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THE PLATONIC CONCEPTION AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE:
A GADAMERIAN INTERPRETATION OF DOGEN’S “MOUNTAINS AND WATERS AS SUTRAS”


KLJUČNE REČI: Dogen, sutre, Gadamer, Platonsko, hermeneutika, kompletno, istina, stvarnost.

Introduction

In this paper I want to inquire how certain aspects of Gadamerian hermeneutics work when applied to Dogen’s “Mountains and Waters as Sutras”. My main question will be: what does it mean to say that a certain text expresses a complete the truth? I will show that this assumption could be positively used with Dogen’s philosophy only if we understand the notions of the truth and language very differently from the way they were predominantly understood in Western tradition, and often in Eastern tradition as well. This will enable us to see how Gadamerian hermeneutics could be expanded so that it is applicable to an even wider range of possible texts.

Gadamer’s positive prejudice

Gadamer emphasized the inescapability of prejudices in interpreting any written work we encounter. “The overcoming of all prejudice/…/ will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only humanity but also historical consciousness (Gadamer, 1975: 277)”. However, not all prejudices could be helpful in interpreting a text. The chief task of hermeneutics is to determine which prejudices are helpful and which are not. But, since hermeneutics is itself a technique or an art (268), it is unreasonable to expect a method which will spell out once and for all those prejudices that are good and those that are bad in any interpretation. Additionally, such result would go against acknowledging our historicity and our inability to entirely separate ourselves from the influence of our epoch. “To be historically means that the knowledge can never be complete (301)”. A list which tells us once and for all which prejudices are reasonable and which are not is itself a kind of complete knowledge, and goes against the very principles of the hermeneutics.
Rather, the value of different prejudices should be determined through the encounter with a text, and there isn’t a determination that should ever be considered complete. This determination is a process, in which our unconscious historical prejudices emerge, get tested by a text, and possibly get set aside (295). However, there is one particular prejudice which Gadamer thought to be positive and that is the prejudice of completeness: “The prejudice of the completeness/…/ implies not only this formal element that a text should completely express its meaning – but also what it says should be the complete truth (294)”. In what follows, I will put this positive prejudice to the test, by using it in the interpretation of Dogen’s “Mountains and Waters as Sutras”.

**Dogen’s four moments**

In Dogen’s sutras there are four moments which appear difficult to interpret given the prejudice of completeness of the truth and our usual conception of language. The first one is that every single thing in the universe has Buddha-nature. “What has been called “the sutras” is the whole Universe in ten directions itself; There is no time or place that is not sutras (Dogen, The Buddhist Sutras: 3: 102)”. Everything is a sutra for the one who is skilled enough to see Buddha-nature in everything. This seems absurd given the fact that something so remote from Buddha, like a heap of sand does not contain any words or messages similar to Buddha’s. It is hard to see how this statement, understood conventionally, could be true.

The second moment is Dogen’s eagerness to ascribe certain predicates to those things, to which they can hardly ever be truthfully ascribed. The example that he repeats many times is that “mountains are walking”. As he says: “Yet the characteristics of mountains manifest their form and life-force. There is walking, there is flowing, there is a moment when mountain gives birth to a mountain child (Dogen, 2009: no. 6)”. To this he adds that there is a shallow and a deep way to understand what does it mean that mountains are walking. It is hard to understand how “Mountains are walking” could be a true statement in a conventional sense, because it would mean something like: a man has seen a walking mountain and we have good reasons to believe what he has seen, which is, for all we know, foolish to believe.

The third is that he emphasizes the relativity of the certain aspects of certain objects by evoking different perspectives of different creatures, in which those aspects appear differently. “Now when dragons and fish see water as a palace, it is just like human being seeing a palace. They do not think it flows. If an outsider tells them “What you see as a palace is running water,” the dragons and the fish will be astonished, just as we are astonished by the words “Mountains flow” (Ibid., no. 16)”. We usually think that, if we had the complete truth, we should be able to say what water actually is, and not just how it looks from different perspectives.

