Izutsu’s Understanding of the I-Consciousness in Zen Buddhism: a Metaphysical Critique of Cartesian Cogito

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Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-93)

- Kawade Shobo Shinsha (河出書房新社) published in 2014: issue featuring him for the 100th anniversary of his birth
- One of the most brilliant Japanese philosophers in the 20th century, vis-à-vis ‘consciousness’ (also, Islamic Studies)

Our aim is to examine his ‘philosophisation’ (metaphysical theorisation) of Zen in his (1977) *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Science.
Zen ‘I-consciousness’

• The most fundamental philosophical assertion of Zen: at the outset a **functional relationship between the subject and the object**, the knower and the known … or the ego and the world. (p. 8)

• **The ‘no-mind’** (無心 Ch: wu hsin, Ja: mu shin): a psychological state in which the mind finds itself at the highest point of tension … **Zen** expression goes: the consciousness illumines itself in the full glare of its own light. In this state, the mind knows its object so perfectly that there is **no longer any consciousness left of the object; the mind is not even conscious of its knowing the object** (p. 15)

• **The Oriental ‘Nothingness’** (空 Ch: k’ung, Ja: kū, Sk: śūnyatā): not a purely negative ontological state of there being nothing. On the contrary, it is **a plenitude of Being** … so full that it can manifest itself as anything in the empirical dimension of our experience … **the true, absolute Ego** as **Zen** Buddhism understands it (p. 82)

**The Cartesian dualism:** standing on the fundamental dichotomy of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* ... an ontological system based on the dualistic tension between two ‘substances’ that are irreducible to one another. As a world-view, ... man (i.e. the ego or an independent personal ‘subject’) is here a detached onlooker confronting a world of external objects. (Izutsu 1977 p. 19)

**The Cartesian cogito (thinking):** from the viewpoint of *Zen*, far from being something that leads us directly to the awareness of the reality of human existence; on the contrary, *cogito* is considered the very source of all delusions about existence: *cogito* is a distraction that leads us away from an immediate grasp of reality as it really is (ibid. p. 148)

**The Cartesian opposition between subject and object:** from the standpoint of *Zen*, something to be demolished before man begins to see the reality of himself and of so-called external objects (ibid. p. 20)
Descartes’ 6-day Meditations

Meditations on First Philosophy together with Objections and Replies (first published 1641)

- **The traditional meditational mode providing an ontological ground:** validates the use of an analytic method in mathematical physics. (p. 8) The Sequence of Descartes’ Meditations clearly conforms to this traditional structure (i.e. below) (p. 11)
- **The six days of Creation:** Descartes’ embarrassing, presumptuous echo, in the six stages of the Meditations. The new creation is the new science of the world (p. 10)

Stage 1: Catharsis, detachment, or analysis: a movement from sensation to imagination and memory, to science and mathematics, to theology.

**Stage 2: Skepsis, despair, or nihilism.**

Stage 3: Reflection (peripeteia), a reflection that performs a revolutionary change.

**Stage 4: Recognition (anagnorisis) or the reflexive, corrective power of the will:** the discovery of the law of noncontradiction as a methodological principle validating reductio arguments.

Stage 5: Ascension from the psychological to the ontological order; proofs for the existence of God.

**Stage 6: Reconstruction of the world and the self.**

Possibly...Stage 7: Descartes’ Sabbath Day after the six-day Creation. Consequently, the firm existence of this meditator can differ from Zen practitioner’s Enlightenment (Absolute Reality).
Common Features

Between Izutsu’s Zen Philosophisation and Descartes’ Metaphysics

1. Distinction between the subject and the object, concerning dualism or dichotomy

2. Affinity between both methodologies: After the sceptical doubts, one’s own Enlightenment / illumination

3. Solution to ‘I-consciousness’ (theorisation from Zen Kōan (公案, Ch: Gongan) examples and Descartes’ argumentation as the meditation)
The **Metaphysico-Epistemological** Transformation of Reality (如來藏 tathâgata-garbha: the ‘Womb of the Absolute Reality’)

