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Agency and Structure in Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics

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Agency and Structure in Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics

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Abstract

The dialectical interplay of agency and structure is a key part of Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics. It has been present in economic discourse over the last several decades, particularly in heterodox approaches that view economics from historical and sociological perspectives. In this article I join the discourse with a new approach by integrating aspects of pragmatism, institutional economics, process metaphysics, and Buddhism. The basic ideas underpinning this integration are (a) that both agent and structure are emergent phenomena and (b) that agency can be seen in a more comprehensive way through the lens of George H. Mead's conception of the "social self." Mead's social self is split into a bipolar model of the subjective I and the objective me. Together these ideas are combined into a single framework of agent, structure, I, and me (ASIM) with implications for ethics as well as Buddhist economics.

Keywords: Buddhist economics, process metaphysics, pragmatism, institutional economics, ethics, George H. Mead, and general systems theory.

Introduction

Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics (SEBE) is an economic paradigm for the engaged Buddhist movement.¹ Traditional Buddhism provides a fairly sparse vision of economics. As such there remains a gap between Buddhist economic theory and the challenges of a complex global economic system—a system in which virtually every Buddhist community in the world is now a part. The goal of the SEBE paradigm is to help bridge this gap with a syncretic infusion of certain elements taken from Buddhist metaphysics, classical American pragmatism, and institutional economics where we find significant common ground among these strands of philosophy and social theory.

Much of Buddhist philosophy and practice is centered around the inner work of individuals who strive to liberate themselves from their personal predicaments, particularly the vexations that capture the mind. But as many socially engaged Buddhist scholars have attested, there are parallels between our personal predicaments and those of society collectively, which affect us all.² The same things that can cause suffering—or *dukkha* in Pali—in people individually can also be found in our social milieu. The Buddha's three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion are

¹ For a more in-depth exploration of Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics, see Joel Magnuson, "Pragmatism, Institutionalism, and Buddhism: Toward a Synthesis for Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 15, (2020); Magnuson, *The Dharma and Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

² David Loy, "Ecodharma: A New Buddhist Path?" *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 15, (2020): 54-55.

pathological conditions that not only affect people individually but are woven into the cultural fabric of capitalist societies. Exploring this broader social aspect of *dukkha* opens a narrative on the possibilities of both a collective realization of our social conditions that embody greed, hatred, and delusion, and a collective movement toward changing these conditions. Changing the conditions that lead to suffering is an imperative that lies at the very heart of Buddhist philosophy.

This paper aims to contribute to this narrative of social change. Here the focus is on a specific part of the SEBE paradigm that highlights the interplay between the individual economic agents and the evolving social structure. The term economic “agent” refers here to members of the economic population who are actively engaged in their roles as consumers, workers, investors, entrepreneurs, etc. “Structure” refers to the social context for agents’ actions. Structure is a key part of institutional economics as it consists of a web of significant social relations between the individual agents, and the relations that are arranged by rules, norms, meanings, and symbols. Exploring the relationships between agency and structure is a practice that is well-established in the bloodline among heterodox schools of economic thought, but generally stands outside the contours of standard economics.

Here the goal is to add to the discourse on agency and structure with quadripolar ASIM framework consisting of agency (A) and structure (S) on one bipolar axis overlaid with pragmatist George H. Mead’s *I* (I) and *me* (M) model of the “social self” on the other axis. Mead’s treatment of the social self complements the A-S axis to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay of agency-structure. As part of this fusion of ideas, the ASIM framework shares commonality with Buddhist concepts of impermanence, dependent co-origination, and emptiness. These concepts also meld with Alfred N. Whitehead’s process cosmology, as well as the concepts of emergence and negation in system science.

In a posthuman turn of mind, one implication of this model is that it breaks away from the Cartesian duality that fundamentally separates agency and structure as either social atomism or social collectivism. Another is the implication of emptiness and negation in which the agent is simultaneously an objective social self and a subjective experiential self. Finally, there is an understanding consistent with all the ideas presented here that nothing is immutable, all is continuously in a state of flux, and all is processual. The first step in building out the ASIM framework is to sketch on a metaphysical canvas of pure emptiness, process, and dependent co-origination.

Process Metaphysics and Dependent Co-Origination

In the aspects from Buddhist philosophy presented here, the processes of interplay between agency and structure take place within a metaphysical field of emptiness. Ontologically, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is not a philosophy that nihilistically denies being or the existence of phenomena. It is a condition of existence that is without fixed entities or objects. Phenomena are real as they can be seen, touched, heard, and understood, but they possess no ontological substantiality in themselves as discrete entities. In this approach to metaphysics, all phenomena exist as formations whose existence is predicated on process as a relation to, and interaction with, all other formations. If there are no such interactive processes, there are no phenomena, which is to say that nothingness is the ultimate attribute of all phenomena. Within this emptiness, formations arise and perish depending on the existence of other formations, which also depend on yet other formations and so on. Agents and structures are such formations. The notion of emptiness used here is not to be conceived in spatial terms. Rather, it is a key aspect of a particular view of the relationship between agency and structure as emphasized by Watsuji Tetsuro's *ningen* (human) philosophy of ethics and human sociality. For Watsuji, an important

contributor to the modern Kyoto School of Japanese Philosophy, there is a dialectical process of emptying as the self empties into the social fabric and the social fabric empties into the self. He emphasizes that the “individual and the whole are both in their true nature ‘empty’ (*ku*), and this emptiness is itself the absolute totality.”³

Process metaphysics holds that formations simultaneously experience emergence and negation. Emergence is the novelty of a formation that arises from the interaction with other formations. Emergent phenomena are not the same as epiphenomena as the emergent formation has properties that are unique to the formation, not the constituent elements. Negation is the inverse of emergence in that the novelty disappears as other formations disappear, yet both emergence and negation can be seen as one in the processual sense. Whether a phenomenon is viewed as emergent or negated depends on one’s epistemological orientation. A rail car moving along its tracks is one process but can be understood to be either arriving or departing depending on one’s perspective. Similarly, phenomena can be either emergent or negated depending on one’s epistemological orientation. Moving epistemologically in one direction is negation and in the other direction is emergence.

