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Buddhism & Phenomenology as Soteriological Projects (Abstract)

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The main goal of Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology is to comprehend the essence of consciousness. To understand it means to find the way to the ultimate stage of existence: *arhat* (*bodhisattva*, *tathāgata*), the enlightened one in Buddhism, the transcendental subject in phenomenology. This is not haphazardly that both doctrines put much stress on consciousness since it leads, and nothing else, to the liberation from the empirical world. The latter is only a point of departure, the world of illusory truths the ontology of which should be ablated by consciousness itself as it proceeds to its own higher level. In spite of conceptual, instrumental, and many other differences Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology share at least one philosophically important feature: for them epistemology is soteriology.

This actually means that to know the essence of something is to be free from it. Such a freedom, indeed an upgraded knowledge of *what is*, should finally whittle away the ontology of the world, of τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι (the essence/what-ness of a thing) of Aristotle or the Buddhist *tattva*, and inaugurate consciousness as the only valid agent of the knowing-process. In other words, the external world, its existence or non-existence matters little not because Buddhism, especially the Abhidharma philosophy (Asaṅga, Vasubandhu), or phenomenology is solipsistic in the Berkeleyan sense of the word but because the knowledge of this world *eo ipso* is irrelevant to the doctrines and their tasks. This is why the Buddhist theory of consciousness as well as the phenomenological one is designed not for a knowing or a Cartesian subject, based on the undisputable assumption of ontological knowledge (*ergo sum*), but for the subject who puts into doubt his own subjectivity.

“All the Nobles,” says the Abhidharma-kośa, “necessarily hold with the idea that all is *dharmas*, not the *ātman*” (1:39). If we specify in a word the distinct feature of the Buddhist epistemology, we can say that Buddhism actually denies not the subject as the agent of knowing-process but the *ātman* as the static state of knowledge. Like phenomenology, *the Buddhist revolution is first of all gnoseological*.

Putting subjectivity into doubt does not mean, indeed, the annihilation of the subject but the radical re-evaluation of his nature; the subject is not an instance whose final goal is to understand the world as such but, instead, to grasp his own knowing-process, knowledge as a flow, and understand how to redirect this flow towards the comprehension of the ultimate reality. Husserl's well-known slogan “to the things themselves” (*zu den Sachen selbst*) signifies something similar to the Buddhist idea of *dharma*: things are not as they appear to us empirically, in our living everyday space; they *are* only being seized phenomenologically, as the ideal instances of the knowing-process. Being seized this way, visualized within the mental world of the subject, like the Buddhist *dharmas*, things in phenomenology become the gnoseological elements – moments – of the constituting of the transcendental subject. To be sure, the latter is not an enlarged version of the empirical subject, but an essentially and conceptually different agent. The transcendental subject does

not perceive things as they show up *hic et nunc*, nor as something given once and forever, but only as (or through) the very moments of his own consciousness-process. From the purely phenomenological point of view, things are nothing else save the inwardly temporal constituents of consciousness.

Thus, if all is a flux (*santana*) of *dharmas*, it implies the unlimited consciousness, i.e. a potentially unlimited class of *dharmic* elements which excludes the existence of an individual substantial psycho, the 'I.'

Now, to the question what are these *dharmas*, the answer could be the following: this is an individual experience not just of a knowledge, but of an *immediately instantaneous knowledge*. To put it another way, within the *santana* or experience of *dharmas* time and thought are the same thing. Ideally, as in the case of *arhat*, there is no time separate from thought and *vice versa*, there is no knowledge hung on the object, no matter accessible to me now or not. Strictly speaking, knowledge is only the knowledge of my *dharmic* comprehension, i.e. of the time of *dharmas*. This is why, from the Buddhist – as well as from the phenomenological – point of view, there is no 'just-time,' existing separately from *santana* or the flow of conscious acts, and even if it exists, it does not concern at all the individual consciousness-process.

Time in Buddhist philosophy is dharmically valid; this is neither the time *during* which certain mental events occur (thoughts, memories, dreams, etc.), nor *where* these events reside, but the very way of immediately instantaneous knowledge.

In Buddhist (Abhidharma) philosophy the substantial ontological subject (the I) does not exist because there is no *time* for its existence, it *has no enough time to be*. Consciousness appropriates all the processes as a whole becoming the only footing (*āśraya*) of itself. In one place of his treatise Vasubandhu metaphorically speaks of consciousness as *ātman* whose predicate is the I in the ordinary life.