(‘Womb/Matrix of Buddhahood’ or ‘Buddha-nature’)

Epistemic Formula

\[ \text{s} \rightarrow \text{o} \]

\[ i \text{ see this} \]

the eternal **Verb SEE** without brackets \[ \rightarrow \] Enlightenment

\[ S \rightarrow = \]

\[ \text{NO MIND or MINDFULNESS:} \]

\[ \text{the Absolute Reality} \]

A Hidden Principle: (I SEE)

Zen consciousness constantly functioning through \( s \) (ego)

**Subjective sphere**

\( (S \rightarrow) \text{s} \)

(I SEE) myself

the empirical ego-consciousness (i)

**Objective sphere**

\( O \leftarrow S \)

(I SEE) this

a concrete actualisation (this)

The **Dynamic Field** in its entirety and wholeness

Ontological Realisation

The **Epistemic Formula**

\[ s \rightarrow o \]

\[ i \text{ see this} \]

1. beyond the dichotomy or dualism between subject and object or mind and body

2. beyond time and space as the Eternal Now and the Ubiquitous Here

**Koan Ex1:** Pai Chang’s Wild Duck

(all the objects within the subject)

百丈野鴨子 from Blue Cliff Record (Ja: Hekigan Roku) No. 53

**Koan Ex2:** Chao Chou’s Cypress Tree

(all the subjects within the object)

庭前柏樹子 from Gateless Gate (Ja: Mu Mon Kan) No. 37

N.B. Zen is not a ‘transcendental’ philosophy, however

Koan Ex1: Pai Chang’s Wild Duck (百丈野鴨子)
from the Blue Cliff Record (碧巖錄 Ja: Hekigan Roku) No. 53

Pai Chang was Master Ma Tsu’s attendant. Once he was accompanying the Master on the road, they saw a flock of wild ducks flying by. Master Ma Tsu asked, "What is that?"
Chang said, "Wild ducks."
The Master said, "Where have they gone?"
Chang said, "They've flown away."
The Master then grabbed and twisted the nose of Pai Chang.
Chang cried out in pain.
The Master said, "Where have they ever flown away?"
A monk asked Chao Chou, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma (the First Patriarch)’s coming from the West (from India to China)?” (asking the ultimate purpose of Zen Buddhism in China)

Chou said, "The cypress tree in the courtyard.”
A monk asked Chao Chou, "What is the real self (who practises Zen)?"
Chao Chou said, “Have you yet to see the cypress tree in the courtyard?”
One day a monk asked Chao Chou, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?"

Chao Chou said, “The cypress tree in the courtyard.”

The monk said, “Master, don’t use objects (outside phenomena that you perceive) to teach people with.”

Chao Chou said, “I have never used objects to teach people.”

Observe how he can convert the ultimate tenet, which is impossible to convert. Naturally (the tenet) covers the heaven and the earth.
The **Metaphysico-Epistemological** Transformation of Reality
(如來藏 tathāgata-garbha: the ‘Womb of the Absolute Reality’
(‘Womb/Matrix of Buddhahood’ or ‘Buddha-nature’)

The eternal **Verb SEE** without brackets ……> Enlightenment

the Subject I embodies I (= I SEE THIS)
Koan Ex1: Pai Chang’s Wild Duck
(all the objects within the subject)

the Object THIS embodies (I SEE THIS =) THIS
Koan Ex2: Chao Chou’s Cypress Tree
(all the subjects within the object)

Enlightenment (Nirvana)

The Dynamic Field
in its entirety and wholeness

Ontological Realisation
on the basis of myself (自内証)

introspection (pratyātma-vedya)

Subjective sphere
(I SEE) myself
the empirical ego-consciousness (i)

Objective sphere
S (←S)

