heidegger and asian thought

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Heidegger mentionne la philosophie indienne et chinoise plusieurs fois dans ses écritures et il a montré l'affinité de sa propre pensée avec la tradition Taôiste et le Bouddhisme de Zen à ses visiteurs. La relation entre la pensée d'Heidegger et la philosophie des Upanisads et de Vedanta peut être dévoilée par une analyse attentive des aspects suivants: la structure littéraire et le style; la poésie, non seulement la prose des textes en question; la rhétorique, les éléments mythiques et magiques, les vers d'humilité et de prière au commencement et à la fin de plusieurs textes de Vedanta. Comme elles, la pensée d'Heidegger est une attente et une préparation pour l'arrivée du sacré, du divin, le Dieu, sans le masque métaphysique. Elle souligne que sans une connexion avec l'éternel, l'homme est devenu incapable de se connaître comme un mortel et la quête de l'immortalité est devenue dénuée de sens. Pour nous aujourd'hui, la pensée d'Heidegger a peu pour faire avec une synthèse culturelle ou la notion d'une culture planétaire ou d'une philosophie universelle. Sa pensée est post philosophique dans le sens que ce n'est plus métaphysique et n'opère plus avec les présuppositions implicitement communes à l'entière philosophie.

The connection between European and Asian philosophy has an impressive and extremely interesting history. For instance, it is well known that Plato and his predecessors had contacts with India, which encourages a comparison between Platonic philosophy and early Hindu ideas, as well as Buddhist thought.

Leibniz' encounter with Neo-Confucianist philosophy and the *I Ching* is the first example of major interest in Asian thought shown by a Western philosopher. Concern with Asian thought developed

gradually until the time of Hegel, who declared his own philosophy as the apex of Western metaphysics.

As more and more Asian texts became available in good translations, there was a greater degree of engagement with Eastern ideas on the part of European philosophers. Thus, Schopenhauer recognised a great depth to Asian philosophy and claimed that Western thought had a lot to learn from Eastern wisdom.

Furthermore, Nietzsche considered that the "re-evaluation of all values" should transcend the Western metaphysical tradition. His understanding of Indian philosophy seemed more profound than Schopenhauer's, as he pointed out possible parallels between his own ideas and certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy.

Within this tradition, *Brahman* has the same role which the term *Logos* plays in Greek and *Tao* in Chinese, corresponding to the Latin notions of *verbum*, *oratio* and *ratio* respectively.

There is a traditional tendency to look at comparative philosophy as an opportunity to present still unfamiliar elements of Eastern traditions in a contemporary manner and thus 'translate' them in Western terms. In this sense, Western metaphysics remains the universally valid paradigm and assimilates Eastern culture.

Heidegger does not follow this tradition, but places the cultural relation between West and East on a completely different basis. It is necessary to distinguish between Heidegger's remarks with regard to Eastern culture and Asian interpretations of his work.

Research on Heidegger's interest in Asian thought has not been particularly enthusiastic. That was mainly due to the fact that for a long time both Heidegger's later thought and Asian philosophy were regarded as marginal in relation to the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition. This added to a series of prejudices which promoted the treatise as the appropriate medium of philosophical writing at the cost of more literary forms, as the task of philosophy was believed to

consist in working with intellectual concepts rather than 'playing' with poetic images. From this point of view, in a philosophical work reason dominates, while imagination only plays a secondary, possibly even counterproductive role. In this context, most of Heidegger's later writings, as well as the Asian texts were not considered to be rigorous enough and were therefore discarded as 'doubtful'.

Heidegger repeatedly pointed out the affinity of his own thought with the Taoist tradition and Zen Buddhism to his visitors. Moreover, in *On the Way to Language*, he explicitly mentioned Lao-tse and the latter's work *Tao te king:* "There is probably something concealed in the word 'Way', *Tao*, the mystery of all profoundly told mysteries, so long as we allow this name to become unspoken again […]. The Way is everything" (Poggeler 2002:48). At the same time, a large number of researchers consider that "Heidegger tried to free himself of *representative* thought with the aim of engaging in *meditative* thought, of making the transition between an *analytical* and a direct, *intuitive* approach" (Ebd. 47). In his lecture of 1957, *The Principle of Identity*, Heidegger adds untranslatable concepts like the Greek *Logos* and the Chinese *Tao* to his discussion of the *Ereignis* (event).

What at first sight seems debatable can sometimes amount to challenging and interesting ideas and what is inconceivable sometimes affords a glance into what thinking is about. Both Heidegger's work and Vedanta philosophy illustrate this point, despite being separated by time and the context in which they were generated. Therefore, if we follow Nikolai Hartmann and other comparativists in believing that there are universal problems in philosophy, or we agree with Paul Deussen that "it is the same voice of truth that thinking spirits everywhere hear" (Poggeler 2002:15), exploring such ways of thought in their similarities and differences acquires unquestionable validity.

The relation between Heidegger's thought and the philosophy of the *Uppanishads* and of *Vedanta* can be uncovered by an attentive analysis of the following aspects: literary structure and style; the poetry, not just the prose of the texts in question; rhetoric and what

appear to be minor flourishes; mythical and magical elements (the role of the sacred syllable *Om*); the verses of humility and prayer at the beginning and end of most texts of *Vedanta*.

