

Rationality's Demand of its Other: A Comparative Analysis of F.W.J. Schelling's *Unvordenkliche* and Huineng's *Wu-Nien*

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ABSTRACT

The speculative power of theoretical reason is not only incapable of grounding itself, but is also powerless to integrate and unify all of the different aspects of our intellectual and spiritual life. This impotency of what Schelling called negative philosophy gives rise to the demand for a positive philosophy that supplies the integrative grounding in which das Unvordenkliche—that before which nothing can be thought—is rooted. I contrast what Schelling calls an “inverted concept” with Huineng’s account of wu-nien (no-thought) found in the Platform Sutra (Tun-Huang Manuscript). Both Schelling and Huineng advance their respective ideas as not only the necessary basis of their thinking, but as a necessary experience one must undergo in order to realize and thus truly comprehend their teaching. Huineng connects this lived knowing with sudden enlightenment, while Schelling speaks of the exuberant fullness of ecstasy. I close with a brief account of Schelling’s appeal for pluralistic tolerance among different philosophical and religious traditions, in which he argues that such traditions are in error to the degree they lay claim to exclusive and infallible truth.

Keywords

Schelling, Huineng, metaphysics, philosophical religion, German Idealism, Zen Buddhism, epistemology, comparative religion

In what follows, I would like to briefly trace the contours of a striking family resemblance between the work of two thinkers, who, although from different times and philosophical traditions, both held that rationality, in order to

complete itself, is ultimately compelled by its own reasoning to ground itself in an extra-rational principle. This epistemological dialectic in turn forms the dynamic infrastructure for constructing a holistic account of how philosophy and religion, in order to remain both relevant and productive, can only exist together as complementary partners tasked with the duty of preserving and further developing the life of the mind and spirit. The two thinkers in question are Huineng, the enigmatic sixth patriarch of Zen Buddhism, believed to have lived in the seventh Century, and Friedrich W. Schelling, the nineteenth Century German philosopher whose work encompassed German Romanticism, German Idealism, and the beginning of Existentialism. Whereas, in contrast to German Idealism, Zen Buddhism forsakes theory in favor of the active cultivation of wisdom, and whereas posterity leaves us with but a few of Huineng's texts while providing us with many from Schelling, the following presentation supports itself mightily with both the work of Schelling, in particular, and with the broader western philosophical framework he himself depended on. Agreeing with Aristotle, Schelling not only held that all philosophy culminates in theology, but he also argued that the challenges of the future, brought on by the growing interdependence of the world's populations, made the demand for what he called a *philosophical religion* indispensable. According to Schelling, to do philosophy without engaging with religion is just as impossible and unproductive as to engage with religion without doing philosophy. And it is precisely Schelling's call for a synthesis of religion and philosophy that provides us with a model of integrating philosophy and religion strikingly similar to one found in Huineng's seminal teachings in Zen Buddhism. The specific point of comparison between these two very different *geistige* traditions is their respective accounts of humanity's true nature and our relation to the Absolute. As a justification for undertaking such a wide-ranging comparison, let us consider the following words of Schelling, which make clear his position regarding our intercultural undertaking:

Those who everywhere in philosophy see only arbitrary [concepts], are not aware of how the same concepts in entirely different individuals in entirely different times under completely different forms have nonetheless always arisen, thereby proving their necessity. (II/1, 559)¹

The necessary concept of which Schelling here speaks is that of the Absolute, which he terms the *natura necessaria* and explains "as that which is *essentia Actus*" (2/1, 562). We will compare Schelling's concept with what Huineng

1. Unless otherwise noted, I follow the standard citation of Schelling's work established in Schelling 1856–1864. II/1, 559 reads: part one, volume one, page 559.

calls the “First Principle,” which he defines as the “True Reality” of the *Tathātā*, which in the Vedic and Buddhist traditions signifies the Absolute.² Per definitionem this necessary concept does not allow itself to be known through the sequences of inferences which characterize discursive thinking, but rather only in direct, active intuition, which Huineng describes as “*tun-wu*” (sudden direct intuition) (Suzuki, 31). In order to perfect its own nature, rational thought thus demands a first principle which is itself beyond rationality. Schelling approaches this fact of our thinking nature through his idea of *das Unvordenkliche*, whereas Huineng’s articulation of this intuition is found in his teaching of *wu-nien* (no-thought). Just as rationality must necessarily complete itself in what is beyond rationality, philosophy itself must also find its completion in religion. Philosophy here signifies that science of reason which is only capable of generating the Absolute within the virtual world of thought, whereas religion denotes the ethical and spiritual arena of actual existence and moral action in which this concept of the absolute should be made a reality. To apprehend and make real this absolute first principle, rationality and its non-discursive other must be integrated into one dynamic process, whose articulation and manifestation occurs in the productive interplay of philosophy and religion.