One of the leading Zen intellectuals of the Kyoto School of Buddhism, Watsuji Tetsuro uses the simple example of a water molecule to elucidate this duality of emergence and negation of formations. A water molecule emerges as a formation—a novelty—from what he calls the “betweenness” or interaction of hydrogen and oxygen elements in a specific two-to-one configuration. With this interaction the molecule is an emergent formation that has its own properties that cannot be explained by either of the constituent elements. When a constituent element is not

³ Watsuji Tetsuro, *Watsuji Tetsuro’s Rinrigaku Ethics in Japan*, trans. Seisaku Yamamoto and Robert E. Carter (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 225.

interacting in relation to the others, the water molecule is negated into pure emptiness.⁴

The parameters of process metaphysics are without boundary. Hydrogen and oxygen elements are also emergent novel formations as they emerge from the betweenness of subatomic wave-particle phenomena, without which they too are negated into emptiness. The betweenness among a multitude of water molecules creates a body of water such as a river or lake that exists by virtue of the betweenness of the water and the contours of surrounding land. There is only betweenness and emptiness, in a temporal flux of emergence and negation of novelty. Ontology is contingent.

In Buddhist philosophy, the contingent betweenness of the existence of formations is referred to as dependent co-origination (*paticca samuppada*). Again, all phenomena arise and perish in conjunction with the arising and perishing of all other things. Dependent co-origination is also a core concept in modern general systems theory and ecological science. Among the most notable scholars in this field is Joanna Macy. A cornerstone of Joanna Macy's work is her synthesizing of the holistic and dynamic aspects of general systems theory and Buddhist philosophy. She rephrases the Buddhist concept of dependent co-origination as a doctrine of "mutual causality." She writes, "In this doctrine, reality appears as a dynamically interdependent process. All factors, mental and physical, subsist in a web of mutual causal interaction, with no element or essence held to be immutable or autonomous."⁵ She argues that as one becomes awakened to a level of being that transcends the immediate self or ego,

⁴ Steve Odin, *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism* (New York: State University of New York, 1996), 56.

⁵ Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), 33.

one also becomes awakened to the dependent nature of their immediate surroundings.

Macy connects process metaphysics to the realm of agency and structure in this epistemological process of awakening. She points out that awakening leads to a deep understanding that the individual self, or agent is not an atomistic, fixed entity, but rather is part of a larger dynamic process in which the agent is interrelated to a broader sphere, or structure. The process of interaction between agent and structure is the flowing and changing set of formations. As she writes, it is

[b]ecause reality is seen as dependently co-arising, or systemic in nature, each and every act is understood to have an effect on the larger web of life, and the process of development is perceived as multidimensional. One's personal awakening is integral to the awakening of one's village and both play integral roles in... the awakening of one's country and one's world.⁶

Awakening is the realization of the web of life gained by freeing the mind from its maddening tendency to become attached to a formation, including to those within the mind and to the self. She continues, "Being interdependent, these developments do not occur sequentially, in a linear fashion, but synchronously, each abetting and reinforcing the other through multiplicities of contacts and currents, each subtly altering the context in which other events occur."⁷ Agents, structures, and events are emergent and negated depending on, as Macy says, which other events occur.

Zen Buddhist Nishida Kitaro also views the agent as a social self through the lens of interconnectedness in the spatial "locus" of absolute nothingness.⁸ Nishida is one of the contributors to the Kyoto School that

⁶ Macy, *Mutual Causality*, xv.

⁷ Macy, *Mutual Causality*, 33.

⁸ Odin, *The Social Self*, 80.

shares much affinity with the American Chicago School of pragmatism and institutional economics as they were all products of the early twentieth century. Nishida notes that the true self is a point of intersection among the infinite strands of interconnections that extend into emptiness. Through negation of the connecting strands, the self vanishes. Through the integrating process of interconnection of strands, the self emerges. The true self is that which is connected to an infinite complex of surrounding milieu. The agent, therefore, is an ultimate category in process metaphysics in which the social character of human selfhood is a product of the social character of reality itself.⁹ When the agent arises, an aspect of the social whole of structure arises; when the agent vanishes, an aspect of the structure vanishes. Everything is equal in both emergence and negation. As Marx and Engels put it, “All that is solid melts into air...”¹⁰

Here we find that Alfred N. Whitehead’s process philosophy is crucial in this connection between Buddhist process metaphysics and the Chicago School. In the 1920s, Whitehead moved from the UK to the US and spent the last years of his career at Harvard University. He had made a substantial shift away from the British craft of formal logic and aligned himself with the enormous hotbed of creativity at the University of Chicago: the birthplace of American pragmatism and institutional economics.

For Whitehead, process philosophy is not about permanent substances undergoing change like immortal billiard balls shifting and re-shifting in configuration, but a timeline of events in which phenomena arise and perish, and only temporarily give the illusion of permanence. Whitehead emphasizes that in “such a philosophy the actualities constituting the process of the world are conceived as exemplifying the

⁹ For a description of the paradoxical nature of social self and nothingness in Nishida’s worldview, see Kitaro Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A Dilworth (1949; repr., Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; repr., New York: Verso, 1998), 38.

ingression (or participation) of other things which constitute the potentialities of definiteness for any actual existence.”¹¹ The agent’s way of being in the world is not confined to the immediacy of existential experience insofar as the experience itself is mediated by something else.

