

Buddhism, quantum theory and international relations: On the strength of the subject, the discontinuous relationality, and the world of contingency

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ipt**Kosuke Shimizu** 

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Abstract

This article is part of a forum on Karin Fierke's book *Snapshots from Home: Mind, Action and Strategy in an Uncertain World*. In it, the importance of viewing international relations from the intersection of Buddhism and quantum theory is discussed. The ontological implication of Buddhism and quantum theory is extremely important in an uncertain world, and when we accept the uncertainty, we gain a new vision of contemporary world affairs. This is precisely where the gates of ethics open to us.

Keywords

Buddhism, ethics, international relations theory, quantum theory, relationality, temporality

Contemporary international relations as an academic field has been dominated by strong subjectivity. This subject inscribes itself in the flat world of materialism in various ways. The strong sense of the subject is spatial and even spatialises and linearises time: what Karin Fierke attempts to reveal in her *Snapshots from Home* is, on the contrary, non-self image based on a multifaceted worldview, relations and discontinuity that contrasts with this strong sense of the self (Fierke, 2022).

This non-self image has never existed in the discipline of international relations before, where the strong image of the self has thoroughly dominated the worldview. The subject of non-self appears as a nod to the web of connections with the background of an ever-changing world picture. But it is not permanent. It appears and disappears, it

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disappears and appears again. So how does the discipline of international relations change when it accepts this concept of non-self instead of the strong self? How does this change the billiard model, which we have taken as common sense?

International Relations has invariably been imbued with the image of clashing actors. The billiard model is a typical example. The subject's position as an agent in international relations has been assumed to maximise its own interests, in accordance with the image of the rational economic man of contemporary economics. In international relations, this has meant maintaining sovereignty and maximising political power and influence over other nations and institutions. Even in liberalism, which preaches interdependence, the actor image has not changed significantly. There, the basic image of the subject remains the same, but the subject is defined with a preference for a more cooperative approach based on political and economic interdependence.

The common assumption of both realism and liberalism is an independent and autonomous image of the subject, where the individual subject is understood in isolation from the rest of existence. The common thread that runs through this is the subject with clear boundaries that forcefully distinguish the inside from the outside. In other words, it is the image of solid and autonomous subjectivity. Conversely, when this solid image of the subject is examined critically, a different image of the world may emerge. So what kind of subject is possible, different from the independent and autonomous image of the subject?

In her book, Fierke focuses on Quantum Theory, Buddhism, Daoism and Hinduism. The common denominator here is not the strong subject image assumed by previous theories of international relations but a new, flexible and unfixed subject image constructed through relationships. In other words, it is a non-self subjectivity with a weak sense of independence and autonomy, and with unclear contours, situated 'in between' various entities. Moreover, it is characterised by its ephemeral position and lack of permanence. In other words, the subject is temporal.

Here, we will focus on quantum theory and Buddhism, which are characterised by temporal relationality. The theory of international relations based on quantum theory can be traced back to Alexander Wendt's 'Social Theory as Cartesian Science: and Auto-Critique from a Quantum Perspective' (Wendt, 2006), but perhaps its most complete form appeared in Wendt's *Quantum Mind and Social Science* (Wendt, 2015).

Quantum theory investigates the micro-level of physics, which shows an astonishingly different constitution from the macro-level of it. While the macro-level of matter appears to us as pre-given, fixed 'things', existing prior to the encounter with us as investigating subjects, at the micro-level, quantum phenomena can be particles *and* waves. The superposition of particles and waves has a profound meaning in the sense that it is not possible to measure quantum phenomena without affecting them. This means when we do not try to measure them, they are in the form of waves, yet when we try to do so they appear as particles. This illuminates the problems of subject/object distinction on which not only physics but also contemporary knowledge, in general, is constructed. This is the moment called 'collapse of waves' in which the quantum loses its wave function and appears as a particle. Alexandre Wendt brings this idea to social science and argues 'our knowledge of ourselves - our identity or sense of Self - does not have determinate properties at any given moment, but becomes determinate only when we act into

the world (collapse)' (Wendt, 2006: 195). In this sense, the anarchy of the international is not a given or pre-existing fact. It is the researchers' and actors' actions of investigation that make international anarchy.