I

Let us begin with the mysterious Huineng, the sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism, who is thought to have lived in China during the eighth century CE. The central text for this discussion is the famous *Platform Sutra* in which, following Yampolsky’s translation, we encounter the following passage:

Good friends, in this teaching of mine, from ancient times up to the present, all have set up no-thought as the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis. Non-form is to be separated from form even when associated with form. No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought. Non-abiding is the original nature of man. (Huineng, 137)

Since the goal of his work is to lead his students to right thought and action, Huineng never supplies the type of philosophical explanation one has come to expect from more academic philosophers. In the *Platform Sutra* Huineng does not provide a theoretical account of what his “main doctrine” of “no-thought” is, or what he means by “non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis”

2. By “True Reality” I understand what Yampolsky sets into direct connection with the “First Principle” and what Suzuki expresses through “Suchness” in his translation of the *Platform Sutra* (Huineng, 116; Suzuki, 33). In his commentary to this work, Yampolsky points out that “these terms . . . indicate the same undefined Absolute” (Huineng, 117).

of our original nature and true reality. This is all the more frustrating since these are the very concepts that hold not only the key to his teaching, but are also the very concepts that provide the strongest family resemblance between Huineng and Schelling. A point which is suggested in Suzuki's much freer rendering of this passage, when he translates Huineng as stating that "[n]o-thought means to be innocent of the working of [a relative mind]" (Suzuki, 31). With this Suzuki implies that *wu-nien* touches not only our original nature, but that the original nature of our thinking is to be free from the limitations of 'a relative mind.' This is a very suggestive point when we consider that in the Buddhist tradition our original nature is intimately intertwined with the ultimate reality of the *tathātā* (suchness), which, subsisting beyond the limitations of discursive thinking, designates the mind's unwavering relationship to the Absolute. Huineng seems to point to this in the following passage, where he further describes what he has experienced in this state of *wu-nien* (no-thought):

prior thoughts, present thoughts, and future thoughts follow one after the other without cessation. If one instant of thought is cut off, the Dharma body [*dharmakāya*] separates from the physical body [*rūpakāya*], and in the midst of successive thoughts there will be no place for attachment to anything. If one instant of thought clings, then successive thoughts cling; this is known as being fettered. If in all things successive thoughts do not cling, then you are unfettered. Therefore, non-abiding is made the basis. (Huineng, 138; cf. Suzuki, 33–34)

It is clear here that Huineng makes liberation, or being 'unfettered,' contingent on discovering within the sequential movement of thinking a non-sequential basis. This discovery of two distinct yet interrelated standpoints from which experience can be considered reveals the essential difference between the *dharmakāya* and the *rūpakāya*, suggesting that from the unfettered and thus absolute standpoint of the non-physical *dharmakāya*, the true nature of reality that permeates and animates the world of our physical *rūpakāya* is disclosed. There is but one world and one existence, but two ways of seeing and understanding it. Huineng makes this dualistic point even more explicit when he writes: "[i]f you cast aside all thoughts, as soon as one instant of thought is cut off, you will be reborn in another realm" (Huineng, 138). This other realm is nirvana, a state of mind wherein one is liberated and free from the time sequence and attachment to the manifold environment of our everyday world. And while the world of objective, living nature itself has not changed, it is nonetheless seen and understood differently, namely in its *tathātā*, in its pure Suchness, wherein the true reality of existence manifests itself, "unfettered" by the relative limitations and deceptions imposed upon it by names and thoughts. Again in the

Platform Sutra he writes:

If you give rise to thoughts from your self-nature, then, although you see, hear, perceive, and know, you are not stained by the manifold environments, and are always free. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says: 'Externally, while distinguishing well all the forms of the various dharmas, internally he stands firm within the First Principle. (Huineng, 139)

The liberated mind frees itself by standing firm 'within the first principle,' finding as it were the unmoving center point of time, and therewith true reality, which in providing the unifying basis of all reality simultaneously reveals to the mind its true 'self-nature.' As Huineng emphasizes, since the knowing mind here stands squarely within the First Principle, free from the stain of abstract divisions, there is no succession of thoughts to which discursive thinking could become attached.³