Process metaphysics, in this case process-oriented epistemology, is also part of the Buddhist spiritual structure of *prajñāparamitā*, which is the understanding of voidness or emptiness in which the form of phenomena is illusory. A lighted stick of incense in a dark room appears as a point of light. The light is a process of slow combustion of wood particles. If the stick is swirled in a circle, the point of light begins to look like a circle, which is a formless geometric abstraction. The faster the twirling, the more reified the circle becomes as a seemingly discreet object. At some speed, our perception is only of the circle and not the process of making it so. To assume that the circle is itself an immutable, enduring object is to be captured by an illusion. Whitehead points to science as fraught with such illusions, in which there is an error

of mistaking abstract for the concrete. It is an example of what I will call the ‘Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.’ This fallacy is the occasion of great confusion in philosophy. It is not necessary for the intellect to fall into the trap, though in this example there has been a very general tendency to do so.¹²

For Buddhists, much of human suffering arises when we find ourselves attached to formations, which can be self-attachment or attachment to things or ideas. This creates a hopelessly futile struggle to make that which is impermanent, formless, and processual into an enduring concrete entity. The struggle gives rise to vexations that give rise to a galaxy

¹¹ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1929), 53.

¹² Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1925), 52.

of human suffering. In Buddhism, liberation from suffering can be achieved by a series of meditative negations which lead to insight into flow and process rather than fixities, and also to formlessness, emptiness, and ultimately enlightenment—a final stage of pure non-attachment. Resonating with this Buddhist vision of things Whitehead emphasizes:

That ‘all things flow’ is the first vague generalization which the unsystematized, barely analysed, intuition of men has produced... Without doubt, if we are to go back to that ultimate, integral experience, unwarped by the sophistications of theory, that experience whose elucidation is the final aim of philosophy, the flux of things is an ultimate generalization around which we must weave our philosophical system.¹³

With process metaphysics, dependent co-origination, and emptiness as the metaphysical foundation, we move to agency and structure specifically. The first step here is to explore theories of agency and structure before building out the ASIM model.

Theories of Agency and Structure

When referring to the relationship between agency and structure in economics, there are a few divergent strands of discourse representing different metaphysics: social atomism, social collectivism, and some strands that weave the two together. The aim here is to work toward building ASIM as an alternative to the two extremes of social atomism and social collectivism. But the alternative is not a conflation of the two in a compromised middle ground. Rather, it is a wholly different approach grounded in the above process metaphysics as the backdrop for the ASIM framework. All the elements in the ASIM framework are formless, subject

¹³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 240.

to emergence and negation, exist within a metaphysical climate of emptiness, and are part of a continuous process of evolution.

Social Atomism

One traditional way of viewing agency structure interplay is from a paradigm of social atomism. This is the reductionist approach to social ontology that undergirds standard economic theory as it was fashioned into neoliberal ideology in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁴ It maintains that social structures have no ontological status and exist only as epiphenomena arising from the interactions of individual agents. Social phenomena are explicable only in terms of individual human organic properties and the intentions derived thereof. As epiphenomena they have no emergent properties that would give them an existence of their own and therefore cannot be understood separately from the properties of individuals within their sphere. Political theorist Wendy Brown states, “the body politic ceases to be a body, but is, rather, a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers.”¹⁵ This paradigm explains away social structures by basically ignoring them. Social causality is exclusively explained as agent-to-structure trends.

The ideological implications of a “society without a society” re-sounds with the theories of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, David Hume, and Adam Smith and others in the tradition of classical liberalism or its more recent incarnation of neoliberalism. Inherent in this ideology is a vision of fundamentalist individualism, or social atomism. With social atomism,

¹⁴ See the summary of classical liberalism and its development into neoliberalism in Friedrich Hayek, “Scientism and the Study of Society, Part II,” *Economica* 10, no. 37 (February 1943): 34-63, and Kenneth Arrow, “Mathematical Models in the Social Sciences,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, ed. May Brodbeck (New York: Macmillan), 635-637.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ron Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Repeater Books, 2019), 10-11.

economics is concerned only with individual producers and consumers pursuing self-interest in the open field of the marketplace. All economic activity is reduced to individual behavior in such a way that all individuals are held to be essentially passive and only inspired to action by shifting market signals. Insofar as structure does not exist, producers and consumers are unburdened of the moral responsibility of social wellbeing. They are free to pursue their own economic self-interest, completely disconnected from one another, yet somehow a natural tendency would be for balance as guided by the superstition of an “invisible hand.”¹⁶

Epistemologically social atomism flounders as it is unable to explain rule-structured social environments or social structures of power. Social theory is based on statistical modelling that finds correlations in social trends. Human sociality is explained away as individuals being endowed with a certain proclivity to prefer social structure or order. It also fails to provide a clear explanation of how social structures influence individual preferences for one kind of social habit versus another. There has yet to be an explanation of economic social behavior purely in terms of individualistic determinism, though the theories suggest that such explanation is demonstrable through logical ratiocination in neoclassical choice theoretic models.¹⁷ Such explanation is impossible when the ontological standpoint is that social structures such as institutions either conform to individual preferences or do not exist. The moment there is admission that institutions in the structure play a role in shaping the

¹⁶ The popularization of the notion of balance in free markets led by an invisible hand of market forces is a misinterpretation of the phrase used in Adam Smith's tome *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith clearly used the invisible hand as a metaphor for the positive yet unintended social consequences of individual industriousness. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* [1776] (1776; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 477.

