths, the magic, the mystical mysterious that point at the unseen are no match for the hard wallop of the indisputably visible. But if it is the case that only the empirical, what is “actually” there can be claimed to be true, where is there “space” for religion or God? Is the triumph of science absolute and total? Has the meta-hypothesis of science removed Him from our cosmologies, making atheism the only rational description possible?¹ I seek here to demonstrate through an exploration of D. T. Suzuki’s *soku-hi* logic how secular Zen, that Kyoto School creation, has embraced the non-scientific and non-rational, the space where religion and God can still lurk, whilst agreeing with the basic claims of scientific and empirical enquiry. In doing so, secular Zen has followed much of what contemporary continental philosophy, in the guise of new materialism, has to say, albeit with important moments of divergence.

1. Nishitani Keiji has also posed this question, stating that the standpoint of modern atheism seeks to ground itself from start to finish in actual being. This is related to the denial of God, in that full engagement of the self in actual being requires a denial of having already been determined within the world-order established by God, as well as a denial of having been fitted out in advance with an orientation to God in one’s very soul. Both standpoints stress the importance of not becoming detached from the locus in which one ‘actually’ is, of remaining firmly grounded in one’s actual socio-historical situation, or more fundamentally, in actual ‘time’ and ‘space.’ But do these standpoints [of modern atheism] really engage actual being to the full? (NISHITANI 1990, 189–90)

RELIGION AND SCIENCE

From the earliest moments of his intellectual career, D. T. Suzuki was concerned about the relationship between science and religion. He believed that religion should not deny the claims of science. Rather, religion should embrace science to purify itself of its own superstitions and pointless rituals.² However, Suzuki felt that science and, indeed, philosophy (which he saw as involving exclusively dualistic rational thinking) could only go so far in explaining the truths of human existence. Science and rational thinking (“philosophy” in Suzuki’s terminology) are based on a dualistic and linear mode of enquiry, forever moving forward with new data and information. In other words, science is not structurally designed to ever grasp the full truth of human life. Truth is always deferred to the future, awaiting one final piece of confirming data that never comes. Religion, though, is circular where science is linear.³ It grasps the unity that is now. But to say that religion is circular and non-differentiating where science is linear and (dualistically) differentiating, and at the same time to acknowledge the compatibility between both positions (Suzuki never rejects science, we must remember) involves embracing a frame of mind that clearly acknowledges and conforms to the absolute contradictions of this posture. Suzuki’s *soku-hi* logic was one clear articulation of this posture, and it was an articulation that has been echoed elsewhere, explicitly in the Kyoto School, but also, I hope to demonstrate, implicitly in large swathes of contemporary continental philosophy.

Science and religion are, of course, both slippery concepts and we must be mindful that both camps and each philosopher within may have different understandings of what each concept means. However, the important point is that both groups see science as a form of knowledge about the world that constantly effaces its own grounds for its own operation. Science is “done” by people who must effectively pretend that it is not they that are “doing” it, that it is just happening, it is just done. For instance, Nishitani comments: “Science is not something separate from the people who engage in it, and that engagement, in turn, represents only one aspect of human knowledge.”⁴

2. SUZUKI, 2001A.

3. This circularity versus linearity theory was also present in the thinking of Suzuki’s mentor Imakita Kōsen (see SUZUKI 2001B).

4. NISHITANI 1982, 46.

In a similar vein, Althusser embraces the philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard, with the result that, as Pfeiffer points out:

Because for both Althusser and Bachelard, science and scientific knowledge are products of the practices that science engages in, there is no “external” check on that knowledge that proves that it is “objective.” In other words, science and scientific knowledge—even insofar as it is able to overcome the Bachelardian “web of beliefs”—is produced solely within the realm of a given set of scientific practices and concepts.⁵

Similarly religion is seen by both groups as not so much the practices and rituals out there in the world as the beliefs within the mind of the believer. Religion is foremost ideological, a belief system that asserts that the material is not all, that there is a beyond, a realm of knowledge, whether true, and hence believed, or simply felt, and hence false, that science cannot touch on.