Thus, it is not merely a matter of form and convention when Guadapada finishes his *Karika* with a salute to the "state of non-multiplicity" (Ebd.17), or when Samkara starts and finishes his commentary "to Brahma who destroys any fear for those who are sheltered in it" (Ebd.), and when at the beginning of the *Upadesasahasri XVIII* he bows "to that eternal conscience, to the ego of the changes of the intellect, from which they stem and appear" (Ebd.), or when Sures bows to "Hari, the witness of the intellect, the scatterer of darkness" (Ebd.). Moreover, when the Vedanta is referred to as a "science which flows from Vishnu's sacred feet" (Ebd.18), this is not just a stylistic device. Neither is the idea, and historically the fact, that the wandering monk renounces the world (*samnyasin*), as he is the only one capable of pursuing the quest.

For *Vedanta*, thought is not an expression of that universal need so drily conveyed by Aristotle: all people naturally want to know (*eidenai*); that urgency which, according to Plato, when united with the pathos of amazement (*thaumazein)*, becomes the *arche* of the entire philosophy. It also cannot be identified with that *episteme theoretike* which, in Aristotle's words, looks for the first principles and causes of being, or with the quest described as "that which is searched for, whether old or new, and which is always missing", but with the being (Ebd.). In the tradition of the *Uppanishads* there is also a quest, with respect to which the intellectual quest is essential, but there is also finding, which does not merely consist in the waiting of the *pathos* or *thaumazein*.

The question of being, as posed by Heidegger, is marked by a radical questioning of everything preceding the current state, of the entire Greek-Christian tradition, which can be subsumed under the term "metaphysics". The historical context in which Heidegger poses the question of being is one which was described as "the darkening of the world, the desacralization, the devastation of the earth, the

turning of people into masses, the hatred and suspicion of any creature" (Heidegger 1999:73). The essence of this decline of the world is the absence of God, and the poverty of this time is explained by Heidegger as follows:

"With Christ's saving appearance and death, the sunset of the day belonging to the gods started for the historical understanding of Hölderlin. It is sunset hour. But when the 'three entwined and unique ones', Herakles, Dionysos and Christ, left the world, the evening of this world time was heading for the night. The night of the world is now shedding its darkness. The god has left us and the age of the world is under the sign of 'the absence of the god'. […] The absence of the god means that there is no god left to call people and things together to himself, distinctly and in perfect clarity, and, starting from this gathering together, to direct the history of the world and man's abiding in it. But this absence of the god heralds something much more serious. Not only have the gods and the god escaped from the world, but the brightness of divinity itself has disappeared from its history. The time of this night is the poor time, for it becomes poorer and poorer. And it has become so poor that it is incapable of recognising the absence of the god as an absence" (Heidegger 1995:243).

Similarly, in Asian thought we find a creative answer to a difficult time in the writings of Samkara. It is a massive, passionate and effective answer relative to the nihilism of its time, trying to avoid the extreme ways of conceiving Being in an objectivistic manner as an object of representation and of complete subjectivity: "This tree of the *samsara*, the circle of worldly existence, which grows from action and constitutes the domain of confusion and error, has to be uprooted. Only in its uprooting does the fulfilling of the aim of life reside" (Parks 2002:20).

Samkara was thinking from inside the limits of a specific culture and addressing people who shared a common tradition, who felt connected through common ways of experiencing life. By contrast, Heidegger's thought is a response, in perfect historical self-awareness,

to what he called 'world civilisation', and to the latter's counterpart, the process of 'Europeanising the earth' and its consequences.

Heidegger's thought, as he himself conceives of it, is an expectation and a preparation for the arrival of what was once regarded as a promise, but which hides behind a tough appearance: the sacred, the divine, God, without the metaphysical mask. Without a connection with the eternal, man has become unable to experience himself as a mortal, and the quest for immortality has become meaningless. That is because mortality, as conceived in the terms of the metaphysical conception of being and time, is only a simulacrum and an evasion of the possibility of that mysterious experience.

For us today, Heidegger's thought has little to do with a 'cultural synthesis' or the notion of a 'planetary culture' or 'universal philosophy'. His thought is post-philosophical in the sense that it is no longer 'metaphysical' and no longer operates with presuppositions implicitly common to the entire 'philosophy'.

Heidegger mentions Indian and Chinese philosophy several times in his writings, but only to underline that it is not a 'philosophy', a term which should be exclusively reserved for the form, method and concern of Greek thought. Heidegger does not feel the need to expose the achievements of non-Western thought as being assimilated or surpassed by his own thought. Essentially, Heidegger's line of inquiry is this: is there a different way of capturing things than that of the ancient Greek philosophers, a way which should still be refined through awareness of its implicit and unquestioned fundamentals?

According to Heidegger, the end of philosophy as metaphysical thought does not mean its end, but rather its consummation, the fact that it has acquired a special place in the history of philosophy.

Today, a relatively unified world civilisation is being born, which should ensure the survival of humanity. In this situation, a dialogue between the various existing traditions is imperative.

Heidegger implicitly initiated a dialogue between the West and the Far East and took over the motifs of the great traditions only to the point to which they were compatible with his own thinking. Heidegger provided a significant stimulus for such a dialogue; nevertheless, the task he set for himself was not fulfilled, but handed down to us as a starting point, as an opening.

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