¹⁷ Joel Magnuson, *The Dharma and Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 77-80.

preferences of the individual, or that structure is incrementally altered by individuals, the paradigm flounders.¹⁸

Social Collectivism

In its extreme the ontology of social collectivism, or structural determinism, holds that individual thoughts and actions of agents are wholly determined by social structure in the form of institutional, cultural, or technological factors. Structure has a dynamic of its own as a distinct entity removed from individual volition. This approach undergirds a different kind of economic vision held by various schools of Marxism and postmodernism. The emphasis is on an ensemble of social relations and the social structures that cohere within these relations that bear down heavily on the habits of thought and action of the population. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser emphasizes that the true subjects for social ontology and epistemology are the “relations of production.”¹⁹ Althusser refers to the Marxian framework of historical materialism and the category of social relations that revolve around the ownership of the material means of production, or capital. In social collectivism, the institutions that define ownership hold ontological primacy, which predicates the primacy of structure over agency. Structure is a puppet master and agency is the puppet.

In this view, there is little room for individuality. Theories of the interplay between agency and structure that originate from social collectivism tend to lack an adequate explanation for how agents’ preferences are shaped by social forces other than that they are being manipulated by the raw power of structure. This view is not entirely a mischaracterization so much as an incomplete picture. There are no means by which to explain

¹⁸ For a more detailed critique of social atomism see Joel Magnuson, “Pragmatism, Institutionalism, and Buddhism: Toward a Synthesis for Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics” *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 15 (2020).

¹⁹ Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital* (1968; repr., London: NLB, 1970), 180.

the creativity, spontaneity, spirituality, diversity in thought and behavior, or sense of aesthetics of the individual agent.

Structuration and Critical Realism

Among the most pathbreaking attempts to weave strands of social atomism and collectivism into a more complex framework was carried out by Anthony Giddens and his structuration theory.²⁰ For Giddens, the path to gaining a true understanding of agency and structure should not be to hold either structure or agency in a position of ontological primacy. Rather, the approach of structuration should start with social habituation that he calls “recursive social practices” as the central focus.²¹ In Giddens’ structuration theory, agent and structure are not seen as distinct entities, but rather aspects of the same phenomenon. Agents are both enabled and constrained by prevailing “recursively organized rules.”²² In this view, the agent becomes a mirror reflection of an object fashioned by the dominant structures in social discourse. There are no emergent properties of either agent or structure. For Giddens and various postmodernist trends, structure is a cognitive assemblage of tropes and symbols constructed in realms of power as assimilated by agents primarily by way of language. The phenomena that transpire between agency and structure are relegated to a holistic mish mash of tropes that become a linguistically reified construct.

Giddens’s work is a major contribution to our understanding of agency and structure as it attempts to transcend the either/or dichotomy of social atomism and social collectivism. Roy Bhaskar and others argue, however, that Giddens did not transcend the duality so much as conflate agency and structure into a monolithic narrative captured by structure.

²⁰ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1984), 35.

²¹ Giddens, *The Constitution*, 169.

²² Giddens, *The Constitution*, 169.

In Roy Bhaskar's theory of critical realism, agency and structure are viewed as separate and distinct yet interdependent entities. Bhaskar's view of reality takes its cue from the Marxist vision in that social structures exist prior to the agents' engagement with society. For Bhaskar, society "must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices, and conventions which individuals reproduce and transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity. But it is not the product of it."²³ Society is imbued with social relations of production, which are locked away by economic conditions of ownership. These relations become the parameters of structured interactions among agents-institutions. Margaret Archer builds on Bhaskar's critical realism with a model of a morphogenetic cycle. The cycle moves through three phases that begins with structure, then social interaction within the structure, and then to modifications and elaborations that become the dominant but modified structure again.²⁴ Yet, as with social collectivism, individual volition and creativity are either downplayed or non-existent. Agents remain the prisoners of the ubiquity of social relations of production dominated by the iron determinism of ownership.

Social collectivism and attempts at conflation with atomism seek to explain individual agents in terms of structures of power without attention given to volitional motivation. Individuality among agents is either assumed away or seen as a form of false consciousness that is whittled into shape by culture and institutions. As such, the volition and creative function of the individual, which is real and viable, remains trapped in structure. Social atomism ignores structure altogether and volition and creativity are given *a priori* and provide a sparse explanation of individual volition outside the caricature of "rational economic man." Rational

²³ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophic Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Brighton: Harvester, 1989), 36.

²⁴ Margaret Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 72.

economic man is a representation of economic behavior that is guided by a single impulse to maximize benefit and minimize cost in an open marketplace, a field in which individuals are prompted into action by stimulus-response mechanisms of shifting prices, namely, financial rewards and punishments.²⁵

What is obvious from an evolutionary perspective is that structure and agency are both in a parallel state of evolutionary flux, and they are both emergent phenomena in their own right. This raises the need for a different paradigm that allows for explanations of how both experiences change over time. Epistemologically, an explanation without a theory of how individual behavior changes falls into the trap of social collectivism. Without an explanation of how structure changes, it falls into the trap of social atomism.

Both traps of atomism and collectivism need to be avoided and this raises the necessity of a framework which elucidates transformation of both agent and structure. The challenge is therefore to provide an evolutionary framework that examines the co-evolution of agency and structure which are in a state of interbeing but not conflating one into the other. As I argue, this entails karmic cause-and-effect relationships passing from structure to agent, and from agent to structure simultaneously.²⁶ In this way, individual volition and creativity are restored to the analysis without reverting to social atomism.