SECULAR ZEN AND NEW MATERIALISM

To gather up in one bumpy bundle the pile of gravelly concepts that is Suzuki’s Zen philosophy, I will use the term “secular Zen.”⁶ It can be defined as seeking religious certainty prior to religious affiliation, where said religious certainty does not wholly reject the paradigm of what can be described as the scientific, empiricist, naturalist, or materialist standpoint. (Of course “Zen” itself is a religious affiliation but this paradox is part of its pleasure.) I will be contrasting secular Zen with a group of contemporary continental philosophers dubbed the “new materialists” by Geoff Pfeifer, namely Louis Althusser, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek.⁷ I will chart how

5. PFEIFER 2015, 20.

6. A 1916 work by D. T. Suzuki, entitled 『禪の第一義』 (2011) has been republished with the subheading “The Primary Purpose of Western Zen” emblazoned on its front cover. The book is in Japanese but this subheading is written in English with no translation. We can behold here a semiotic move that would take a whole army of cultural studies scholars to decode. However, my quick, spontaneous interpretation of this book cover title is to see it as a way of distancing Suzuki from the orthodoxy of Zen as institutionally practiced in Japan, whilst paying homage to Suzuki’s intellectual validity and creativity. I will follow this example and see Suzuki as the articulation of a new tradition of “secular” (i.e., “Western”) Zen, without worrying too much about issues of institutional legitimacy or heterodoxy.

7. PFEIFER 2015.

soku-hi logic encapsulates the secular Zen standpoint, while at the same time, articulating core sections of the new materialist position. Both follow a common trajectory but with a final and vital split emerging at the end.

SOKU-HI

D. T. Suzuki introduces his concept of *soku-hi* in this form⁸:

AはAだというのは、
AはAでない、
ゆえに、AはAである

We can translate it as “A is A implies A is not A, therefore A is A.”⁹ Suzuki asserts that this is the form of argumentation the Diamond Sutra engages in, asserting something, then negating it, then reasserting it on the basis of that negation.¹⁰ For instance, the sutra states, as translated by Suzuki in *A Manual of Zen Buddhism*: “all these many particles of dust are no-particles of dust and therefore that they are called particles of dust.”¹¹

Suzuki claims that his *soku-hi* logic is a description of *prajñā*-intuition, a core concept in Mahayana Buddhism.

A is A

Let us look at the first step in this logical formulation: A is A. This is a

8. Suzuki, 2001c.

9. Another possible translation, as presented by Wayne S. Yokoyama, is “For A to be affirmed as A, A has to be non-A; therefore, it is A.” YOKOYAMA 2011, 216.

10. Suzuki’s translation of this aspect of the Diamond Sutra has been disputed and seen as inaccurate by some. For instance, Tachikawa has commented on

the paradoxical expression that “A is non-A. Therefore it is called A” that repeatedly appears in the Diamond Sutra means “A is non-existent. Therefore, it is worded as A.” The domain of discourse of the proposition “A is non-A” is not the whole, but A. Therefore, the phrase “A is non-A” should be interpreted to mean that “the being that is considered to exist in the name of A is in reality non-existent,” not that “A is all the things other than A.” In line with this argument, we have no reason to assume that an unconventional logic governs the Diamond Sutra. (TACHIKAWA 2002, 209–10.)

The fact that a possible mistranslation has helped in the expression and conceptual development of secular Zen demonstrates the creative and dialogic nature of translation in the development of religion and philosophy in human history. Indeed, I have myself penned a humble monograph which ruminates on this very subject. See Ó MUIREARTAIGH 2015.

11. SUZUKI 1960, 44.

description of the world that is very much in keeping with that of core scientism, naturalism, paleo-materialism, empiricism, or any such ideology which sees the world of nature, and our representation of it, as stable and coherent. In this view, objects have their own coherence apart from humans. An apple is an apple and can be “seen” as an apple even without humans. A is A is where every object and every event in the universe can be labelled and related to the whole, the collection of all other objectively identifiable objects and events in the world. There is nothing else going on but this world, and the things (“A’s”) in it. It is the world being as it is in its “actuality.”

