



Gereon Kopf, *Beyond Personal Identity: Dōgen, Nishida, and a Phenomenology of No-Self*

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GEREON KOPF HAS specialized in the Japanese Buddhist philosophy of Dōgen (1200–1253), founder of Sōtō Zen, and Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), founder of the Kyoto school philosophy. Based on his profound knowledge of Western and Eastern philosophical traditions he has completed his first comprehensive monograph in the comparative study of philosophy. Its title *Beyond Personal Identity: Dōgen, Nishida, and a Phenomenology of No-Self* already indicates his intention of elucidating a new paradigm of personal identity based on a Buddhist notion of no-self. This quest presents the most urgent enterprise in a philosophical discourse since “Derek Parfit’s radical denial of the notion of personal identity and the subsistence of any personal essence over time,” and because of “the questions of ethical accountability, responsibility, property rights, and the delineation of human life” (3). Thus, Kopf’s comparative study centers on the question: “How is it possible to talk about persons, selves, and minds in the face of a theory of selflessness?” (4). And Kopf treats the philosophy of Dōgen and Nishida as “a phenomenology of no-self suggesting a conceptual strategy to respond to the questions of personal identity and theorizes a selfless self after the refutation of the notion of personal identity and after the loss of an enduring self” (xii).

To give a very simplified overview of Kopf’s comparative study, his strategy is

concerned with four different positions: 1) the “essentialist approach,” as developed by Leibniz, conceiving personal identity as a substantially conceived, unchanging unity; 2) the “reductionist approach,” as presented by Parfit, discarding the concept of individuality as a “convenient, but artificial superstructure”; 3) the “phenomenological approach,” represented by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, differentiating between the self-qua-subject and the self-qua-object; 4) the “Buddhist approach” of Dōgen and Nishida, offering a new paradigm to overcome both the essentialist paradigm of personal-identity-over-time and the reductionist paradigm of indeterminate selflessness. These four positions are concretely examined under the four subjects: 1) selfhood, which constructs personal-identity-for-the-self; 2) alterity, which raises the issue of personal-identity-for-the-other; 3) continuity of experience, and 4) time as a necessary factor for that continuity.

Thus, Kopf undertakes a great and fascinating journey of examining the philosophical concepts of personal identity, ranging from the Western philosophical traditions such as Leibniz, Hume, Kant and Hegel over Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as well as Sartre and Heidegger, up to Buddhist traditions, represented by Gotama, Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Fa-tsang, Dōgen and Nishida. Against this comprehensive work, a book review can trace only some aspects that are significant for achieving the final goal of Kopf’s comparative study.

To begin with, one may wonder about the usage of the term “a phenomenology of no-self” in the context of Buddhist traditions. Since the term “phenomenology” is used to signify a specific Western philosophical tradition, it sounds strange to apply this term to Buddhism. However, to introduce the phenomenological approach in a broader sense is decisively important for Kopf in order to open a new horizon of comparative study between Western phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy. Indeed, as Kopf suggests in full awareness of their different orientations, a Buddhist meditative practice can be interpreted “as a suspension of *doxa*, in the sense of Husserl’s phenomenological *epoché*” (220) to observe one’s mind in the state of being free from external stimuli and intellectually intentional activities. This specific kind of phenomenological reduction goes without any presupposition of an unchanging substantial nature of all beings and regards them as impermanent phenomena. In this respect, Buddhist phenomenology seems to be even more radical than any Western phenomenological philosophy. This is also the case, as Kopf stresses, regarding Dōgen’s meditation of “casing off body and mind,” when enlightenment cannot be attained by an intentional act but rather by a somatically aware activity of “thinking about not-thinking without-thinking” (220).

Further, as Kopf points out, one may find it controversial to identify Nishida’s philosophy with “a philosophical expression of Zen” or even with “a Zen philosophy” (xv). Though Nishida’s philosophical exploration is based on his experience of the practice of Rinzaï Zen meditation, Nishida strives for establishing a genuine philosophical system without any specific religious reference. In his general and comprehensive system of the world, many religious beliefs can be integrated and can even coexist in harmony with each other. It is, however, legitimate for Kopf to

treat the spiritual heritage of Nishida under the specific aspect of the non-substantial, non-dual concept of the self since it shows a striking resemblance not only to Dōgen but also to Husserl with regards to the “pre-reflective unity of the epistemic subject and object” (xvi).

Such critical issues as identifying Zen meditation with a phenomenological approach and Nishida’s philosophy with a Zen philosophy may give the reader the impression that Kopf undertakes a risky adventure. Nevertheless, this kind of risk is inherent in any comparative study of different intellectual traditions. Kopf has, therefore, only to clarify “the structural and conceptual similarities between Dōgen and Nishida as well as between Zen and phenomenology” (xx). On the other hand, because of its intellectually adventurous character, Kopf’s comparative study intends to be innovative by repositioning the subject matter on a new horizon, whose further implications may remain hidden insofar as they are discussed within their own traditional framework. By presenting a new context for traditional Buddhist discourse, the last chapter “Personhood as Presencing” is explicitly dedicated to the new philosophical reinterpretations of Dōgen’s concept of no-self as “presencing.”