²⁵For a nontechnical description of rational economic man, see Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017), 81-88.

²⁶Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: An Alternative Sociopolitical Perspective* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 128.

The ASIM Framework

The ASIM framework is quite distinct from standard economics as it draws the classical Chicago schools of pragmatism, particularly the work of George H. Mead, and institutional economics together with contemporary Buddhist social thought into a single paradigm. This framework is consistent with the flurry of developments in social theory in the last few decades that transcends the dichotomy of social atomism and social collectivism into a more sophisticated, integrated paradigm.

The original Chicago Schools of classical American pragmatism and institutional economics both began to take shape around the turn of the twentieth century. Together they crafted a humanistic and progressive social philosophy that was unrivalled in their time. Just as Thorstein Bunde Veblen cleared a path for a new approach to economics for wellbeing, John Dewey and George H. Mead did the same for a new approach to social philosophy with their emphasis on social reconstruction and the application of science to perennial human problems.

Mead's work, which is characteristic of all pragmatists and institutional economists, is a challenge to social atomism which remains at the core of standard economic theory. In Mead's I-Me dialectic of intersubjectivity and emergence, the agent is not an isolated individual imbued with insatiable self-interest. The agent, viewed on the Me side, arises as a formation by assuming and internalizing the patterns, symbols, culture, and language of the social milieu at large. Yet, the socially imbued self, in turn, acts on the I side individually, spontaneously, and creatively as an individual whose impulse is to act in the world. The agent is both a formation as Me and an elemental subformation as I in the broader social sphere. In Mead's conception, the social self is a being made of both individuality and sociality. In process metaphysics, individuality and sociality are both

formations that are emergent and negated depending on which other events occur or which other formations they interact with.²⁷

Following the initial overtures by William James, Charles S. Peirce, and Alfred N. Whitehead set out to develop a social philosophy that has a practical bearing on human life through civic participation, building democratic institutions, a gradualist evolutionary approach to social change, and a commitment to human wellbeing. For pragmatists, the process of moving in the direction of positive change exists in a state of mutual determination of the individual agent and their social environment. Through social action, individuals play an active role in shaping the context, as well as a passive role of having their actions take shape within their milieu.

The ASIM Framework

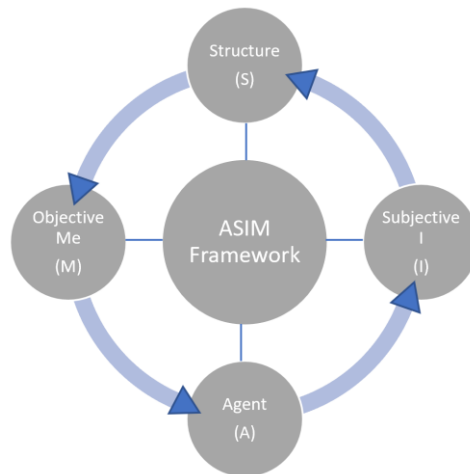


Figure 1. The ASIM Framework represents the relationship between economic agent (A) and social structure (S) by overlaying the agency-structure bipolar construct with Mead's Subjective I (I) and Objective Me (M) bifurcated model of the social self.

²⁷ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 173-178.

This view elevates social action to a place of central importance in the moral philosophy of human conduct in which the individual exists within, and has a karmic impact on, an embracing social context. Ethical exigencies arise in the context of knowing that our present conduct has an impact on the social milieu that will be karmically inherited by future generations. For pragmatists, the process of positive social change is not something that can be achieved simply by appealing to an individual agent to change their habits of mind and action. It must extend into the realm of changing social conditions as well. Dewey argued specifically that proclamations of social reform that promise putting an end to war, labor strife, or inequality are hollow unless accompanied with plans for changes in objective arrangements and institutions.²⁸ It should also be noted that institutional economics and pragmatism have both experienced a revival in the last two decades and have caught the eye of socially engaged Buddhists, particularly with the George H. Mead's characterizations of the social construction of the self—the social self. Mead provided core insights into the nature of the social self that allow for a deeper and more holistic understanding of this interplay as the dynamic of two separate yet integrated evolutionary trends.

For Mead, in the field of space and time there does not exist a one-directional extension with one level shaping the other. Rather, the effects of all are simultaneous, whole, and multidirectional, "...if we admit that the evolutionary process consists in a mutual determination of the individual and his environment—not the determination of the individual by his environment—moral necessity in conduct is found in the very evolutionary situation."²⁹ The interplay between people's actions in daily life and the temporal flux of the social firmament was his central focus. He stood out among the pragmatists as the most preoccupied with problem-

²⁸ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Modern Library, 1930), 107-108.

²⁹ George H. Mead, *Selected Writings: George H. Mead*, ed. Andrew J. Reck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 86-87.

solving in society, particularly in the context of the flurry of the scientific developments of his era. Mead's approach to pragmatism, often referred to as "constructivism," was developed around what he called his "philosophy of act."³⁰ Mead emphasized that ethical considerations are bound to the reality that the evolution of human beings and the impact their actions have on their social and natural environments, are *coterminous*.

Mead's philosophy of act is more than merely considering some useful course of action, it is a statement of metaphysics in which a central aspect of human existence is the primacy of action, interaction, and impact or practical bearing. Mead writes, "It has become evident that an environment answers to the susceptibilities of the organism; that the organism determines thus its own environment; that the effect of every adaptation is a new environment which must change with that which responds to it."³¹ The recognition of this process of mutual codetermination and impact engenders a sense of an ethical responsibility for Mead, "The full recognition, however, that form and environment must be phases that answer to each other, character for character, appears in ethical theory."³² Form and environment are subject to cumulative change and moral awareness of the karmic impact of actions can determine the path of this change. In this way, Mead's social philosophy is consistent with the Buddhist notion of dependent co-origination and resonates with Macy's notion of social awakening.