A is not A

Why would A not be A? Most generally, in the continental philosophical tradition, the assertion of A’s non-A-ness can be derived from the idea of the Kantian transcendental (rather than transcendent) subject (which the condition of A being A is dependent upon), and the family of concepts and positions that have derived from this assumption ever since.¹² To argue why A is not A, when we include the transcendental subject, we can follow a number of commonly trod steps that have been taken, with alternate terminologies, by those in the secular Zen and new materialism traditions.

The notion of a filtered world

This here is the idea that the conscious self existing in the world cannot be one more object in the world. What this means in effect is that A being A is a subjective imposition or filtering without which there would be no world of A is A, but only a cosmic mush of eternal non-differentiated A-ness. We exist in the world but filter that world which means: (1) As filters, we are outside the set of all that is being filtered. We cannot be included in the world. To repeat, we are not one more object in the world. Atman is anatman, self is

12. As Slavoj Žižek explains:

When I misperceive some object in my phenomenal reality, when I mistake it for a different object, what is wrong is not that I am unaware of how things “really are in themselves” but of how they really appear to me. One cannot overestimate the importance of this Kantian move. Ultimately, philosophy as such is Kantian and it should be read from the vantage point of the Kantian revolution, namely, not as a naïve attempt at “absolute knowledge” as a total description of the entirety of reality, but as the work of deploying the horizon of preunderstanding presupposed in every engagement with entities in the world.” (ŽIŽEK 2003, 44–5)

no-self. The filtering atman of self cannot be ascribed positive existence since this would put it on the other side, as in that which is being filtered and not the filter itself. (2) Our filters cannot be absolute truth. We sift truth, break it down into bits, destroy its essential totality, and leave out the truth of its utter interpenetration. We see only the partial truths we have constructed with our filters. The world looks coherent to us not because that is how it really is but because we have made it so.

Difference first

The next step is to recognize that difference, not object, is primordial in our world. (This is how filters work, they “make” objects through their prior differentiating function.) One clear way of expressing this idea is the Derridean notion of *différance*. This is how Geoffrey Bennington explains it:

Identities in general (of whatever kind, at whatever level) arise out of difference, but difference is not itself any thing at all. It is not that there are first things, and then differences and relations between them: the “things” emerge only from the differences and relations, which have an absolute priority, and that emergence is never complete. It’s that insight that led to the neologism *différance*.¹³

While neither secular Zen nor new materialism explicitly use the term *différance*, the posture it expresses (“difference is not itself any thing at all”) can be traced and delineated in both. *Différance* is found in much of Kyoto School thought in the idea that the world is not about constant separate “A”s emerging in nature but how these “A”s, as the products of difference and relations, are masking how their own supposed absolute differentiation is the outcome of a prior undifferentiatedness.¹⁴ This prior undifferentiatedness cannot be one more A (as in the mass of all “A”s together) in the world, so it is emptiness (空). In other words, any view that embraces difference to be primordial must also acknowledge the unifying realm from which this difference is to emerge, and also understand that this realm is not a prior step in a chain of differentiation but the immanent grounding and place of the differentiation. As Nishitani describes it, “that all things are severally what

13. BENNINGTON, 2016.

14. For a detailed description of the resonance of *différance* with Kyoto School thinking, see KOPF 2011.

they are in themselves directly implies that they are all collected together. Such is the field of emptiness.”¹⁵ The point being that when we see A as A we are seeing the outcome of that prior realm of absolute emptiness. This is not the interplay of A turning into non-A, or A emerging from where there was the emptiness of non-A, nor is it the sum of all amounting to zero through pluses and minuses, but is the very condition of A when the self as non-self is to be accounted for. This mirrors the comments by Slavoj Žižek regarding difference between “everything is matter” and “there is nothing which is not matter.” For Žižek, the difference “that a truly radical materialism is by definition nonreductionist: far from claiming that ‘everything is matter,’ it confers upon ‘immaterial’ phenomena a specific positive nonbeing.” Žižek is reacting against the crude materialism where A is A (to borrow Suzuki’s description), and emptiness has no positive value. Žižek writes, “when we imagine the Whole of reality, there is no longer any place for consciousness (and subjectivity). There are two options here: either subjectivity is an illusion, or reality is *in itself* (not only epistemologically) not-All.”¹⁶

