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Metaphysics as praxis : Rereading Dōgen's Metaphysics through Deleuzian pragmatism and Pratīyasamutpāda

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CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: METAPHYSICS AS PRAXIS

6.1 What This Research Has Done

Reinterpreting Dōgen through Deleuze's pragmatist metaphysics allowed the current study to put forth the argument that Dōgen's metaphysical ideas concerning Buddha-nature, and temporality were not expressive of a 'true-way-reality-is,' but radically pragmatic in kind, intended to support spiritual practice. Metaphysics does not explain reality-as-it-is. Rather, it explains what a particular philosophy *considers to be* reality within and through its embeddedness to that very process of experiencing and articulating reality. When this Deleuzian view was accepted as a foundation for practical philosophy, metaphysics no longer had to 'prove' an asserting 'truth of reality'; rather, it became a practical tool to assist one's care-of-the-self in accordance to the spiritual and ethical framework set in accordance to what that philosophy chose as its preferred conditions of reality.

In other words, ontology and metaphysics are 'stories'³⁵⁴ we create to make sense out of reality. If such 'stories' condition the way we live, overcoming the sufferings born from such world- and self-conceptualizations first necessitates a change in these 'stories' themselves. One must then rewrite the 'story' through which we base our understanding of the world and self and then transform our way of living in accordance to such a new vision. Dōgen's Total-function or *pratītyasamutpāda* is one such 'story' pragmatically set to reconsider the way we live.³⁵⁵ Therefore, applied to Dōgen's Buddhist framework, to think metaphysically came to work as a spiritual praxis for us to re-conceive

³⁵⁴ By 'story' I do not imply a derogatory sense that they are 'fictitious,' rather, in agreement with David Loy I am implying how our narrative thought process is itself entangled with the creation of what we consider to be 'reality.' In this sense we can consider our 'story' creation and the reality we live are a heterogenesis. See: David Loy, *The World is Made of Stories*, (Boston: Wisdom, 2010).

³⁵⁵ As David Loy points out, such a pragmatist view on the role of Buddhism leads to a fundamental question concerning its practical function: Is Buddhism a spiritual practice that merely replaces normative worldviews with a "better-functioning" 'story' that helps one end suffering? Or, is the Buddhist 'story' suggesting that there is ultimately a way out of all story-creation? Both seem to be implied. Loy, *The World is Made of Stories*, 33-45.

how the world and we ourselves relate in ways beyond that which habituates us in suffering by applying *pratītyasamutpāda* to every aspect of our lives. So far, we have seen that such a radically pragmatist approach to metaphysics as praxis is not only applicable to, but helped emphasize, the absolute primacy Dōgen placed on spiritual practice as constitutive of Buddhism proper.

In this way, I was able to establish a reading of Dōgen’s concepts of Practice-confirmation, Total-exertion, Dharma-position, and Living-time as each functioning in a heterogenetic manner in relation to the central concept of Total-function that was Dōgen’s preferred worldview founded on *pratītyasamutpāda*. Rather than each concept understood as *dhātu-vāda* corresponding to a particular objective ontological and/or epistemological ‘truth,’ all concepts functioned within the confines of the transcendental conditions of Total-function/*pratītyasamutpāda* as each other’s mutual prerequisite and precondition. In this sense, Dōgen’s philosophy worked as an internally consistent system of practical philosophy founded on the ontological, epistemological and ethical criteria of *pratītyasamutpāda*. This allowed Dōgen’s philosophy to overcome what I considered the limitation in the Critical Buddhist and the “comparative” interpretations; a limitation, which I argued, was rooted in their implicit reliance on the correspondence theory of truth in understanding the role of metaphysics.