In his *Ideen I* (1913), where the phenomenological theory of consciousness reaches its apogee, Husserl introduces a soteriological element which pushes the whole body of transcendental idealism far beyond 'the standard epistemological model,' proposed by Kant, with its a priori distinction between the subject and object. Contrary to Kant, Husserl's task is not to define the limits of subjective knowledge but to overcome it. This first of all means that the subject should bridge over his own self and enter what Husserl calls "immanent transcendence" in which any distinction between the subject and object is inappropriate.

Soteriology here consists in creating by the subject his *own-other* consciousness; or, to use the Buddhist terms, the subject enters such flow of consciousness where he no longer perceives – cannot perceive – himself as *the* subject opposed to an object. He *becomes* what he perceives, what he thinks, and this becoming is limitless. Certain key paragraphs from the *Ideen I* would be enough to see how it works.

In the *Ideen I* (§§ 14, 49) Husserl shares the idea of Aristotle, namely that “μὲν γὰρ οὐσία ἐκάστου ἢ ἴδιος ἐκάστῳ” (*MET Z, XIII : 10*)¹. The essence and thingness (another translation of τόδε τι) differ in their epistemic function, however in Aristotle they remain in one inseparable combination ontologically determined. Husserl notices this trap. The consciousness of essence depends on what it manifests being incapable to comprehend and display its own true nature. It exists only within the ontological appearances bound to the given reality, fundamentally misleading in fact. This is what separates consciousness from the things themselves (*Sachen selbst*) or *cittamātra* in the Buddhist terms; the Aristotelian τὸ ὄν is thus overwhelmed with the presence of analytic descriptions. This is the crucial point where Husserl begins to outline his disagreement with the classical metaphysics and to correct the Aristotelian view by establishing the primacy of thought over the being. Like the Buddhist authors, especially of the Yogācāra school, Husserl deprives ontology of its status of the only institution of truth. If, for example, in Descartes the *ego* remains ontologically the unique source of all the substantiality, and all substances come from this *ego*, Husserl invalidates the generative force of the ego dramatically changing the perspective: instead of being directed towards the ὄν, the subject is placed strictly within its own mental acts in order to see nothing except the consciousness-process. This phenomenological turn marks consciousness as the only possible reality in which the metaphysical opposition between subject and object is, rigorously speaking, irrelevant.

There is nothing beyond consciousness-only which perceives itself and always proceeds to a higher level of its existence; in such process all the ontological truths reveal their illusory, non-substantial character, they become phenomenologically insignificant. Husserl often points out that phenomenology is by no means ontology (*ist überhaupt keine Ontologie*), not metaphysics but the radical science of the being in the absolute sense.

Again, the aim of the Buddhist ‘pure consciousness, consciousness-only’ – *vijñapti-mātratā*, or *cittamātra*; Chinese: *wéi shí zōng*, elaborated at most in the Yogācāra school of Buddhism, consists in bringing the individual to the state of *arhat*. This state means that the subject stops perceiving himself as such. Besides, the concept “self, himself” (*ātman*, Chinese: *zì wǒ*) can have only a ‘metadescriptive’ meaning. In other words, within the given theory of consciousness this concept plays no epistemological role. Hence we have an intriguing problem of relation between the language and the object of description in Buddhist philosophy. The same can be said about the empirical subject in phenomenology who in *a certain moment* of consciousness becomes epistemologically invalid within the consciousness gained by the ἐποχή.

One of the basic features of the Buddhist *arhat* (*bodhisattva, tathāgata*), also peculiar to the transcendental subject, is the apprehension of the

¹ The essence of a thing is what uniquely belongs to it.

detachment from the world and mastering the true knowledge (*paramārtha-dharma*) that, indeed, echoes the phenomenological “essential intuition” (*Wesenanschauung*). Like the Buddhist enlightened one, the transcendental subject is saved from the world (*samsāra*), and this salvation reveals itself in the super-knowledge of the I, of *ātman*. Namely, the idea of the I (in Pali: *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi*) or the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* – is a result of consciousness dependent from the world. In order to reach the true, ultimate knowledge, this dependence must cease to exist by means of the ἐποχή or through the apprehension of the illusory nature of Self.