Mead was the first among the pragmatists to open the inquiry into the social construction of the individual agent as a bifurcated and dialectic self in a bipolar model that holds the agent to be simultaneously both a subjective I (I) and objective Me (M), as they are both formations and sub-formations relative to structure.

³⁰ Mead, *Selected Writings*, xlvi.

³¹ Mead, *Selected Writings*, 241.

³² Mead, *Selected Writings*, 86-87.

Agent → I

Starting with the connection between the agent as I, the agent is instinctively a force in the world. It is a formation, or an emergent, formed within the spatial climate of emptiness and the metaphysics of process. For pragmatist and institutional economists, a core aspect of the human life of the agent is to be active. The agent-as-I is the aspect of the self that is subjectively acting in the world with volition and creativity. Rather, it is fundamentally active and socially interactive in such a way that makes the ontology of social context as much a part of our being as our physical selves. John Dewey envisioned human behavior as intrinsically purposeful in a wide range of possible modes of development. He rejected the idea that human economic behavior is inert unless prompted by promise of utility or financial gain, “The idea of a thing intrinsically wholly inert in the sense of absolutely passive is expelled from physics and has taken refuge in the psychology of current economics.”³³ The economics he refers to is that of the neoliberal view of social atomism.

For Mead and other pragmatists, the everyday economic lives of people have always been largely consumed in the struggles to gain a livelihood in their material surrounding. Knowledge about their material surrounding is derived from what is illuminated in, or relevant to, these struggles. Through the routines of daily work, individuals and communities settle on following a certain set of practical procedures, without which they would have to uneconomically reinvent and redefine the manner with which one performs work tasks each day. These procedures become habits and consequently provide a stable foundation upon which new procedures can be innovated in the face of new challenges, or by virtue of pure creativity. The agent-as-I exerts creativity and originality that is not dependent on the antecedent of structure. In his process cosmology, Whitehead notes that creativity “is the principle of *novelty*. An actual

³³ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*. (New York: Modern Library, 1930), 119.

occasion is a novel entity diverse from any entity in the ‘many’ which it unifies. Thus ‘creativity’ introduces novelty into the content of the many, which are the universe disjunctively. The ‘creative advance’ is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity each novel situation which it originates.”³⁴ The agent-as-I is therefore an agent of evolutionary change through its own volitional acts of creativity. As an evolutionary force, the agent and a multitude of other agents are subformations that are coming together and having a formative impact on structure.

I → Structure

Through the volitional routines of work, individuals and communities settle on following a certain set of practical procedures, without which they would have to uneconomically reinvent and redefine the manner with which one performs work tasks each day. These procedures become habitualized and consequently provide a stable foundation upon which new procedures may be innovated in the face of new challenges, or by virtue of pure creativity. People work in the world together to make things, and in so doing self-create their own social groups. Facing the same situation and reacting in like fashion is an ongoing project of problem-solving in the tasks of wresting a livelihood from the crust of the earth—the most core material action within all economic systems. Dewey writes, “The problem of origin and development of the various groupings, or definite customs, in existence at any particular time in any particular place is not solved by reference to psychic causes, elements, or forces. It is to be solved by reference to facts of action, demand for food, for houses, for a mate...”³⁵ In the economic processes of production, distribution, and consumption, the habits of mind and habits of behavior of people become “deeply grooved systems of interaction which we call social groups, big and

³⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 26.

³⁵ Dewey, *Human Nature*, 119.

small...”³⁶ Common ways of thinking and acting reify into social groups which in time become part of the structure, including the economic institutions that impose order and control over the economic process.

As humans have the volitional will to act creatively in their community, this action will indubitably be a force—large or small—in the direction with which the firmament evolves through a series of algorithms. All is impermanent and in a state of flux. As we touch on evolutionary processes, we create a temporal aspect of our understanding. It also places us on a karmic timeline that includes past and future. Returning to Whitehead:

[E]ach actual entity, although complete so far as concerns its microscopic process [formation], is yet incomplete by reason of its objective inclusion of the macroscopic process [subformation]. It really experiences a future which must be actual, although the completed actualities of that future are undetermined. In this sense, each actual occasion experiences its own objective immortality.³⁷

Through their collective and habituated action in economic life, each individual social self shapes the contours of the structure or social firmament. The firmament, in turn, shapes the actions of people with work rules, symbols, social norms, and social habits, which in time become the building blocks of social institutions. Whitehead’s objective immortality, in this context consists of the aspects of our being that have flowed into the structure and live on symbolically through the storehouse of culture.

³⁶ Dewey, *Human Nature*, 60.

³⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 248.

Structure → *M*

Social institutions cohere into the structures that provide the rules that guide economic life. Institutions define the rule-structured environment that becomes a part of the very fabric of the construction of objective agent-as-Me. As the agent becomes institutionalized as such it takes on a role-playing function, or the agent as role player. The institutionalized role player is itself a newly created formation as part of the evolutionary transformation of structure. In this way, the development of the agent-as-me and the evolution of the social firmament are locked together in a state of dependent co-origination. The agent, the institutions that control economic activities, such as government, corporate and financial institutions, and the surrounding social firmament, are all in a state of interbeing. They are processual and emergent.