Overdeterminism

“A is A” as the world of discreet stable identities is also the world of identifiable and discreet causes and effects. If we picture a world at one instance, we see a world where all is divided synchronically into its unit components. If we picture the world then at the very next moment in time, there is still a division of the world into discreet units, but this division has changed somewhat. There are now different units, new units have replaced old ones. In other words, there has been a movement in the world, and units in the prior instant have caused, and can be linked to, all the new units that have appeared in the current present world.

However, when “A is A and is not A,” the act of delineating what is moving and what has moved between any two instances of time becomes an act of arbitrary heuristics. Which causes are necessary and which are contingent is a judgment, not a measurable quantity. In fact, when A is not A, it is the everything that is causing the all to change between any two instances of time. There is not a chain of being, but ruptures of events which can never

15. NISHITANI 1981, 192.

16. ŽIŽEK 2006, 168.

be fully explained except through fictions of cause and effect relations edited from the sum of all. In this vision of Althusserian overdetermination or Buddhist *pratīyasamutpāda* (co-dependent arising) there are still possible rankings of causes, between the contingent and the necessary, the *hetu* and the *pratyaḡa*, but necessities are distinguished from contingencies in an ultimately contingent way since the only necessity is the all, or rather the emptiness of all.¹⁷

Ideology

To briefly recap, I have followed a chain of argument that posits the transcendental self, and sees this self as filtering or imposing the identification that makes A to be A. This act of imposition makes difference primordial to the object that is defined as A, and when all is put in motion and A changes into what it is not, this is on account of causal relations that are non-linear, over-determined and which can only be implied in a partial sense since any final account of causality would be total and hence neither descriptive nor useful. This lack of fit between the world out there and the world as we are imposing it can be referred to as ideology. Ideology is our most basic experience of truth, as in A is A, the reality that is there in its “actuality.” However, it is ideology that is making A to be A. In other words, there is a contingency, an imposition on a site or field where A is not A. That is to say, A is not absolutely A, nor either is it anything else (like “B”). It is a site of infinite other possible configurations.

The contingency of A is A works when it is experienced as absolute. Yet, as an absolute, this A is A masks the fact that A is not A. Why does ideology do this? Because in our reading of the world (“A’s being “A’s”) we cannot take into account (structurally) the position of the reader (which should be one more “A”). The eye sees by not seeing itself. Similarly, consciousness qua ide-

17. For example Louis Althusser states: “instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming necessary of the encounter of contingencies.” Quoted in PFEIFER 2015, 6.

Similarly, Imakita Kōsen (D. T. Suzuki’s sensei) explained that the Buddhist distinction between direct and indirect cause (*hetu* and *pratyaḡa*) should be seen in unison in a world where, due to absolute interpenetration, the myriad things do not come or disappear, increase or decrease (不生不滅不增不減). SUZUKI 2001b, 219.

ological action works by effacing itself. This notion is expressed in Suzuki's account of *vijñāna* (in contrast to *prajña*).

Vijñāna is not the creator of the logical law, but it works by means of the law. *Vijñāna* takes it as something given and not provable by any means devised by *vinjana*, for *vijñāna* itself is conditioned by it. The eye cannot see itself; to do this a mirror is needed, but what it sees is not itself, only its reflection. *Vijñāna* may devise some means to recognize itself, but the recognition turns out to be conceptual, as something postulated.¹⁸

And so both new materialism and secular Zen follow the same story in their crushing of positivist A is A-ism. However, both face the same problem where A is A meaning A is not A can descend into relativist incoherence or even deeper ideologically masked fantasies of certitude, as in the self-validating, but ultimately self-deluding, notion that one sees the true fluidity of the world in a way that nobody else does.