Now please pay attention to this happy coincidence of translation, in that it is this "First Principle" of Huineng that will lead us, after a brief detour through Aristotle, to Schelling's very similar understanding of the nature and liberating effects of knowing the First Principle of ultimate reality. An ultimate reality which, for the sake of discussion, is a "placeholder phrase" representing what Huineng calls "True Reality," what Aristotle calls "πρῶτο οὐσία"—the ultimate being of "being qua being"—and what Schelling terms the "inverted concept" of *das Unvordenkliche*. For as we will see, all three of these designations point towards the pregnant emptiness and the formless form of a First Principle that is the fundamental basis and unity of all reality.⁴

II

Aristotle brings this fundamental basis of our reality into focus using three strategies found in his metaphysics, ethics and psychology. From an ontological perspective his *Metaphysics* investigates the first principle and thus cause or basis of our phenomenal world. Driven by the threat of circular reasoning, the cause of the transient world cannot itself change and must therefore be immutable. Consistent with his physics, to be unchanging, such a principle would

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3. Consider for example Aristotle's suggestive description in *De Anima*: "For in the case of things without matter that which thinks and that which is thought is the same as its object" (Aristotle, *De Anima*, III 4, 430a2).
 4. Following Yampolsky, I equate Huineng's True Reality with Aristotle's πρῶτο οὐσία and Schelling's Absolute. All three terms point to the pregnant emptiness and formless form of ultimate reality, which constitutes the unity and basis of our world. They all point to "the unified oneness of the universe" (Huineng, 136, fn. 60).

have to be separable from the inherently unstable potential nature of matter, since if it incorporated potentiality it could also *not be*, or simply be other than it is. Subsisting then as pure actuality beyond change and transformation, the primary οὐσία of this First Principle is devoid of any reference to indicate or measure the successive moments of chronological time. And with this we have our second contact with Huineng's thought, namely one of the central tenants of his teaching, his claim of the "non-form of substance": Aristotle's primary substance, as pure actuality, is utterly devoid of individuating matter, and as such must be a formless form.

From the standpoint of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, we find the following analogue with Huineng's non-abiding, in that Aristotle holds that the telos of humanity is happiness (1176a30), and happiness thrives only if it is not dependent on anything beyond itself: it must be self-sustaining, autonomous, non-abiding, detached, and liberated from dependence on anything that may change. Consequently, pleasure is defined as a "perfect activity," devoid of all motion, and thus change, understood in this context as variation in degree of intensity (1174b17). As pure actuality this pleasure is a simple, incomposite whole, and thus something perfect (1174b7). Thus whereas change *qua* movement "necessarily occupies a space of time ... a feeling of pleasure does not" (1174b7). Just as the pure actuality of ultimate reality—the primary οὐσία—is beyond the 'space of time', so too does the perfectly pleasurable experience exceed chronological time. Because the true subject is the unchanging substrate of potentiality, matter, and thus change, the condition of the possibility of time's flow is removed, with the result that for the subject there is no before or after, but only the eternal now of the *nunc stans*. Our happiness in this pleasure is thus "eternal," not only in terms of our experience of the timeless condition of pure intuition, but also in the same sense that with this meditative insight we participate in the eternal state of happiness in which, according to Aristotle, the divine itself lives (1178b 21). And with this there arises yet one more parallel with Huineng, namely that this True Reality can only be apprehended through intuitive reason in an activity both Aristotle and Huineng refer to as meditation, and that the breaking in of True Reality into consciousness can only be described as instantaneous—an experience that is captured perfectly in Huineng's doctrine of sudden enlightenment.

Since this activity is meditation, meditation must also be our most potent form of activity. And as happiness must contain pleasures, Aristotle concludes that "the pursuit of wisdom contains pleasures of marvelous purity and permanence, and it is reasonable to presume that the enjoyment of knowledge is a still pleasanter occupation than the pursuit of it" (1177a25). The pursuit of wisdom culminates in this enjoyment of knowledge; a perfect enjoyment that occurs only

within meditation, and *not* in practical applications of the moral virtues, since for Aristotle the activity of meditation is “the only activity loved for its own sake: it produces no result beyond the actual act of meditation, whereas from the practical pursuits we look to secure some advantage beyond the action itself” (1177b). Meditation and wisdom in this sense are one and the same, in that to experience one we must engage in the other. Huineng points to this intimate connection between wisdom and meditation when he writes how we should “[n]ever under any circumstances say mistakenly that meditation and wisdom are different; they are a unity, not two things. Meditation itself is the substance of wisdom; wisdom itself is the function of meditation” (Huineng, 135).