My particular reading of Dōgen and my ethical inclination to be faithful to *pratītyasamutpāda* in the study is not only conditioned by the ‘stories’ created by Buddhism and Deleuze, it is also a product of my personal needs, aspirations and values in life. My interpretation of Dōgen born from the amalgam of these contingencies is no longer explicitly ‘Dōgen,’ ‘Deleuze’ or ‘myself,’ but a philosophy of the ‘Erewhon’ open for others to tread, interpret, transform and take into the future. To this extent, I do not claim that my interpretation of Dōgen is the ‘truth’ of Dōgen. At the most, I have argued for a “better” or “effective” reading of Dōgen given that it is to function within the spiritual and ethical aims laid out by *pratītyasamutpāda*. Consequently, I view that my reading of Dōgen was at least faithful to and did particular “justice” to the absolute primacy Dōgen himself placed on spiritual practice. Though the final verdict lies in the readers themselves, I hope that this interpretation convincingly redeemed Dōgen from *dhātu-vāda* and restored the relevance of his metaphysics as a functional practical philosophy in line with *pratītyasamutpāda* and ethics. As

long as we do not close the doors by pinning Dōgen on some conclusive ‘truth’ of what his philosophy must be, I believe that Dōgen’s thought will continue to speak to us in ways significant for our problems today. Hence, I only hope that many more will attempt to radically reread Dōgen alongside *pratītyasamutpāda* in ways relevant for their own spiritual and existential quests, so that his philosophy continues to live as practically effective tools for us to live better lives.

However, before I conclude the study, there are two concrete suggestions concerning what it may further contribute to beyond the confines of Dōgen or Deleuze studies. First is a suggestion that the pragmatist approach to practical philosophy may be complementary to philological and historical approaches, and second is a suggestion for the possibility of further studies for the integrative approach between ‘Western’ pragmatism and Buddhism (vice-versa).

6.2 The Pragmatist Approach as Complementary to Cultural and Philological Approaches

While I have clarified how the current study is differentiated from purely philological approaches to Dōgen, and hence much of what I have presented may seem to lack philological relevance, I suggest that the current thesis may also be complementary to philological approaches. By this, I mean the method of reading Buddhist philosophy taking seriously an absolute centrality of practice and thereby, interpreting and evaluating doctrines based on *what they do* in practice rather than what they represent, may be useful as an additional position from which practice-based philosophies can be understood.

To understand the practical necessity, function and aims a particular philosophy involves necessitate the utility of our imagination and sympathy in attempting to place ourselves as close as possible within the internal contingency of the thinkers in question. This means to attempt to imagine and delve into the psychological, and emotional concerns/conditions (e.g. existential concerns, sufferings, and anxieties) as well as the ethical values, questions and aspirations the thinker possibly embraced in relation to what kind of practical aim his/her philosophy is concerned about. This also involves the necessity to consult philological and cultural studies of the philosophy in constructing an

idea as to what kind of external contingencies the philosopher dealt with. This means to understand the particular social, cultural and intellectual climate in which the thinker's internal conditions were related to. Second, we sincerely adopt the internal contingencies of the thinker as one with our own ethical concerns in life and society today, in order to figure how their philosophy functions as practice. In other words, one could say that such a method of understanding practical-philosophy is itself a form of spiritual-exercise.

Such an approach may complement rather than undermine philological and cultural approaches to studying practical philosophies such as that of the 'Eastern' traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, as well as those of ancient Greece and the 'Western' mystical traditions. If understanding a particular philosophy means to reproduce as 'accurately' as possible the particular internal and external contingencies which shaped that philosophy, and we take for granted the condition that 'perfectly' recovering the whole of such contingencies is impossible, then it maybe that we can never in reality, claim an assertable 'truth' of a particular philosopher. The best we can do is to attempt to come close as possible to the various contingencies which produced the philosophy in creating *what we think* is their intention and meaning, and to adapt this philosophy to *what use we want to make of it* from a multi-angular, multi-disciplinary approach. If so, a practice-centred pragmatist approach to philosophy can be of much significance in addition to the philological, historicist, and cultural approaches. While philological and cultural approaches to philosophy helps to clarify the external contingencies, such as the cultural and philosophical climate that influenced a particular thinker, a practice-based approach, by focusing on the questions of how a philosophy functions and for what practical purpose, helps approach the internal contingencies which motivated the creation of the philosophy. For this reason, it may help construct a fuller picture of the thinker and his/her philosophy. In addition, though the following aspect may not be directly fruitful for philological approaches, such a method of interpretation whereby we synchronize our own existential and ethical needs with the sufferings, existential concerns, anxieties and ethical aspirations of the thinkers in question will help adapt these philosophies as significant tools to approach our own ethical problems today.