Therefore A is A

However, both new materialism and secular Zen go one step further to assert that “therefore A is A,” the fact is that A can only ever be A. There is no place where A is not A can happen. There is no transcendence from the world of positive existence. We are stuck in our world of “A”s. There is no escaping this. Similarly there is no escaping ideology. There is no no-ideology, no no-samsara. The idea that one can remove the false view that A is A and see the world as it really is, is itself an ideological fantasy. In other words, the metaphor is not about taking off the rosy distorting glasses of false delusion and seeing the true world out there, but rather the metaphor is about the eye being able to see itself seeing. This is of course impossible, as is any escape from ideology. This impossibility then, and the aporia, antinomy, and parallax that expresses it, is necessary and structural. Taking away this impossibility would mean indulging in the ultimate ideological blindness.

The solution is not to try and overcome or transcend the impossibility but to embrace it. What is to be embraced and what this embracing involves can be better understood if we take into consideration the two acts of “seeing” we are discussing here. The first type of seeing is simply the case of you

18. SUZUKI 1955, 120–21.

seeing the world and objects and events in it. The second type of seeing is you seeing the impossibility of seeing “seeing” itself. This second type of seeing involves pure freedom in that this act can never be automatic. Only you can consciously decide to engage in this act of seeing. It cannot be done for you. It is that part of human consciousness that, for instance, AI (where AI is designed in a mechanical, computational, and modularly composite way) will never reach or replicate.

The aporia has consequently deepened in that not only do we face the impossibility of ever seeing ourselves seeing (when in fact seeing ourselves seeing is our deepest moment of self-conscious certitude), but now we also face the fact that we are both absolutely determined and absolutely free. We are absolutely determined in that our act of “seeing” the world is biologically derived. We are one more object in the world and as such utterly embedded in the events of the world as much as any other part of nature. But we are also absolutely free in that we can choose to break out of this act of seeing the world and decide to see ourselves seeing the world (with the impossibilities of this seeing being ultimately what it is that is seen). This second type of seeing cannot be ultimately linked to physical causation. It is not part of the great chain of being but is something that erupts from pure self-will. Thus, freedom and determinism both equally describe our condition. *Jiriki* (自力) and *tariki* (他力) are one and the same.

But let me go further and assert that it is from this ability to see oneself seeing that arises the social and the religious. When we see ourselves seeing the world, the idea that the world sees us back arises. This is not necessarily a logical conclusion but rather a potent and inadvertent intuition. The eyes of the other is felt to be endowed with the same pure freedom that we experience within ourselves. When another looks at you, you know they know you are there. However, tied in with this social sense of being, there is also a sense that the world itself *en masse* is looking at you and knowing you. There is what we can describe as an uber-consciousness out there. A personality in and beyond the world that sees you and knows you. There is a big Other, a God. Again, this is not a logical conclusion but something that we seem to be primed to sense from the most primordial beginnings of our conscious life.

So far, then, secular Zen and new materialism are still together and in accord. But it is at this point that the two diverge. In the concluding

remarks to his book on the new materialists, Pfeiffer makes an interesting link between the new materialists and the sociologist Emile Durkheim. Basically, the connection is the fact that Durkheim saw the existence of the social not as the sum of all individual minds in a given society, but as a collective consciousness out there, beyond, but only ever to be experienced by individuals. It is this social that is the source of the sacred in the world. It is consciousness, it is out there beyond the self, but is only really ever in the self, and as such, it is never transcendent of the world. It is imminent in the material. Pfeiffer observes:

