

Launching out into the Aesthetic Depth

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If the body is taken as a companion in the search for wisdom, is it a hindrance or not? For example, do sight and hearing convey any real truth to men? Are not the very poets forever telling us that we neither hear nor see anything accurately? But if these senses of the body are not accurate or clear, the others will hardly be so, for they are less perfect than these, are they not?

Plato, *Phaedo*

The principle of the dual nature of things celestial and spiritual, and earthly and material is a powerful conceptual framework which leaves its seal on every branch of thought and experience. Ordinary ethnic, political, juridic, ethical and aesthetic vision are conditioned by it to such a degree that we find it hard to conceive of the lives of individuals and the processes of human history outside the grid which crucially houses the ideas of purity and impurity, right and wrong, the attractive and the repugnant, and so on. On the plane of common experience, the very alternation of night and day, birth and death seems to bear out and underpin the veracity of the dual framework.

Metaphysically, dualism distinguishes being and non-being, being and becoming, or again substance and process, selfhood, and selflessness, 'thingness' and nothingness. The philosophies of being, substance, selfhood, thingness are founded on the principal value of one, and those of non-being, becoming, process, selflessness, emptiness, on the principal value of zero.

Now, while we know that it is not the task of philosophy to solve the problems deriving from the concrete application of mental frameworks, it is certainly its task to recognize that they are mental frameworks, and that, precisely by virtue of their conceptual nature, they can be shaped and modified.

Few philosophical doctrines in Eurasia have dared to modify the framework based on the dialectical contraposition of opposites. One of these is the 'middle way' (in Sanskrit *madhyamapradipad*) advanced by the great Indian thinker Nagarjuna (ca. 150-250), and Buddhist thought as a whole has provided a powerful alternative to dualistic ossification. Conceptual frameworks based on the complementarity and interpenetration of opposites are no less at the basis of Taoist philosophy in China and of Shinto thought in Japan, each of whose roots are sunk deep in a holistic vision of the subtle forces interpenetrating things.

As we know, the Western approach to the philosophies of India and eastern Asia has gone through various phases, and it has taken a long time to recognize that the two most important contributions provided by the Asiatic philosophies are, on the one hand, the intrinsic connection between mind and nature, human intelligence and cosmic energy, and on the other, the fact that the vision of reality and the philosophical theories related to it, including the aesthetic theories, depend on the way in which the mental frameworks are structured.

In his *Oriental Enlightenment* J. J. Clarke traces the phases of the theoretical shock experienced in contemporary thought with the coming to the fore of process thought as opposed to substance thought a tradition which has been central in Western philosophy and which goes back to Aristotle. Charles Hartshorne, Clarke remarks, was one of the few scholars to have discovered in Buddhism a way of thinking about the physical and the mental world which anticipated in many ways the approach of process philosophy, and advocated the study of Buddhism as a corrective to endemic errors in Western philosophy deriving from its long-held views about substance"¹. N. P. Jacobson, a more recent exponent of process philosophy, claims that "Buddhism anticipated by over two thousand years the efforts of a whole series of philosophers in the West C Bergson, Dewey, Darwin, Fechner, James, Hartshorne, Whitehead, and Peirce to construe the world of events in their novel, emerging forms of togetherness"².

In the realm of theoretical aesthetics, the epistemic importance of Buddhist and Taoist frameworks has recently been highlighted by Kenneth K. Inada³, and more than a few Japanese thinkers⁴ are engaged today in this fecund line of research, which is albeit, unfamiliar still to the majority of Western aestheticians.

I should therefore like to contribute, in this article, to bridging this cultural gap by examining the way in which conceptual frameworks affect views on perception and on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience.

My analysis begins from a classic of substance thought: Plato's *Phaedo*. This is the Dialogue in which Socrates, in the last hours before his death, entrusted his disciples and friends keeping vigil with him in the prison of Athens with what is possibly the trickiest and most esoteric part of his philosophy. In fact, the doctrine of the immortal soul expounded in the *Phaedo* digs its argumentative way through the perilous, porous terrain of the natural aesthetic condition of human being. And the more determined that doctrine seems to shaken off that condition the more deliberately ensnared it becomes, and we ask ourselves: but is sensuousness (Greek *aisthesis*), which in the course of this Dialogue is appealed to no less than seventeen times, really the net which ensnares the soul in its bodily and earthly career, or does the relation between the senses and the soul, the sensuous and the intelligible spheres lead to an ambiguity, a principle of uncertainty nesting precisely where the two spheres enter each other's orbits, laying bare the appallingly neutral nature of becomingness?