Pragmatist of the Chicago School Charles H. Cooley sees the socially constructed agent-as-Me as a kind of “looking-glass self” which is an emergent socially-constructed or habituated role that will be played out by individuals. Once an agent identifies the role as an aspect of their own self-identity—that CEO image is me, that plumber is me, etc.—they compare to the self-concept, make adjustments based on “pride or shame,” then “bring it into the social world.”³⁸

The concept of the social construction of the individual runs through all the work of the classical pragmatists, with the core assertion that the individual agent is part of a process of social construction by way of the intersubjective use of symbols, or symbolic interactionism. Their shared interaction pours into the social structure through the medium of codes, symbols, and images, that accumulate in time as the whole of culture. This is a process whereby the agent-as-I is interacting with other

³⁸ Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 183-184.

such agents, and their interaction leads to formations mediated through the intersubjective medium of symbolic interaction taken from within the storehouse of culture—the most significant aspect of which is language. The agent is self-reflective while simultaneously carrying out activities while absorbed in the remembered language, symbols, and rules in their surroundings. These symbols, words, and rules are the raw material aggregate that forms social habits and habits of mind. That aggregate, or whole of culture, lies at the very heart of institutional economics.

The holistic vision of a web of interconnectedness in the form of a commonwealth was the original conception of institutional economics. Institutionalist and legal scholar Walton Hamilton observes, “The world of [economic activity], to which imperfectly we accommodate our lives, is a tangled unbroken web of institutions.”³⁹ Elaborating on this theme, institutionalist Allan Gruchy emphasizes that the fundamental view of institutional economics is that it takes this web to be an “evolving, dynamic whole or synthesis, which is not only greater than the sum of its parts, but which also relates the parts such that their functioning is conditioned by their interrelation.”⁴⁰ Such interrelation is the diversity of individual action within the unity of a vast cluster of social habits, conventions, folkways, beliefs, and symbols, etc., that impose form on the daily activities of individuals as they go about making their living. Institutionalist Russell Dixon notes that “[t]o understand modern economic activity, which has become the dominant and directive force in our industrialized world, one must appreciate its place in the social entity called culture.”⁴¹

³⁹ Walton Hamilton, “Institution,” in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* VIII, eds. Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson (New York: Macmillan, 1932) 84-89.

⁴⁰ Allan Gruchy, *Modern Economic Thought* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1947), 4.

⁴¹ Russell Dixon, *Economic Institutions and Cultural Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941), 5.

M → Agent

Within that entity there are elements that reify into rules for living, life rules—roles, myths, behavior norms, rules and other aspects that form into the “role-taking” that pours back into the agent and becomes an aspect of the subjective, self-conscious individual. The agent remains as the same self, but has changed in some way or another. In Buddhism, one of the core concepts is that of change and impermanence. Not only are there no enduring entities, or selves, as all arise as a result of interactions, but there is a phenomenological constant of change which the social firmament pours semiotically into the agent and which the agent assimilates; this is inherently active and carries the semiotically-absorbed concept of self into the material world. This changes the material world. These material changes pour into the social firmament semiotically and the social firmament changes. The changed social firmament pours into the agent and the agent changes. Over a timeline, the result is nondeterministic transformation of both agent and structure.

With process metaphysics and the Buddhist coloring to this view, all agents and structures have no independent existence away from all the other elements that make up the whole of culture. Both agent and structure are in a state of interbeing with their surroundings and constituent elements, such that economic behavior cannot be understood outside of this holistic milieu any more than the behavior of fish can be understood without water. The whole of the social structure is continuously in a state of flux resulting from the dialectical interplay between its unity and the diversity of the mass of active agents, each playing a role of social self. Taking a similar stance, institutional economist Geoffrey Hodgson summarized it this way:

The central idea here is that society creates a store of intuitions and experiences that are condensed in customs and laws, formulated through the medium of language. The customs and laws are

social emergents standing above the individual. They are formed by individuals, but they also form a social environment to which each individual adapts.... Not only do these customs and laws emerge out of individuals and their interactions, but also they coerce and impose sanctions upon individuals. The causation works both ways.⁴²

All aspects are thus impermanent and transformative. The evolutionary direction of the transformation, however, is nonteleological and uncertain. For pragmatists, institutional economists, and socially engaged Buddhists, the ultimate task is to consciously give some direction to this evolution with mindfulness and cognition, and with the normative goal of overall wellbeing.

The cognitive reaction to each evolutionary experience is a reflection of the totality of all experiences up to each moment, which gives new shape to experiences to come. Through a process of karmic volition, much of human experience is derived from a will to act, which steadily transforms one's world and one's consciousness, and these transformations are cumulative. The implication for ethics is also an important part of this framework.

Ethics

Given that the social firmament is in a state of continuous and cumulative transformation, a question arises as to the direction of this change. Both pragmatists and institutionalists argue that the direction is nonteleological. In terms of Darwinian evolution, change is subject to chance and circumstance and can drift in an infinite number of directions. At the same

⁴² Geoffrey M. Hodgson, *The Evolution of Institutional Economics: Structure and Darwinism in American Institutionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 104.

time, however, the transformation of the social firmament is subject to volitional will. The volition to act in the world is universal to all people and the specific actions agents take are shaped within the structure. All the while, however, they are leaving their marks of alterations within the structure such that it is subject to permanent alteration by a cumulative series of actions. Through the dialectic process of mutual creation between individuals and firmament, volitional human action in the world constitutes the key to cumulative change and social evolution. As the process is indeterminant insofar as there is no pre-determined blueprint, there are both karmic and ethical implications regarding the overall direction of such change.