We might argue that, for both Badiou and Žižek, what is new in their materialism is the newness found in the rebirth of the old claim to universalism, but here encountered in a new form—as appearing within existence (and not as external to it). Here again the Durkheimian conception of the “sacred” is relevant, as whatever is “sacred,” and hence collective, *appears* materially in effervescent moments, and it becomes a matter of figuring out how to sustain those moments. As Badiou puts it at the end of *Logics of Worlds*, “But I need neither God, nor the divine. I believe that it is here and now that we arouse or resurrect ourselves as Immortals.”¹⁹

However, whereas the new materialists see the social in the sacred, the secular Zen tradition sees the sacred in the social. The fundamentally Durkheimian idea is that when humans group together and engage in rituals, these rituals, although of sacred meaning, are ultimately about group solidarity. By contrast, secular Zen sees group solidarity and the love of neighbor it implies, as emanating from a deeper “field,” to borrow Nishitani’s term, that is of a religious (i.e., beyond the material) nature.²⁰ The case in point being Nishida who, speaking for secular Zen, sees the God of the social other as, indeed, God. The other is the space where God emerges. There is no other place for God to be. God coemerges with the self. Nishida writes:

Our self is established as the affirmation of the absolute self-negation of God, and... this is real creation. The absolute does not merely transcend the relative. If that were so, it would be merely negative, while in actuality it is relative. The true absolute faces its own absolute self-negation and embraces absolute negation within itself: it mediates itself in an absolutely contradi-

19. PFEIFFER 2015, 137.

20. NISHITANI 1982, 284–85.

catorily self-identical way through absolute negation—as the logic of *soku-hi* as the Diamond Sutra has it. Our self is established through God’s absolutely negating self-mediation; it exists at the outer limit of the self-negation of the absolute one into the individual many. Therein our self, the self-projecting point of the absolute one, is the image of God and absolutely volitional.²¹

Unpacking this statement, we can see that Nishida is asserting God as that which co-emerges with the self. This assertion can be grounded on the fact that the absolute, that which includes all, cannot have a positive value, be one more thing in the world, nor can it be the whole world added up either (such an adding up would remove the self). It can only be understood as the contradictory condition of the existence of the self in the world, the fact that the world is not where the self is but is not not there as that place where the self exists as itself. To put it in other terms, the big Other will stand in opposition to us at that moment our consciousness is generated from and as our self. The world out there where the big Other lurks is identified as being everything that is not one’s self, despite being utterly depended on one’s self for its identification. There is no other means by which to resolve this innate contradiction of the self in the world than to see it as the very site of consciousness and meaning in the world. The self and the other creating each other by not being each other but never coherently separating on account of this act of absolute self-mediation that unites through the very act of separation points to a deeper non-differentiating, or rather pre-differentiating consciousness wherein lurks the religious. Let us follow Suzuki in calling this *prajñā*. As Suzuki explains:

Prajñā, however, is the eye that can turn itself within and see itself, because it is the law of identity itself. It is due to *prajñā* that subject and object become identifiable, and this is done without mediation of any kind. *Vijñāna* always needs mediation as it moves on from one concept to another—this is in the very nature of *vijñāna*. Therefore, it swings the staff; sometimes it asserts; sometimes it negates, and declares that “A is not-A and therefore A is A.” This is the “logic” of *prajñā*-intuition.²²

21. NISHIDA 1987, 85–6.

22. SUZUKI 1955, 121.

CONCLUSION

Both new materialism and secular Zen agree that the existence of the self in the world creates an inherent structural contradiction that generates identity and meaning but is undermining of that meaning in its very operation. There is a gap in the cosmos, and here can lurk the space for God. Is it a case of the oft-spoken *gap of the God*, that fantasy we use to plug in the gaps in our knowledge, or the *God of the gap*, that which emerges because the meaning out there in the world, the sense of the Other beyond but with us, is meant to be known. There is meaning in the world because the world is meaningful. Where Lacanians may see the big Other as God that emerges with the development of consciousness as fantasy, Nishida sees it as a “real creation.” No science will ever resolve this issue. It is the logic of *soku-hi*, the very fabric of reality.

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