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Theses on the Relational Self and the Genesis of the Western Ego

1.

From the time I first began to read *Fritz Buri's* *Theologie der Existenz* and *Dogmatik als Selbstverständnis des christlichen Glaubens* I sensed that his insight into the nature of faith would become a paradigm for my own theological thinking. In the summer of 1963, we first sat together on his terrace overlooking the Rhine and thus began one of the deepest professional associations and warmest relationships of my life. Some time later, when my interest in physical cosmology and philosophy of science developed into a quasi-professional obsession, I found myself looking toward the sciences, and especially physics, for models of reality that might serve as a more exact basis for theological construction. The result of that venture is in some measure shared in this brief essay proudly dedicated to Buri who may fail to see as clearly as I the lines of connection with his programmatic insights which served as the matrix in which I began this independent quest. It seems appropriate on this occasion to begin not with my thought, but with his, as a way of indicating the historical matrix from which I began and the comparative context for deciding the question of the continuity between his thought and mine.

Of all Buri's deeply insightful works, my favorite is his *Denkender Glaube*, which I assisted in bringing to the attention of the English-speaking world. Choosing for his title a phrase Jaspers had coined earlier,¹ Buri approaches the question of *reality* through a rigorous interrogation of "*thinking*" (*Denken*). Out of all the possible operational questions with which theology can be inaugurated Buri chooses "What is thinking?" and only out of an answer to that question is he able to identify and "locate" the prime realities of the self and Being. For Buri all thinking presupposes the subject-object schema of consciousness (contra Heidegger and Ott), and yet reaches certain limits, namely, what cannot be thought. At these limits there is, in Buri's terms, a "Revelation of the Naught", for there is "disclosed" to thinking a relative and an absolute boundary. Guided by his existentialist commitments, Buri argues that the subject, the thinking I, can never be objectified. Following his Kantian commitments, he claims further that Being (= "the totality of Being", "the totality of the object-world") represents an absolute boundary, for it is in no sense objectifiable. On the one hand, anthropology which objectifies personhood has limited access to the real nature of personhood, which Buri feels can only be rendered in the language of myth, namely, that we stand before the ultimate mystery that in the infinite expanse of Being a voice resounds summoning us to responsibility in community. On the other hand, cosmology and ontology represent objectifications of what is ultimately non-objectifiable, and hence do not re-

¹ "Der Offenbarungsglaube . . . war ein denkender Glaube": K. Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* (1962), p. 36.

spect the mystery of non-being. To speak of Being in view of non-being requires the language of myth. Being in view of non-being is Grace. With respect to the limits of thinking consciousness the reality of God is an “impossible possibility”; but what for thought is mere possibility becomes in faith reality.

2.

In the *theses* that follow shortly I approach the question of *reality* not through thinking, but through *experience* as this term has been enriched by the American philosophers James and Peirce, and the Japanese thinker Nishida Kitaro. Buri's failure to discuss the wider context of experience per se, of which thinking is but a part, separates his schema from my own. For him, in my opinion, experience is too easily identified with thinking, however much he may protest. Even so, it will come as no surprise to Buri when I shall argue finally that our intentions and the pragmatic sense of our separate systems are similar. By approaching the question of reality through my questions rather than his, however, I hope to effect a formulation that is more open to diverse cultural representations of selfhood and reality. That, however, is something each reader must judge after considering the merits of the theses that now follow.

I. Theses on pure Experience.

1. The most economical ontological assumption is that experience is all there is. This assumption invalidates metaphysical attempts to locate ultimate reality in a trans-experiential domain.
2. The most economical assumption about experience is that fundamental components of experience are accessible only in Pure Experience. All too often, philosophers and theologians have sought the fundamentals solely through an analysis of reflected experience.
3. Pure Experience is characterized by Immediacy.
 - a. Immediacy is experiencing; it is pure activity.
 - b. In Immediacy there is no subject over against an object, hence no Ego.
 - c. In Immediacy there is no “prior” or “posterior”. There is no “experiencer” prior to “experiencing”. There is no “experienced” (thing) posterior to “experiencing”.
 - d. In Immediacy there are no “intervals”: there is no “passing from A to B”. Everything is, all at once.
 - 1) There is no “spatial separation” between Knower and Known.
 - 2) There is no “temporal separation” between Intention and Act.