The imminence of death accepted by Socrates with serene firmness gives his words a special charisma. The fact that in only a few hours Socrates the man will be a corpse, and that with him the philosopher will vanish too, compels his disciples dolefully to consider how subtle the dividing line is separating (but also the bridge joining) being alive from what is commonly identified as its opposite, being dead. The one state excludes the other and linear time does nothing other than mark the line between that which was and is no more and that which will be and is not yet. And it is this mental framework, on which Aristotle was to construct his logic, that now induces the disciples to formulate the question: "What *really* ceases when life is no more?"

This is no less crucial a question than that concerning the destiny of the soul once it has been liberated from the mortal body. And Socrates implicit reply (or Plato's through the mouth of Socrates) is that with the extinction of life the sensuous sphere is deactivated, the human being's capacity to perceive and feel, and thus the mixture of play and sorrow, which is irreconcilable with the intelligible and rational sphere. Indeed, nothing that happens in the world of the senses is exempt from continual change, and whoever entrusts himself to his senses cannot ignore that they are the least reliable and most deceptive part of his being.

The chance to show how true this is urgent, and Socrates does not let the occasion slip. The chain that has been tightly gripping his leg is loosened by a prison guard. Socrates massages his numb leg and remarks:

How strange a thing is what men call pleasure! How wonderful is its relation to pain, which seems to be the opposite of it! They will not come to a man together, but if he pursues the one and gains it, he is almost forced to take the other also, as if they were two distinct things united at one end (60, II) ⁵.

This could very easily be the observation of a Buddhist thinker: instability and ambiguity dominate the world of the senses, and impermanence is the only stable factor in this discontinuous continuity. Toshihiko Izutsu reminds us that "this is not only true of the external world in which we exist, but it is equally true of the world within us, the internal world of concepts and judgements. This is not hard to understand, because whatever judgements we make on whatever thing we choose to talk about in this chaotic world, our judgement is bound to be relative, one-sided, ambiguous, and unreliable, for the object of judgement is itself ontologically relative"⁶.

However, we know very well that the provisional and mixed character of sensations is Socrates' main premise for demonstrating that through the senses it is impossible to reach the real and substantial plain of Ideas. But, *nota bene*, this is only half true. That is to say: perceptions (Greek *aistheseis*) are not in themselves conducive to the supersensible world, yet nevertheless, by using our senses (Socrates says to Simmias) we recover the knowledge we had previously possessed (i.e. before we were born).

Here the dual nature of perceiving, which is of crucial importance for an aesthetic foundation of knowledge, springs to the fore. Insofar as it is mutable and promiscuous it does not in fact lead to the intelligible world, and yet to the degree that memory is activated through it, perception becomes the indispensable instrument for acceding to knowledge: "For we have found it possible to perceive a thing by sight, or hearing, or any other sense, and thence to form a notion of some other thing, like or unlike, which had been forgotten, but with which this thing was associated" (76, XX).

In classical Greek the linguistic uses of *aisthesis* and its cognate terms are remarkably extensive. An intelligent, quick-witted man is called *aisthanōmenos*, the verb *aisthanesthai* means not only to perceive with one's senses but to observe, recognize, understand, give attention to, and as for the

noun *aisthesis*, its range oscillates from physical perception to interior image and vision, as in passage III, LIX, where Socrates says that the inhabitants of the mythical 'real earth' see gods in visions (*aistheseis*). But finally the same dual meaning of 'sense' as we currently use it, puts us on the tracks of an archaic mental framework where semantic polarization has not yet ossified thought and language.

Let us now take leave of the *Phaedo*, cherishing its hidden riches. Inspecting the ambiguous nature of perception, a Hermes-like shuttler between the angelic and the earthly planes of reality, Plato caught a glimpse of a dimension of non-duality deeply concealed in the aesthetic shell, but his dual framework obstructed the way to it.

There are mountains hidden in the sky. There are mountains hidden in mountains. There are mountains hidden in hiddenness. This is a complete understanding.

Dogen, *Shobogenzo*, 'Sansuikyo'

In Buddhism - as Junijro Takakusu neatly explains "there is no actor apart from action, no percipient apart from perception; therefore no conscious object behind consciousness. Mind is simply a transitory state of consciousness of an object. There is no permanent conscious subject, for no fabric of a body remains the same for two consecutive moments as the modern physicists say. Buddhism contends that the same is true of the mind as well"⁷.