Finally, Dogen often uses paradoxes, and points to the limits of a certain conception of language. He says, for example: “An ancient Buddha said, “Mountains are mountains, waters are waters. These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains (Ibid., no. 16)” Also: “Set words and phrases are not words of liberation. There is something free from all of these understandings: “Green mountains are always walking,” and “Eastern mountains travel on water.” You should study this in detail (Ibid., no.6)” It is hard to see how these statements could be interpreted as true and as a part of the complete truth because it seems that they are self-contradicting.
The Platonic conception

Now, in interpreting these moments we are accustomed to use a certain conception of language, truth and reality. I shall call this the “Platonic conception”. The first characteristic of the Platonic conception is the duality between an observer and the thing that is being observed. For example, I am a different thing from a mountain that I am seeing as being still or possibly walking. The second characteristic is the interpretation of language primarily as a tool for expressing true statements about the reality. The value of language, spoken and written, comes from the fact that it can transmit a coherent set of propositions which inform us about some outer reality. The third is the conception of truth as correspondence with the objective reality. The statement P is true if and only if there is something in the objective world which makes statement P true (in the modern philosophical jargon – it has a truthmaker). Different philosophers had different conceptions of what the objective reality that makes statements true is. For Plato, truthmakers were Ideas, for Hume impressions, and for Russell and early Wittgenstein – the most recent among the great representatives of this view – they were facts or states of affairs.

According to this interpretation the statement “Mountains are walking” is true if and only if there is something in reality, independent of us, that makes it true, which would be, according to Russell – for example, the fact that mountains are walking. But, for all we know, there is no fact like this in reality. Nobody has ever seen a walking mountain. If Dogen wants to state that he has actually seen a walking mountain, surely he must be delusional or mad. And if, in the very unusual set of circumstances, the water is a palace from the perspective of a dragon, and the water from a perspective of a man, not both of these perspectives could be correct. There could be no such fact that could make both the statements “Water is a palace” and “Water is water” true, because they contradict each other, and that fact would be self-contradicting, which is impossible. And neither could the statement “Mountains are mountains, waters are waters, these words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains” be true, because there could be no such fact that makes “mountains are mountains” true and another fact that makes “mountains are not mountains” true in the same world. In the modern philosophical jargon, the world containing these two facts would not be a possible world, because it involves a contradiction. However, it is hard to believe that this was really what was Dogen trying to say. We cannot fruitfully use the hermeneutical prejudice that this text tells us truth understood in the Platonic way, because it tells us only falsity and contradiction if we understand it in that way. Therefore, I propose to interpret it as an example of the use of language against the very Platonic conception of language, against “set words and phrases”, which create the duality that is obstructing us in approaching the world. I understand Dogen as someone who tries to overcome the traditional ways of speaking, reading and teaching, and to discover a new, non-dualistic way of grasping reality.1

Bodily perception and the dynamic universe

One of the main features of the Platonic conception of language is the model of knowing based on visual perception. However, for Dogen, it is bodily experience that should be primary in understanding how our knowledge works. “The body comes forth from the study of the Way, and what originates from the investigation of the Way is likewise the body. The entire universe is precisely the very

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1 For similar interpretation, see (Loy, 1999: 252).
human body… (Dogen: 1975: “Shinjin-gakudo”)” If we have a human body as the primary model, the directedness towards the outer and the different of the visual perceptions loses its importance. There is no need for something that is outer and different, something to be perceived, known and left as it is. The way that bodily perception works is that what we perceive becomes a part of our body. Once the weight of a hammer, its shape and its hardness are felt, it becomes a tool that is a part of our body, an extension of our hand. To use Heideggerian terminology, a hammer and a body work as a unity, and only when the hammer gets broken, the dualistic distinction is drawn again. It is also a common theme in samurai swordsmanship, which was influenced by Dogen’s Zen Buddhism, that the body and the mind should be one, and also that a sword should become an extension of a hand. Thus, for Dogen, the bodily perception draws us closer to the reality, by removing the dualistic detachments. As Appelbaum says: “To muster the body-mind, to enter into the lived-body experience, is to cast off the perceived object together with their reliance on dualistic tendencies of eidetic language (Appelbaum, 1983: 119).”