II. Theses on the genesis of the Western Ego derived from the theses of pure experience.

1. The Western Ego emerged partially through attempts to locate the fundamentals of experience by analyzing reflected experience.

2. Reflection introduces “intervals” which signal the loss of Immediacy.
 - a. Methodic, i.e. Cartesian, doubt introduces a “spatial interval” between Knower and Known.
 - 1) Immediacy is lost because subject and object are separated: the object is “mediated” to the subject. The Ego emerges.
 - 2) Methodic doubt is the principal source for the Cognitional Ego, i.e. the thinking subject. This is Descartes’ *res cogitans*.
 - b. The temporalization of the will creates a “temporal interval” between Intention and Act.
 - 1) The temporal features of Immediacy suddenly become paradigmatic, with the result that the experience of succession becomes a succession of experiences.²
 - 2) The temporalized will is the principal source for the Moral Ego, i.e. the introspective subject. The Moral Ego is the “subject” of moral reflection.

III. Theses on a metaphysics of relations.

1. The most economical assumption about Pure Experience is that its fundamental (i.e. irreducible) components are relations. These are the *res verae*, the only concrete entities. Pure Experience = Immediacy = Activity.
 - a. There are no exceptions to the assumption that relations are fundamental.
 - 1) All relations are fundamental.
 - 2) Only relations are fundamental.
 - b. To account for all the features of experience it is necessary to distinguish between simple relations, composites of relations and the Totality of relations.
 - 1) Simple relations, as the irreducibles of experience, provide the ontological key to reality.
 - 2) Composites of (some) relations account for the discreteness of the units of experience and, hence, for “the middle range of the empirical”.
 - 3) The Totality of relations is a speculative paradigm for the Absolute.
2. It follows that *relata* are abstractions. To ascribe fundamentality (i.e. concreteness) to abstractions is to be guilty of “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (Whitehead).
 - a. All *relata* must be viewed as derivatives from fundamentals.
 - b. Derivatives of relations are co-derivatives: the operation that produces the notion of subject is complementary to the operation that produces the notion of object. Subjects and objects are thus co-derivatives of relations,

² The notion that “an experience of succession is not a succession of experiences” derives from Borden Parker Bowne. My source is P. Bertocci, *The Person God Is*. The Muirhead Library of Philosophy (1970), p. 52.

- hence abstractions. This notion of co-derivation is modelled on Laszlo's theory of bi-perspectivism.³
- 1) The ingressive consideration of a relation produces the notion of subject.
 - 2) The effective consideration of a relation produces the notion of object.
- c. Derivatives of simple relations I call simple co-derivatives.
- d. Derivatives of composites of (some) relations I call compound co-derivatives.
- 1) The sense of subjectivity is to be explained as an ingressive compound co-derivative. This is the origin of the notion of subjective consciousness. The co-derivation of the sense of self is the basis for speaking of the relational self.
 - 2) The sense of the "other" person or thing is to be explained as an effective compound co-derivative:
 - a) The notion of other "person" emerges when the effective derivation involves a relation of full mutuality;
 - b) The notion of other "thing" emerges when the effective derivation involves a relation of restricted mutuality.
- e. Derivatives of the Totality of relations I call omni-co-derivatives:
- 1) The omni-co-derivative God (= God-Language) emerges from the ingressive consideration of the Totality of relations. This is the basis for speaking of God as person.
 - 2) The omni-co-derivative World (= World-Language) emerges from the effective co-consideration of the Totality of relations.
 - 3) Therefore, theology and cosmology represent complementary (i.e. bi-perspectival) aspects of the same domain.
3. Relations are not "located" in space and time.
- a. Space and time are not fundamentals.
 - b. The notions of physical space and time emerge from reflection on Pure Experience.
 - c. Physical space and time represent merely the language or logic of measurement.
 - d. Pure Activity is always a Now-moment.
4. The "self" of relational metaphysics is the relational self.
- a. As a derivative of composites of relations the self is merely a function of Pure Activity.
 - b. As a co-derivative, the self is defined through the relation that co-defines the "other".
 - c. It is a good approximation to say, with Peter Bertocci, that "the self is what it is doing". In relational metaphysics only a functional definition of selfhood is permitted.

³ E. Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy. Toward a New Paradigm of Contemporary Thought* (1972), p. 152.