6.3 Suggestions for Further Integrations of Buddhism and ‘Western’ Practical Philosophy

Perhaps a practice-based, pragmatist reading of Buddhist doctrine, such as the one I have utilized reading Dōgen, can be significant in a wider application in the field of Buddhist studies and comparative philosophy. Such a pragmatic approach may contribute to the following. First, to promote an alternative way of understanding Buddhism in general, where practice is absolutely central and its philosophical endeavors are all understood as pragmatically utilized for the sake of practice. Second, to ultimately present possibilities to further dissolve the separation between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ philosophy as a tool to reunite humanity for the sake of solving common ethical problems. This does not mean to reduce human multiplicity to a theoretical, universal value of ‘humanity,’ as we have done in the past, but to utilize philosophy as a tool to connect people upon the observation of the fundamental and common experiences of living. The coming together of a practice-based approach to philosophy on either side of the ‘East’ ‘West’ divide concerned about ethical and, psychosomatic self-betterment, as well as the solving of personal and social suffering may reunite humanity on the grounds of what all of humanity shares: that is our life, our condition of living as humans with common sufferings, and our aspiration to overcome these sufferings.

6.3.1 The Further Significance of Integrating ‘Western’ Pragmatism with Buddhism

As I had previously noted³⁵⁶ I believe a ‘pragmatist’ attitude to practical philosophy is inherent to Buddhism for example in the form of the doctrine of upāya. However, the fact that the doctrine of upāya is more of a practical attitude than a concrete doctrine elaborated in ontological or epistemological terms may have led to its obscurity from the view of ‘Western’ philosophy. This may have also contributed to the scarcity of scholarly interpretations of Buddhist doctrine that emphasize upāya. In this sense, I believe that the kind of integrative approach I have taken between

³⁵⁶ See chapter 1.

‘Western’ pragmatism and Buddhism may be beneficial for further studies. Deleuze’s pragmatist attitude in re-conceiving metaphysics was of particular significance since Deleuze created a detailed ontological and epistemological reasoning behind how metaphysics is to become practical. While pragmatism is not a stance limited to Deleuze, his philosophy was singular in the sense that he considered philosophy as a practical endeavor, did not deny metaphysics and had utilized pragmatism to transform how metaphysics can become practical. Such a philosophy was helpful in articulating what I considered Dōgen’s pragmatic utility of metaphysics for the sake of Buddhist practice, in a manner more familiar to ‘Western’ philosophical perspectives. In this way, reading Buddhist doctrines in connection with ‘Western’ pragmatism may further complement the inherent Buddhist tendency towards metaphysical inquiry and pragmatism by giving it an ontological and epistemological ‘voice’ that will help it to be communicated to ‘Western’ audiences. As I have demonstrated through the complementary nature between Deleuze and *prāṭīyasamutpāda*, there is a way to make such integrations without having to endanger the ethical foundations of Buddhism.

My use of ‘Western’ pragmatism was limited to Deleuze, yet I believe that it maybe equally insightful for further studies to read Buddhist philosophy by utilizing other ‘Western’ thinkers who are either pragmatists or are influenced by pragmatism like William James, Alfred North Whitehead, or Richard Rorty. Their philosophies may help shed a light on different aspects of how Buddhist philosophy functions from multiple angles. In addition, my use of Deleuzian pragmatism in reading Dōgen was limited to the topics of Buddha-nature, and temporality. It is possible for further studies to make a more extensive reading of Dōgen’s philosophy by applying a similar pragmatist perspective to every aspect of Dōgen’s thought.

6.3.2 The Further Significance of Buddhist Philosophy to ‘Western’ Practical Philosophy

Schroeder’s quote in the introduction of this study described Buddhism as practice-based and in contrast to his view that “Western philosophy traditionally favors theoretical reflection over

praxis.”³⁵⁷ This is a view whose one-sidedness becomes evident when we consider the re-emphasizing of the role of spiritual-practice from within the ‘Western’ tradition of philosophy exemplified by Deleuze, Foucault, Hadot and Shusterman.³⁵⁸ Upon the convergent concern for spiritual practice, perhaps the complementarities between Buddhism and ‘Western’ philosophy can run much deeper than is often considered.