Mead emphasized that ethical considerations are bound to the reality that the evolution of human beings and the impact their actions have on their social and natural environments are coterminous. The recognition of this process of mutual codetermination and impact engenders a sense of an ethical responsibility for Mead, "The full recognition, however, that form and environment must be phases that answer to each other, character for character, appears in ethical theory."⁴³ Form and environment are subject to cumulative change and moral awareness of the karmic impact of actions can determine the path of this change.

Similarly, Dewey argued that it is impossible for a person to be morally neutral in this regard. Conduct, unless carried out in pure isolation is socially shared, and for that reason has the potential for ethical impact, one way or another. The ethical exigency arises in the context of making modifications that will have a karmic impact on the condition of the structure and agents in the future. Ultimately for both Dewey and Mead, the process of positive social change is not something that can be achieved by simply appealing to an individual to shape up and change their habits, as would be the case in social atomism. It must extend into

⁴³ Mead, *Selected Writings*, 65.

the realm of changing social conditions as well. Dewey argues, “We change character from worse to better only by changing conditions—among which, once more, are our own ways of dealing with the one we judge. We cannot change habit directly: that notion is magic. But we can change it indirectly by modifying conditions...”⁴⁴ Dewey was adamant that proclamations of social reform that promise putting an end to war, labor strife, or inequality ring hollow for him unless accompanied with plans for changes in social structures. Dewey continues:

...no amount of preaching good will or the golden rule or cultivation of sentiments of love and equity will accomplish the results. There must be change in objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment [structure] not merely on the hearts of men [agents]. To think otherwise is to suppose that flowers can be raised in the desert or motor cars in a jungle. Both things can happen without a miracle. But only first by changing the jungle and the desert.⁴⁵

Dewey places stronger emphasis on the need to direct our ethical considerations on structure, though maintaining the need to change the “hearts of men.” Both Mead and Dewey see a need to build a comprehensive path of holistic change at all levels.

Returning to social atomism, there is little space in this paradigm set aside for a philosophy of ethics. The critique of the “rugged individualist” trope has been a consistent theme throughout institutional economics since its inception. One of the original architects of this school of thought, John R. Commons, found some inspiration in the work of Elijah Jordan. Jordan emphasized that there is a fundamental distinction between “individualism” and “individuality,” which is an important part of

⁴⁴ Dewey, *Human Nature*, 21.

⁴⁵ Dewey, *Human Nature*, 21-22.

the agent-as-I concept.⁴⁶ He was critical of the philosophy of individualism as passed on in the tradition of Herbert Spencer and William G. Sumner. Jordan saw individuality as an important aspect of social and cultural development. The healthy development of individuality arises in part from the context within which the individual themselves are born, grow, and develop sociality. Individuality implies freedom and sociality implies responsibility. The unleashing of individual freedom without responsibility results in the destruction of social order, chaos, and ultimately violence. Jordan writes:

We have seen that individualism implies a principle of cause and mechanism as the law of human nature and of human relations; this law in its practical concepts is an expression of mere brute force, which is the final category in the system of individualism. A social 'order' which rests upon the law of competition and whose ultimate practical concepts are property and contract is never at peace, is continually in a state of active war.⁴⁷

One of the principal questions in SEBE is about how to deal with pathological conditions that have run amok in our social institutions and have a bearing on the formation of agent-as-Me: the image of ourselves. Pathologies such as widespread violence, greed, and social instability as seen from the individualist philosophy is an extension of human nature structured internally within the individual. Institutions that serve such pathologies are simply the means to an end of desires of human nature. Jordan sees it differently, "institutions of political, ethical and legal life which have been the genius and meaning of the modern period of human development ... have been superseded by ends somewhat differently

⁴⁶ Elijah Jordan, *Forms of Individuality: An Inquiry into the Grounds of Order in Human Relations* (Indianapolis: Progress Publishers, 1927), 133-134.

⁴⁷ Jordan, *Forms of Individuality*, 133.

envisaged.”⁴⁸ For Jordan, institutions of government, media, education, or finance were once created to serve a common purpose related to human progress and development but eventually became taken over by those in positions of power that seek to use them for their own purposes of greed and self-aggrandizement.

Conclusion

Zen Buddhist teacher and writer David Loy indicated that in light of the ecological, political, and social malaise bearing down on both the agent and structure, there is a role for Buddhist activism. This entails acting without being attached to any particular outcome but doing the very best we can to make a positive difference. Loy emphasizes that “... if-contemporary Buddhists cannot or do not want to do this, then Buddhism is not what the world needs right now.”⁴⁹

But at the very core of Buddhist teachings is a doctrine that points the way toward this kind of activism. In my own adaption of The Four Noble Truths, they teach that our suffering exists, that pathological conditions also exist that cause this suffering, that changes need to be made to free ourselves from this pathology and suffering, and that societies need a system of ethics that chart a course for these changes—changes that apply to individual agents as well as the overall structure.

In Mead’s “Philosophical Basis of Ethics,” he explicitly rejected the notion that there was some ideal order for society independent of the natural world that exists as a preexisting, predetermined paradigm toward which we are groping around to find in our darkness. His was a vision of evolution which can drift in an infinite number of directions, and it is up

⁴⁸ Jordan, *Forms of Individuality*, 134.

⁴⁹ David Loy, *Ecodharma*, 12-13.

to the agents to chart a path for that direction with the same kind of action and compassion they use to build the perfect mousetrap.

Our understanding of the relationship between agency and structure can be enhanced with a fresh and thorough review of Mead's social philosophy and the contributions to economic thought by other members of the original Chicago school. By examining their work and the various ways they share common ground with Buddhist social theory, socially engaged Buddhism can move closer to developing a distinctive and much-needed philosophy of economics.

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