The Absolute Reality

ZEN

an actualisation (this)

a concrete actualisation (this)

1. beyond the dichotomy or dualism between subject and object or mind and body
2. beyond time and space as the Eternal Now and the Ubiquitous Here

The **Metaphysico-Epistemological** Transformation of Reality
(如來藏 tathâgata-garbha: the ‘Womb of the Absolute Reality’)
(‘Womb/Matrix of Buddhahood’ or ‘Buddha-nature’)

**Epistemic Formula**

\[
S \rightarrow \text{i see this}
\]

A Hidden Principle: (I SEE)

Zen consciousness constantly functioning through s (ego)

**Izutsu’s formulation**

From a sole subjective sphere on the basis of myself
(introspection; pratyātma-vedya; 自内証)

**Solution to a logical fallacy from the transformation of This Reality**

- Perceiving clear & distinct ideas
  - Cartesian Circular Reasoning (in his *Meditations*)
  - The existence of a non-deceiving God

- The circularity: first pointed out by Arnauld in the *Objections* (1984 CSMII p. 150)

- A Hidden Principle: (I SEE)
  - the eternal Verb SEE without brackets
  - = NO MIND or MINDFULNESS:
    - Enlightenment
    - the Absolute Reality
    - The Dynamic Field
      - in its entirety and wholeness

- 1. beyond the dichotomy or dualism between subject and object or mind and body
- 2. beyond time and space as the Eternal Now and the Ubiquitous Here
- 3. beyond any logical fallacies

- The existence of a non-deceiving God

Given a justified way of each methodology:

Zen Koan & Descartes’ Meditation

• Zen Koan (Chan Gongan/Seon Kongan) is akin to a Socratic dialogue: a dialogue between the historical master and disciple is given as a meditational prop from the master to the disciple. Self-Realisation/Enlightenment as the ‘vicarious experience’ (Ruggeri 2006 p. 187)

• Descartes’ meditation is a guided reading: the author’s thoughts are listed in a monologue fashion, but at the same time the reader is guided through different steps of the reasoning (as if the reader were logically meditating with her cogito).

• Both methodologies imply a degree of dialectic on the part of the meditator/reader

HOWEVER

• Whilst Koan aims to trigger Enlightenment through a paradoxical intuition and the ultimate elimination of discursive thinking (Izutsu 1977 pp. 151-55), Descartes’ meditation aims to build an analytic reasoning/demonstration for the metaphysical conclusions (Discourse on the Method Pt. II 1985 pp. 116-22).

They are both meditations, but very different ones!
Where is ‘I-consciousness’ off to?


• The Zen Master simply advises us to return: … we must return to where we are. We must regain our grasp of the present moment as it is being experienced. (pp. 56-7) [T]he enlightened person appears “extraordinarily ordinary.” (p. 134)

• [T]he state of no-mind is supposed to be **outside the bifurcation into subject and object**. To the Western philosopher who thinks of the subject/object distinction as a priori, the Zen characterization is either suspect or, at best, metaphorical. (p. 57)

• [For] Zen Buddhism … **reality is what is now happening**—it is **not outside our experience** … this has the implication that reality is protean, always changing its shape as soon as we come into contact with it and try to pin it down. (p. 61)

**Zen ‘I-consciousness’:** towards No Mind apprehending herself in This Reality Now without any bifurcation/duality (Enlightened with the light of introspection)

**Cartesian ‘I-consciousness’:** towards the undoubted existence of herself in this reality after the bifurcating proofs (well illuminated with the light of certainty)
Zen Philosophisation Revised

From Izutsu’s Interpretation, Compared with Descartes’ Metaphysics

1. Reflection on the self: focus on the relationship between subject and object (from the subjective perspective here-and-now but not retrospectively / from the retrospective perspective across time)

2. Foundation of the self (disapproving / approving the existence of the self metaphysically)

3. One’s own Enlightenment / illumination out of the success of 1 & 2 above