In this respect it is also striking to see how Kopf is careful to use terminology specific to Dōgen and Nishida, such as “non-relative,” which stresses the original meaning of “absolute,” literally being devoid of opposition (70).

Kopf’s innovative philosophical challenge is basically concerned with the Buddhist fundamental notion of “no-self.” This was introduced in the history of Buddhism as one of the core teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni, presenting an antithetic concept of the self in the sense of a substantially understood and therefore unchanging, enduring essence of a person (xi). The concept of no-self, however, seems to contradict the concept of karma, which holds that one is responsible for one’s own actions and presupposes a certain continuity of self-identity designating the agent in question. Buddhists tried to solve this dilemma by, for example, explaining this in terms of emptiness or non-substantiality and the epistemological relativity of all dualistic notions, such as constancy and change or cause and effect, as developed by the Mādhyamika School, or in terms of a psychic energy flow in a multilayered structure of consciousness, as developed by the Yōgacāra School. Dōgen and Nishida developed their own dialectics, which are essentially based on the Kegon Buddhist concept of the “unhindered interfusion of particular with particular” presenting a dialectical structure of “all in all” (211). Additionally the Tendai Buddhist concept of the threefold truth provided them with three different ways of observing the same reality in terms of emptiness, being devoid of self-nature, momentary appearance, and ultimate reality, while “all three truths are dialectically and trialectically correlated and interwoven” (211).

In the Japanese Buddhist way of thinking, which is based on the Mahāyāna traditions mentioned above, no-self is conceived in a multilayered, dialectical structure. It is essentially empty in itself, that is, devoid of any substantial nature, and is therefore deeply embedded in an interdependent relationship with others and the world.

On the other hand, selflessness does not mean a total negation of the self-identical agent, but rather it stresses the importance of liberating oneself from emotional attachment to the solipsistic and ego-centered selfhood. The “selfless self” in these multifaceted senses is, then, open to the cosmic dimension of the enlightened dharma-world. As Kopf points out, against this background Dōgen frequently talks about the self instead of using the term no-self. Thus, the sentence expressing his central thought begins with the phrase: “To study the Buddha-way is to study the self” (57). The term “the self” is ambiguous and Kopf undertakes an analytical, hermeneutical exploration.

At this very point, Kopf may run into another risk when he investigates Dōgen’s thought in an epistemological and phenomenological orientation by omitting its soteriological implication. Dōgen says, “to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by myriad dharmas; to be actualized by myriad dharmas is to cast off body and mind of self and other.” It is not so evident, as Kopf suggests, that the self to be studied implies “the self-reflective nature inherent in self-awareness as the self studying itself in the sense that ‘I am aware of myself as I’” (58). This specific understanding relates also with the problem of translation in general. I wonder whether Kopf merely accepted the prevailing translation of the sentence in question. Anyway, instead of the intellectual “study” presupposing a subject-object dichotomy, I would suggest using the word “realize” in the twofold sense of understanding and actualizing at the same time: “To realize the Buddha-way is to realize the self.” This translation would actually correspond to the significance that Kopf himself intends to clarify. That is to say, the enlightened self or “the cosmic dimension of the self” (58) would become real at present by casting off its delusive, ego-centered self together with the mind-body and the self-other dichotomy. The samadhic awareness belongs to an authentic “religious experience of *satori*, in which the individual event qua microcosm reflects the macrocosm within itself” (241), while this enables Dōgen to “[identify] the self with ‘mountains, rivers, suns and stars’” (224). Indeed, “the realization of the interconnectedness is awakening” (261). Moreover, as such, this kind of experience must transform the whole awareness of one’s self-identity, realizing the cosmic dimension of the self that presents the clue to Buddhist soteriology.

Indeed, Kopf stresses this cosmic dimension of the self in part III, moving on to discourses on the four factors which are supposed to be constructive for personal identity. This last part is dedicated to the Buddhist concept of a multilayered structure of the world, according to which personal identity shows different features. Thus, Kopf introduces the dialectical relation of the self and the dharma-world as the fifth factor specific to a Buddhist philosophy of selfless self-realization or, as he seems to prefer, “Zen Conceptions of Identity.” As Kopf suggests, Nishida is concerned with the same reality of the selfless self in relation to the dharma-world as Dōgen. The self as a part exists not only in mutually determining relationships with others but is also embedded in the world while the whole manifests its universal character in its parts. Since both the parts and the whole are empty in themselves, they are

identical with each other while being different from each other. Thus, Nishida goes a step further, as demonstrated in his later philosophy, by re-describing the logic of “selfless self-identity” in terms of “self-identical self-determination of the dialectical universal” (cf. 238–40; 253).

This review cannot cover all the subjects and discourses that Kopf treats in detail by making use of philosophical terms of Western and Eastern traditions. It can only encourage readers to engage in a fascinating philosophical journey on a comparative study of personal identity. In the same way that a Zen master realized after his awakening that mountains are really mountains (212), Kopf’s message can be understood by saying that going beyond personal identity is returning to the personal identity.

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