There is no doubt that propositions like this provoke no mean intellectual shock in someone who is accustomed to locating 'thinking' and 'feeling' in the grid of dualism. For a mind not trained in multi-leveled cognitive inspection in Buddhist schools 'I think' and 'I feel' are in inconfulalbe truth of fact, as is the squared relationship between an experiencing subject and an experienced object. And when the experience happens to be aesthetically charged, as in the case, illustrated by Dogen's lines, of somebody contemplating mountains hidden in the sky or painted on a scroll or evoked in a poem, in this case too the squared relationship between an experiencing subject and an experienced object is not called into question. All the same, Dogen, and those who have trained themselves in multi-leveled cognitive inspection, assert that the squared relationship consists in an *incomplete* understanding; and that the route of access to a complete understanding, relative and provisional though it still may be, passes through

self-inspection where the 'I think'/'I feel' axis is set aside, and one proceeds by other means. Like the gardener monks of the stone gardens who train themselves to look at their garden as if they were being looked at by it.

A similar discipline where bodily faculties fully partake in a launching out into the aesthetic depth of "what is", lies behind the aesthetic theories (Sanskrit *rasa margā*) developed in the Indian Classic tradition, the advaitic (i.e. non-dual) epistemology of Kashmir Saivism having being one of its pivots between the VIII and the XII century, in a period covering Nara and Heian eras in Japan.

In *The Advaita of Art* Harsha v, Deheja provides the essential know-how to move into the jungle of *rasa* theories based on the six main orthodox schools (*sad-darshana*), the Upanishads and the Vedas⁸. On one point Advaitic and Buddhist theorists agree, and it is on the selfless ground wherefrom springs the aesthetic shock (Pali *samvega*). *Samvega* - A. K. Coomaraswamy explains - is a state of agitation, fear awe, wonder or delight induced by some physically or mentally thrilling experience. When in the presence of a poignant work of art, we are struck by it, the blow has a *meaning* for us, and the realization of that meaning, is still a part of the shock. These two phases of the shock are, indeed, normally felt together as parts of an instant experience; but they can be logically distinguished, and since there is nothing peculiarly artistic in the mere sensibility that all men and animals share, it is with the latter aspect of the shock that we are chiefly concerned. In either phase, the external signs of the experience may be emotional, but while the signs may be alike, the conditions they express are unlike. In the first phase, there is really a 'disturbance', in the second there is the experience of a peace that cannot be described as an *emotion* (*italic is mine*), in the sense that fear and love or hate are emotions"⁹.

Once being made witness to his own emotions, the experiencing subject gets consequently detached from them. And this does not occur, and cannot occur in a trance or in a catalectic state, but only in the adamant lucidity of a full and fully-rounded awareness.

The soul described by Socrates in the *Phaedo* as being re-absorbed into the pure world of Ideas is rooted in the same selfless ground of Buddhist awareness. The only difference is the conceptual framework adopted respectively by the Greek and the Asian mind.

Notes and References

- (1) J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment, The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 118.
2. Ibid. See there also note 11.
3. In "A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics: A Prolegomenon," *Philosophy East and West* 47 (2) (1997), Prof. Inada traces a seminal way to comprehend 'the 'dynamics involved in becoming as the basis for an aesthetic theory.'
4. I'm particularly referring to Sasaki Ken-ichi, the renowned aesthetician of Tokyo University, and a specialist in French studies. His *Aesthetics on Non-Western Principles*, version 0.5 (Maastricht: Jaz van Eyck Akademie, 1997), marks a significant turn in his views re-oriented to the riches of Japanese aesthetic tradition.
5. Plato, *Phaedo*. This quotation and the following are from F. J. Church's version. Introduction by F. J. Anderson (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1951).
6. T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism, A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1983).
7. J. Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* Ed. By Wing-Tsit Chan and C. A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1947).
8. H. V. Deheja, *The Advaita of Art*, Foreword by K. Vatsyayan (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996). See also Pramoda Ranjan Ray, *Theory of Oriental Beauty* (With special reference to Rg. Veda) (Sambalpur: First All Orissa Sanskrit Conference, 1974).
9. A. K. Coomaraswamy, "*Samvega: Aesthetic Shock*," Selected papers: I. Ed. By R. Lipsey (Boston: Princeton University Press, 1977). P. 183 f.

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