If we adopt this model of perception, we can see how statements that all beings have Buddha nature, and that mountains are walking make any sense. Once the dualism of beings is cast-off, everything that we perceive becomes part of us, and we become part of it. There is everything in anything. If we are to perceive a mountain, we must become that mountain, and since we are walking, mountains will be walking as well. It is the bodily unity with a certain mountain that we attain when we perceive that mountain. This is the deep way to understand the walking mountains, that Dogen mentions, and the shallow one is Platonic, in which this statement is obviously false.

To this we must add Dogen’s dynamic metaphysics, similar to Heraclitus’, to expand our understanding of how everything can contain Buddha-nature. According to Dogen, one thing realizes itself in the multitude of other things. For example, water realizes itself as earth, fire, wind, mountains, and sutras and so on. There is no single essence of the water, like being colorless, tasteless liquid or being H2O, which is common to all of its manifestations. As Dogen says: “All things are ultimately liberated, it is nowhere they abide”. But he adds “You should know that even though all things are liberated and not tied to anything, they abide in their own-dharma position (Dogen, “Mountains and Waters as Sutras”: no. 13).” Therefore, although there isn’t any eternal essence of the water, there is something to be said about the water, and that is contained in all of its relations to other things. These relations are also casual relations, where one thing becomes from another. Each object, understood as a web of relations, is both the cause and the effect of all others. The consequence of this is that the “life” of one thing becomes the “life” of all others, so that the whole world reflects in every single object (Loy, 1999: 254). But there could be no true statement about some part of the reality or some object that is set once and for all, because there is no fixed eternal reality, no property of the universe that does not change, and that would make that statement true once and for all.

Thus, language should be understood as something that reflects the flux of the reality. Dogen’s conception of language and reality is similar to Heraclitus’, where activity, movement and flux describe everything. Therefore, the statements that is contradictory in the Platonic language: “These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains” expresses how the change is fundamental to the reality in Dogen’s language. Words can mean “mountains are mountains” at one moment, but because the fundamental reality of a mountain has changed in a meantime, mountains are no longer mountains.

2 Emphasis mine.
3 See Heidegger’s distinction between present-at-hand and ready-to-hand in Being and Time (1927).
Dogen also often emphasizes the different points of view about the reality to highlight his idea
that there is no aspect of the reality which is privileged over another by being constant and present in all
different worldviews. This is the reason why he talks about water being palace from the perspective of
a fish and water from the perspective of a man. The point is that there is nothing more to the essence of
water then it being a different thing in a different perspective. There is no essence which will make one
perspective right, and another wrong, as it is in the Platonic conception. That is why set words, which
freeze one perspective, one aspect of reality, can never be the whole story and cannot lead someone to the
liberation and the enlightenment.

Conclusion

If I am correct in my interpretation of Dogen, the common conception about Zen Buddhism, that it
uses language in a contradictory sense to point out that not all could be said in language, is not completely
correct in Dogen’s case. Rather, he uses language differently because he has different conceptions what
language and reality are. He uses it as a tool to erase limitations posed on us by the dualistic Platonic
worldview, and to get us closer to the primordial reality.

These points about truth and language should be kept in mind in reconsidering the prejudice of
completeness. Dogen’s very conception of the truth says that no text could contain all of the truth, because
reality is always in a flux. Therefore, in hermeneutical art of applying the prejudice of completeness to
Dogen’s “Mountains and Waters as Sutras” I have discovered that these sutras say about themselves that
they cannot contain all the truth. This is an important point, because it liberates language and hermeneutical
practice from the Platonic conception, and its duty to represent the world in the completely correct way.
I see this as an expansion of Gadamerian approach, which tells us that the prejudice that a text contains
truth could function as a positive prejudice only if we are open to learn a new way in which the truth can
be understood from a text that we are studying, and in Dogen’s case, it should be formulated in a way that
it is never the complete truth.

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Platonistička koncepcija i granice jezika: gadamerovska interpretacija Dogenovih
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(Apstrakt)


Ključne reči: Dogen, sutre, Gadamer, Platonsko, hermeneutika, kompletno, istina, stvarnost.