Wendt's point that at the quantum level, through the act of observation by the observer, the quantum loses its wave function and emerges as a particle is also of great importance in the social sciences. In fact, the people we focus on are not those who exist in pure reality, but named people positioned in a specific given context. They emerge as conceptual entities linked to specific social roles and positions, such as politicians, entrepreneurs, literary scholars, soldiers, perpetrators/victims of wartime sexual violence, refugees, and so on, rather than concrete existence as human beings. In other words, the collapse of the wave in social science occurs at this moment of conceptualisation. Here, the act of describing an event fixes people as soldiers, perpetrators/victims of wartime sexual violence or refugees. They lose the qualities of their multifaceted and fluid existence – a husband, good father, a good colleague at work, Asian, science degree holder, football fan, male – and appear before us only as soldiers, perpetrators/victims of wartime sexual violence or refugees (Fierke, 2022).

According to this conception, the subject and object in the world we depict are determined by various relationalities and do not exist independently of themselves. The most salient is, of course, ourselves. Researchers are deeply involved in the construction of this world. We are not looking at international relations from afar but are in fact intervening in and constructing them as objects through the act of our research.

This relationship-based worldview is not limited to quantum theory. A very similar worldview can also be found in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In fact, Carlo Rovelli, a well-known scholar of quantum theory, refers in his book *Helgoland* to Nagarjuna, the founder of Mahāyāna Buddhism, as having similar ideas to quantum theory (Rovelli, 2020). There, Nagarjuna explains that all existence is established through dependent origination (*Engi*). The dependent origination is a relationality that does not last, and in this sense, what we consider to be continuous existence means that there is a continuous emergence of the dependent origination. This continuous arising of relationality is not planned in advance but is understood to be happening contingently (Shimizu and Noro, 2023). Time in Buddhism is therefore centred on the present moment where the dependent origination is taking place. In the words of Nishida Kitaro of the Kyoto School, time is a continuity of discontinuities (Nishida, 1948).

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, there is no existence without relations. The world before the relation is described by the term 'emptiness'. This is the same as the world depicted by quantum theory, which is fundamentally empty and orderless. There is no reality or essence in this world according to Mahayana Buddhism. What exists are intermittent dependent originations and the resulting illusions. This empty view of the world would certainly make us feel uneasy. However, Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches us that accepting this 'emptiness' actually means freedom from anxiety. If the world is empty, then our worries and suffering are also empty. On the contrary, it is an illusion that this world is essential and substantial that makes us anxious. Power, wealth, civilisation, everything is impermanent, transient, and constantly changing. This is because the dependent origination always takes place contingently. Under the contingent *engi*, we cannot continuously have power, money or prosperity. If you are now in possession of these things, it would

be less unsettling for you to think that they are the result of chance caused by innumerable dependent originations. If you are not in possession of these, then they are also just the result of coincidence. This miracle/suffering is not eternal. This is the logic of emptiness. And when you realise this, your anxiety and suffering will be dispelled. In this sense, Mahāyāna Buddhism is a philosophy of liberation.

The idea that the world is empty and that the dependent origination gives rise to the whole range of existence, also tells us how current international relations are shaped: if, as Fierke says, the world is shaped by our linguistic acts like measurement in Quantum theory, then it is natural to assume that the dependent origination in Mahāyāna Buddhism is also brought about through linguistic acts (Fierke, 2022). If this is correct, then we cannot avoid paying attention to the function of language at the same time (Wittgenstein, 1958).

When we use language, we have to accept certain cultural and social structures. Ray Chow argues, in response to Spivak's question of whether Subalterns can speak, that speaking itself has already been structurally incorporated into a firm history of domination and oppression (Chow, 1993). There are gatekeeping practices going on for the dominant language. On the other hand, Derrida draws attention to the undecidability of language (symbols). Symbols are always open to a multitude of meaning possibilities, and the intended meaning of the author is always open to misunderstanding, misinterpretation and transformation (Derrida, 1977).

Decidability and undecidability, or rules and contingencies, these dichotomies appear to us as an unrefusable temptation, that is, the dichotomy must be settled. This overwhelming temptation, which resembles an obsession that one or the other must be right, rather than both are right, suspends us in midair. But Buddhism and quantum theory teach us the importance of 'resignation', or 'giving up' of the either/or thinking. Nagarjuna explains the importance of the middle way, or third way, without extreme dichotomies. Unlike Giddens's well-known Third Way (Giddens, 1999), what we have to recall here is the concept of superposition, in which the quantum is a wave *and* a particle before the intervention of humans. Unless there is an intervention by the observer, the quantum retains the superposition of the two properties. Schrödinger's cat is in a state of a superposition of life and death. This quantum revelation presents us with another third way of both/and rather than either/or.

The word for 'truth' in Mahāyāna Buddhism is 'resignation'. What we need now is to know the truth on the basis of 'resignation', to accept that the world cannot be understood as clearly as conventional science of either/or logic suggests. Nevertheless, we must seek how the world of impermanence works for the sake of a just world. It is here that the gate of ethics is opened to us.

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