- d. It is not appropriate to speak of a permanently abiding self, since the relational self is not “located” in space and time. The “continuity” of selfhood is therefore not a “passage through time” but a sense of memory.
- e. Memory, the sense of the past, is merely the structure of Immediacy.
- f. For the relational self, the self of Pure Experience, there is only the Now-moment.

IV. Theses on the genesis of the Western Ego derived from the metaphysics of relation.

- 1. A pseudo-fundamental is a co-derivative that has been accorded fundamentality, i.e. an abstraction that has been treated as concrete.
- 2. Principal pseudo-fundamentals of Western culture include selves (i.e. subjects), other selves, objects (e.g. physical things), God and World.
- 3. The subject-object paradigm of Western thought that has dominated Western metaphysics by providing it with the alternatives of Idealism and Realism, derives from the erroneous operation of treating relata as fundamentals.
- 4. In the subject-object paradigm of reality relations are treated as contingent, i.e. non-fundamental.
- 5. The Western Ego is traditionally regarded as “located” in space and time.
- 6. The Western Ego is an asocial, arelational pseudo-entity which results from according concreteness to an abstraction. Many, if not most, of its psychic ills are due to this fact of its origin.

V. Theses on the relational Self.

- 1. The relational self is the self of Pure Experience.
 - a. In Pure Experience there is no differentiation between the self and what it experiences; i.e. in Pure Experience the self is nothing more than an aspect of a unity.
 - 1) Pure Activity is not the product of a “subject”. There is only unitive activity from which the notion of “subject” may be derived.
 - 2) An “experience” is not the product of an “experiencer”; rather, the “experiencer” is a derivative (i.e. an abstraction) of the “experience” (\cong Whitehead’s notion of “superject”).
 - b. In Pure Experience “there is not the slightest interval between the demands and the realization of the will”.⁴
 - 1) The “good” is not sought and then found; the “good” must be present from the beginning (Eckhart).
 - 2) Time is not a fundamental of Pure Experience. The temporalization of the will which produces the “Moral” (i.e. achieving and failing) Ego is based on an inordinate ascription of fundamentality to time.

⁴ Nishida Kitaro, *A Study of Good*. Transl. by V. H. Viglielmo (1960), p. 6.

2. The relational self is the "I" of "I-Thou".
 - a. In the words of Feuerbach who proposed the "I-Thou" paradigm of experience, "The 'I' is merely a linguistic ellipse, that, merely for brevity's sake, leaves out half of what is understood by itself".⁵
 - b. In the thought of Buber who enriched the notion by his deeply perceptive insight into reality, the "I-Thou" signals a unifying "Between" (das Zwischen) of which the I and Thou are but aspects, or as I call them, derivatives.
 - c. Feuerbach's and Buber's "I-Thou" is equivalent to the relational self advanced in the relational metaphysics outlined above. The "I" of "I-Thou" is no subject and the "Thou" is no object.
 - d. When the unitive "I-Thou" experience is analyzed, i.e. reflected upon, its Immediacy is lost. An "I" emerges, but it is no longer the I of "I-Thou". The I emergent upon reflection is the "I" of "I-It".
 - e. The "I-Thou" relation is not a function of the subjective "I", nor is the "Thou" a function of the personal "other". Rather, they are co-ordinately functions of the "Between". They are, in a relational idiom, co-derivatives.
 - f. The hyphen between "I" and "Thou" does not mark an interval; it is neither conjunctive nor disjunctive. In the "I-Thou" experience there is neither spatial nor temporal separation. In Buber's words: "only the It-World lies in time and space". The "I-Thou" relation is Eternal.
3. The relational self is the self of Christian self-denial.
 - a. The most paradigmatic of Christian ideals is self-denial.
 - 1) The Christian teaching of the God-Man reached its apex in kenotic Christology.
 - 2) The Christian ideal of self-denial is rooted in the self-denial (i.e. kenosis) of the Christ. Self-denial is the true imitatio Christi.
 - 3) Christian self-denial is an "emptying" (i.e. kenosis) that is "fulness".
 - 4) The emptying that is fulness is the paradox of grace:

"Even if a man does humble himself he cannot do it sufficiently, so God has to do it and then the man is exalted. Not that humiliation is one thing and exaltation another, but the highest heights of exaltation lie precisely in the lowest depths of humiliation . . . for depth and height are the same thing" (Eckhart).⁶
 - b. The most complex of Christian ideals is self-denial.
 - 1) The temporalization of the will in the West (i.e. the separation of intention from act) created the conditions for the paradox of self-denial.
 - 2) Both achievement and failure in moral action intensify the Moral Ego. Both produce introspection.