As we had seen in Dōgen, practice is considered absolutely primary in Buddhism and all other philosophical concerns function as tools to enhance practice. In this sense Buddhist philosophy has no purely ‘theoretical’ concern intended to just ‘explain’ or ‘describe’ reality since all of its activity functions for the sake of fulfilling the ethical concern for cultivating altruism and ending suffering. Therefore, in Buddhism no duality exists between rational inquiry, spiritual practice and life itself. All aspects of our living are tools and occasions for us to become a more compassionate being.

While Deleuze’s philosophy does suggest a similar mode of philosophizing where ethics and practice becomes important, his philosophy stays short of emphasizing practice as foundational to every aspect of his philosophy to the extent observable in Buddhism. In addition, despite Deleuze’s ethical concern to counter ill conscience, his ethics does not involve a clear emphasis towards altruism; an ethical stance I believe is crucial in addressing the state of suffering in the world today. Nor does Deleuze put forth or have access to a set of concrete, clear, tried and tested forms of spiritual-exercises as in the case of the various Buddhist meditation techniques and the wealth of understanding of the human mind accumulated by the history of utilizing these techniques. In this sense there is still the danger that Deleuze studies overlook Deleuze’s concern for practice and end up in a purely ‘theoretical’ rut isolated from concerns for ethics, life or spiritual-practice.

As both Hadot and Foucault has shown, ancient Greek traditions of philosophy without a

³⁵⁷ John Schroeder, “Nagarjuna and the Doctrine of Skillful Means”, *Philosophy East and West* 50.4 (2000): 560.

³⁵⁸ Pierre Hadot revisions the practical significance of ‘Western’ philosophy through his study of ancient Hellenic thought (for reference to Hadot see chapter one). Richard Shusterman attempts to create a modern practical philosophy with its own therapeutic spiritual exercises founded on the tradition of ‘Western’ pragmatism. See: Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, (New York: Routledge, 1997). Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2008).

doubt also incorporated various concrete spiritual-exercises involving certain forms of meditation and thought training. However, these systems are no longer a living tradition and the accurate details as to how these techniques are to be practiced and what kind of physical effects and states of consciousness they produce cannot be fully understood from the lack of documentations that remain. Even if Hadot, Foucault, Deleuze and their followers wanted to reinstate or adapt forms of concrete spiritual practices as was exercised by the ancient Greeks into their philosophy, the option is limited.

For the above reasons, ‘Western’ philosophical attempts to re-emphasize spiritual practice may benefit from Buddhist insights in two ways. First, is to gain insight into the significance of making altruist ethics and spiritual practice absolutely primary. This involves the concern for how to pragmatically integrate all aspects of philosophizing and human activity into this central concern of living an ethical life. Second, to experiment with the many forms of meditation that has been historically tried and tested in Buddhism in order to: a) perhaps adopt and adapt these techniques into ‘Western’ systems of philosophy, or b) to try them and to see how they work in order to gain possible insights into understanding or reinterpreting what form the ancient Hellenic technologies-of-the-self took and how they may have functioned.

Granted, such integrative philosophies will become something ‘other’ than what is identifiable as purely ‘Buddhist’ or ‘Western’ philosophy. Rather, they may present the potential of a ‘Buddhism-to-come,’ a ‘philosophy-to-come’ that transforms traditions for the sake of pragmatically addressing the ethical problems we face today. While sincerely tracing the practical contingencies that necessitated the original philosophies, such integrative approaches based in pragmatism may take the form of philosophies freed from attachment to itself by understanding itself as ‘stories.’ I hope the current study may become inspirational for such future studies that make the best out of these ‘stories’ as practical tools to restore conviction in the world and ourselves, to overcome geo-political divides and ‘self-centredness’ to reunite humanity upon the common experience of ‘life’ for the sake of creating an alternative, more compassionate future than tradition allows.