In order that the pleasure and happiness of completed meditation be self-sustaining and autonomous, there must be a power within us, which is not of the physical or human body. According to Aristotle, the philosopher who engages in this meditation does so “not in virtue of his humanity,” but rather “in virtue of something within him which is divine” (1177b30). He recommends that “we ought so far as possible achieve immortality, and do all that man may to live in accordance with the highest thing in him; for though this may be small in bulk, in power and value it far surpasses all the rest” (1177b30). This divine element within the philosopher cannot be a composite substance of form and matter such as humans are. It must instead be like the pure actuality of the divine: incomposite, indivisible and thus simple. Here we encounter again more parallels with Huineng and his decisive distinction between the *rūpakāya* and *dharmakāya*, between the physical and the immaterial elements of our being, whose unique difference and identity only becomes fully known in the act of meditation. And, as we have seen above, Huineng makes clear that the immaterial element of the *dharmakāya* is what he calls “your self-nature,” employing almost precisely the same words Aristotle uses as he maintains that the simple divine element within us is “the true self of each” (1178a2).

But how does this meditation work? To answer this we must now turn to the Aristotelian analogue of Huineng’s “no-thought.” In the psychology of his *De Anima*, Aristotle explains this highest level of thinking capable of grasping the indivisible actuality of the *πρῶτο οὐσία*. Aristotle posits an active agent that, outside the individual mind, affects the passive potential of our limited mind to think the first basis of our world. For at this level of thinking, the “true self of each” fulfills its form as it exceeds all that it potentially is to become fully actual. But for it to exhaust all its potential, the mind requires an active agent that is both a part of the mind and yet different. And this active agent is the divine element cited both above in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the following infamous passage from *De Anima*:

Mind in the passive sense is such because it becomes all things, but mind has another aspect in that it makes all things; this is a kind of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential into actual colors. Mind in this sense is separable, impassive and unmixed, since it is essentially an activity; ... Actual knowledge is identical with its object. Potential is prior in time to actual knowledge in the individual, but in general it is not prior in time. Mind does not think intermittently. When isolated it is its true self and nothing more, and this alone is immortal and everlasting, and without this nothing thinks. (430a10–25)

The “true self” of the mind is that divine element which, as pure actuality and thus beyond change, is “immortal and everlasting” and without which “nothing thinks.” We can now see how Aristotle completes his philosophy by unifying his ethics and his metaphysics in this one psychological experience of contemplating the divine and eternal basis of True Reality. The answer to the question of his metaphysics—what is being qua being—is provided through the contemplation of the eternal now that is the telos of our human existence. Being qua being—the *πρῶτο οὐσία*—is an incomposite and thus simple principle. To know this principle we must abstract from all *composite* qualities of individual objects. Consequently this incomposite form must be without matter, for if it had matter it would be composite. And as matter is the principle of potential and individuation, once matter is removed, there is only the pure actuality of universal form. And it is at this point that the binary structures of logic implode upon themselves, thereby thrusting meditation beyond the world of duality, of before and after, to the other shore of non-dualistic simultaneity: in agreement with Huineng’s positing of ‘another realm’ enjoyed by the liberated mind, Aristotle concludes that the pure actuality of universal form is a formless form, which not only exceeds, but also grounds, the chronological time-sequence of everyday life. Aristotle writes:

The thinking of incomposite objects of thought occurs among things concerning which there can be no falsehood; where truth and falsehood are possible there is implied a compounding of thoughts into a fresh unity ... if thinking is concerned with things past or future, then we take into account and include the notion of time. For falsehood always lies in the process of combination ... But when the object of thought is ... indivisible, the mind thinks of it in indivisible time, and by an indivisible activity of the soul. In this act the Mind is self-cognizant, it has no contrary, and is thus actual and self-existent.

(430a26–b2, 430b15–32)

Here, in the intuitive comprehension of the pure subject, unblemished by predicates, we finally encounter Aristotle’s position that that which is so fully actual and indivisibly one is that about which it is senseless to speak about its