⁵ L. Feuerbach, *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus, besonders in Beziehung auf die Willensfreiheit: Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by W. Schuffenhauer, 2. Kleinere Schriften, IV, 1851-1866 (1972), p. 8.

⁶ R. B. Blakney (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. A Modern Translation* (1941), p. 37.

- a) The more the Moral Ego strives to achieve self-denial, the farther it moves from its goal.
- b) Failure in moral action defined as self-denial is, per definitionem, an act of the self-bound Moral Ego.
- c. The affirmation of the relational character of the self is an affirmation of the ideal of self-denial.
 - 1) In true self-denial there is not the slightest interval between the intention and the act.
 - 2) Where there is no “interval” there is Pure Experience.
 - 3) In Pure Experience of moral import there is no “subject” separated from the act.
 - 4) Hence, the relational self is not the “subject” of moral acts such as self-denial; rather, the self-denying is the reality, a derivative of which is the relational self.
- d. The most adequate approximation to the notion of Christian self-denial in the later history of Christianity is Meister Eckhart’s notion of *Abgeschiedenheit* (= disinterestedness/detachment).
 - 1) Genuine “poverty in spirit” is not the result of will.

“As long as a person keeps his own will, and thinks it his will to fulfill the all-loving will of God, he has not that poverty of which we are talking, for this person has a will with which he wants to satisfy the will of God, and that is not right. For if one wants to be truly poor, he must be as free from his creature will as when he had not yet been born. For, by everlasting truth, as long as you will to do God’s will, and yearn for eternity and God, you are not really poor; for he is poor who wills nothing, knows nothing, and wants nothing.”⁷
 - 2) “Poverty in spirit” is not “becoming poor”, but “being poor”.

D. T. Suzuki paraphrases Eckhart’s insight with some gain in clarity:
“our spiritual discipline . . . consists not in getting rid of the self but in realizing the fact that there is no such existence from the first. The realization means being ‘poor’ in spirit. ‘Being poor’ does not mean ‘becoming poor’; ‘being poor’ means to be from the very beginning not in possession of anything and not giving away what one has. Nothing to gain, nothing to lose; nothing to give, nothing to take; to be just so, and yet to be rich in inexhaustible possibilities – this is to be ‘poor’ in its most proper and characteristic sense of the word, this is what all religious experiences tells (sic) us. To be absolutely nothing is to be everything.”⁸
 - 3) Eckhart’s admonition to “Get beyond time!” is fully commensurate

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁸ Cited from *Wisdom in Emptiness. A Dialogue by Daisetz T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton*, published in T. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), p. 109.

with the claim that the relational self is not located in space and time. He wrote: “all time is contained in the present Now-moment”.⁹

4. The relational self is isomorphic with Zen No-Mind.
 - a. In Zen Awakening there is no discrimination between subject and object, nor of space or time.
 - b. Zen Awakening is neither the result nor the product of a specific state of consciousness. Neither is Awakening a specific state of consciousness.
 - 1) It is not an object of thought. In states of consciousness subjects are “bound” to objects and hence are not emancipated.
 - 2) Nor is it an object of will. There is no Moral Ego.
 - c. Zen is the pure act of seeing. According to Hui-Neng, the Father of Chinese Zen, Awakening is *chien-hsing*, i.e. “to look into the nature [of Mind]”. Suzuki summarizes this teaching as follows:

“The seeing is not reflecting on an object as if the seer had nothing to do with it. The seeing, on the contrary, brings the seer and the object seen together, not in mere identification but the becoming conscious of itself, or rather of its working.”¹⁰
 - d. The Zen “act of seeing” is pure, i.e. it is not the act of a subjective state of consciousness, nor does it have as its object “the seen”. Suzuki has well stated this doctrine:

“So long as the seeing is something to see, it is not the real one; only when the seeing is no-seeing – that is, when the seeing is not a specific act of seeing into a definitely circumscribed state of consciousness – is it ‘seeing into one’s self-nature’ . . . Paradoxically stated, when the seeing is no-seeing, there is real seeing . . . As it is ‘no-thought’ or ‘no-mind’, the seeing is really the seeing.”¹¹
 - e. Zen does not accept the dualistic “discrimination” between good and evil that is linked co-ordinately to Knowledge and the ego. The truth of Emptiness is realized not by “egocentric consciousness” but by the mind; and “when this is done it knows that there is no self, no ego, no Atman that will pollute the mind which is a state of zero. It is out of this zero that all good is performed and all evil is avoided”.¹²
 - f. In Zen there is not the slightest interval between Intention and Act. To illustrate this I shall draw on Eugen Herrigel’s reflections on Zen archery: “For them (i.e. the Zen Masters) the contest consists in the archer aiming at himself – and yet not himself, in hitting himself – and yet not himself, and thus becoming simultaneously the aimer and the aim, the hitter and the hit.”¹³

⁹ Blakney (n. 6), p. 212.

¹⁰ W. Barrett (ed.), *Zen Buddhism. Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (1956), p. 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹² Suzuki, cited from Merton (n. 8), p. 107.

¹³ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery. With an Introduction by D. T. Suzuki*. Transl. by R. F. C. Hull (1971), p. 6.

Having earlier asked his Zen Master, "How can the shot be loosed if 'I' do not do it?", he received the reply: "'It' shoots."¹⁴ Later he narrates the conclusion to the question:

"'Do you now understand', the Master asked me one day after a particularly good shot, 'what I mean by 'It shoots', 'It hits'?"

'I'm afraid I don't understand anything more at all', I answered, 'even the simplest things have got in a muddle. Is it 'I' who draw the bow, or is it the bow that draws me into the state of highest tension? Do 'I' hit the goal, or does the goal hit me? Is 'It' spiritual when seen by the eyes of the body, and corporeal when seen by the eyes of the spirit – or both or neither? Bow, arrow, goal and ego, all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them. And even the need to separate has gone. For as soon as I take the bow and shoot, everything becomes so clear and straightforward and so ridiculously simple . . .'

'Now at last', the Master broke in, 'the bowstring has cut right through you.'"¹⁵

3.

The Basler Münster, where Buri served as Hauptpfarrer from 1957 till 1968, has on its façade a curious equestrian representation of the fourth century bishop, St. Martin. It is curious because alongside the horse stands not a beggar, as is usually the case, but the stump of a tree. In a famous book, *Die Bilder und das Wort am Basler Münster*, Buri cogently argued that this representation originally included the figure of the beggar for whom St. Martin is dividing his cloak; but that, when the Cathedral was renovated in 1590, the newly proclaimed teaching of the Reformers against "good works" effected an alteration of the original by which the figure of the beggar was "transfigured" into a stump.

In his commentary on the divergent theologies underlying the original and altered versions of St. Martin it is clear that Buri – although committed to the Reformers' doctrine of justification by faith – is not altogether happy about the drastic modification of the original representation on the façade of the Cathedral. For, in his view, the present representation also advocates an extreme position (i.e. "ohne Werke") which has resulted from the success of the Reformation, and which the original, had it been unchanged, could now serve to correct.

The figure of St. Martin on the Cathedral is a symbol of the paradox of Christian *self-denial*. The medieval theology reflected in the original was right in maintaining that the "saintliness" of St. Martin – his true identity – was a function of the beggar with whom he shared his very cloak. Sainthood, in this case, marks the relational self: what St. Martin is, is defined by the "other", the beggar. On the other hand, the Reformers were right in fearing the peril of "egocentricity" latent

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 69 f.

in this act of sharing, and in judging all moral acts dangerous for this very reason. On this issue it is not difficult to perceive why Meister Eckhart, whose views on self-denial were quoted earlier, is usually claimed to be a forerunner of the Reformation. The moral and religious paradox is that both the original and altered versions of St. Martin are “unsinnig” (to use the term Buri reserves for the latter): the original, in view of Eckhart’s deep understanding of “die eigentlichste Armut”; and the altered version, in view of the non-relationality of the solitary figure of St. Martin.

The gift of representing what is not located in space and time is not foreign to religious artists, for their works – like the reality they depict – are always a Now-moment. But their works invite interpretation and herein lies the difficulty. The ontological theme of “relatedness”, deeply engrained in the religious literature and art of our forebears, is all too easily “transfigured” into a “spatiality and temporality” that belies our experience: a “spatiality” in which the God “for us” is rendered ultimately inaccessible, and a “temporality” in which the “Good” becomes an Act inaccessible to Intention.

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